

Introduction

The Quest for a Christian Philosophy

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Orthodoxy and Orthodox theology have long become “global projects,” and are no longer confined to traditionally Orthodox countries. Furthermore, the number of non-Orthodox scholars who possess in-depth knowledge about Orthodox theology and Orthodox thought is increasing. The authors who have contributed to this volume live and work in Austria, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, the UK, and the US. The aim of this collection of essays is to reflect on the relationship between Orthodox theology and contemporary philosophy. The contributors were invited to write specialized, but at the same time accessible, essays on key philosophical topics.

The first two contributions are dedicated to Orthodox theology and political philosophy. *Evert van der Zweerde* discusses the relationship between theocracy, *sobornost'*, and democracy in the works of Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Ivan Ilyin. According to these thinkers, there is no strict opposition between either theocracy and democracy, or between democracy and *sobornost'*. In order to understand their main ideas, one has to pay attention to the more fundamental difference between a theocratic and an “anthropocratic” understanding of politics. It is the “anthropocratic” approach that all three thinkers reject—although they hold different views about how to realize the theocratic ideal.

Kristina Stoeckl and *Dmitry Uzlaner* reflect on the notion of the *post-secular* in contemporary Russia, focusing on the descriptive as well as normative meaning of this concept. They raise the question of whether it is possible to discern a “third way” in Russian society that avoids both a reactionary return to pre-Soviet conditions *and* an uncritical embrace of modern secularism. Yet they come to the conclusion that a profound and

creative reconfiguration of the religious-secular divide that goes beyond these two extreme positions is missing in contemporary Russia.

Christina Gschwandtner takes a little-known text on Eastern Orthodoxy by Max Scheler as the starting point of her reflections on Orthodox theology and phenomenology. Drawing on ascetic texts by Evagrius of Pontus and Symeon the New Theologian, as well as on the anonymous writing *The Way of Pilgrim*, she provides a phenomenological analysis of Orthodox consciousness, discernment, and spiritual experience. She argues that Scheler's view of the Orthodox ethos as a passive, otherworldly, and apolitical quietism that pays little attention to neighborly love and social responsibility, is insufficiently nuanced and disregards important aspects of Orthodox spiritual life.

David Bentley Hart argues for the inevitability of metaphysics in Orthodox theology. For him, the concept of a wholly "post-metaphysical theology" amounts to a contradiction in terms. Hart appreciates Jean-Luc Marion's subtle phenomenological analyses, but gives an account of a religious epistemology and ontology that is more consistently based on the christological and trinitarian doctrines as well as on a non-dualistic understanding of the relationship of nature and grace. Hart refuses to view the apocalyptic novelty of the event of revelation and the metaphysical conjectures of human reason in anticipation and response to this event as mutually exclusive.

Sergey Horujy presents a summary of his *Synergic Anthropology*, an original and complex Orthodox philosophy of the self that combines Zizioulas's personalism with the Palamite doctrine of the divine energies, and aspects of secular, postmodern conceptions of the self. His aim is to establish a constructive dialogue between religious and secular thought, and to widen the horizon of Orthodox discourse on the self that is often too narrowly defined in ecclesial and eucharistic terms.

Paweł Rojek reflects on the claim that Christian truth is antinomic—a view which either leads to a radical theological irrationalism, or a non-classical logic. More specifically, he explores whether Pavel Forensky's deabsolutization of the law of identity and non-contradiction is best interpreted in terms of a paraconsistent, L-consistent, or non-monotonic logic, or whether a rhetorical understanding of his discourse about antinomy is more plausible. Rojek argues that this question cannot be conclusively answered, and that all four options express aspects of Florensky's views.

Rico Vitz begins his considerations on Orthodoxy and ethics with a brief account of the three dominant approaches in philosophical ethics: virtue ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism. He sees a particular affinity between Orthodoxy and virtue ethics and explains how the church fathers adopted and modified the pre-Christian understanding of virtue, and how it helped them to conceive of the way to deification in Christ. Moreover, he points to some interesting parallels between Orthodox virtue ethics and Confucianism. Vitz also articulates a response to the “situationist challenge” that questions the plausibility of virtue ethics to explain human behavior.

The last contribution focuses on philosophy of language and looks at three dimensions of linguistic meaning in the works of Pavel Florensky and Sergii Bulgakov: meaning as reference, meaning as use, and meaning as sense. An attempt is made to give an outline of a triadic, trinitarian, philosophy of language that takes into account all three aspects of meaning, and that avoids the various reductionist fallacies of modern philosophy of language. For instance, an Orthodox philosophy of language must transcend both logical empiricism (ideal language philosophy) that sought to conceive of meaning in terms of verifiability, and ordinary language philosophy (and its Continental equivalents), which tended to overemphasize the pragmatic aspect of meaning.



Even in the twenty-first century, critical and creative engagement with modern and postmodern philosophy is still a rarity in Orthodox theological circles—although the situation is changing rapidly now. The reasons for this deficiency are manifold and complex, and not just the result of the suppression of free theological thinking in twentieth-century Eastern Europe. As John Panteleimon Manoussakis harshly but cogently remarks: “The Orthodox Church can be seen as a case-study of a church that undercuts her theological future by falling victim to a narcissistic nostalgia for a glorious past. Symptoms of this pathology are to be found in the way theology is done by the majority of Orthodox theologians in the last millennium . . . a merely philological collection and exegesis of patristic fragments.”¹

Even among contemporary Orthodox theologians, one often finds the attitude of a “first naiveté,” i.e., the view that the intellectual risk of engaging with contemporary thought must be avoided, because no theological gain

1. Manoussakis, “Anarchic Principle of Christian Eschatology,” 44.

is to be expected from such an endeavor. One of the aims of this book is to advance the transition from a first to a *second* naiveté. There is a fundamental difference between blindly and unreflectively *presupposing* that the patristic era is normative for Orthodox theology, and consciously and reflectively *knowing* why pre-Kantian and pre-Reformation thought still has something to contribute to contemporary debates. For even if Orthodox theology takes a critical stance on the emergence of modern secular thought and the divorce of theology and philosophy, it will nonetheless deepen its insights and gain intellectual credibility if it engages with the intellectual debates of its time.

This book is not meant to promote one particular approach to the relationship between Orthodox theology and philosophy. Rather, the idea is to give an overview of how scholars working on the intersection between Orthodox theology and philosophy understand the interrelationship between these two academic disciplines. Accordingly, the following, sketchy reflections on theology and philosophy express in the first place my own views and should not be read as an attempt at articulating a consensus among the authors who have contributed to this volume.

The Orthodox tradition must emphasize the need for a “Christian philosophy”²—against the general trend in contemporary philosophy.³ Whereas the sciences isolate and theorize about a limited aspect of reality, philosophy “aims at an all-encompassing overview” and forms “a general theory of reality and a general theory of knowledge.”⁴ Every philosophical theory—whether pre-modern, modern, or post-modern—is, explicitly or implicitly, based on ontological and epistemological presuppositions.

To be sure, proponents of post-metaphysical philosophy in the wake of Kant, Wittgenstein and Heidegger argue that the task of philosophy is quite different and more modest compared to the pre-modern era.⁵ According to the later Wittgenstein, philosophy no longer makes ontological statements. It merely fulfils a therapeutic function and helps us discern and overcome our metaphysical illusions about knowledge, truth, and how

2. Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernii*, 78; *Unfading Light*, 91.

3. See, e.g., Heidegger, “Phänomenologie und Theologie,” 66. According to Heidegger, the idea of a Christian philosophy is a “square circle” (*ein hölzernes Eisen*).

4. Clouser, *Myth of Religious Neutrality*, 70.

5. Braver, *Groundless Grounds*, 223–39; Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, 318–26.

language refers to the world: “All that philosophy can do is destroy idols. And that means not creating a new one—for instance as in ‘absence of an idol.’”⁶

That this new paradigm of philosophy has been successful in eliminating certain problematic and implausible philosophical approaches is relatively uncontested. What is less clear, however, is what the destruction of “idolatry” has been replaced with, and whether the menace of new forms of idolatry has really been averted. Wittgenstein and Heidegger have—in very different ways—provided a more nuanced understanding of the contingent aspect of human language and existence under spatio-temporal conditions. But what post-metaphysical philosophy has repudiated is not metaphysics *per se*, but at best a *specific* type of metaphysics that privileges the univocal sense of being (“onto-theology”), or a problematic, atomistic correspondence theory of meaning. Furthermore, it is evident that this sensitivity for the temporal, contextual and finite aspect of human existence is inextricably intertwined with a *radical, dogmatic finitism*. Post-metaphysical philosophy establishes rigid rules as to what counts as intelligible discourse and what not.⁷ As William Desmond explains:

Postulatory finitism first supposes, then later presupposes, that the finite and nothing but the finite constitutes the ultimate horizon for human thinking, one greater than which none can be thought. Originally a postulate, this finitism now becomes the presupposition of all thinking. But that it is a postulate recedes into the background, falls asleep to its postulatory nature, even as it functions silently as a presuppositional censor of what is to be deemed as a significant and worthy question.⁸

Like post-metaphysical philosophy, the sophiological movement in Russian religious philosophy paid much attention to time, history, as well as to contextual and cultural differences. But unlike post-metaphysical philosophy, it combined “post-modern” with pre-modern thought insofar as it sought to establish a metaphysical model that conceives of finitude, historicity, synchronic difference and diachronic change as grounded in divine eternity and infinity.⁹ It thus continued and advanced the theological and

6. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*, 171.

7. Meillassoux, *Après la finitude*, 51–80.

8. Desmond, “On God and the Between,” 102.

9. Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 69; Florensky, *Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 35.

philosophical project of the Byzantine era.¹⁰ Furthermore, the sphiologists were aware that “philosophy, no matter how critical it might seem, is at its base mythical or dogmatic.” They realized that the notion of an independent, neutral and pure philosophy is an illusion. There is always a “metaphysical premise that represents only an expression of an intuitive world-perception.”¹¹

For this reason, Orthodox theology can embrace neither an (uncritically) *instrumental* nor a *foundational* use of philosophy. The instrumental use of philosophy rejects the view that Christian theology must have a non-theological foundation but uses philosophy for the intellectual elucidation of its beliefs. Theology uses the conceptual tools that are available in a particular context and at a particular time: e.g., hermeneutics, phenomenology, existentialism, and so forth. The problem with this approach is that—although Christian thought never becomes dependent on any *particular* philosophy—certain logical, epistemological and ontological presuppositions are (explicitly or implicitly) incorporated into the Christian understanding of reality. It wrongly presumes that on the most fundamental level of philosophical reflection (logic, epistemology, ontology, etc.), the Christian worldview is neutral, and that, paradoxically, its unique character is only fully actualized if its basic beliefs are expressed within ever-new conceptual frameworks. In fact, the instrumental use of philosophy tends to undermine the transformative power of Christianity and results in accommodation to secular thought.

Furthermore, even within a limited historical era, or a limited cultural space, there is a wide variety of different, and often conflicting, philosophical movements. The instrumental use of philosophy cannot explain why a particular philosophical model is privileged. For if *theological* reasons are adduced for why a particular approach is selected rather than another, the instrumental approach has already been abandoned. The more authority is granted to theology to decide which philosophical model is appropriate to express theological truths, the more the criteriological and methodological primacy of the theology is preserved. If one follows this rule, the instrumental use of philosophy gives way to (the development of) a *Christian* philosophy. However, this is not to say that there is “*a single, absolute philosophical*

10. Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology of St. Maximus*; Tollefsen, “Metaphysics of Holomerism”; Mitralaxis, *Ever-Moving Repose*.

11. Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernii*, 78; *Unfading Light*, 91.

system that would accommodate absolute truth.”¹² A Christian philosophy is always in the making. It is a never-finished, eschatological project. Thus, it may well adopt insights and theories from various philosophical traditions and schools. Yet it must always retain its criteriological independence and uphold the normativity of the christological and trinitarian doctrines.

According to the foundational use of philosophy, for theological truth-claims to be intellectually meaningful and respectable, they require a philosophical, non-theological justification. This view makes theology dependent on philosophy and regards human reason as the ultimate, universal arbiter. This foundational use of philosophy is particularly characteristic of the Enlightenment era and philosophical theism. As John Locke points out, “revelation must be judged of by reason,” for reason is “the last judge and guide in everything.”¹³ The main goal of philosophical theism is thus to provide reasons for why the belief in God’s existence is rationally justified. Only that which can be proved, or made probable, on the basis of generally recognized standards of formal logic and argument, and which meets clearly defined epistemological criteria, can be regarded as knowledge.¹⁴ The *rationalists* consider reason to be a source of indubitable and self-evident truths that are innate and common to all human beings. Following the paradigm of mathematics, it is possible to logically infer certain knowledge from these truths. The *empiricists*, by contrast, deny the existence of innate ideas and emphasize that all true knowledge is experiential knowledge. The function of reason is limited to processing this empirically acquired knowledge. Accordingly, the empiricists favor the inductive reasoning of the empirical sciences that generates insights and beliefs of different degrees of probability. With respect to philosophical theology, rationalists rely on the ontological argument and *a priori* versions of the cosmological argument (rational theology), whereas empiricists focus on *a posteriori* interpretations of the cosmological argument, and on the argument from design (natural theology).¹⁵

The way Enlightenment theism (and its continuation and development in analytic philosophy of religion) conceives of the relationship between theology and philosophy, makes it unsuitable for an Orthodox

12. Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernii*, 79; *Unfading Light*, 93.

13. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 4.19, 14.

14. Dalferth, *Theology and Philosophy*, 89.

15. Dalferth, *Theology and Philosophy*, 92. See also Dalferth, *Die Wirklichkeit des Möglichen*, 257–307.

Christian philosophy. Even more than the instrumental use of philosophy, the foundational use undermines the transformative power of the Incarnation and fails to envisage a christological and trinitarian reconfiguration of reason and rationality. In the Orthodox tradition, grace is always mediated by nature, and there is no such thing as “pure nature” to which grace is extrinsically added.¹⁶ Accordingly, although it is possible to differentiate between theology and philosophy, the two disciplines cannot be separated.¹⁷

Both the notions of “pure reason” and “pure faith” (without the involvement and mediation of reason) are theologically problematic. However, theology does not have to conform to preconceived, non-theological notions of knowledge, reality and rationality. Rather, it is the discourses of faith and theology that should determine epistemology, ontology, and logic. This is not to say that Christian philosophy cannot critically and creatively appropriate new and innovative philosophical thought models and conceptual schemes—even if they do not have an explicitly theological origin. However, this exploratory experimenting will eventually give way to a consolidation of the Christian tradition. In the end, it must be possible to put forth a theological rationale for the innovation that was embraced.¹⁸

But what is unique about Christian philosophy? For instance, the way it conceives of the relationship between the universal and the particular. It avoids the Scylla of an abstract, indeterminate and impersonal universal, as well as the Charybdis of an equally indeterminate, solipsistic interiority. In William Desmond’s terminology, it allows us to envisage an “intimate universal”¹⁹—a philosophical model derived from the doctrine of the Incarnation. Many essays in this volume seem to imply something like an intimate universal. For instance, the centrality of virtue ethics for traditional Christianity, lucidly set out by Rico Vitz (see chapter 7), can be explained by the fact that we can think together universal divine goodness and truth (universality) with the most intimate gift of “being good” that allows us to perform virtuous acts in changing contexts and situations (particularity). In Maximus the Confessor, for instance, it is the free and active reception

16. Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 101.

17. Gregory, *Five Theological Orations*, 29.21 (260); Martzelos, “Vernunft und Offenbarung,” 295; Kapriev, “Es sind zwei Augen der Seele.”

18. See Meredith, *Christian Philosophy in the Early Church*, 155.

19. See Desmond, *Intimate Universal*, esp. 23–59.

of the divine *energeiai*, proceeding from the divine *ousia* that enable us to acquire a *hexis* (i.e., habitus) and lead a virtuous life.²⁰

Similarly, Orthodox political theory endeavours to transcend both abstract universalism and individualism/atomism. With respect to the relationship between society and the individual, they seek to overcome both impersonal collectivism and individualism. “Social life is not a condition superadded to the individual life, but is contained in the very definition of personality.”²¹ Regarding international relations, we find a notion of the supernational that goes beyond nationalism and cosmopolitanism. A nation’s activity should strive to be “national in its origin and means of expression, but wholly universal in its content and in its objective result.”²² Moreover, the brief outline of an Orthodox philosophy of language in chapter 8 on the one hand sees language as a determinate, objective, eternal and transpersonal *logos* (universality), and on the other hand as something intimate and subjective that enables the interlocutors to express what is most personal to them (particularity).

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20. Renczes, *Agir de Dieu*, 329–36.

21. See, e.g., Solovyov, *Justification of the Good*, 175.

22. Solovyov, *Justification of the Good*, 256.

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