THE ORTHODOX RENAISSANCE

A new generation of theologians gives Paul L. Gavrilyuk hope for the future of Orthodoxy in the West.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, those Westerners who knew about the Orthodox Church tended to think it exotic and theologically and culturally irrelevant. Orthodox theology was very little known and even less understood, and perhaps even less valued than understood. The Bolshevik Revolution changed this. By the direct order of Lenin, at the beginning of the 1920s, the leading Russian religious thinkers were exiled to the West. With the arrival in Western Europe of the leaders of what became known as the Russian Religious Renaissance on the “philosophy steamer” (since most of them traveled by sea) and the establishment of the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris in 1925, Orthodox émigré theologians began to speak with distinctive and recognizable, if at times discordant, voices in the West.

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The Russian Religious Renaissance was an attempt to interpret all aspects of human existence—culture, politics, even economics—in Christian terms, brought about by the generation of Nicholas Berdyaev, Sergius Bulgakov, Nicholas Lossky, and Lev Shestov. This older generation built upon the main currents of nineteenth-century western European and Russian religious thought. For example, Berdyaev’s religious existentialism and personalism had its roots in German mystics, especially Jacob Boehme, as well as in the religious questions raised by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Bulgakov took as his point of departure the German Idealist tradition, especially Schelling, as worked out in the sophiology of Vladimir Solovyov. Lossky developed religious and philosophical intuitivism, whereas Shestov worked out a form of antirationalist existentialism akin to the religious vision of Søren Kierkegaard. The movement was interrupted midstream in Russia, but it continued with renewed vigor in the diaspora.

The younger generation, whose thought matured in the emigration, was led by Georges Florovsky and Nicholas Lossky’s son Vladimir. This generation rebelled against the previous generation’s perceived theological “modernism” and was concerned to free Orthodox theology from its centuries-old “Western captivity.” They announced a reform of Orthodox theology through a return to the patristic sources. By the second half of the twentieth century, this theology had become the dominant paradigm of Orthodox theology.

In Florovsky’s works, this reform program received the name of a “neopatristic synthesis,” which, he wrote, “should be more than just a collection of patristic sayings or statements; it must truly be a synthesis, a creative reassessment of those insights which were granted to the holy men of old. It must be Patristic, faithful to the spirit and vision of the Fathers, ad mentem Patrum. Yet, it also must be neo-Patristic, since it is to be addressed to the new age, with its own problems and queries.” For Florovsky, this involved a Christocentric approach to theology, rooted in the Chalcedonian definition, whereas for Lossky it was a rediscovery of the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Along with Basil Krivocheine and Myrrha Lot-Borodine, Lossky participated in the retrieval of the theology of Gregory Palamas. The Palamite distinction between the incomunicable divine essence and the communicable divine energies, and the attendant theological anthropology, became a trademark of an important expression of neopatristic theology called Neo-Palamism.

In the course of this development, those who tended to present Orthodox theology as something universal—for example, Bulgakov and Berdyaev—ultimately lost the battle of ideas to those who emphasized Orthodoxy’s particularity and distinctiveness. The generation involved in expanding the boundaries of Orthodoxy lost its battle to the generation involved in defining the same boundaries. Even those Orthodox theologians who resisted a self-imposed intellectual isolation from the West tended to highlight the differences, rather than the points of resemblance, between the Eastern and Western modes of theologizing.

Orthodox theologians often “orientalized” Orthodox theology by presenting it primarily as an antithesis to Western theology. To simplify the frequently invoked dichotomies, the allegedly individualistic, legalistic, rationalistic, positivistic, and anthropocentric Western religious thought was contrasted with the allegedly communitarian, holistic, mystical, and theocentric Orthodox thought. Such dichotomies reveal as much about the internal tensions within various expressions of Western intellectual history as they do about the alleged contrast between the East and the West. Along with constructing modern Orthodox theology as an alternative to its Western counterpart, Orthodox intellectuals could not resist producing an idealized picture of their Church, a “book version” of Orthodoxy, in the interest of apologetics. Often it is this sanitized picture of Orthodoxy that has the greatest initial appeal to Western inquirers.

After World War II, the second steamer sailed across the Atlantic. The most important migrants on the “theology steamer” first included Nicholas Lossky (his son Vladimir stayed in France) and Georges Florovsky (who became the first Orthodox to teach at Harvard Divinity School), who were followed shortly thereafter by Alexander Schmemann, John Meyendorff, Serges Verkhovskoy, and others. Although other theologians, primarily Greek theologians like John Zizioulas, John Romanides, and Christos Yannaras, exercised theological leadership in the historically Orthodox countries, Orthodox theology remained largely a phenomenon of the diaspora. Behind the Iron Curtain, communist governments stifled theological thought, although some heroic attempts were made in the Soviet Union and Romania to pass on this nearly extinguished light. One may mention in this regard the names of such scholars as Alexei Losev, Sergej Averintsev, and Dumitru Staniloae.
It is true that only a few first-rate minds could rival the extraordinary spiritual boldness, learning, and resourcefulness of the Renaissance thinkers, but the standard of Orthodox theology remained high. For example, under Schmemann’s influence, Orthodox liturgical theology acquired its maturity. Creative works in Orthodox moral theology began to emerge, including, for example, the contributions of Paul Evdokimov and Vigen Guroian, followed by forays into the field of Orthodox biblical studies, such as the works of Theodore Stylianopoulos, Paul Tarazi, and John Breck.

Presently, Orthodox theology in the West is changing fundamentally. It can even be said to have been transformed already, and in five important ways.

First, Orthodox theology has developed from an unknown commodity into a respectable minority theology. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Orthodox theology inspired little sympathy in the West. Harnack, for example, construed Greek patristic theology as a result of the corruption of the gospel by Greek metaphysics. Writing in the 1930s, Florovsky noted that “in the West one has become accustomed to regard Orthodoxy as a sort of exhumed Christianity, retrograde and stagnant, to think that the Christian East, at best, is in a state of historic coma. Historic separation and estrangement account for this deceptive interpretation.”

Today, many universities in the United States pride themselves on having at least one “token” Orthodox faculty member in their departments of religion, theology, or philosophy. For example, Harvard Divinity School has Kimberley Patton, Princeton Theological Seminary George Lewis Parsenios, Brown University Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Edith Humphrey, and Baruch College Michael Plekon. Remarkably, the theology departments of Fordham and Duquesne universities each have two full-time Orthodox faculty members. It is not unreasonable to expect that where two or three Orthodox theologians are gathered, there could emerge a small center or a program to promote Orthodoxy’s intellectual legacy, like the Orthodox Christian Studies Center that George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou have established at Fordham in 2007, hardly possible even thirty years ago.

In most cases, Orthodox theologians enjoy considerable intellectual freedom and little ideological pressure at the non-Orthodox schools that employ them. Our Catholic hosts, as a rule, accept us as potentially offering a corrective to what they perceive as the limitations of “Latin” theology. Our Protestant colleagues often regard the representatives of Orthodoxy as offering the goods of Catholic Christianity without the historical traumas of the Reformation. As a minority, we enjoy a unique, politically non-threatening status and are respected for who we are.

Second, Orthodox theologians have moved from teaching mainly in Orthodox seminaries to teaching in non-Orthodox schools. A century ago, the majority of Orthodox theologians who relocated to Europe either held posts at the established Orthodox schools like the University of Belgrade and Sofia University or had to create new Orthodox institutions like the St. Sergius and St. Denys theological institutes in Paris. After the war, in the United States, most Orthodox theologians taught at the recently established Orthodox schools. Today the situation is quite different. The total number of full-time faculty at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, and St. Tikhon’s Orthodox Theological Seminary is around fifty. At least twice as many now teach religion-related subjects at non-Orthodox institutions and seminaries.

Due to the financial challenges and relatively slow growth of the Orthodox Church in the U.S., the number of full-time faculty at the Orthodox schools is not going to increase considerably in the near future. Yet the number of Orthodox students pursuing doctoral work has been steadily growing, and these often very gifted young scholars are more likely to find teaching posts at mainstream academic institutions than at Orthodox schools. They will interact regularly with their non-Orthodox peers as well as the non-Orthodox students, and their thinking, teaching, and writing will naturally turn into an implicit dialogue with the non-Orthodox. Any act of accountable and serious scholarship becomes in some sense an ecumenical act, whether or not they actually engage in formal ecumenical negotiations.

Third, Orthodox theology is shifting from engaging in ecumenical dialogue to addressing the post-denominational condition. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the ecumenical dialogue was predicated on the assumption of clear and rigid denominational boundaries. Those outside one’s own group were typically regarded as heretics or schismatics. While the traditionalist Orthodox may still use this language, the denominational boundaries in America have become increasingly porous and flexible.

On one level, a century after the beginning of the ecumenical movement, Christians have become even more divided. On another, the dividing lines no longer coincide neatly with the ecclesiastical...
boundaries but with positions on controversial issues of human sexuality, the ministry of women, and other social issues. On yet another level, non-Orthodox theologians are more and more willing to engage with and incorporate into their own work the insights of Orthodox theology. For example, apophatic theology and the concept of deification are no longer perceived as exclusively Eastern ideas. Postmodern theologians of all stripes are captivated by the via negativa, and more remarkably, Catholic and Protestant theologians, both mainstream and Evangelical, have recently offered very appreciative accounts of deification.

There is a growing awareness that the Orthodox tradition has been previously neglected in the curriculum of Western theological institutions and has to be more effectively represented. Forward-looking deans of various theological schools are considering concrete ways of institutionalizing such changes. For example, Union Theological Seminary created the endowed chair in Late Antique and Byzantine Christian History for the renowned Orthodox patristic scholar and theologian John Anthony McGuckin and provided the resources for the establishment of the Orthodox Sophia Institute. Fordham University will soon establish an endowed chair in Orthodox Theology and Culture. More institutional determination will be required in the future for this trend to continue.

Fourth, Orthodox theology has shifted from diaspora theology to convert theology. Only thirty years ago, almost without exception, Orthodox scholarship in the United States was dominated by Slavs like Schmemann and Meyendorff and Greeks like Romanides. Some were educated and even born outside of their countries of ethnic origin, but their roots still ran deep in their respective ethnic traditions. Now, a deep immersion in the Orthodox tradition has led a number of noted scholars to join the Orthodox Church. These include McGuckin, Humphrey, Harvey, the late Jaroslav Pelikan, Richard Swinburne, Andrew Louth, and David Bentley Hart. All of them teach or have taught primarily at non-Orthodox schools. Converts also predominate among Orthodox graduate students. For example, the ten Orthodox students currently pursuing their doctorates at Fordham are all either converts or come from the families of converts.

As a Slavic immigrant and an Orthodox Levite myself—the maternal side of my family includes several generations of Russian Orthodox clergymen, albeit with a hiatus during the Soviet time—I welcome this new development. At the annual meetings of the Orthodox Theological Society in America, the contributions of the converts are at least as substantial as those of the ethnic Orthodox. As for the sessions of the Eastern Orthodox Studies Group at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion, recent years have witnessed increasing attendance by Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, and others.

Sociologically, the increasing intellectual presence of converts—I predict that their influence will grow exponentially in the years ahead—will create some new identity challenges for the Orthodox. Having received the elephants like Pelikan, Swinburne, Hart, and McGuckin into the house of contemporary Orthodox theology, the walls are bound to shift in unpredictable ways. One cannot, of course, just shrug one’s shoulders and declare that any given theological contribution counts as Orthodox theology if the author intends it as such. Some damage control and boundary making will be inevitable, as the gifts of the convert theologians are received and unwrapped.

How, for example, are we to fit Richard Swinburne’s defense of Christian theology, written before his entry into the Orthodox Church, into the body of modern Orthodox theology? With trepidation or with admiration? Swinburne’s use of probabilistic arguments to defend the rationality of Christian beliefs is without precedent in Orthodox theology. Such a move challenges Orthodox theologians to reconsider the role of reason. Swinburne’s work, widely read by philosophers in Russia, is awaiting its reception in Orthodoxy.

Moreover, consider the exchange a few years ago between McGuickin and Hart in the pages of the Scottish Journal of Theology. McGuckin argued that Hart’s engagement of postmodernism in The Beauty of the Infinite did not authentically speak for Orthodoxy. Hart replied that Orthodoxy does not offer one paradigm for doing theology and cited precedents of other paradigms besides the neopatristic one. This was an argument between two convert theologians regarding the boundaries of Orthodoxy.

Some converts prefer to draw more clearly defined boundaries between the East and the West than do many cradle Orthodox, especially those of my generation. After all, the converts made a conscious decision to move from non-Orthodoxy to Orthodoxy, something that the ethnic Orthodox have not experienced. For some converts, joining the Orthodox Church is a bit like a happy second marriage: the hairs are gray, the feelings mature, but the bliss of the honeymoon is not over yet.
Finally, *Orthodox theology is shifting from the dominance of neopatristics to a re-emerging plurality of theological paradigms.* The Russian Religious Renaissance was an enormous explosion of different theological visions of the world, in which no aspect of human endeavor was to remain outside of the framework of Christian teaching (it is somewhat akin in its breadth to the Radical Orthodoxy movement). In contrast, the post-war generation accepted Florovsky’s and Lossky’s critique of the Renaissance and expanded most of its scholarly efforts on patristic theology and church history. However, *pace* Florovsky, not all theological problems can be successfully resolved by recourse to the history of patristic ideas. For example, many questions in the contemporary discussion of theology and science should be addressed on strictly philosophical, rather than exclusively historical, grounds. The same applies to Orthodox bioethics and political theology.

In the years ahead, neopatristic theology will remain a leading direction of Orthodox theology. Indeed, Orthodox theology cannot become post-patristic if it is to remain Orthodox. Yet the time is ripe to explore the paradigms that engage modernity and post-modernity in a more robust and direct manner. Orthodox theology is at the crossroads, and there is a growing dissatisfaction with the hegemony of the neopatristic paradigm, at least as practiced by Florovsky’s generation.

The emerging diversity of paradigms must not deteriorate into a cacophony in which Orthodox theologians lose their common language, or their common ontological assumptions, or their common goal of coming to know more profoundly the reality of the triune God. There are many ways in which our ivory towers could be turned into a tower of Babel. The emerging pluriform Orthodox theology must avoid this fate. Fortunately, however, contemporary Orthodox theologians have exactly the right amount of common ground required to move forward.

I left the September 2011 meeting of the Orthodox Theological Society in America with a strong premonition that we are at the threshold of a new theological renaissance. In this renaissance, the United States, not Europe, is more likely to be the center of gravity, though I also expect some groundbreaking work to come from Greece as well as from Russia, Ukraine, and Romania, as they continue to emerge out of the ruins of their communist past.

I had felt this already at the Orthodox theological conferences in Moscow in 2007 and in Volos in 2010. Orthodox theologians are making a clear attempt to break out of the neopatristic paradigm in very creative ways. In the common internet space that Orthodox theologians now share, the ethnic and geographic boundaries are going to matter less and less. The international exchange between Orthodox theologians will grow, even if the bishops—conspicuously absent from the theological societies’ meetings—have no immediate plans for resolving our enduring and scandalous jurisdictional divisions in the United States and elsewhere. In this regard, the pan-Orthodox character of the Orthodox Theological Society in America is another powerful sign of Orthodox unity in America.

Whatever the theologians produce in the years ahead—and the harvest, I predict, will be plentiful—will have to be received, rejected, or ignored by the Church at large. It appears to be increasingly clear that we are presently witnessing the first signs of a theological earthquake that will bring about the new and more potent wave of the world-wide Orthodox theological renaissance. The epicenter is likely to be North America, the main areas affected are likely to be non-Orthodox schools, and the sources of the most potent shockwaves are likely to be converts to Orthodoxy. Even if my prediction errs in its details, for the earthquakes of the Spirit are more difficult to predict than natural events, we are soon likely to enjoy an embarrassment of theological riches not seen since the heyday of the Russian Religious Renaissance of the previous century.
As Paul's words droned on like the furry buzz of bees, I unfolded off the floor, crammed myself into a window. The sun crawled down onto the horizon and stared at me, as if to say, pay attention, you whose time is so short, you who have no idea on what day your thread will be cut. I stared until the sky purpled, until the darkness swept its broom through the sky, scattering shards of dust winking at me in the blackness.

Then the words lulled me. I tried as best I could to listen, to hear what miracles he described, only, I admit, I was painfully bored. What were these other than fairy tales I would tell my little cousins on a long night? The air thickened, and I found myself dreaming of lying out in a tall field of grain. In the distance someone was reaping. I could hear the whisper of the scythe intoning through the wheat, could hear its urgency, saying something about this moment. Only I lay back and closed my eyes and fell.

When I woke, he was standing over me whispering. A crowd stared down at me, their mouths, their eyes wide, as if they could not decide whether or not this was a moment of horror or triumph. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said, “He’s alive!”

Afterwards, we climbed the stairs, broke bread. I stared at him, surprised not just at the oddity of being alive but also understanding everything he had said was true: a heavy yoke I shouldered that night slipping his words now ringing true around my unwilling neck.

—David Holper