Archpriest Georgii Vasil’evich Florovsky (1893–1979) is commonly credited with initiating a return to the Fathers in twentieth-century Orthodox theology. For Florovsky, Christian Hellenism was the norm by which all modern theological proposals were to be judged. He believed that Western influences upon modern Russian theology led to dangerous distortions and to the “Babylonian captivity” of Orthodox life and thought. Consequently, he offered his neopatristic synthesis as a reform program for Russian émigré theology. In his writings, the neopatristic synthesis emerged as an inspired vision intended to chart the only authentic direction of Orthodox theology.

Though neopatristic synthesis was the guiding vision connecting all aspects of his scholarship, from Russian studies to ecumenical work, Florovsky never developed this vision into a comprehensive theological system.¹ He did not produce anything comparable in scope to Sergii Bulgakov’s major trilogy On Godmanhood or Vladimir Lossky’s The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church. He was too much of a historian of ideas to complete a systematic theology. Most of Florovsky’s theological works are historically structured; his historical expositions, in turn, are theologically driven.

In this paper, I discuss the polemical motivations and the constructive aspirations of Florovsky’s retrieval of the Fathers. To throw the neopatristic synthesis into a sharp relief, I consider Florovsky’s program against the background of the major social, intellectual, and ecclesial currents of his time. I also discuss how his engagement with the Eurasian movement in-

Florovsky’s Neopatristic Synthesis and the Future Ways of Orthodox Theology

Paul L. Gavrilyuk
fluenced his thinking about the ways of Russian theology. I argue that there are considerable methodological parallels between Adolf von Harnack’s account of the Hellenization of early Christian theology and Florovsky’s account of the Westernization of Russian theology, and, I identify the limitations of Florovsky’s appeal to the normativity of Christian Hellenism. I then conclude by suggesting two directions in which Florovsky’s vision takes Orthodox theology today.

**Florovsky’s Participation in the Eurasian Movement**

Florovsky was born in 1893 in the southern Ukrainian city of Elizavetgrad (modern Kirovograd), which then was a part of the Russian Empire. His family was both clerical and well educated. His father combined his priestly duties with seminary teaching and administration. At the age of eighteen, Georges Florovsky had plans to enter the Moscow Theological Academy in Sergiev Posad, and even corresponded with Fr. Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), who then was assistant professor at the Academy, seeking his advice and assistance in the matter. Unfortunately, for health reasons Florovsky had to abandon these plans and pursue his undergraduate education closer to home, at the University of Odessa. Florovsky’s well-rounded college education included natural sciences, law, history of philosophy, psychology, physiology, and languages, but not religion. In theological subjects Florovsky was entirely self-educated. It should be noted that Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergii Bulgakov, the two leading minds of the older generation, were equally unspoiled by the formal theological education imparted in the prerevolutionary Russian Orthodox seminaries.

Young Florovsky was both conversant with, and yet felt an outsider to, the main currents of the Russian Silver Age. At the age of sixteen Florovsky fell under the spell of Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), whose religious philosophy and poetry had been a major inspiration for the generation of Bulgakov and Berdiaev. Soloviev cast many of his philosophical arguments in the form of the history of ideas. Florovsky found this approach to be quite congenial: The history of ideas, be it patristic thought or Russian intellectual history, was both his first love and his scholarly forte. In the spirit of Soloviev and German Idealism, Florovsky would come to describe his own project as a synthesis. While the spell of the father of Russian sophiology did not last very long—Florovsky’s first bibliographic essay already shows a fairly critical assessment of Soloviev’s
religious philosophy—it is clear that Soloviev provided a major impetus for Florovsky's further studies in Russian intellectual history.5

In 1920, during the Red Army's occupation of Crimea, Florovsky's family decided to leave Russia, never to return to the country again. Florovsky would spend the second third of his life in Western Europe and the last third in the United States. He shared the experience of dislocation with religious thinkers of an older generation, including Berdiaev, Bulgakov, S. Frank, and numerous others who were forced to leave Russia in the early 1920s. In the first issue of an influential émigré journal Put' (The Way) its editor Berdiaev described this experience succinctly and aphoristically: "Russian dispersion is a unique phenomenon. In its scope it can only be compared to the Jewish Diaspora."6

Berdiaev's apt analogy could be extended further. For the ancient Israelites, the profound historical trauma of the Babylonian exile provided an impetus for the recording, selection, and preservation of the Torah and prophetic writings. The exile and its aftermath forced the Jewish people to articulate their beliefs and practices into a canon of scripture and become especially concerned with the preservation of their religious identity. Similarly, the relocation to Western Europe, a different kind of exile, prompted the leaders of the Russian emigration to spend much of their energies reflecting on the Russian émigré community's distinct role and identity in the West. The meaning of the Russian past had acquired a greater existential significance now that Bolshevik Russia was building a future from which the Russian exiles had been excluded.

Florovsky began one of his first published essays with an observation that "The history of Russian thought had not been written yet."7 For the next quarter of a century, Florovsky was engaged in interpreting this history. His articles on Russian religious figures that appeared from 1912 to 1937 were the building blocks of his magnum opus, The Ways of Russian Theology, published in Paris on the eve of the Second World War. Florovsky's work followed a larger trend in Russian intellectual history, for it appeared in the same year with Berdiaev's Roots of Russian Communism, and a year after Fiodor Stepun's The Russian Soul and Revolution.8 This period was marked by several catastrophic events: the First World War, two Russian revolutions—the second of which brought the Bolsheviks to power—the subsequent banishment of a significant part of the Russian religious intelligentsia to Western Europe, and the emergence of Hitler's National Socialist Party in Germany. Along with many of his European
contemporaries, Florovsky shared a keen sense of living through a time of crisis. This sense would not leave him in the postwar years.9

The relocation to Western Europe also meant that the West was no longer a geographically distant reality. On the contrary, the West, its social institutions, its expressions of Christianity, and its modes of life, were now encountered as the unavoidable “Other.” In these new circumstances, many leaders of the emigration turned for inspiration to the paradigmatic debate in nineteenth-century Russia between the Westernizers and the Slavophiles. The Westernizers welcomed Russia’s integration with Europe, whereas the Slavophiles accentuated Russia’s unique destiny, distinct from that of the West. Upon his arrival to Europe, Florovsky joined the Eurasians, who to some extent followed the Slavophile trajectory in the new historical circumstances. The original Eurasian group included four young scholars: linguist and geographer prince Nikolai Trubetsky (b. 1890, Moscow, d. 1938, Vienna), geographer and economist Petr Savitsky (b. 1895, Chernigov, d. 1968, Prague), musicologist, pianist, literary critic, and philosopher Count Petr Suvchinsky (b. 1892, St. Petersburg, d. 1985, Paris), and Florovsky himself. The Eurasian movement became public after the publication of the programmatic collection of essays, Exodus to the East.10 Florovsky contributed to this and the next two volumes published by the Eurasians, On the Ways and Russia and Latinity.11

The Eurasian movement aimed at becoming the future ideology of Russia-Eurasia. Its leaders hoped that in due course their political platform would replace the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The Eurasians emphasized the historical and cultural uniqueness of Russia-Eurasia and decried Russia’s Westernization.12 The Eurasians positioned themselves as relentless critics of the “rotten,” or decaying, West, an expression borrowed from Nikolai Danilevsky and the Slavophiles.13 Oswald Spengler’s The Decline of the West, the first volume of which appeared in 1918 and was widely read in émigré circles, also had an influence upon the Eurasian conception of the future of Western Europe.14 Spengler’s notion of cultural “pseudomorphosis” would play a major explanatory role in Florovsky’s analysis of Russian religious thought.

The polemics against “Latinity,” that is, Roman Catholicism, were a prominent feature of the Eurasian ideology. The Eurasians emphasized the differences between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. They insisted on the unity of the Orthodox Christians with the Asian peoples, in particular, with the Tartars. Their strongest attack against Roman
Catholicism was launched in the third Eurasian collection of essays, entitled, *Russia and Latinity* (1923). The introductory article of this volume advanced a claim that for the Orthodox believer in France to be converted to Roman Catholicism was worse than to be killed by the Bolsheviks in Communist Russia, on the grounds that the former led to the eternal perdition of the soul, whereas the latter caused merely a temporal destruction of the body. When this astonishing idea was criticized by Prince G. N. Trubetskoy on the pages of *Put’s*, the Eurasians promptly responded with an open letter in defense of their moral comparison of the repressive character of Bolshevism and Catholicism. Florovsky, who was one of the contributors to the Eurasian volume *Russia and Latinity*, had signed the open letter in question. In the same issue of *Put’s*, Florovsky also felt compelled to defend the Eurasian position against Berdiaev in a separate article. Hence, in the early 1920s, Florovsky must have shared, at least to some extent, the staunchly anti-Western and anti-Catholic views of his fellow Eurasians.

**The Waywardness of Russian Theology and the True Way of the Church Fathers**

During the Eurasian meeting in Berlin in 1926, Florovsky began to distance himself from the other leaders of the movement. The final break with the Eurasians was marked by Florovsky’s article, “The Eurasian Temptation” (*Evraziiskii Soblazn*), published in 1928. Retrospectively, Florovsky was inclined to emphasize that he had never completely agreed with the Eurasian agenda, especially its political side, even at the time of the movement’s inception. It is not clear, however, whether Florovsky’s memory served him well. Whatever the vagaries of Florovsky’s relationship with the Eurasian movement, Andrew Blain’s conclusion seems to be essentially on target: “Although Florovsky’s involvement with Eurasianism lasted little more than the two years he lived in Bulgaria, he remained under its shadow for several years to come.” Indeed, there is a connection between the anti-Western impulse of Eurasianism and the fundamental methodological assumption of *The Ways of Russian Theology*. The Eurasians claimed that the preservation of the unique national identity of Russia-Eurasia depended on Russia’s faithfulness to Eastern Orthodoxy. In contrast, they held that any rapprochement with the West would in the end distort Russia’s historical identity.
In his preface to *The Ways of Russian Theology*, Florovsky writes: “The study of the Russian past has convinced me that an Orthodox theologian today can find the true norm and the living spring of creative inspiration only in the heritage of the Holy Fathers. I am convinced that the intellectual separation from patristics and Byzantinism was the main cause of all interruptions and spiritual failures in Russian development. A history of these failures is narrated in this book.”

For Florovsky, the history of Russian religious thought is a drama in three main acts, with a drawn-out and largely silent prelude as well as a brief interlude. In the prelude, appropriately named “The Crisis of Russian Byzantinism,” medieval Russia makes a historically fateful decision to embrace Byzantine Orthodox Christianity, but then fails to engage its theology and remains theologically inarticulate for more than a half millennium. In “The Problem of Old Russian Culture,” Florovsky explains that the reason Byzantine theology did not “awaken [the] Russian soul” was because “Byzantium had offered too much at once—an enormous richness of cultural material that simply could not be absorbed at once . . . The heritage was too heavy and too perfect.” While Russia was able to appropriate Byzantine piety, asceticism, and iconography, it failed to draw creatively upon Byzantium’s theological heritage.

In the first act, which takes place in seventeenth-century Kiev, Russian thought experiences the first major pseudomorphosis consisting in “acute Latinization” of its theological education. Florovsky describes the impact of the Kievan metropolitan Peter Mohyla, the founder of the first theological school in Ukraine, in the following way:

Under Mohyla, the Western Russian Church comes out of its disarray and disorganization from which it suffered from the time of the Union of Brest. Yet everything is suffused with a foreign, Latin spirit . . . This was an acute Romanization of Orthodoxy, a Latin pseudomorphosis of Orthodoxy. A Latinizing school system was built on an empty spot; not only ritual and language, but also theology, worldview, and religious psychology became Latinized. The very soul of the people was Latinized.

This passage resounds with the harsh rhetorical condemnations of Latinity reminiscent of the Eurasian pamphlets. The inspiration here is precisely Eurasian, rather than Slavophile, since it is free from the Slavophile tendency to idealize Russian Orthodox folk piety as it existed in Russia.
before Peter the Great.²¹ Spengler’s notion of “pseudomorphosis” is here applied to the ethos of the Orthodox Church to emphasize that the new development was a distortion, a profound disruption of the ages-old modes of piety and patterns of theological thought.

In the second act, ushered in by the Petrine reforms of the early eighteenth century, Russia experiences a “Protestant pseudomorphosis of ecclesiastical life.”²² Among the indicators of such a pseudomorphosis is Peter’s abrogation of the office of the patriarch of Moscow and the justification of government absolutism in the writings of Bishop Theophan Prokopovitch. The Westernization of education in Russia’s theological schools now takes the form of Protestant influences.

A decade later, in his address at the formal opening of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, Florovsky summarizes the story of the first two pseudomorphoses thus:

The first theological schools in Russia, in the seventeenth century, were Latin by language and rather Romanizing in spirit—Aquinas and Cardinal Bellarmine were for a time regarded as one supreme authority. Later on came a sudden change and for the whole of the eighteenth century the theological teaching in Russian seminaries and academies was based on Protestant authorities [. . .] It was an abnormal “pseudomorphosis” of the Orthodox theology. But we have to keep in mind that it was the school theology that went astray—the worshipping Church kept close to the patristic tradition. A certain tension, divorce, and opposition between piety and teaching was the most unhappy outcome of this historical adventure. This tension and divorce were overcome to a great extent in the heroic struggles of the nineteenth century.²³

During a brief interlude, which Florovsky dates to the first part of the nineteenth century, Russian theological education in the person of Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow attempts to recover its Eastern identity by shaking off the Western theological approaches. Unfortunately, this period is short-lived. In the final act, ushered in by Vladimir Soloviev and continued by the promoters of the “new religious consciousness,” Orthodox theology was turned into a system of speculative metaphysics under the damaging influence of German Idealism.²⁴ While admitting that Soloviev’s religious philosophy had stimulated a religious ferment in Russia, Florovsky emphasizes that theological creativity was achieved at the ex-
pense of even greater estrangement from patristic and Byzantine theological tradition.

The assumption of the normativity of patristic theology appears fairly early in Florovsky’s writings, beginning with his review article of the literature on Vladimir Soloviev. As one would expect, Florovsky came to formulate this assumption with greater clarity in the course of his more sustained study of the Fathers. While continuing his work on *The Ways of Russian Theology*, Florovsky was also reading lectures in patristics at the newly founded St. Sergius’s Theological Institute in Paris.

The invitation to teach at St. Serge came from the school’s first dean, Sergii Bulgakov, who saw Florovsky as a promising young historian and, for a brief period, as his “spiritual son.” To accept Bulgakov’s offer, Florovsky, recently married, had to relocate with his wife from Prague to Paris. Florovsky hesitated: He was worried that his conservative theological views would not be well received by his senior colleagues at St. Serge; he also felt underprepared to teach patristics, since his previous academic work was in other areas (in Prague he defended a master’s thesis on Alexander Gertsen’s historical philosophy and subsequently taught the philosophy of law25). In the end, Bulgakov convinced Florovsky to come to St. Serge, assuring him that with his talent and command of languages he would soon gain the requisite expertise in Church history.26 Florovsky proved a remarkably quick learner; the first volume of his patristics lectures, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, was published in Paris in 1931, about five years after he had assumed his post at St. Serge.

In the introduction to the volume, Florovsky states: “I believe and know that only patristic theology opens the right and sure way to the new Christian synthesis, which is being craved and desired so much in our time.”27 Florovsky’s lectures on patristic theology were not merely a historical study but also a theological manifesto. When he studied the Fathers, he thought of the waywardness of Russian theology.28 In turn, when he read Russian authors, he put them on trial, measuring them constantly against the (rarely articulated) patristic norm. It is as if his patristics lectures and his *Ways of Russian Theology* were engaged in a constant dialogue with each other.

The titles of the two communications that Florovsky delivered at the First Congress of Orthodox Theologians in Athens in 1936 are especially telling in this regard. The first communication, entitled “Western Influences in Russian Theology,” presents the negative conclusions of *The Ways of
*Russian Theology* in a condensed form, while the second communication, entitled “Patristics and Modern Theology,” is an impassioned appeal to go “back to the Fathers” in order to liberate modern Orthodox theology from its Western captivity.²⁹ It is ironic that a Russian theologian, born in the southern Ukraine and residing in France, would come to Greece to deliver his first communication in German and his second communication in English in order to protest the “Western captivity” of Orthodox theology. One might be inclined to think that such a theologian “doth protest too much.”

Florovsky’s two volumes of patristic lectures and *The Ways of Russian Theology* constitute a trilogy of sorts: the “right and sure” way is charted in the first two volumes; the ways of errors and failures, the ways of interruptions and distortions, are criticized in the last volume. It is telling that Florovsky’s exposition of Byzantine theology breaks off in the eighth century, right at the point when the story of Russia’s conversion to Christianity is about to begin.

**Florovsky’s Westernization and Harnack’s Hellenization**

Methodologically, but not in content, Florovsky’s account of the Westernization of Orthodox theology bears a rather unexpected similarity to Adolph von Harnack’s (1851–1930) approach to the process of early Christianity’s Hellenization. According to Harnack’s *Dogmengeschichte*, Hellenization amounts to a corruption of the original message of the gospel by Greek metaphysics. Jesus preached the simple message of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men.³⁰ The Church had distorted this message by attempting to fit it into an alien philosophical framework, resulting in the especially pernicious doctrines of incarnation and deification. Gnosticism was a product of what Harnack called “acute Hellenization.” The theology of the Church Fathers did not fare much better in comparison, since it, too, was the result of a more gradual, but equally damaging, impact of Hellenization. The original message of the gospel was obfuscated, corrupted, and distorted. The task of a Church historian was to “overcome dogma by history.” The study of the history of dogma spelled the end of dogma. One studied doctrinal history in order to intervene in the course of history by purging biblical Christianity of the alien accretions of metaphysical Hellenism.

Florovsky’s appeal to the normative character of Christian Hellenism was a polemic against Harnack’s grand narrative of Hellenization. In a
programmatic essay “Christianity and Civilization,” published in the first volume of a newly founded journal, *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* (as it was originally called), Florovsky expounds his notion of Christian Hellenism and points out his fundamental disagreement with Harnack in no uncertain terms:

It was a “New Hellenism,” but a Hellenism drastically christened and, as it were, “churchified.” It is still usual to suspect the Christian quality of this new synthesis. Was it not just an “acute Hellenization” of the “Biblical Christianity,” in which the whole novelty of the Revelation had been diluted and dissolved? Was not this new synthesis simply a disguised Paganism? This was precisely the considered opinion of Adolf Harnack. Now, in the light of an unbiased historical study, we can protest most strongly against this simplification. Was not that which the nineteenth-century historians used to describe as an “Hellenization of Christianity” rather a Conversion of Hellenism? And why should Hellenism not have been converted? The Christian reception of Hellenism was not just a servile absorption of an undigested heathen heritage. It was rather a conversion of the Hellenic mind and heart.

Florovsky’s Christian Hellenism was hardly a product of “unbiased historical study.” Clearly, Florovsky offers a highly selective and idealized exposition of Christian Hellenism in response to Harnack’s equally uncompromising denunciation of Hellenized Christianity. If Harnack advocated a de-Hellenization of Protestant theology, Florovsky, on the contrary, proposes a re-Hellenization of Orthodoxy. Considered from this vantage point, Florovsky is Harnack’s theological antipode.

However, methodologically, the two historians had much in common: Westernization in Florovsky’s equally devastating criticism of Russian religious thought played an explanatory function akin to that which Harnack accorded to Hellenization. Both German and Russian historians saw the theology of a specific period as a timeless criterion by means of which all later theologies were to be judged. Harnack restricted such a period to the time of “primitive” or “biblical” Christianity. Florovsky’s much broader historical horizon includes the theology of the Greek Church Fathers up to the time of Gregory Palamas. For Florovsky, “the teaching of the Fathers is a permanent category of Christian faith, a constant and ultimate measure or criterion of right belief.”
Harnack interpreted the development of Christian doctrine in the post-
postolic period as a corruption of the original gospel. Florovsky makes a
similar interpretative move by condemning the history of Russian religious
thought as a story of interruptions and failures, indeed a story of pseudo-
morphosis and corruption of the Byzantine theology by various Western
influences. Like Harnack, who distinguished between acute and gradual
Hellenization, Florovsky speaks of an acute and less severe “Latinization”
of Russian theology.

Harnack’s theological purpose in writing *Dogmengeschichte* was to pu-
rify German Lutheran theology at the turn of the twentieth century from
non-biblical accretions. Harnack fought the Lutheran confessional Scho-
lasticism of his time. The historian, on this view, was a heroic and pro-
phetic figure, someone who announced a new theological paradigm, the
liberation from dogma. As I showed earlier, Florovsky turns to the Fathers
in order to rescue contemporary Orthodox theology from its Western cap-
tivity, to overcome the Western pseudomorphosis of Russian Orthodoxy.

As noted by John Meyendorff, and well documented by Alexis Kli-
moff, the background of Florovsky’s work in patristics is his tireless po-
lemic against the sophiological trend in modern Russian theology. If
Harnack was a consistent anti-Hellenist, Florovsky is an unbending anti-
sophiologist. Florovsky is convinced that the advocates of a “new religious
consciousness,” who counted among themselves Nikolai Berdiaev, Sergii
Bulgakov, Semen Frank, Georgii Ivanov, and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii,
were profoundly misled by their Western sources. To return to my com-
parison, both Harnack and Florovsky wrote their respective histories with
a view of reforming the theology of their contemporaries.

According Harnack, any mixture of Christianity with Hellenism led to
the aberration of the gospel. Harnack discounted even the possibility that
Christianized Hellenism could retain continuity with the original mes-
 sage of Jesus. The inevitable implication of Harnack’s position was that
Hellenism simply could not be Christianized. Similar to Harnack, Floro-
 vsky holds that the encounter between Russian Orthodoxy and the West
had led to a slavish imitation of Western patterns of thought and danger-
  ous distortions of Byzantine Christianity. An encounter with the West in
which Eastern Orthodoxy would not be subject to pseudomorphosis,
while possible in principle, was yet to occur.

The concluding chapter of *The Ways of Russian Theology* addresses this
matter with the following promissory note:
The future polemical [obelichitel’noe] theology must offer a historio-
sophic explanation of Western religious tragedy. This tragedy must
be experienced as our own, in order to manifest its possible catharsis
in the fullness of ecclesial experience, in the fullness of patristic heri-
tage. In this new, sought-after Orthodox synthesis, ages-old experi-
ence of the Catholic West must be accounted for with greater diligence
and sympathy than has been done in our theology before. This does
not mean that we should borrow or accept Roman doctrines, or oth-
wise imitate Romanism.37

If there was to be a new encounter with the West, such an encounter had
to happen on an equal footing and without slavish imitation.

In practice, however, Florovsky continues to maintain a guarded atti-
utude towards Western thought and shows little interest in undertaking
the program of “the possible catharsis of Western theology in the fullness
of Orthodox ecclesial experience.” A decade later, Florovsky, now an in-
fluential voice in the ecumenical movement, notes with satisfaction the
success of his program at the formal rededication of St. Vladimir’s Ortho-
dox Theological Seminary:

The Orthodox theology has, in recent decades, been speedily recov-
ering from the unhappy “pseudomorphosis,” by which it was para-
lyzed for rather too long. But to regain once more its own Eastern
style and temper must mean for the Orthodox theology no detach-
ment from the rest of the Christian world. What is to be rejected
and repudiated in the Westernizing school of Orthodox theology
is its blind subservience to the foreign traditions of the school, and
not its response to the challenge of other traditions, and not the
fraternal appreciation of what has been achieved by the others. All
riches of the Orthodox tradition can be disclosed and consum-
"med only in a standing intercourse with the whole of the Chris-
tian world. The East must face and meet the challenge of the West,
and the West perhaps has to pay more attention to the legacy of the
East, which after all was always meant to be an ecumenical and
catholic message.38

In this speech, Florovsky offers a captivating and prophetic vision of
the meeting of the East and the West as equal partners in theological
dialogue.
The Limitations of Christian Hellenism

Despite this glorious vision, which encompassed “fraternal appreciation of what has been achieved by others,” Florovsky’s own theological attention is largely focused on the heritage of the Greek Fathers. In his writings, he repeatedly stresses that it is this heritage, not any other, that possesses a lasting significance. In 1936, he provokes much discussion among the Orthodox theologians gathered at the Congress in Athens by issuing the following appeal:

In a sense the Church itself is Hellenistic, is a Hellenistic formation,—or in other words, Hellenism is a standing category of the Christian existence. . . And thus any theologian must pass an experience of a spiritual hellenisation (or re-hellenisation). . . . Many shortcomings in the modern developments of Orthodox Churches depend greatly upon the loss of this hellenistic spirit. And the creative postulate for the next future would be like this: let us be more Greek to be truly catholic, to be truly Orthodox.39

Florovsky was not inclined to nuance his position over time. About twenty years later, in 1957, Florovsky addresses the Greek-American readers of The Orthodox Observer with a passionate appeal that sounds like a variation on the same theme: “The task of our time, in the Orthodox world, is to rebuild the Christian-Hellenic culture, not of the relics and memories of the past, but out of the perennial spirit of our Church, in which the values of culture were truly ‘christened.’ Let us be more ‘Hellenic’ in order that we may be truly Christian.”40

Christian Hellenism is here offered as a universal, transcultural norm of authentic Christian identity in all times and places. Incited by the slogan “let us be more Greek in order to be truly Orthodox,” the minds lacking Florovsky’s cosmopolitan upbringing would be tempted to conflate ethnic and religious identity. Taken out of its context, such a slogan may be misread as an invitation to ecclesial triumphalism, ethnic isolationism, and a certain phobia of the religious “Other”—mental attitudes that the ecumenically engaged Florovsky would have been the first to criticize.

One could ask, if Christian Hellenism is the only form of authentic Christianity, what is one to make of the existence of other cultural expressions of Christianity, for example, the one represented by the Latin Fathers? Florovsky gives a baffling answer: “What is the difference [between East
and West]? Here I, first of all, offer one of my ‘heresies.’ I believe that the early period of Christian theology, sometimes described as patristic, was purely and thoroughly Hellenic, Hellenistic, Greek, and that Latin patristics [had] never existed.” 41 The astonishing claim that “Latin patristics [had] never existed” is bound to raise questions even among the most ardent Hellenophiles. Making a generous allowance for rhetorical exaggeration, we may interpret what Florovsky here calls his “heresy” in light of what he says in the already mentioned address at the rededication of St. Vladimir’s Seminary:

For several centuries Christendom has been united in theology, under the uncontested lead of the Greek Fathers and masters. Western theology up to St. Augustine was basically Greek, though in Latin dress: St. Hilary, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, all of them were but interpreters of the Greek tradition, and even St. Augustine himself was deeply Hellenistic in mind. Tertullian also fits easily into the same Hellenistic frame. 42

The predilection for sweeping generalizations, the tendency to reduce the contributions of recognized thinkers to “influences,” which was so prominent in The Ways of Russian Theology, also finds expression in Florovsky’s attempt to fit the Latin Fathers “into the same Hellenistic frame.” It appears that it is precisely on this assumption that Florovsky draws upon the theological insights of Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome, Augustine, Vincent of Lérins, and other Latin patristic authors.

We should stress the asymmetry in Florovsky’s evaluation of the theological contributions of the East and the West. Arnold Toynbee argued that the Christian West was a separate “intelligible world” which could be understood independently from the Christian East. 43 Against Toynbee, Florovsky maintains that the theology of the Eastern (read: “Greek”) Fathers was a common foundation both for the East and for the West. On this reading, the Christian patristic East possessed a degree of self-sufficiency and comprehensiveness that could not be claimed by the West. 44 Florovsky believes that the theology of the Latin Fathers, in the final analysis, derived from that of the Greek Fathers. In contrast, all forms of Western theology after the Great Schism of 1054 represented various deviations from the Greek patristic norm. It followed that all Western theologies were culture bound; Christian Hellenism alone had a universal value. 45
Given Florovsky’s peculiar contention that the Latin patristic tradition (up to Augustine) is a species of Christian Hellenism, it is understandable why his St. Serge lectures on patristics do not contain separate chapters discussing the distinctive contributions of the Latin Fathers. To remind the reader, the two volumes of his lectures were published under the titles *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century* and *The Eastern Fathers of the Fifth–Eighth Centuries*. Actually, the titles could just as well be *The Greek Fathers of the Fourth Century* and *The Greek Fathers of the Fifth–Eighth Centuries*, since the non-Greek Eastern theologians did not fair much better than their Latin counterparts. For example, his discussion of the Syriac Fathers, relegated to the last and shortest chapter of the first volume, is hurried and dismissive.46

We have solid grounds for believing that these rather eccentric views remained dear to Florovsky till the end of his life. In his “Theological Will,” recently published by Andrew Blane, Florovsky sums up one of his guiding convictions thus:

Salvation has come “from the Jews,” and has been propagated in the world in Greek idiom. Indeed, to be Christian means to be Greek, since our basic authority is forever a Greek book, the New Testament. [The] Christian message has been forever formulated in Greek categories. This was in no sense a blunt reception of Hellenism as such, but a dissection of Hellenism. The old had to die, but the new was still Greek—the Christian Hellenism of our dogmatics, from the New Testament to St. Gregory Palamas, nay, to our own time. I am personally resolved to defend this thesis, and on two different fronts: against the belated revival of Hebraism and against all attempts to reformulate dogmas in categories of modern philosophies, whether German, Danish, or French (Hegel, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Teillard de Chardin) and of alleged Slavic mentality.47

What is one to make of the claim that “to be Christian means to be Greek,” which Florovsky repeats with troubling persistence? How should we interpret this surprising conflation of cultural and religious identity? Is Christian Hellenism a historical reality or a utopian reconstruction of a much more complicated past? In particular, should the Orthodox biblical scholars simply shrug their shoulders at the rediscovery of the Jewishness of Jesus? The proclamation of cultural hegemony of the properly converted Hellenism left Florovsky deaf to the ways in which revelation could
become incarnate in other cultures, including that of the ancient Hebrews. Are we meant to hide under the “sacred canopy” of Christian Hellenism from the philosophical problems raised this side of modernity? Should the Orthodox theologians simply ignore Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and others, on the grounds that these philosophers were not interested in the restoration of Christian Hellenism? It should be admitted that among the Orthodox, Florovsky’s rhetoric has at times provoked affirmative responses to these questions. When such responses are used to make curricular changes at the Orthodox seminaries, the consequences become dire.

The Enduring Value of the Neopatristic Synthesis

Yet it is also possible and, I would think, desirable, to take Florovsky’s vision in a quite different direction. I suggest that there is a second, alternative way of completing Florovsky’s neopatristic synthesis. At the heart of the neopatristic synthesis is not a mindless glorification of Hellas’s past, but the Church’s ongoing experience and proclamation of Christ. Christian Hellenism, as Florovsky uses the expression, is a paradigm for a comprehensive conversion of intellectual culture. Such a conversion is nothing less than a “dissection of Hellenism by the sword of the Word, of the Christian Revelation.”

Florovsky argues that in the process of undertaking such a conversion, the Church Fathers created a “new philosophy” which was quite distinct from anything that pagan Hellenistic philosophers had to offer. The ahistorical cosmism of the Greeks gave way to the mighty acts of God in history; the conception of a divinized eternal cosmos was replaced with the intuition of creaturehood, i.e., of the creature’s contingency and dependence upon God; the metaphysical primacy of the universal over the individual was challenged by Christianity’s emphasis on the uniqueness of persons; the determinist accounts of divine and human agency were rejected in order to safeguard God’s radical freedom in creation and redemption, as well as the human freedom to cooperate with the divine grace.

Florovsky takes this new philosophy to be a Christian philosophia perennis, a perennial philosophy, which incidentally was the title accorded to Aristotle’s system in Scholasticism. In contrast, Florovsky sees Western Scholastic theology as a species of insufficiently Christianized Hellenism (largely due to its overindulgence in the philosophy of Aristotle).
The same charge applied, mutatis mutandis, to German Idealism, in this case for the failure to sufficiently Christianize Plato.\textsuperscript{52} Hence, the deeper problem with modern Russian theology was not its Westernization per se. The problem was that, by adopting Western philosophies, Russian religious thinkers accepted a historical development of Hellenism that was inadequately Christianized, that is, did not do justice to the historical divine revelation received by the mind of the Church. In fact, the alleged flaws of pagan Hellenism—cosmism, panentheism, impersonalism, and determinism—are also, in Florovsky’s interpretation, the gravest errors of Russian sophiology.\textsuperscript{53}

Admittedly, the historical value of these sweeping generalizations is rather dubious. Florovsky might be a relentless critic of German Idealism, but he surely shares the Idealists’ predilection for grand historical narratives. Florovsky might be a persecutor of Romanticism in Russian thought, but he himself indulges, despite his protestations to the contrary, in romanticizing Hellenism. He theologizes history and historicizes theology. While engaging patristic thought he is constantly reaching after “a new synthesis,” a constructive vision that would enable contemporary Orthodox theology to properly reconnect with its patristic and Byzantine roots. He frequently emphasizes that merely repeating old patristic formulae is not enough. It is more important to capture the spirit than the letter of patristic writings. It is vital to share in what Florovsky calls “ecclesial experience.”

In an early essay, “The Father’s House,” Florovsky maintains that “Christianity is experience.”\textsuperscript{54} For Florovsky, “ecclesial experience” is a broad category referring to the appropriation of the historical divine revelation by the mind of the Church. Similarly to Lossky, Florovsky contrasts ecclesial or catholic (sobornyi) experience with the experience of divine reality found in the individualistic forms of Western mysticism. To participate in ecclesial experience is to overcome the subjectivity of private religious experience. Florovsky does not elaborate on how, precisely, this is to be accomplished. I should note that his appeal to the category of “ecclesial experience” as something self-authenticating is not immune from the charge of circularity.

According to Florovsky, the earliest ecclesial experience is prior to Scripture, inasmuch as Scripture is a fruit of the Church’s reception of the divine revelation. The Bible may be authentically interpreted as Scripture only within the Church. Florovsky is especially fond of repeating Tertullian’s claim, in \textit{De Praescriptione Hereticorum}, that outside of the Church
there could be no Scripture, properly speaking.\textsuperscript{55} By receiving and interiorizing the rule of faith within the Church, the believer is able to grasp the \textit{skopos}, that is, the overarching plan and intent of Scripture.

For Florovsky, ecclesial experience includes a liturgical dimension,\textsuperscript{56} a matter that will be developed with great force by Alexander Schmemann. The “enchurching” (\textit{votserkovlenie}) of the self is intended to bring about a cognitive transformation necessary to enter into the mind of the Fathers or the “common mind of the Church.”\textsuperscript{57} Florovsky understands this cognitive act to be akin to intellectual intuition rather than discursive reasoning, on the basis of authoritative premises supplied in patristic tradition.\textsuperscript{58} He questions the notion of the “development of doctrine,” especially the models of such a development that were proposed by German Idealist philosophers as well as the Russian followers of Soloviev.\textsuperscript{59} The Fathers made their theological terminology more precise not in order to “develop a doctrine,” but rather to defend the ecclesial consciousness against the distorting impact of the heresies, in order to guide minds to the knowledge of God.

In his religious epistemology, Vladimir Lossky places an equally high cognitive premium on experiential knowledge culminating in the “vision of God.”\textsuperscript{60} For Lossky, the apophatic purification of religious language functions as a spiritual discipline preparing the mind for the contemplation of God. Less concerned with apophasis, Florovsky stresses to a greater extent than does Lossky the definitive character of dogmas and the Christocentricity of the divine revelation. Florovsky’s theology begins and ends with Christ. For him, the doctrine of the Church is “a chapter of Christology.”\textsuperscript{61} Both his ecclesiology and his eschatology are robustly Christocentric. He places comparably little emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{62}

In his writings, Florovsky decries the loss of the Christological focus in Russian sophiology, especially in Soloviev and Florensky.\textsuperscript{63} He insists that contemporary Russian Orthodox theology needs to be firmly grounded in the central dogmas of the historical revelation, especially the Trinitarian vision of the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian definition, and only then be concerned with speculative metaphysics and disputed doctrinal questions. According to Florovsky, Russian sophiologists did precisely the opposite: They were preoccupied with abstract metaphysical questions and made debatable \textit{theologoumena} (e.g., the multiple identities of Sophia, the metaphysical principle of Godmanhood) foundational for their theological systems. Florovsky insists that it is by entering into the mystery of
Christ first that one can properly survey the rest of the mysteries of faith, including the Trinity and the Church.

Florovsky proposes that the Chalcedonian Christology, properly understood, is asymmetrical, whereas the divine nature of Christ eternally possesses its own divine hypostasis; the human nature of Christ is enhypostasized in the incarnation. Here Florovsky draws on Leontius of Byzantium’s development of Chalcedonian Christology in order to counter Bulgakov’s claim that Christ’s humanity is eternally, rather than only contingently, rooted in the divine. As a polemicist, Florovsky practices a peculiar reductio ad heresim of modern Christologies that deviate, in one way or another, from the patristic norm. Thus he speaks of the Gnostic character of Russian sophiology, of the “Monophysite” tendencies in Protestant neo-Orthodoxy, as well as of the “Nestorianism” of Protestant liberalism.

As a historian, Florovsky stands on the shoulders of the Russian pre-revolutionary patristic scholars, especially Vasily Bolotov, Nikolai Glubo-kovsky, Aleksandr Gorsky, Aleksei Lebedev, Viktor Nesmelov, and Anatoly Spassky, as well as his contemporaries Lev Karsavin, Mikhail Posnov, and others. Florovsky was equally well acquainted with the European patristic scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He finds particularly congenial the work of the German theologian and church historian Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838), who issued an appeal to return to the Fathers, which went largely unheeded in the Catholic Church of the early nineteenth century.

It is also significant that the publication of his patristics lectures and The Ways of Russian Theology coincided with the first stirrings of the ressourcement movement in French Catholic theology, represented by such figures as Gustave Bardy, Louis Bouyer, Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Yves Congar, and Marie-Dominique Chenu. There was much in la nouvelle théologie that resonated with Florovsky’s new synthesis of the Fathers. The ressourcement theologians announced a return to the patristic sources in order to challenge the intellectual hegemony of neo-Scholastic rationalism in Catholic theology. Chenu insisted on the primacy of the historical revelation over speculative metaphysics and emphasized the centrality of the history of salvation for theology. Balthasar spoke of the need to reappropriate “the fundamental and secret intuition which directs the entire expression of [patristic] thought.” According to Daniélou, the publication of the patristic series Sources Chré-
tiennes, begun in 1941, had a theological, rather than a merely historical, purpose. For Daniélou, the Fathers were “not only the truthful witnesses of a bygone era; they are also the most contemporary nourishment of men and women today, because we find there a certain number of categories which are those of contemporary thought and which Scholastic theology had lost.” While Florovsky’s reform program has Russian sophiology, rather than Scholastic theology, as its primary target of criticism, his appreciation of the contemporary value of the Fathers agrees with the theological agenda of the ressourcement movement. Like Florovsky, the ressourcement theologians saw a great ecumenical potential in the retrieval of the Greek Fathers.

Thus Florovsky’s promotion of the neopatristic synthesis, despite its anti-Western orientation, is much facilitated by the revival of patristic studies in the West. We should also note that Florovsky takes part in and writes a euphoric review of the first two international conferences on patristic studies that took place at Oxford in 1951 and 1955. He describes the spirit of these gatherings in terms reminiscent of his own theological program:

There is a vigorous revival of interest and study in the field of Christian Antiquity, and of the theology of the Fathers in particular, in all countries throughout the world. The most distinctive feature of this modern study is probably that “Antiquity” is no longer regarded as something “antiquated,” or as a burdensome “survival” of an outlived past which can be assessed simply by a sympathetic archeological curiosity, but rather as an integral constituent of the contemporary mind, and a living spring of inspiration.

One might recall how, twenty years earlier in the preface to The Ways of Russian Theology, Florovsky speaks of the need to return to patristic theology in order to find “the living spring of creative inspiration.” Allowing for Florovsky’s tendency to assess the intellectual currents of his time through the prism of his own theological agenda, it cannot be doubted that the theology of the ressourcement movement gave a significant impetus to the Oxford patristics conferences. For at these meetings, Florovsky rubbed shoulders with Jean Danielou, Henry Chadwick, and other world-class patristic scholars and theologians. Florovsky always stayed au courant of early Christian and Byzantine studies, as his numerous reviews of books in several European languages attest. The fact that so many
Orthodox theologians today wear the hat of a patristic scholar owes at least as much to the revival of patristics in the West as it does to Florovsky’s vision.

A Generation after Florovsky: Two Ways Forward

Florovsky’s retrieval of Christian Hellenism can be taken in two principal directions. On the one hand, Florovsky’s program can encourage among the Orthodox an all-too-familiar ecclesial triumphalism and self-satisfaction: an idealization of the past resulting in a tendency to belittle the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church’s present; a posture of spiritual superiority vis-à-vis the Western “Other” and a concomitant spiritual and intellectual isolationism; a deep-seated phobia of all things non-Orthodox; a siege mentality which, from time to time, especially in the monastic circles, finds its outlet in misguided apocalypticism; a fixation upon ethnicity, be it Greek or Slavic, verging on idolatry; a reluctance to confront massive intellectual, social, and moral dilemmas of our times; a heresy-hunting zeal encouraged by what one might call “patristic fundamentalism”—that is, an attitude of holding on to the patristic letter and denying the spirit thereof; a “theology of repetition” which still paralyzes Orthodox efforts in the areas of biblical studies, political theology, moral theology, as well as science and religion, to name only a few examples. Such is the first direction that finds its support among a vocal minority of Orthodox leaders and faithful.

On the other hand, properly understood, Florovsky’s vision can lead Orthodox theology in an entirely different direction. Far from sanctioning triumphalism, Florovsky’s searching criticism of Russian religious thought invites an intense self-examination, a metanoia of ecclesial consciousness, which is so needed in the age of chronic failures of episcopal leadership and obsession with the jurisdictional disputes in local Orthodox churches. Florovsky calls on us to acquire the mind of the Fathers, to be emboldened by their example as we join in the arduous work of planting the seeds of the Gospel in our increasingly pluralistic cultures. In this process, the Fathers are not our infallible teachers, but rather our spiritual guides to Christ. In this context, Christian Hellenism stands for a theological vision that refuses to subordinate the historical divine revelation to any philosophy that compromises the centrality of the divine incarnation. Despite Florovsky’s misleading rhetoric, it is not the cultural hegemony of
“sacred Hellenism,” but the Christ of the Gospels, the Christ of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the Christ of the Church, that is at the center of his neopatristic synthesis.

Orthodox theology is a house of many mansions. There will always be room in it for those who wish to dedicate themselves entirely to the study of the Fathers. But neopatristics also requires that we go beyond such archeological explorations. Having regained its patristic foundations in the last fifty years, Orthodox theology today is poised to take on issues of contemporary relevance with greater confidence and determination than before. In the spirit of Florovsky’s motto “forward, to the Fathers,” we need a new Origen in the Orthodox biblical scholarship. We need a new John Chrysostom to tackle moral and prophetic theology. We need a new Augustine to pursue anthropology, gender problems, and sexuality. We need a new pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite to address postmodern theories of religious language. We need new Cappadocians, a new Athanasius and Maximus the Confessor, to help us navigate the metaphysical and epistemological options on offer in our time. We need a new Symeon the New Theologian to recover the charismatic dimension of our faith. We need a new Palamas to continue translating the experience of deification into the categories of modern church life.

In addition, in the spirit of Florovsky’s ecumenical work, a new creative encounter between the East and the West must occur in the twenty-first century, an encounter transcending geopolitics and manipulation, an encounter in which both traditions would speak as partners rather than adversaries. The East must make an effort to attend to the wounds of the West. Orthodox theologians should embark on this work without the fear of somehow drowning in the theological ocean of the West. It would be a sign of our theological maturity when we begin to treat the iconic figures of the Western theological tradition—Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, and others—neither as convenient straw men, nor as untouchable “Others,” but as partners worthy of serious engagement. Unfortunately, this day has not arrived yet; dare one hope that it arrives in this century?

Nevertheless, there are some encouraging signs that the task of engaging the West is being undertaken by the Orthodox scholars of my own and younger generations. Much further work needs to be done in this largely uncharted territory. For example, it would be a good idea to publish a new series of books offering the distinctly “Eastern” readings of the...
most significant expressions of the Western theological tradition. Beyond this, we need to begin a discussion about curricular changes in our theological schools. The manner in which the Orthodox seminarians are presently introduced to Western theological sources, especially in the traditionally Orthodox lands, leaves much to be desired. I realize that much discernment is required in this arena and we need to proceed with due caution.

We need to reconsider the familiar juxtaposition of the faithful East and the misguided West in our thinking. The difference between the theological “grammars” of the East and the West is not a sufficient ground for forever guarding our theology against all Western influences. The distinctly Western theological beliefs are often assumed to be false, merely on the grounds that they are Western. This generic fallacy has poisoned our theological thinking for too long. If we reject the Western “Other” without making an effort to understand the “Other,” paradoxically, we are letting ourselves be more dependent on that “Other.” It is precisely the staunchly anti-Western Orthodox thinkers who end up being utterly dependent upon the West, even if this dependence takes the form of unreflective rejection. The search for truth cannot be limited by geography. It is not the cultural uniqueness of Eastern Christianity, but the divine revelation appropriated by the Church, that should serve as the main criterion of Orthodoxy. We need to overcome the limitations of Florovsky’s historiography in order to fulfill his extraordinary vision.