THE RECEPTION OF DIONYSIUS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY EASTERN ORTHODOXY

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The CD has made an indelible mark on the development of the Byzantine Orthodox tradition and the overall tenor of Orthodox theology. Although much in the CD could justifiably provoke controversy, the incorporation of the CD into the canon of patristic writings was surprisingly quick and met with relatively little resistance. Commenting on this peculiar development, Jaroslav Pelikan wrote:

There is both historical significance and theological irony in the chronological coincidence between the condemnation of Origen and the rise of Dionysian mysticism, for most of the doctrines on account of which the Second Council of Constantinople anathematized Origen were far less dangerous to the tradition of catholic orthodoxy than was the Crypto-Origenism canonized in the works of Dionysius the Areopagite.

Admittedly, the characterization of Dionysius as an Origenes redivivus should not be accepted without qualifications. Clearly, the Byzantine theologians did not endorse the CD out of repressed nostalgia for Origen. Besides, there are just as many differences as there are genetic links between Origen and Dionysius’ own versions of Christian Platonism. Nevertheless, there is much truth in Pelikan’s provocative remark: Dionysius is in some ways more dangerous “to the tradition of catholic orthodoxy” than Origen. The boldest speculations of the Alexandrian theologian pale in comparison before the linguistic and mystical audacity of the Areopagite.

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The rediscovery of Dionysius by twentieth-century Orthodox thinkers is a largely untold story, which deserves a book-length exposition. Here I will be able to sketch only the main contours of this story. Most of the influential Orthodox interpreters of Dionysius located the *CD* within the framework of larger master narratives. Such narratives in turn have helped to forge twentieth-century Orthodox theological identity vis-à-vis Western theology. In the process, Dionysian theology has been used as a historical source as well as a polemical weapon. Ironically, while offering an interpretation of the *CD* that is non-Western in character, some Orthodox thinkers strongly relied on Western sources.

My survey will proceed in chronological order. I will begin by considering the treatment of the *CD* in the pre-revolutionary and later works of Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944), indicating the roots of his sophiological system in the writings of Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900). Banished from the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, Bulgakov for the last two decades of his life taught at the newly-founded Orthodox Institute of St. Sergius in Paris. Bulgakov’s sophiology was a source of much discord in émigré Russian Orthodox circles and beyond. Hence, it is misleading to speak of a single Paris school of Russian theology, as some scholars do, because neither Nicolas Berdyaev (1874–1948) nor his younger contemporary Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958), whose use of the *CD* will be considered next, had great affinity with Bulgakov’s sophiological speculations, or with each other’s work for that matter. Lossky’s approach to Dionysius’ apophaticism finds a number of parallels in the work of the Greek theologian Christos Yannaras (1935– ). I will then consider another Russian émigré theologian, John Meyendorff (1926–1992), who left Western Europe and crossed the Atlantic to play a major role in establishing St. Vladimir’s Theological Seminary in New York. Meyendorff’s critique of Dionysius’ Christology and liturgical theology stimulated further discussion in contemporary Orthodox scholarship.3

It is one of the strangest turns of history that most Eastern Orthodox thinkers discussed in this essay wrote, thought, taught, and spent considerable time, if not all of their lives, in the West. For Sergius Bulgakov, Nicolas Berdyaev, Vladimir Lossky, and Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) the painful experience of dislocation occasioned by the revolution added an existential dimension to the already troublesome question of modern Orthodox Christian identity. Faced with a largely non-Orthodox intellectual world, some of these thinkers came to emphasize more sharply the dividing line between the thought and ethos of the Christian “East” and those of the Christian “West”. I deliberately put the categories of the “East” and “West” in quotation marks, since these categories were not used in their primary geopolitical sense, but in a rich and evocative metaphorical sense, reaching into the depth of history and having as their primary reference point the Greek patristic tradition and the culture of Byzantium together with its Slavic expressions.4

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In light of the quest for a modern Orthodox identity, it is hardly surprising that some Orthodox thinkers conflate—sometimes inadvertently, at other times quite deliberately—the markers of identity with the criteria of truth. In such accounts “Eastern Orthodox” becomes synonymous with “authentic”, “correct”, and “true.” Conversely “Western” comes to be closely associated with “distorted”, “misguided”, or simply “false”. Throughout this essay I will have several opportunities to comment on this peculiar use, or rather a very telling misuse of the terms.

Vladimir Solovyov, Sergius Bulgakov, and Nicolas Berdyaev

Three main periods may be distinguished in Bulgakov’s complex intellectual evolution: (1) a philosophical period, during which he was largely preoccupied with articulating and subsequently overcoming a Marxist political economy; (2) a religious-philosophical period, which will be our main interest here; (3) and finally, a theological period, during which Bulgakov brought to completion his comprehensive sophiological system.

Vladimir Solovyov provided the main impetus for Bulgakov’s turn to Christian idealism. In addition to being a metaphysician, Solovyov was a poet and a mystic, who is said to have been visited three times by the mysterious figure of Sophia, the Wisdom of God. Nature mysticism, Spinoza’s pantheism, and German idealism, especially Schelling, played a major role in Solovyov’s metaphysics of “all-unity” (vseedinstvo). The guiding notion of Solovyov’s system is the idea of Godmanhood (Bogochelovechestvo). The incarnation of the Godman Christ is expanded into a metaphysical principle that provides the paradigm for all instances of divine-human interaction. In this scheme, empirical humanity strives towards ideal humanity, which is eternally inseparable from the being of God. History is interpreted as a process of divine-human cooperation culminating in deification.

Bulgakov drank from the same philosophical wells and made Solovyov’s sophiological vision fully his own. In The Unfading Light (Svet Nevechernii, 1917) Bulgakov makes a foray into religious epistemology, cosmology, and anthropology. He emphasizes that any account of the experience of the divine is fraught with the fundamental antinomy of the transcendent that reveals itself and thus becomes immanent, while also remaining transcendent, a point that will be developed later by Lossky and Meyendorff. Following Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), Bulgakov speaks of the irreducibly paradoxical character of the central Christian dogmas, such as the Trinity and the incarnation.

The Unfading Light is divided into three main sections, the first dedicated to the doctrine of God, the second to creation, and the third to theological anthropology. The first section is provocatively entitled “Divine Nonbeing” (Bozhestvennoe nichto), an expression that is Dionysian in inspiration. According to Dionysius, since God does not belong to the order of created beings, all
creaturely properties must be denied of God, including existence. Following Plotinus, Dionysius concludes the *Mystical Theology* by observing that God “falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being”. With his characteristic penchant for sweeping generalizations, Bulgakov declares: “religious philosophy knows no more central problem than the meaning of divine nonbeing”.

In a drawn-out chapter of about forty pages Bulgakov provides the first sketch of the history of negative theology in Russian philosophy. Without following chronological order consistently, he begins his discussion with Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Philo, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers and reaches Dionysius, whom he calls “the true father of apophatic theology”. According to Bulgakov, the central point of the *Divine Names* lies in upholding the utter transcendence, inexpressibility, and incomprehensibility of God. Bulgakov observes that Dionysius offers a form of apophaticism that is more radical than that of Plotinus: for Dionysius God surpasses even the notion of oneness. In light of recent scholarship it seems clear that Bulgakov has exaggerated the epistemological difference between Plotinian and Dionysian apophaticism, since Plotinus is equally insistent that the One surpasses being, as well as all human categories and powers of expression.

Bulgakov notes in passing a prominent role accorded to *eros* in Dionysius’ account of the ecstatic experience of God, aptly characterizing this account as “erotic epistemology” (*eroticheskaia gnoseologika*). After the *CD*, Bulgakov turns to Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Gregory Palamas, John Scotus Eriugena, Nicholas of Cusa, as well as Jewish, German, and English mystics. Bulgakov closes his overview of the history of negative theology quite surprisingly with Kant. The Russian philosopher sees an unrealized potential for negative theology in Kant’s notion of *Ding-an-sich* to which no human categories apply and which remains outside the boundaries of human experience. Kant himself, Bulgakov is quick to point out, was not a mystic, but a rather narrow rationalist, as attested by his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, a book that Bulgakov calls “religiously tasteless”. Bulgakov, however, finds Schelling and Hegel, while not entirely unmusical to the mystical dimension of theology, nevertheless lacking the apophatic dimension, since for them all transcendent features of reality ultimately become immanent states of self-consciousness.

Thus Bulgakov inserts the *CD* into a metanarrative which begins with Plato and, continuing through select Church Fathers, philosophers, and mystics, ends with Kant. Bulgakov reads Dionysius as a philosopher would, not as a student of *Dogmengeschichte* (in a typical early twentieth-century sense of that term). Unlike other Orthodox theologians discussed below, Bulgakov is not concerned whether and how the *CD* fits into the patristic tradition or Byzantine Orthodoxy. Rather, Bulgakov’s consideration of the history of negative theology plays a constructive role in articulating his own theological system.
The approach of Bulgakov’s friend and critic, Nicolas Berdyaev, presents several intriguing points of comparison. In *Spirit and Reality: the Foundations of Divine-human Spirituality* (1937) Berdyaev inserts the CD into a master narrative similar to Bulgakov’s, dedicating even more attention to the German mystics, especially Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme. Following the dominant view in the Western scholarship of his time, Berdyaev dismissively treats the CD as “mainly a repetition of Plotinus and Neoplatonism”.

In his earlier work, *Freedom and the Spirit* (1928), Berdyaev criticizes the Church Fathers for sidelining mystical writers. Berdyaev observes that “school theology” has a tendency towards either ostracizing or domesticating mystical theology. For Berdyaev, the purpose of the dogmas is to express the mystical experience of the Church, not to stifle mystical life. He recognizes the possibility of the “approved orthodox mysticism”, such as that of Dionysius or Symeon the New Theologian, but insists that the church authorities have often been afraid of the mystics and distrusted them. Berdyaev also points to the potential of the mystical writings for surpassing narrow, confessional boundaries. Bulgakov in contrast does not see a strong tension between the official teaching of the Church and the work of the mystics.

Although what might be called the apophaticism of Dionysian inspiration played a constructive role in Bulgakov’s *Unfading Light*, the situation changed during his third, “theological” period. In his great trilogy *On Godmanhood*, comprising *The Lamb of God* (1933), *The Comforter* (1936), and *The Bride of the Lamb* (written in 1939, posthumously published in 1945), the distinctive epistemic concerns of apophatic theology have receded into the background. For example, while covering in *The Bride of the Lamb* many of the same subjects as he had a quarter century earlier in *The Unfading Light*, Bulgakov no longer engages the CD or the broader apophatic tradition in any depth. Vladimir Lossky correctly criticizes Bulgakov’s sophiological speculations for lacking apophatic reserve.

Bulgakov’s sophiological speculations for lacking apophatic reserve. Bulgakov tends to “eternalize” the content of revelation, folding the events of salvation history into the inner life of the Trinity, with the result that the distinction between the divine economy and the immanent Trinity all but disappears.

The points of continuity between Dionysius and the Russian sophiologists (Solovyov and Bulgakov) are, strictly speaking, meager. What unites them is a common trajectory of Christian Platonism. Like Dionysius, they insist upon the foundational significance of mystical theology. However, if for Dionysius the paradigm of this theology is provided by the ecstatic, ineffable union with God, completely imageless and surpassing all powers of perception and intellect, for the Russian philosophers, in contrast, the experiential paradigm is given by the image of the eternal feminine in the figure of Sophia, the Wisdom of God. Perhaps the contrast between apophatic and sophiological mystical theologies should not be drawn too sharply, since one aspect of sophiology is the awareness of the eternal beauty of God in creation, which
has some parallels with Dionysius’ vision of the cosmos as a complex hierarchy of symbols bespeaking the beauty of God.

Still, the Dionysian version of Christian Platonism sharply differs from that of the Russian sophiologists in another respect. Sophiology baptizes Platonism and “Platonizes” revelation by transforming the divine incarnation into a general metaphysical principle of Godmanhood, the principle by means of which the material cosmos and humanity acquire their ontological link, eternal ground and transformative potential in God. Despite recent attempts to defend Dionysius on this score, it is obvious to most commentators that his cosmology does not account for the centrality of the divine incarnation in a comparably strong way. Russian sophiology is a version of Christian panentheism that in the final analysis does not do justice to the apophatic dimension. Dionysian Platonism is a form of Christian apophaticism that has a tendency to obfuscate the importance of the incarnation. Where Dionysius speaks apophatically about the things revealed, the Russian sophiologists presume to speak cataphatically about the things hidden.

Vladimir Lossky and Christos Yannaras

Bulgakov’s younger contemporary, Vladimir Lossky, was also one of his most unwavering critics. When the controversial elements of Bulgakov’s sophiology came to the attention of the Russian Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities, it was Lossky who compiled a comprehensive report on the basis of which the head of the Russian Church, Metropolitan Sergius Stragorodskii (1867–1944), and the synod of the Patriarchate of Moscow issued their condemnation of Bulgakov’s system. Lossky conceived of the project of modern Orthodox theology very differently from Bulgakov and Berdiaev. Together with Georges Florovsky, Lossky was at the forefront of the “return to the Fathers” in Eastern Orthodox theology, a movement that was coterminous and developed in conversation with the Roman Catholic ressourcement movement in Europe, which was particularly influential in France.

Both Florovsky and Lossky saw the post-Palamite Orthodox theology of the last four hundred years as becoming increasingly more captive to the theological categories of the “West”. For them, Orthodox theology’s liberation hinged on a strongly apologetic re-reading of the Eastern Fathers. This led both authors, on the one hand, to exaggerate the historical continuity of the Eastern Fathers of untainted orthodoxy, overlooking more problematic features of their theologies, and, on the other hand, to tend to establish rigid, sometimes even impenetrable intellectual boundaries between the “East” and the “West”. Florovsky’s “neopatristic synthesis” aimed at a comprehensive recovery of all aspects of patristic thought, with an emphasis on the contribution of the early Fathers and the Seven Ecumenical Councils. Lossky’s work, in contrast, looked to Byzantium, and especially to Gregory Palamas as the theologian who achieved the definitive synthesis. For this
reason, Lossky’s project, subsequently continued by John Meyendorff and others, has been referred to as Neopalamism. This project may be viewed as the theological antipode to Neothomism.

If one were to name one patristic author who influenced Lossky’s theological vision most, it would be Dionysius.24 Lossky began his scholarly career by publishing an article on the apophaticism of the Areopagite.25 The study of various forms of *via negativa* and related epistemological issues remained a focal concern throughout his life, and is especially prominent in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (1944), the book for which Lossky justly became well-known in the West. In his article “The Elements of ‘Negative Theology’ in the Thought of Saint Augustine” Lossky distinguishes between apophaticism as a speculative method and as a religious attitude towards the incommensurability of God.26 Lossky criticizes the Thomistic tradition for its tendency to downplay the role of the *via negativa* and to subordinate it to the *via positiva*. For Aquinas, as Lossky interprets him, the method of negation amounts to a qualification that no positive predicates apply to God in a finite, creaturely sense. But the predicates can be applied to God analogically, understood in a more elevated sense, befitting God. Lossky contends that the Thomistic form of apophaticism fails to account for Dionysius’ insistence that ultimately all talk about God must be abandoned in the unitive experience beyond all words and beyond knowledge.27 Apophaticism is “above all, an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God”.28 Elsewhere Lossky also criticizes Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy on exegetical grounds, arguing that the Latin translation of the *CD* that Aquinas had at his disposal did not do justice to the conceptual richness of the Greek term *analogia*.29 According to Lossky, *analogia* refers primarily to the creaturely “capacity” or “aptitude” to participate in God.30 I concur with Florovsky’s judgment that “Lossky dismisses the Thomistic versions of the ‘negative theology’ probably too easily”.31

Lossky’s understanding of apophaticism has had considerable influence upon many twentieth-century Orthodox thinkers, including the Greek theologian Christos Yannaras. In the introduction to his book *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite* (1967) Yannaras observes that the main purpose of his study is “to clarify the difference between Greek thought and the west”.32 If Lossky allows for different kinds of apophaticism in the West, Yannaras mistakenly, but confidently, reduces all forms of Western apophaticism to the method of correcting the limits of analogical predication in natural theology.33 Like Lossky, he contrasts this view with Dionysian apophaticism properly understood, which points to the experiential immediacy and relatedness of God.

According to Yannaras, the knowledge acquired in an ineffable personal encounter with God surpasses propositional knowledge. Whether the emphasis upon the non-propositional *personal* knowledge of this sort can be credibly derived from the *CD* is rather dubious, although both Yannaras and
Lossky are convinced that it can be. Yannaras goes so far as to make a distinction between the Greek “apophaticism of person” and the Western “apophaticism of essence”. This distinction, historically unsupported, is at odds with the Palamite insistence that it is the essence (or unnamable “superessence”) of God, not the divine persons, that is absolutely incomprehensible. The distinction with which both Orthodox theologians work looks surprisingly close to Bertrand Russell’s “knowledge by acquaintance”/“knowledge by description” distinction, the “I-Thou” theology of Martin Buber, and similar motifs in French existentialism. According to Rowan Williams, “Lossky is able to develop his emphasis on personal encounter in the knowledge of God in a way which at times seems consciously and deliberately to echo philosophers like Sartre.” It appears that the Eastern Orthodox theologians are fighting the misguided “West” with ammunition borrowed from the enemy.

Having defined Dionysian apophaticism as “the abandonment of every conceptual necessity” and “the annihilation of all conceptual idols of God”, Yannaras transfers this concept into the context of contemporary European nihilism and agnosticism. Yannaras argues that the Enlightenment and later critique of Christianity applies to the “conceptual idol of God” or to the God of Western European natural theology. When Nietzsche’s superman proclaimed the death of God, it was the God of Western rationalism and scholasticism that became defunct. The God of Dionysian apophaticism cannot be conceptually attacked, because this deity cannot be conceptually expressed. It is impossible to prove or disprove the existence of a God who surpasses being, as well as all other categories of human thought. Yannaras resonates with Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology, but criticizes the German philosopher for failing to see the connection between his philosophy of being and Dionysius’ ontology. Although Yannaras’s position has been rightly criticized for being dangerously close to agnosticism, the parallels that he sees between Heidegger and Dionysius are not without foundation. Like Lossky, he believes that Eastern Orthodox theology, when purified of Western influences, can withstand the intellectual onslaughts of post-modernity.

Lossky makes Dionysius the centerpiece of the normative master narrative leading from the early Fathers to the fourteenth-century Byzantine theologians, from Clement of Alexandria to Gregory Palamas. In his lectures read at the Sorbonne in 1945–6, subsequently translated into English and published posthumously under the title The Vision of God (1963), Lossky likewise accords the central place to his intellectual hero. He sees in the CD the synthesis of all previous patristic discussion of the possibility of direct, unmediated experience of God. Earlier patristic authors, such as Clement and Origen, are viewed against the norm of Dionysian mystical theology. Clement’s account of the vision of God is deemed “intellectualist” on the grounds that such experience allegedly involves exclusively intellectual faculties, exalts the knowledge of God above salvation, and is not quite as radically
apophatic as that of Dionysius. Origen is similarly accused of “intellectualism”, for he construed divine incomprehensibility as a function of the limitations of created, rational beings. Eunomius represents “intellectualism” of the worst kind, since he taught that even the fallen human mind was able to comprehend the essence of God.

Thus the proponents of what Lossky calls the “subjective unknowability of God”, Clement, Origen, and Eunomius, are contrasted with the Cappadocian Fathers, Dionysius, and other patristic writers of unblemished orthodoxy as the advocates of the “objective unknowability of God”, that is, the view that God’s essence cannot be known in principle, even by the deified intellect. The CD becomes, on Lossky’s reading, a “dogmatic basis” for the distinction, already inherent in the thought of the Cappadocian Fathers and most fully developed by Gregory Palamas, between the unknowable essence and the uncreated, but cognitively accessible, energies of God.

Lossky’s aim is to show the profound continuity between Dionysius and Palamas. For the purpose of this largely apologetic task Lossky makes Dionysius appear more orthodox than he really was. Although dependent upon Proclus (Lossky more often speaks of Plotinus in this context), Dionysius is credited with modifying the Neoplatonic scheme by making both Trinity and oneness equally inapplicable to the superessence of God. Lossky adds that Dionysian apophaticism does not relativize the trinitarian distinctions, which inhere in the divine essence. In defense of this claim, which on the surface appears to be in tension with the CD’s radical apophaticism, he points to the Dionysian distinction between the “unified names”, such as power and goodness, which apply to the Godhead as a whole, and the “differentiated names” of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which refer to the divine persons. Recent scholarship seems to support the main thrust of Lossky’s interpretation.

In Lossky’s scheme the term “Western” has a very strong connotation of “doctrinally questionable”. (As the reader may recall, for Yannaras, the “West” also stands for everything that is wrong with theology in general). In other words, a complex geopolitical category has been transformed into the criterion of truth. Lossky’s Neopalamite synthesis may be represented by the three concentric circles of ever-increasing doctrinal rigidity. The larger circle would contain all patristic and Byzantine authors and would exclude all Western authors after the Great Schism of 1054. The smaller circle would include all Eastern Fathers of unblemished orthodoxy and would exclude all those regarded by the Church as heterodox. Finally, the third circle would encompass select doctrinally acceptable Eastern Christian mystical theologians with Dionysius in the center.

One feature of the Neopalamite synthesis stands out as particularly pertinent for the present study: Dionysian mystical theology, from which the roads have historically led to most daring speculations (for example, those of Meister Eckhart and John Scotus Eriugena), is turned, after much apologetic
effort, into the standard of orthodoxy. Dionysian Hellenism is treated as successfully Christianized, whereas Origenism is dismissed as “Platonic intellectualism and spiritualism alien to the spirit of the gospel”.45

Lossky’s apportionment of blame upon the heretics and praise upon the orthodox theologians is not likely to gain him much credibility among contemporary patristic scholars. Lossky alternatively presents the following view as an a priori theological assumption and as a result of historical inquiry: “doctrinal tradition—beacons set up by the Church along the channel of the knowledge of God—cannot be separated from or opposed to mystical tradition: acquired experience of the mysteries of the faith. Dogma cannot be understood apart from experience; the fullness of experience cannot be had apart from true doctrine”.46 Lossky took the CD to be a paradigmatic case of how theosis can lead to the heights of speculative theology.

For better or for worse, Lossky’s impact on the Western understanding of the normative boundaries and experiential character of Eastern Orthodox theology has been significant, although somewhat exaggerated. This is all the more surprising, if one realizes just how novel Lossky’s choice of theological friends and enemies was. As Ysabel de Andia observes, “il était devenu banal de dire […] que Denys a plus influence l’Occident que l’Orient, la position se renverse avec Vladimir Lossky qui fait de Denys le modèle de la théologie mystique de l’Église d’Orient”.47 If Dionysius was for Lossky the synthesis of patristic tradition and the “dogmatic basis” of Byzantine theology, another influential Orthodox churchman, Alexander Schmemann (1921–1983) could write The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy (1963) without as much as mentioning Dionysius!

John Meyendorff

While working within the same master narrative, John Meyendorff attempts to break free of the confines of Lossky’s Dogmengeschichte. In his own approach to doctrinal history, Meyendorff follows the main contours of the same historical narrative leading from the early Fathers to Gregory Palamas. In contrast to Lossky, however, Meyendorff moves the focus of the Palamite master narrative from mystical theology to Christology. Dionysian Christology, as is generally admitted, leaves many questions unanswered.48 Hence, it is to be expected that in Meyendorff’s version of Neopalamism, Dionysius loses his status as the “dogmatic basis” of Byzantine theology (Lossky’s classification) to take the backstage and at times even to be turned into an anti-hero. In his early work, Christ in Eastern Christian Thought (1969), Meyendorff writes: “If [Dionysius] was successful in the area of theologia, his success was much more questionable in the realms of cosmology and ecclesiology, in which the absence of common Christological references made illusory his effort to bridge completely the gap between the Gospel and neo-Platonism”.49
One of the enduring critical questions that Meyendorff pursued throughout all of his works on Byzantine theology is the relationship between the expressions of Christian thought and practice on the one hand and the intellectual structures of Hellenism on the other hand. Meyendorff follows Florovsky in turning the Harnackian thesis on its head: instead of viewing the history of dogma as a sad saga of the pernicious Hellenization of Christianity, both Russian historians describe the same process as the Christianization of Hellenism. In Florovsky’s judgment, it is not patristic theology that needs to be de-Hellenized, but it is rather post-Palamite Orthodox theology that needs to rediscover Christian Hellenism through the Fathers. While Florovsky and Lossky at times tend to smooth the rough edges of this development in order to present the orthodox Fathers in the best possible light, Meyendorff is not as invested as they are in apologetics.

Meyendorff recognizes that the struggle between non-Christian and Christian intellectual currents in Hellenism was prolonged and at times acrimonious. Origen’s attempt at Christianizing Platonism represents one of the earliest stages of this process. But a historical theologian—and this is Meyendorff’s remarkable insight—should not freeze Origen’s alleged failures in time, but consider how Origenism was in turn reworked, partially rejected, and more fully Christianized by the later Fathers. Unlike Lossky, Meyendorff does not present Origen as a failure and Dionysius as a success in the story of the gradual Christianization of Platonism. For Meyendorff, both of them in some respects failed and in other respects were successful.

In Meyendorff’s view, Dionysius’ endorsement of the hierarchical structure of the Neoplatonic universe is problematic, because it tends to obscure the centrality of God’s unmediated becoming man in the incarnation. It also leads Dionysius to a somewhat arbitrary taxonomy of the nine angelic orders, which has “no foundation in Scripture”. Still Meyendorff credits Dionysius with having initiated the process of baptizing the hierarchical conception of cosmos by making the hierarchy of being a feature of the created order, not an outcome of the noetic fall, as it was for Origen. In this respect, Dionysius moves one step beyond Origen in Christianizing Neoplatonism.

While criticizing Harnack’s Hellenization thesis, in his own approach Meyendorff is equally preoccupied with showing the distinctiveness of Christian theology. Following Lossky, Meyendorff unduly emphasizes the differences between Neoplatonic and Dionysian theological epistemologies. The Neoplatonists are (wrongly) credited with the view that it is possible for the purified human intellect to know the essence of God. For Dionysius, as we saw earlier with Bulgakov and Lossky, God is absolutely incomprehensible in his essence, not due to any creaturely limitations. In ecstatic experience God reveals himself to the deified mind as surpassing all knowledge and understanding. Meyendorff holds that these epistemic and ontological differences enable Dionysian apophaticism to point to the

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reality of the living God of scripture, not the knowable God of the philosophers. In assuming such a sharp dichotomy between the *deus philosophorum*, which can be conceptually grasped, and the “biblical” *deus absconditus*, Meyendorff comes dangerously close to Harnack’s methodological dichotomy between the gospel and Hellenism, meanwhile consistently questioning Harnack’s historical conclusions. Both scholars start with the presupposition that to be authentically Christian a given doctrine must be dissimilar from anything recognizably Hellenic.

Meyendorff finds Dionysius’ theology in need of further correction in the area of ecclesiology. He claims that Dionysius’ conception of celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies is static and artificial. Dionysius’ attempt to correlate the three stages of the spiritual progress—purification, illumination, and perfection—with the threefold ministerial orders of deacons, priests, and “hierarchs” (Dionysius’ preferred term for bishops) does not correspond well to their liturgical functions in the Church of his time. The most serious problem is that “the relationships between God and man are conceived in a purely individualistic manner and are completely determined by the system of intermediaries”.

More damaging is Meyendorff’s critique that Dionysius’ liturgical theology reduces the material objects used in ritual activity to the symbols of higher, immaterial reality. According to Meyendorff, Dionysius’ theology of the Eucharist is insufficiently Christological and incarnational. In his later work Meyendorff became increasingly more critical of the CD and found Dionysius’ “static” hierarchical vision and symbolic liturgical theology responsible for what the Russian historian saw as the Byzantine abuses of earlier patristic practices, including clericalism. Along similar lines, Paul Wesche argues that the CD fails to account for the soteriological significance of the transformation of the human body and material creation and, in the final analysis, “renders superfluous the incarnation of Christ”.

Similarly negative conclusions have been a part of the Protestant and Roman Catholic readings of the CD for quite some time. Meyendorff’s and Wesche’s criticism provoked two other Orthodox scholars, Alexander Golitzin and Eric Perl, to attempt to restore Dionysius to the diptychs. Eric Perl aims to meet Wesche’s criticism by arguing that Dionysius’ symbolic ontology offers a sacramental vision of the world, since the entire cosmos participates in the divine energies. Perl writes:

Dionysius represents precisely those doctrines which are most typical of Orthodoxy in distinction from the west: creation as theophany; grace as continuous with nature; knowledge as union of knower and known; Incarnation and sacrament as fulfillment, not exception or addition; liturgy as the realization of the cosmos; mysticism as ontological union rather than psychological condition; sin as corruption and loss of being, not legalistic transgression; atonement as physical-ontological
assumption, not justification or juridical satisfaction; hierarchy as service and love, not oppression and envy.\textsuperscript{57}

While the precise correlation between the Dionysian participatory metaphysics of symbols and sacramental realism remains debatable, it is clear that the inclusion of the CD into the Orthodox tradition has historically required from John of Scythopolis, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory Palamas, and others, and continues to require, much apologetic effort.

Conclusion

The reception of the CD into the bosom of Byzantine theology may be compared to the impact that the famous Grecian horse had on Troy: \textit{timeo Danaos et dona ferentes}.\textsuperscript{58} If I may be permitted to paraphrase Virgil, \textit{timeo Dionysium et dona ferentem}. Beware of Dionysius, even if he brings gifts! The reception of the Dionysian gifts into Eastern Orthodox theology has been intertwined with an uneasy quest for its modern identity. While both Lossky and Meyendorff are in agreement that Dionysius is better understood if read through the eyes of Palamas, not through the eyes of Aquinas, they come to very different conclusions. For Lossky, Dionysian mystical theology points to the experiential ground of all theological discourse. Dionysian mystical theology is turned into the criterion of earlier patristic thought on the knowledge of God and the “dogmatic ground” of Byzantine theology. Along with the Cappadocian Fathers, Dionysius is also viewed as the mastermind of the foundational distinction between the unknowable essence and the knowable energies of God. To borrow Luther’s expression to make an un-Lutheran point, Dionysian apophaticism is, in Lossky’s master narrative, \textit{articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae}.

Meyendorff agrees with Lossky that Dionysius’ religious epistemology does not fall into some of the traps into which earlier Christian Platonists, such as Clement and Origen, fell. The historical signposts of Meyendorff’s account are the same: the selective emphasis upon the Greek patristic authorities culminating in the “Palamite synthesis” of the fourteenth century. However, since Meyendorff’s organizing theme is the development of Christology, in contrast to Lossky’s and Bulgakov’s emphasis on mystical theology, Dionysius’ role changes from that of “the true father of mysticism” (Bulgakov) and “dogmatic ground” (Lossky) to that of \textit{enfant terrible} in need of baptism with much water. Lossky regards Dionysian Platonism as authentically Christian. For Meyendorff and his followers the matter is more complex: Dionysius’ system, while it continues the Christianization of Platonism, requires a “Christological corrective”, provided by Maximus the Confessor and Palamas, among others.

Russian sophiology represents a different way of thinking through the metaphysical implications of integrating Neoplatonic idealism and incarnation. Sophiology, while correctly emphasizing the sacramentality of material
creation, takes a different form of religious experience as paradigmatic. In sophianic mysticism the images of divine beauty are not superseded by the utterly imageless and ineffable experience of God, a distinguishing feature of Dionysian apophaticism. Nor are Bulgakov and Berdyaev preoccupied with offering a normative metanarrative of Eastern Orthodox theology, purified of Western influences, as are Lossky and Meyendorff. The scope of Bulgakov’s and Berdyaev’s interests is broader and is less conditioned by the rigid dichotomy between the theologically orthodox East and the heterodox West. Both of them are prepared to admit that mystical theology and doctrinal orthodoxy were sometimes at odds with each other.

In contrast to Berdyaev, Meyendorff claims, following Lossky, that “Byzantium never knew any conflict, not even a polarization between theology and what the West calls ‘mysticism’” . Both Lossky and Meyendorff turn the normative claim about the ideal relationship between mystical theology and dogmatic theology into a descriptive generalization about the historical development of Byzantine theology. Such a conflation of theological desideratum with what purports to be a historical description is a peculiar temptation of the Orthodox reading of the patristic past.

Lossky, and Yannaras, are deeply invested in “de-Westernizing” Dionysius and presenting his theology as an authentic form of Christian Hellenism. In my judgment, these apologetic preoccupations, on the one hand, make these scholars turn a blind eye to the CD’s more problematic features and, on the other hand, allow the quest for historical and theological truth to be driven by the quest for Orthodox theological identity vis-à-vis the Christian West.

Dionysius himself, however, appears to have been more interested in seeking truth, rather than identity labels: “As far as I am concerned I have never spoken out against the Greeks or any others. In my view, good men are satisfied to know and to proclaim as well as they can the truth itself as it really is.” For Dionysius truth-seeking was far too important to be subordinated to some other task, even the legitimate quest for one’s religious identity in an intellectually fractured world.

**NOTES**

1 For a discussion of this issue, see Andrew Louth’s first contribution to this volume.
3 Considerations of space will not allow treating the important contributions of Paul Wesche, Andrew Louth, Eric Perl, and Alexander Golitzin here.
5 I am aware of the postmodern objections to the legitimacy of the distinction between identity and truth claims. I would argue that these objections are self-referentially and performatively contradictory, but I cannot enter into the details of this argument here.
7 An alternative English rendering of this term is “divine humanity”. I prefer “Godmanhood”, to keep the term etymologically close to “Godman” (Bogochelovek).


9 MT 5, 1048A.

10 Svet Nevechernii, p. 130.

11 Svet Nevechernii, p. 105.


14 Bulgakov’s contemporary Semen Frank developed, in a deeply original way, the idea that every act of cognition is surrounded by a transrational ocean of incomprehensible reality in his Nepostizhimoe [The Incomprehensible] (Paris, 1939).

15 Svet Nevechernii, p. 130.


18 Freedom and the Spirit, p. 258.


21 See Ep. 3, 1069B.


23 The first study that fleshed out this agenda was Florovsky’s influential The Ways of Russian Theology (1937). Berdyaev aptly dubbed this book “the waywardness (besput’e) of Russian theology”, since Florovsky’s goal was largely negative: to show that Russian theology has abandoned its patristic foundations.

24 For Lossky’s interpretation of Dionysius’ apophaticism, see A. Papanikolaou, Being with God, pp. 12–25.


27 Mystical Theology, in In the Image and Likeness of God, p. 26. See DN 1. 1, 588B; 7. 3, 872A.

28 Mystical Theology, pp. 38–39.


33 On the Absence and Unknowability of God, p. 28. Dumitrou Staniloae offers a particularly uncompromising version of this position: “If Roman Catholic theology reduces all the knowledge of God to knowledge from a distance, Eastern theology reduces it to a theology of participation in various degrees which are ascended through purification”, The Experience of God, trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), p. 112.

34 On the Absence and Unknowability of God, pp. 71, 87.


36 On the Absence and Unknowability of God, p. 73.


38 The Vision of God (Bedfordshire: The Faith Press, 1973), p. 103. Lossky finds in the CD a form of the doctrine of the spiritual senses, but does not discuss any specific texts.

39 Lossky quotes Clement’s statement that salvation and the knowledge of God are “absolutely identical” and then proceeds to argue against the text: “Whatever Clement may say, the contemplation of God and eternal salvation are actually separate here, if only in thought”, The Vision of God, p. 45. Lossky’s exegetical faux pas is followed by John Meyendorff, Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1983; first published in 1974), p. 13.


41 The Image and Likeness of God, p. 35.


46 Mystical Theology, p. 236.

47 Y. de Andia, Henosis, p. 452.


49 Christ in Eastern Christian Thought, p. 100.


51 Christ in Eastern Christian Thought, p. 102; Byzantine Theology, p. 28.

The charge of individualism was later addressed by Andrew Louth in his monograph *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), pp. 18, 131–133. Louth reconstructs the social and liturgical context of the CD’s theology and argues that the concept of the hierarchy presupposes the interdependence and harmonious connection of lower and higher orders. The hierarchy is constituted by the members of the church and, more broadly conceived, comprises the whole cosmos. Hence, the claim that Dionysian mystical theology is individualistic is without serious foundation.


Virgil, *Aeneid* II. 49.


*Ep. 7. 1, 1077C.*