# Foreword to the English Translation

Vladimir Lossky is widely recognised as one of the half-dozen or so most influential theologians of the Eastern Christian tradition in the twentieth century. Compared to others who might be so acknowledged, his published output in his lifetime was relatively slight – one major, though not very long, book, and a dozen or so substantial articles. However, the force and originality of his work were already evident before his untimely death in 1958 at the age of fifty-five; and the posthumous publication of many more essays and lectures confirmed his intellectual stature, cementing a significant influence throughout the Orthodox world. His book on *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, first published in French in 1944, remains a classic of what has come to be called (not always very helpfully) the 'neo-patristic' style of Orthodox theology. This is an exploration of the central themes of Christian doctrine, by way of an imaginative, and in many ways innovative, reading of the early Christian centuries. This book sought to hold together the legacy of Orthodox contemplative practice and mainstream trinitarian and Christological themes, demonstrating creative use of some more recent intellectual categories in European thinking.

Three themes are central to Lossky's theological project. He begins from an insistence on the priority of the 'apophatic' in theology, the so-called *via negativa*. It is impossible to attempt a definition of God as we would define an object within the universe, looking for an 'essence' that serves to define God. Instead, Lossky works with and develops the ideas of the anonymous sixth century writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius. For this writer, any language that includes God in any sort of class of beings of a certain kind is inadmissible; this makes the task of the theologian in some important sense 'iconoclastic', a

struggle against language about God that would effectively reduce God to another *being*, another 'thing'. But Lossky's second theme is no less important. He makes extensive use of the fourteenth century Byzantine theologian, Gregory Palamas, who proposed a clarification of various strands in Greek theology, suggesting a distinction between divine 'essence' and divine *energeia*, 'agency' or 'energy'. If there was no possible discourse that could define divine essence, what we were speaking of theologically must always be divine agency or agencies, the multiple refractions of the divine act in its engagement with finite reality, the plural activations of the single ineffable reality of God. The third governing theme adds a very significant refinement to this. The theology of God as Trinity, and the analysis of the unique union of divine and human in Jesus of Nazareth, began to shape in later patristic thinking a model of the 'personal' that was quite novel in the history of philosophy. The agency of God was not a general set of influences and effects in the cosmos, but the life of a unity in plurality of three 'hypostases', three subsistent subjects eternally existing in inseparable union. In Christ, there is one ultimate agent determining the human phenomenon of Jesus, which is the second hypostasis of the Trinity. Christ is one 'person', whose distinct, unique status as a hypostasis is his distinct and unique *relation* to Father and Spirit; but he is also active in two 'natures', two (we might say) patterns, rhythms or kinds of existence, the human and the divine. The full statement of this mystery in the formulae of the early councils lays the foundation for a systematic distinction between nature, as a system of fixed patterns of agency, and person, as a unique and free *centre* of agency; that is, at the same time, unique in and only in virtue of its unique place in a network of relations. 'Person' is thus always more than an individual instance of a general pattern of life, a 'case' of some natural kind.

Behind this elegant and complex scheme lies a deep hinterland of learning in Greek patristics, but a Greek patristics very much as revived and developed by the Roman Catholic theologians, whom Lossky worked alongside for decades in Paris. Exiled from Soviet Russia in 1923, along with many other non-Marxist intellectuals, he had settled in France and pursued a career as an academic mediaevalist. He came to know both the extraordinary generation of scholars who had revived the philosophical heritage of Thomas Aquinas – above all, Etienne Gilson, who supervised his research – but also the slightly younger group of scholars who were reading the Greek Fathers

with new eyes, and finding in them insights that chimed with the concerns of phenomenological and existentialist writers of the day. Lossky read the monographs of scholars like Jean Danielou, Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar, and knew many such scholars personally. During the Second World War, Lossky joined a number of mostly Catholic intellectuals (all of them in various ways involved in resistance to the Nazi occupation) in founding a journal, *Dieu Vivant*, which set out to encourage dialogue with the broader cultural life of France. This journal was founded on the basis of a theology shaped by engagement with a doctrinal and contemplative tradition which was much broader and deeper than the conventional systems of the seminaries. The lectures that eventually became the book on *Mystical Theology* were originally delivered to groups of friends and colleagues who shared these concerns.

After the war, Lossky continued his academic work formally, as an editorial assistant in the offices of the great Du Cange dictionary of mediaeval Latin, and as a research student preparing a doctoral thesis. He also participated in this work less formally, as an instructor in a small theological institute serving the Russian Orthodox communities in Paris that had remained in communion with the Patriarchate of Moscow. This occurred because Lossky had already made something of a name for himself in the fierce controversies that divided the different groups of Russian Orthodox in France. He also took an increasing interest in ecumenical dialogue outside France and became a regular visitor to the summer conferences of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius in Britain, at that time largely an Anglican-Russian Orthodox network; some important essays of his were delivered as lectures to the Fellowship. His courses on dogmatic theology in the 1950's – published after his death in much abbreviated form – show a mind constantly growing and maturing, engaging with an impressively wide range of sources and developing his basic theological insights, especially around the person-nature tension, with increasing sophistication.

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And so, at last, to the work on Eckhart. The writings of this remarkable fourteenth century Dominican are now relatively familiar to readers interested in the contemplative traditions of the Middle Ages, and there are numerous translations and commentaries, both scholarly and popular. Yet in the middle of the last century, scholarly discussion

was not nearly so ample; many studies had concentrated on Eckart's German sermons, and some had rather prematurely assimilated his thinking to Advaitin (non-dualist) Hindu models. This focus left a substantial corpus of Latin sermons and commentary on Scripture that had not received adequate discussion. Lossky's thesis set out to discuss Eckhart's fundamental ideas about the knowability of God, and how exactly he had positioned himself in relation not only to Pseudo-Dionysius and to his own Dominican confrere Aquinas, but also to the wider mediaeval discussion that involved Jewish and Muslim thinkers, Maimonides, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and others. In other words, Lossky is asking where Eckhart belongs in an ongoing philosophical conversation, rather than treating him as an isolated 'mystical' genius cut off from his Western mediaeval contemporaries.

Lossky died before submitting the work for examination and publication. His friend and mentor Maurice de Gandillac, along with a younger friend and disciple, Olivier Clement, prepared the manuscript for publication (it is clear that the book was very close to completion), and the result was warmly acclaimed, not least by Gilson, as a masterpiece of interpretative scholarship. It has held its own in the field of Eckhart scholarship up to the present, partly because of its exceptionally close readings of some difficult philosophical discussions in Eckhart's Latin works. Clement recalled that Lossky hoped to write a further study in which Eckart's thought could be compared at length with the theology of Gregory Palamas later in the fourteenth century. Lossky touches on this tantalizingly at several points, but very properly remains focused on Eckhart himself.

It is not possible to summarize the book in a brief introduction, but a few things may be worth pointing to as an indication of what Lossky is aiming to achieve. He helps us to see that, while Eckhart often uses terminology familiar from Aquinas, he is regularly correcting or challenging the earlier writer, sometimes returning to the language of Dionysius himself where Aquinas has attempted to tone down the more startling aspects of the Greek master. Eckhart is committed to the idea that the *esse*, the active being of the finite world, is, strictly speaking, continuous with God, not simply an *effect* of God's action. To that extent, there is indeed a 'non-dualism' in the relation between God and the cosmos. However, the fact of finite plurality means that this is not a simple matter of continuity, as if finite and infinite being were just stages on a spectrum (in the technical language of mediaeval metaphysics, they cannot simply be spoken of 'univocally'

as if the language used for one could just be transferred to the other). The hiddenness of the divine *esse* in the depths of everything that is remains the heart of all existence, but it must become the cause of distinct and separate kinds of life: the uncreated intellectual forms in God's eternity must be 'exteriorized' into finite forms. Eckhart interprets the words of Ps.61.12 (in the Vulgate; 62.11 in most English versions), 'God has spoken once, and I have heard these two things', as meaning that the first foundation of creation is the eternal speaking of the divine Word, which is then repeated in the multiplicity of creation.

'Oneness' is the best term for God (granted that God's actual essence is beyond all naming), as it affirms the unity of God's own differentiated (trinitarian) life and the unity that sustains the being of all things. In this way, their plurality is not opposed to the oneness of *esse* but manifests its richness. Eckhart disagrees with Aquinas in denying any real diversity of attributes in God, but qualifies it by noting that God is intrinsically intellect and so must eternally 'understand' the real diversity of how his action will be received. In other words, distinctions between God's attributes, just like distinctions between things in the world, are not just the work of human minds. Divine oneness, however, remains the sheer fact of not-being-from-any-other, and even Aquinas's identification of God's essence with *esse*, active being, is, in Eckhart's eyes, still in thrall to the idea that we can somehow reduce the overflowing and limitless act of God (Eckhart loves the imagery of *ebullition*, 'boiling over', for God's action) to a defining characteristic. God is uniquely a 'thereness', an 'isness', and so is that by which everything is at all (*quo est*). If Aquinas can be read as saying that what God gives to creatures is 'actuality', Eckhart wants to go further; he argues that it is simply this 'isness', the irremovable movement of the intellectual reality of God's life into the diversity of the world, in order to make it be there at all in its diverse presence.

Our knowledge of God is thus ultimately something that occurs not in the created intellect, as such, but in the absolute letting go of all definitions of *esse*. This means that that *esse* itself is all that is in the mind, in such a way that it is in no sense an *object* of the mind. In this sense, the mind, when encountering God, encounters something totally and unmanageably other to itself, while at the same time being united with what it is in its own ultimate depths. In a way, this is of a piece with Eckhart's argument that knowing anything is knowing it by a sort of Platonic 'memory' of what is already in the mind's

interior. We implicitly 'know' the eternal Logos from which all things come, and so implicitly know the forms that finite life can take (sense experience is a necessary crutch for our fallen and incapacitated minds). But knowing God, while in one way a knowing of what is 'in' the self, is also, necessarily, being deprived of all form that the mind can express for itself. Our intellect is ultimately, in one of Eckhart's difficult verbal coinages, *increabile*, 'uncreatable', not something that exists simply in reaction to a world that already is before it.

Eckhart thinks of *analogy* in talk about God in terms distinct from those preferred by Aquinas, to the extent that he emphasises first and foremost the radical difference between the active and the passive poles of the analogical relationship. The finite reality is there only as the fact of what happens when the infinite idea in the being of God realises some possible form of its reflection or repetition in encounter with a complex of finite causality. There can be no reciprocity in the relation between God and a finite reality, no sense in which the relation is anything but pure dependence on the creaturely side. Once again, Eckhart, while insisting so powerfully on the oneness of *esse* in God and the world, absolutely denies any 'univocity' in speaking of God and creation (which explains some of the hostility expressed towards his work by Franciscan contemporaries). Yet his version of analogical predication is a distinctive one, and we can be misled by some of its Thomist externals. He is not interested in the 'analogy of proportionality' that Thomists tend to appeal to (we can use the same terms for God and creature if we recognize that the truth of the ascription is qualified by the 'proportion' of one term to the other, that is, by recognizing that a term cannot be true of God and creation in the same sense because of the disproportion of their relation; they are not on the same level, so to speak), concentrating rather on 'analogy of attribution'. *Only* God is the true possessor of whatever morally or intellectually significant quality is attributed to a finite subject; finite beings cannot possess these things intrinsically, so we are always talking about qualities that have been bestowed on finite subjects from outside their specific finite existence.

Ultimately all this is inseparable from the spiritual practice that Eckhart writes about – a passing beyond both finite life and intellect into the interiority of *esse,* where the eternal Father utters the eternal Word, not as something to be thought or contemplated but as the plain condition for being as such. It is what the incarnation of the Word makes possible for us (it is a mistake to think that Eckhart is

not interested in Christology). Our blessedness is simply to live in the divine plenitude, where all distinctions have been set aside in a life that is an 'inhabiting' of the eternal Word. As the mind settles in this inhabiting, it becomes a true image of the Trinity, of the inseparable movement of the Word's birth and the Spirit's bliss as the Father acts. In this sense alone, we can say – rather boldly – that we ourselves become 'analogous' to God, because the life of the Trinity is what is real and active in us.

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These are some of the aspects of Eckhart that Lossky draws out, with great clarity and perception. It is not too difficult to see here reflections of his own preoccupations. What can we say about the relation between unity and diversity in God – both the diversity of the trinitarian life and the manifold pattern of God's active presence in creation? If there is nothing we can truthfully say about God's 'essence', what is it that grounds the truth claims of any theological talk? What is the nature of both human and created individuality, and is the human person uniquely something other than a case of individuality, a mere instance of the human kind? Lossky hints heavily that Eastern theology as he understood it offered some ways out of the impasses he detected in later mediaeval thought. The essence-energy distinction, he believed, cut across the unity and diversity problem: the real plurality of the things that could be said on the basis of God's 'energetic' presence was grounded in what was truly and fully God, God-in-action; there was no need to claim that true speech about God must entail some access to a concept of divine essence (as Lossky believed Aquinas was saying). Eckhart's distinction of the *quod est* of creation (what something is) and the *quo est* (God's *esse*) was, according to Lossky, trying to do some of the same work as Palamas's distinction. This was achieved through feeling its way towards a notion of what Lossky calls 'energetic presence' in creation, that was both distinct form and at one with the hidden *esse,* out of which every divine self-determination comes. The frustratingly brief treatment of this gives some idea of what Lossky might have worked out further had he lived to do so.

The quality of the work, nevertheless, guarantees it a lasting place in the scholarly literature of mediaeval theology. In the last couple of decades, discussion of some of the favourite topics of the Middle Ages has become much livelier than it once was. The implications

of what can be said about the continuity and discontinuity of both God's life and creation's life have been treated in great depth and explored for their ramifications in our thinking about humanity and the created order, the nature of divine (and human) freedom and even the character of human thinking itself. This translation of a great classic of creative interpretation will have been no small task and every grateful acknowledgment is due to the translators' labours. It will make an invaluable contribution to these discussions, and if this leads many back to Lossky's own creative theological essays on the integrity of the person and the interrelation of thought and contemplative practice, so much the better.

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