

# **The Struggle for Patristic Theology in the Church of Russia**

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A strong romanticism can often be discerned in contemporary Orthodoxy that looks to the past in traditionally Orthodox areas as a “golden age” when everything was so much better. The truth of the matter remains quite different. Neither “golden Byzantium” nor “holy Russia” ever really succeeded in freeing themselves from an on-going struggle between the experience of the Gospel and the allure of a more speculative theology. These speculations always claimed to be capable of “rationalizing” theology through intellectual, philosophical and even moralistic means. This limitation of the exposition of the Christian faith to only these realms could never be fully faithful to the patristic spirit, however, since they lacked any foundation in a real *experience* of the Truth.

The long history of the Church of Russia is filled with this struggle between a theology faithful to the experience of the Church Fathers and the speculations of a far less traditional theology. Indeed, the fact that over many centuries the Church of Russia has not produced a single Church Father in the most classic sense has been used by some as a “proof” of the triumph of this type of theological speculation. While this might be an overstatement in light of the many spiritual mothers and fathers that have enlightened the Russian land for over a millennium, there can be no denying that patristic theology struggled for proclamation in the Church of Russia. But before any investigation of this struggle can occur, it must be made clear just what patristic theology entails.

## **Aspects of Patristic Theology**

Patristic theology should not be equated merely with patristics or patrology as has often been the case in modern scholarship for this imprisons the most definitive expression of Christian witness after that of the Apostles to limited chronological and geographical perimeters. In its most authentic form, patristic theology witnesses to Christ in all times and places, just as the original preaching of the Apostles did in the ancient world. The authenticity of such a *kerygma* is not found

so much through reference to scriptural texts as in an actual existential encounter with the Christ described as Lord of Glory in the Old Testament and Messiah in the New: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our own hands” (I John 1:1). After his ascension, this encounter with Christ was no longer limited to his original followers but has become a possibility for everyone in every place at every time.

In its most classic sense, the designation “Church Father” has generally been ascribed to those bishops whose own preaching has only strengthened the original Christian *kerygma* in radically changed circumstances. Because their preaching was never an intellectual exercise but the proclamation of a “living faith,” their theology was never a speculative one. Since faith is already the beginning of human cooperation (synergy) with divine grace, patristic theology possesses within itself the very real possibility of the experience of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Of course, this does not mean that patristic theology fails to possess an intellectual component in its exposition of the Christian faith but only that this cannot be considered the basis of its existential character. Since its foundations must always remain empirical, a speculative theology would possess little merit.

The acquisition of the Holy Spirit that leads to a real encounter with Christ certainly cannot be limited to the theological experience of those Church Fathers who were bishops for all women and men have the capacity to become participants in patristic theology. Whether they possess great intellectual capacities or not, the existential character of the Christian faith means that spiritual motherhood or fatherhood presents itself as a possibility for every human being who lives the life of faith, prayer and works. Purified and illumined, such Christians also possess the possibility of encountering Christ through their own participation in God’s glory through glorification (*theosis*). Although a rule of life (*askesis*) with these aspirations has been especially associated with monasticism, this historical development certainly does not limit it. All holy men and women, clergy or laity, monastic or not, may aspire to become bearers of the Spirit, manifesting the spiritual fatherhood and motherhood that makes them successors to the Apostles.

Church Fathers, in the most classic sense of the term, have generally been considered, first and foremost, interpreters of scripture. This textual emphasis could be seen as contrary to an existential experience of Christ but it must be remembered that the proclamation of the Gospel and much else in scripture was meant to be announced rather than read. Had other false gospels not arisen in the centuries after Christ, scripture probably could have remained in its oral form

rather than being written down. Such was not the case, however, and the original *kerygma*, now in its written form, became part of the Church's Tradition. Still, living faith in Christ was not robbed of its existential content. The experience of the Church was never verified against the text of scripture alone, but through "agreement with the holy Fathers." Only their exegesis alone was fully trusted in not only the proclamation of the Gospel but also concerning the unity of the experience of Christ in both the Old and New Testaments.

In order to be fully loyal to the *kerygma* as announced on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5-8), patristic theology always manifests itself as a vernacular theology. If the Gospel is to be successfully proclaimed, it can only be done in such a way that assures each recipient of the possibility of the fullest participation. Once again, this should not be misconstrued to mean that the Gospel is an intellectual challenge but that its incorporation as a rule of life can occur only through comprehension on the part of each believer. As both scripture and its homiletic interpretation passed beyond oral presentation into a written format, this vernacular expectation continued. For any missionary activity to be equal to that of the Apostles and loyal to patristic theology, not only the oral *kerygma* but also its written counterpart must be made available in a comprehensible manner.

From the perspective of patristic theology, the extension of the Christian *kerygma* into the canon of scripture provides only the first element of the Church's Tradition. Just as alien and false gospels competed with the Gospel of Christ, so too did false prophets arise, misinterpreting the Church's experience of God and the divine relationship with man and creation. Once again, the Church Fathers safeguarded the original preaching of the Gospel against error through the proclamation of proper teaching or dogma, much as they had promulgated a canon of scripture. This second element of the Church's Tradition has often been misinterpreted as an intellectual component that posits a speculative theology in opposition to the more experiential aspects of faith, prayer and works. But patristic theology sees no existential distinction between dogma and the experience of the Christian life. Dogma is nothing more than an expression in non-scriptural language of the Truth inscribed in scripture yet available to the experience of the individual Christian through the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. This explains why the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed begins not with "we believe" but "I believe."

The use of non-scriptural language in the spreading of error by philosopher-clergy in the early Church ultimately forced the Church Fathers to adopt the use of a philosophical vocabulary in combating these errors. Because of this, patristic theology has often been wrongly portrayed as a philosophical theology. As

Gregory of Nazianzus puts it, when the Fathers theologize, it must be “in the manner of the Apostles, not in that of Aristotle.”<sup>1</sup> Since the philosophical terms that the Church Fathers incorporated into Christian apologetics received a radical change in meaning, this makes it difficult to accuse them of making patristic theology into a branch of pagan philosophy. Furthermore, they never betrayed the existential character of Christian theology by allowing it to deteriorate into a speculative exercise. While they might use philosophical terms, the Church Fathers never incorporated philosophical thought into Christian theology. This fact helps underline why a theology that claims itself as truly patristic can never contain philosophical presuppositions.

The consensus of the Church Fathers (*consensus patrum*) has often been misconstrued in the Church’s history to mean that an agreement in absolutely everything exists among them. Such an attitude can generally be identified with a “proof-text” methodology that emanated from the use of *florilegia* (*catenae*) that depended upon extracts rather than the patristic writings themselves. Despite this, both differences of opinion and even mistakes can be found within the writings of individual Fathers. Even so, there truly exists a consensus among them in the essential elements of the Church’s Tradition as found in both scripture and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. This consensus merely echoes the existential experience of the faithful within the Church who have acquired the Holy Spirit. Still, within the life of the Church in various times and places, differences (*diaphora*) do exist, manifesting tradition rather than Tradition. Within the Church, these traditions can be identified with such aspects of Church life as ecclesiastical canons or liturgical forms and customs. And, within patristic writings themselves, a wide variety of opinion can be found, especially within the discussion of anthropological and cultural issues.

As a vernacular theology, true patristic theology always addresses the current culture for only through the apologetic of a theology of culture can the experience of Christ be brought to every place and every age. A missionary spirit has always pervaded such a theology, even in those cultural circumstances where the Church is “established.” While never betraying the Church’s Tradition, patristic theology, to be true to its vocation, always nurtures a tradition of dialogue with “the world” so that the Gospel of Christ might never go unheard. This is why all the writings of the Church Fathers possess such infinite value, not just for an understanding of the Church’s dialogue with the world in the past but as an inspiration to successive ages as well. Only in such a way, can succeeding generations manifest new Church Fathers. To “acquire the mind of the Fathers” should never be misconstrued as a slavish intellectual imitation of the past for that would be contrary to their spirit.

The style of their intellectual arguments should never be so over-emphasized that the existential character of the message of the Gospel is obscured. In Christ, all divisions are overcome, especially the dichotomy between a theology of experience and a theology of speculation. This is what authentic patristic theology has confessed in the past and this is what a continuing patristic theology does in order to be fully faithful to its forebears.

### **Ancient Rus'**

The planting of a patristic-inspired theology in ancient Rus' when Christianity was adopted there in the tenth century proved somewhat easier through work that had been accomplished earlier. A number of scriptural, liturgical and patristic texts had already been translated from Greek into Slavic as a result of the missionary activity of Cyril and Methodios in Moravia during the ninth century. This mission, under the auspices of Patriarch Photios of Constantinople, himself revered in the east as a Father of the Church, laid the vernacular foundation for later work among the Slavs. This included the baptism of the Bulgarian nation that preceded that of Rus'. In Bulgaria itself, even more translation work was completed. No sooner had the baptism of Rus' occurred than the copying of such translations also began in Kyiv, according to the *Primary Chronicle*, a historical account of that era.<sup>2</sup>

Despite such literary progress, it must be remembered that initially, the Christian *kerygma* that was presented to the Slavs was just that: The original apostolic preaching presented orally. The Slavs were illiterate and it was only through the Cyrillo-Methodian mission that they had acquired their first written language. Consequently, despite the existence of some scriptural, liturgical and patristic texts in Slavic, only a very small portion of the population in the ensuing centuries would be able to read them. Because of this, a living faith had to be nurtured through other means such as liturgical participation, the experience of the icon as unwritten scripture and the rule of life associated with monasticism as a practical path to the illumination which the acquisition of the Holy Spirit brings. While it might be a slight exaggeration to say that this reality explains why ancient Rus' took dogma "for granted," it did tend to cause the intellectualization and thus, compartmentalization of dogma from the existential experience of the individual Christian.<sup>3</sup>

Even if all the faithful had been able to read, the number of scriptural and patristic texts available in Slavic translation was only a fraction of that needed to make the complete and integral unity of patristic theology evident. For instance, it is far from clear that ancient Rus' ever possessed a Slavic text of scripture in its entirety. Prior

to 1500, no Slavic Bible seems to have existed in a single manuscript.<sup>4</sup> This lack of a complete, dependable vernacular translation of scripture will surface as a perennial problem throughout the history of the Church of Russia. Prior to the invasion of the Mongols in the thirteenth century, a limited amount of patristic exegesis was available, especially through the translated homilies of various Church Fathers (John Chrysostom was especially beloved) but these once again tended more towards the practical Christianity of prayer and good works rather than dogmatic exposition.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the long succession of Greek-speaking metropolitans appointed to Kyiv by Constantinople, knowledge of the Greek language proved almost non-existent in ancient Rus', even among its most celebrated native bishops. This meant that whenever they attempted to construct their own response to the Gospel, their interpretations of Tradition were limited by the small number of works that had been translated into Slavic, leaving the vast corpus of patristic literature in Greek a *terra incognita*.<sup>6</sup> Centuries of administrative control by Greek-speaking metropolitans also meant that a rather slavish adherence to Constantinopolitan liturgical practice and custom came to be expected. This confusion of tradition with Tradition would have grave consequences for Church life in later centuries when ritual questions would obscure the more universal components of patristic theology. Despite the foundations of a true vernacular theology in Rus', Church life would continue to be haunted by this expectation of Greek-ness.<sup>7</sup> Such an attitude also had a detrimental effect on the construction of an indigenous theology of culture.

The difficulty in proclaiming an authentically patristic theology in Rus' becomes evident through even the most cursory examination of the theological output of its most notable ecclesiastics. Hilarion, the first native Metropolitan of Kyiv (mid-eleventh century) provides an excellent example. His most famous homily, "On Law and Grace," already demonstrates a departure from patristic practice concerning the unity of the Old and New Testaments. Rather than emphasizing the comparability of the existential encounter of Christ as Lord of Glory in the Old Testament and as Messiah in the New Testament, Hilarion chooses to highlight what he perceives as a dichotomy between law and grace in the two testaments. And Hilarion was certainly not alone in doing this. As Fedotov has noted concerning many of these early "theologians" of Rus', "They live(d) in the opposition of Old and New Testaments, of Law and Grace, of the Jewish and gentile Church."<sup>8</sup> From the patristic perspective, this must be considered a false opposition.

If there was somewhat of a deficiency in acquiring “the mind of the Fathers” in the dogmatic presentation of the Christian faith by the ecclesiastics of ancient Rus’, the same could not be said concerning the cultivation of a rule of life that helped manifest the existential character of the faith. The availability of a work such as John Climacus’ *Ladder* as well as the *vitae* of such ancient ascetic fathers as Antony, Euthymios and Sabbas had a remarkable influence upon not just monasticism but inspired a life of prayer and works within popular piety as well.<sup>9</sup> While ancient Rus’ may not have produced Church Fathers in the most classic sense, a work such as the *Paterikon* of Kyiv’s Monastery of the Caves certainly reveals that the attainment of spiritual fatherhood or motherhood was not impossible. Already in the life of Theodosios of the Caves, we hear for the first time of the Jesus Prayer.<sup>10</sup> While it cannot be certain whether the repetition of this prayer was already used in the cultivation of the unceasing prayer that the acquisition of the Holy Spirit initiates, such a connection is not an absolute impossibility.

The chief shortcoming in the asceticism of ancient Rus’ resided in its almost complete identification with “moral” life. From the patristic perspective, this rule of life was certainly meant to encourage the battle against evil through purification but it was also to provide access to the Truth expressed in Christian dogma through the existential experience of illumination through the Holy Spirit and the encounter with Christ in glorification. The constant emphasis on “morality” outside monastic asceticism occurred in the various popular *izborniki* (collections of admonitions) spuriously attributed to patristic authors in order to give them greater authority among the laity.<sup>11</sup> Those who read them could not help but identify “moralism” with the Church Fathers. Worse, these writings helped drive a wedge between Christian life and theology. In the popular mind and even in the mind of ecclesiastics, it inevitably occurred that “morality” came to be identified solely with the experience of living out the Christian life while the healing and transfiguration that true *theologia*, the experience of God, could bring through participation in glorification was eclipsed. From such a perspective, the view would inevitably evolve that the Christian life could be lived “morally” through good works but that theology possessed no comparable empirical dimension since it could only be “thought.”

The Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century only worsened the situation as ecclesiastical decline accompanied the general social upheaval. Widespread destruction of churches, monasteries and libraries occurred. Thus, the loss in many locations of what few scriptural and patristic texts were available placed a moratorium on the possibility of any further positive developments. Obviously, the

copying and translating of texts was also made extremely difficult in such an environment. This cruel turn in historical events made it all the less likely that a fully patristic theology could ever flourish in ancient Rus’.

### **A Tale of Three Cities**

The devastation suffered by Kyiv and the surrounding principalities through the Mongol invasions precipitated a shift in political and ecclesiastical power towards the north. As Constantinople’s geographical proximity receded, so too did the small number of those who might know Greek well enough to translate patristic texts. In late medieval northern Russia, centers where Greek could be studied were found in only a few places such as Rostov and Vladimir. Also, the fact that few Russian “textbooks” for the study of Greek have survived could signify both disinterest in the language as well as proof that it was considered just too difficult.<sup>12</sup> Only in the monastic translation centers of the Balkans and on Mount Athos was it possible to encounter Slavs who could both speak and write in Greek. And it was to these locales that northern Russia had to look in order to lay the foundations for a patristic renewal.

The victory of hesychasm during a series of Constantinopolitan councils between 1341 and 1351 as well as the proclamation of Gregory Palamas as a Church Father in 1368, gave renewed impetus to the work of monastic translation and copying centers for the dissemination of materials that helped verify the patristic foundations of hesychastic theology. Especially important to the success of these projects was the Bulgarian Patriarch Euthymios of Trnovo. His involvement assured that the so-called “second South Slavic influence” of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had widespread influence in northern Russia.<sup>13</sup> Despite his devotion to translation work from Greek into the purest Slavic, an attitude that should have assured a solid basis for a vernacular theology in Slavic lands, such was unfortunately not the case. By the end of the fourteenth century, the united Slavic language had begun to break up into regional tongues much as Latin and the Romance languages had parted ways in the west centuries earlier. This would have serious implications as Slavic continued to be accepted as a sort of theological *lingua franca* in ensuing centuries despite its deterioration into a dead language.<sup>14</sup>

That the empirical theology of hesychasm (i.e., “Palamism”), faithfully reasserting the existential character of the Christian life of purification, illumination and

glorification as outlined by the Church Fathers, was accepted in the Russian north became especially evident at Moscow. As the new ecclesiastical center of the Church of Russia, its churches and monasteries acquired a greater influence on the direction Church life would take. A monastery such as the Trinity Lavra was especially prominent. Possessing the oldest monastic library of northern Russia, it contained many fourteenth and fifteenth-century translations of the writings of the ancient ascetic Fathers which had provided the impetus for hesychastic practice. In this respect, the work of the second South Slavic influence becomes obvious. However, in the libraries of the Trinity Lavra and other monasteries of the Russian north, it must also be noted that the treatises by Palamite theologians espousing the dogmatic sources of hesychasm as well as more classic dogmatic works by the Church Fathers themselves were nowhere to be found.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the same preference for ascetical and “moral” patristic literature, to the detriment of exegetical and dogmatic works, was re-occurring in the Russian north much as it had in ancient Rus’.

Despite the fact that the number of patristic texts available in Slavic translation had doubled between the years 1350 and 1450, the continuing large-scale absence of exegetical and dogmatic works inevitably meant that there would continue to be a heavier emphasis on the “moral” aspects of the Christian rule of life than an attempt to integrate the dogmatic theology of the Fathers into the existential experience of the Christian faith.<sup>16</sup> Of course, this did not mean that the practice of hesychasm did not bear spiritual fruit even if its connections with patristic scriptural exegesis and dogmatic theology were not always apparent to those in the Russian north. The spiritual fatherhood of Sergei of Radonezh had enormous implications for the spread of the Christian ascetic life. Stephen of Perm’s devotion to the original Christian *kerygma* through his translation of scriptural and liturgical texts into Zyrian for the Finnish tribes reasserted the necessity of a vernacular foundation for the survival of an authentically patristic theology in any new cultural circumstance. And, the creation of the so-called “Old Testament Trinity” icon by Andrei Rublev demonstrated at least the apprehension of the pre-incarnate Christ as Lord of Glory in the Old Testament even if this had not been exegetically expounded by local ecclesiastics in the manner of the Church Fathers.

Two circumstances, one at the end of the fifteenth century and the other in the early sixteenth century, clearly underlined the struggle that the assertion of a truly patristic theology faced in the Church of Russia: First, the attempt to compile the first complete Slavic Bible by Archbishop Gennadii of Novgorod and second, the translation work of Maximos of Vatopedi (called Maksim “the Greek” in Russia). In the case of the Bible, because a number of Old Testament books could not be

located in Greek manuscript, these were translated into Slavic from the Latin Vulgate with the aid of foreign translators. This disregard for the Greek Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament used by the Church Fathers, in exchange for the inconsistencies and inaccuracies of the Vulgate, marked an unfortunate departure from previous practice.<sup>17</sup> Such an error was only reinforced when Gennadii's Bible was reproduced decades later as the first-printed edition of the Slavic Bible, the Ostrog Bible of 1580.

In the case of Maksim the Greek, a similar Latin influence entered into the translation process. Invited to Moscow from Mount Athos, to provide new patristic translations, Maksim (who knew Latin from a long period of residency in the west) ultimately had to carry out his work in Latin since that was the only language the Russians and "the Greek" could mutually understand. Instead of translations from Greek into Slavic, the translation had to occur first from Greek into Latin, and then from Latin into Slavic.<sup>18</sup> Undoubtedly, there could be no better example of the possibility of "something lost in translation." Such was the problem that the ignorance of Greek posed for patristic theology in Muscovy.

The Russian penchant for Latin over Greek might come as a surprise but it was shaped more by historical and political events than concern for the priorities that would aid in the construction of a truly patristic theology. Constantinople's acceptance of the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-9), that briefly reunited the eastern and western spheres of Chalcedonian Christianity, also introduced feelings of suspicion towards Greek-speaking Christians to the south. In some ways, the Fall of Constantinople to the Turks (1453), seemed a further verification to the Russians that their mother Church had chosen the wrong path. This captivity of the Great Church by the Turks brought even further isolation to Greek-speaking Christians from the Church of Russia. Since the Russians had never shown much aptitude for the Greek language anyway, the growing absence of Greek-speakers in their midst could only encourage further ignorance of that language. As Moscow opened up more diplomatic and commercial contacts with western Europe, the value of Latin as a mode of communication became obvious. It was not merely the fact that Latin was easier to learn than Greek; it had a far more utilitarian purpose in serving the aspirations of the Muscovite state.

The fact that the Latin vocabulary lacked the nuance of Greek was one thing but the eventual adoption by the Church of Russia of Latin scholastic attitudes to fill the theological vacuum was something far more threatening to the proclamation of an authentically patristic theology. The Unia movement, which brought a portion of the Church in Belorussia and western Ukraine into communion with Rome at

the end of the sixteenth century, acted as the conduit. Without going into all the political and cultural aspects of this historical development, it is enough to note here that the early founders of the movement such as Hypatius Pocij and Meletii Smotriskii charged that Greek-speaking ecclesiastics to the south had “maligned and distorted the patristic heritage.” They evidently had in mind the Calvinist-leanings of both Meletios Pigas of Alexandria and Cyril Loukaris of Constantinople.<sup>19</sup> In at least this instance, these suspicions of Greek-speaking Christians were well-founded. Nonetheless, the wisdom of reunion with Rome in the hope of a return to more patristic foundations also has to be questioned in light of the scholastic theology that pervaded the western Church at that time.

Metropolitan Peter Mogila re-introduced Kyiv into the theological ferment through his establishment of a school that was meant to preserve the local Church in the face of the Unia threat. The fact that the institution was called a “collegium” revealed not a patristic inspiration, however, but an attempt to pattern the school on Jesuit antecedents in Poland and Lithuania. Mogila himself had already been influenced by many aspects of scholasticism. For example, his belief that Photios was the last Church Father almost paralleled the scholastic view that it was John of Damascus. While Mogila may have had the best of intentions, the results of the school’s establishment were lamentable. As Florovsky has noted, the school’s presentation of a *theologia scholastica* was just that- a “school theology” which had nothing to do with the existential experience of the Christian faith through the living rule of prayer.<sup>20</sup> Scholasticism, from its very inception in Augustine and Aquinas, was a theology founded upon philosophical presupposition rather than the patristic foundation of empirical participation in revelation through illumination and glorification. Consequently, a rather epistemological approach would come to characterize the theological attitudes associated with the Kyiv Collegium.<sup>21</sup>

The rather brusque reception that theologians from Kyiv would receive in Moscow in the seventeenth century had little to do with a better understanding of patristic theology as existential rather than speculative. Instead, it was the fear of that which was “western.” Kyiv’s “orientation to the traditions of Latin university theology” immediately raised suspicions. Nevertheless, the continuing suspicion of “the Greeks” to the south meant the need for an eventual turn to the Russian west for help due to Moscow’s increasing isolation. Establishment of a Ukrainian brotherhood of scholar-monks at the Andreevskii Monastery in 1647 at the invitation of the government in order to translate patristic texts marks this change-of-mind. This was the first time in the history of the Church of Russia that the works of the eastern Fathers were translated from the Greek or published western European editions.<sup>22</sup> Whether a distrust of this methodology ultimately encouraged

the Church of Russia to re-establish ties with Greek-speaking Christians to the south remains difficult to say but it did occur about this time as well.

Unfortunately, this turn to the Greek-speaking south deteriorated into more of a quest for Greek-ness than a desire for a faith more firmly grounded in the Tradition of the Church Fathers. While the journeys of Arsenii Sukhanov to locate and bring back Greek manuscripts from Mount Athos between 1653 and 1655 on behalf of Patriarch Nikon reaped almost 500 Greek manuscripts for Moscow, the thrust of the new movement almost immediately narrowed to concern over liturgical forms and customs. Rather than any real interest in Tradition, it seemed that only ritual traditions really concerned the Moscow Grecophiles. The mentality of a *Kulturkampf* rather than a patristic renewal becomes immediately apparent in Nikon's famous utterance: "I am Russian but my faith is Greek." In other words, Greek forms and customs came to be accepted as more "correct" than any local variants. When the historical moment presented itself for a real opportunity in beginning to acquire "the mind of the Fathers" anew in the Church of Russia, what instead occurred was a rift over ritual.<sup>23</sup>

What made the Moscow Church Council of 1666-67 especially hard for many to accept was the fact that the emphasis on Greek-ness rather than patristic rectitude meant the necessity of the abjuration of another previous synod, the so-called Stoglav Council of 1551.<sup>24</sup> It was that synod's mistake to have given almost dogmatic stature to the local form for making the sign of the cross.<sup>25</sup> When the Grecophiles of the seventeenth century ultimately discovered that the "Greek" form was, in fact, different, they, in turn, "dogmatized" it as proper. Of course, neither was more correct than the other but the exclusive character of the decision gave the "old believers" no choice but to break with the Church since, to their minds, the earlier synod has spoken so unequivocally and thus, "dogmatically" on the issue. Had there existed on both sides a better grasp of the essential elements of Tradition from a patristic perspective, such a terrible outcome could have been avoided.

Even when the Council of 1666-67 did attempt to reiterate an essential element of patristic Tradition such as the prohibition of the iconographic depiction of God the Father, the results were, at best, mixed. This prohibition was renewed as a response to an iconography purporting to depict the Holy Trinity in which God the Father was portrayed as an old man. While such a representation within a Trinitarian context did cease, the iconographic presentation of an old man as the Old Testament "Ancient of Days" continued. Obviously, the patristic identification of the existential encounter with Christ as Lord of Glory (and Ancient of Days) in the

Old Testament and as Messiah in the New Testament, so evident to the Church Fathers, had eroded significantly since Rublev's "Old Testament Trinity" icon. Within the context of a truly patristic theology, all Old Testament epiphanies can only be those of the pre-incarnate Christ and must be depicted as such.

With the Pyrrhic victory of the Council of 1666-67, further impetus was given to the Grecophiles. The arrival of the Likoudes brothers at Moscow in 1680 led to the foundation of the so-called Hellenic-Greek School. This was presumably done to counter-balance the perceived Latineity of the Kyiv Collegium and its representatives who were arriving in Moscow in greater numbers due to Polish expansion in the south. Actually, the brothers themselves were somewhat Latin-minded since they themselves had studied at Padua.<sup>26</sup> Their involvement in a conflict over the supposed "moment of consecration" of the eucharist between the Moscow Grecophiles and the Ukrainian Latinophiles clearly showed that they and their Moscow supporters were no freer from the influences of a scholastic mentality than their counterparts from Kyiv. A belief in the possibility of the determination of a "moment of consecration" already betrayed a scholastic attitude that could never be associated with patristic theology. Indeed, the Grecophile argument that the consecration occurred during the invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiklesis*) can be considered no more exclusively patristic than the Latinophile view that associated the consecration with Christ's words of institution. A close reading of a Church Father such as John Chrysostom would have revealed that both the *epiklesis* and the words of institution were considered consecratory.<sup>27</sup> The condemnation of Kyiv's support for the words of institution through support of the *epiklesis* by the Moscow Council of 1690 was re-echoed by the Council of Constantinople in 1691.<sup>28</sup> Obviously, a real understanding of patristic theology was as equally absent in the Greek-speaking south as in the Russian-speaking north.

Despite the perceived "victory" of the Grecophiles over the Latinophiles at Moscow, in only a decade, Peter the Great reasserted the strength of the Latinophiles because of what he perceived as their western-leanings. In 1701, when Peter appointed Stefan Yavorskii as administrator of the Church of Russia, the Latinophiles took control of the Church. Even as the Likoudes brothers were exiled from Moscow, Yavorskii brought many scholars from Kyiv so that the Moscow school could be modeled along the lines of the Collegium. What had been the Hellenic-Greek School was soon transformed into the Slavonic-Greek-Latin Academy. In other words, the use of Latin began to prevail, not just in the reading of patristic texts but in the teaching of the curriculum itself. The ascendancy of the representatives of Kyiv also again curtailed contact with Greek-speaking Christians

to the south even as the doors were opened to every non-patristic influence from western European Christianity.<sup>29</sup>

The appointment of a Church administrator in place of a Patriarch of Moscow had set in motion Peter the Great's plan for placing the Church of Russia completely under government control, much as in the Protestant countries of northern Europe. Because Yavorskii's pro-Rome sympathies had proven so strong, Peter preferred a more Protestant-leaning candidate, which he found in Feofan Prokopovich. Prokopovich's *Regulamentum Ecclesiasticum* demonstrated a clear belief in royal absolutism, associating any type of "spiritual authority" with "popery."<sup>30</sup> According to Prokopovich, it was the Tsar himself who was truly *episkopos* rather than the bishops themselves. This anti-patristic attitude was maintained throughout Prokopovich's work. He also was the first in the Church of Russia to insist on the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament, excluding the "deuterocanonical" books of the Septuagint.<sup>31</sup> As far as patristic writings themselves, Prokopovich spoke very critically of the works of the Church Fathers, regarding "the patristic ascetic ideal as groundless and its practical realization as impossible because it did not answer the demands of a civilized and centralized state."<sup>32</sup> With the establishment of Saint Petersburg as the new capital of the Petrine state, Prokopovich laid the foundations for a new theological academy there, modeled after the Lutheran seminary at Halle and dedicated to the embodiment of his own ideas.<sup>33</sup>

It was through the Saint Petersburg Academy that Prokopovich's outlook came to dominate the Church of Russia for almost a century. Although Protestant in tone when compared with the tradition of the Kyiv Collegium that had also been transplanted into the Moscow Academy, the Saint Petersburg Academy also adopted the use of Latin in the teaching of theology. Western European Latin sources were introduced into a "theoretical" theological curriculum. In those few instances when patristic works were read, this also occurred in Latin rather than in Greek or Slavic translation. Such an artificial approach could hardly aim for the existential theology that the Church Fathers espoused. In fact, the new theoretical approach considered patristic theology as a part of the past, having nothing to do with the current experience of the Church. It consequently came to be studied as a part of Church history.<sup>34</sup>

Eventually, even the Moscow Academy succumbed to Prokopovich's influence but only after his death. "Among the Moscow theologians, the protestantization of Russian theology reached its apogee."<sup>35</sup> But it was not so much the theology of the Reformation that was ultimately established in eighteenth-century Moscow but first, the influence of Protestant scholasticism and later, that of Protestant pietism.

Even Platon Levshin, the most important eighteenth-century contributor to Church education, first as rector of the Academy and later as Metropolitan of Moscow, could not escape these influences. Although called “the Peter Mogila of the Moscow Academy” (S.K. Smirnov), his catechesis differed little from “the vague and moralistic Lutheran emotionalism of the times.” Nor, despite his pastoral concerns, was Levshin willing to break with the tradition of theological instruction in Latin.<sup>36</sup> Still worse, for him, the exegesis of the Church Fathers served merely as an optional method in explaining scripture. The one positive development that Levshin spearheaded was the revival of the Optina Monastery.<sup>37</sup> With the secularization of monastic properties under Catherine the Great, traditional monasticism had been largely undermined so the reconstitution of Optina was an important event. And, despite Levshin’s own misunderstanding of the significance of patristic theology, Optina was destined to become a catalyst in the future patristic revival of the Church or Russia.

If there was any one individual in the eighteenth century who personified the shape of things to come in the long-overdue patristic revival in the Church of Russia, it surely must be Paisii Velichkovskii. As a young man, he had departed from the Kyiv Collegium, totally disenchanted with the conditions there, complaining especially about how little attention was paid to the Church Fathers in the curriculum. Afterwards, Paisii devoted himself to the ascetic life in monasteries on Mount Athos and in Moldavia.<sup>38</sup> Within this life of asceticism, he also began collecting and translating ascetical works from Greek. In addition, Gavriil Petrov, Metropolitan of Saint Petersburg, commissioned Paisii to translate the *Philokalia*, a recent compilation of hesychastic texts by Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain (i.e., Mount Athos). It was published in Saint Petersburg as *Dobrotolubiye* in 1793, just one year before Paisii’s death. Although he never returned to Russia, Paisii corresponded with many ecclesiastics there, particularly the monks at Optina. His translation of the *Philokalia* acted as an inspiration for even more patristic translation work to occur at Optina well into the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup>

It would seem not a little ironic in this complicated tale of three cities that it would be the Metropolitan of Saint Petersburg, probably the least traditional location in all of Russia, who would incite the beginnings of the patristic revival through Paisii’s *Dobrotolubiye*. While it has to be admitted that the work of the “Paisii movement” concentrated largely on the texts of the ascetic Fathers rather than classic patristic dogmatic treatises, it was a very real reassertion of the existential character of patristic theology in the face of the theoretical scholasticism and sentimental pietism that had taken over the Church of Russia. A better appreciation of patristic theology would only begin to emerge many decades later, however. For

the moment, things remained pretty much the same. Theological attitudes stayed imprisoned within scholastic categories and Latin continued as the language of instruction in the theological academies, making the true establishment of a vernacular theology impossible. According to the Commission on Ecclesiastical Schools in 1808, “erudition” was the chief aim of theological education.<sup>40</sup> That theology was more than “a matter of the mind” obviously never crossed the minds of the commissioners. As Florovsky put it, the legacy of the eighteenth century in the Church of Russia was “a theology on stilts.”<sup>41</sup> It badly needed brought back to the ground of the patristic sources.

### The Nineteenth Century

As the nineteenth century dawned, the Church of Russia stood at as great a distance from its patristic foundations as ever. One portion of it remained shunned by the other over inconsequential differences in ritual practices. Worse, practically no vernacular texts existed to meet the needs of the Church’s faithful. This absence included not just patristic texts themselves but even an accessible text for both the Old and New Testaments as well as the liturgical services. The continuing evolution of the spoken language had meant that Slavic no longer could serve even as a “literary language.” Yet, despite the need for the vernacular, there remained a pervasive fear towards contemporary translation on the part of ecclesiastics despite the basic incomprehensibility of the texts for most. Even the text for the *Catechism* of Metropolitan Filaret Drozdov of Moscow was withdrawn in 1824, a year after it was issued, because it contained scriptural texts and prayers in Russian rather than Slavic.<sup>42</sup> Whatever reservations might be expressed from a patristic perspective concerning the decidedly western-Christian format of a catechism as a teaching medium, certainly not much learning could occur when a portion of its texts were unintelligible.

Filaret served as a figure of transition in the continuing struggle for patristic theology in the Church of Russia. His imprint and influence can be found on nearly every aspect of ecclesial life that led to both the re-awakening and the appreciation of patristic theology in nineteenth-century Russia. According to Florovskii, Filaret became the first individual in the history of contemporary Russian theology for whom dogmatic theology was more than a speculative exercise. Rather, for Filaret, theology could be termed an existential experience—“he was not merely a theologian, he lived theology,” as Florovskii noted.<sup>43</sup> Of course, this cannot obscure the fact that Filaret sometimes remained imprisoned within scholastic categories as his *Catechism* shows. Still, he offered a radical reassessment of the ecclesiastical status quo that had prevailed since the time of Peter the Great. More

than merely dismissing that the Tsar served as *episkopos* over the Church, he asserted that although a sovereign might receive his or her “legitimacy” through the Church, the state could not claim any jurisdiction whatsoever over the Church.<sup>44</sup>

In light of Filaret’s own existential theology of grace, it should not surprise that for him, the Bible remained first and foremost a book of history, the history of the existential encounter between God and man that proved speculative theology superfluous.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, he risked his reputation by insisting upon the absolute necessity of a complete vernacular translation of scripture in which he eventually became personally involved. In the early nineteenth century, timidity had prevailed in carrying out such a large-scale project. Although a Russian translation of the entire New Testament was published in 1820, almost immediately afterwards, the translation work undertaken on the Old Testament foundered over the propriety of using the Hebrew rather than the Greek text. While this was admittedly a diversion from the Septuagint preferred by the Church Fathers, it was at least a step in the right direction for the Church of Russia needed a renewed understanding of the unity of the Old and New Testaments. Despite the completion of the Russian translation of the Pentateuch in 1825, fear of error took hold once again and the translation was rather dramatically burned at the Alexander Nevskii Lavra in Saint Petersburg so that it could not be circulated.<sup>46</sup>

This reactionary spirit concerning scriptural translation into Russian for fear of theological error prevailed well into mid-century and only then was there a renewed effort through Filaret’s influence. Between 1860 and 1875, a new translation project was carried to completion with the involvement of all the theological academies. Filaret himself read through and verified all the material.<sup>47</sup> Such success did not end reactionary attitudes, however, for fear arose especially within the state apparatus that controlled the Church that the Bible translation would ultimately lead to a popular movement demanding the translation of the language used in the church services from Slavic into Russian.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, this never occurred but such fear itself demonstrated how the government bureaucrats who oversaw “the Department of the Orthodox Confession” viewed any type of improvement in the understanding of the Church of Russia’s members as a threat to their own control.

Another example of this prevailing conservatism can be found in Filaret’s need to defend the preparation of new scriptural commentaries on the Pauline Epistles. Since John Chrysostom had provided such exegesis centuries earlier, some asked if there really remained a need for anything more.<sup>49</sup> While such an attitude might be

interpreted as a desire to “return to the Fathers,” it actually manifested a form of fundamentalism that was alien to patristic intention. A renewed emphasis upon preaching as an important component in church services helped underline the need for a contemporary exegesis that met the needs of current-day Christians. Any new interpretation that did not undermine the Tradition of the Church truly displayed the acquisition of “the mind of the Fathers” more than a merely mechanical repetition of their own words.

The possibility of the full participation of the theological academies in the scriptural translation project in mid-century had had its origins in 1814, when the then youthful Archimandrite Filaret proposed a new charter for the theological schools. According to this accepted and enacted charter, scripture became the primary subject of study in the theological academies.<sup>50</sup> Reading of scripture was associated with a great emphasis on biblical languages and this helped provide the personnel for the translation project.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, the new Russian Bible was never read aloud in church and only the Slavic text continued to be used liturgically. Mercifully, however, Filaret’s example of lecturing in Russian at the Saint Petersburg Theological Academy at least initiated a return to the use of the vernacular instead of Latin in the theological schools. By the 1840’s, all the schools used the vernacular. In this same vein, instruction in pastoral theology was also introduced unto the theological curriculum, bringing the study of theology “closer to the demands of life.”<sup>52</sup>

If the primary emphasis on scripture proved the greatest strength in the 1814 Statute, certainly its secondary emphasis on philosophy must be considered its greatest weakness.<sup>53</sup> The continuous infusion of the philosophical presuppositions of scholasticism into the theological curriculum over several centuries obviously had made such a philosophical “tradition” difficult to end despite Filaret’s best intentions. Yet it was not classical philosophy but Kant and his disciples that came to dominate philosophical studies in the theological academies of nineteenth-century Russia. This turn to the metaphysics of German idealism emanated from the Saint Petersburg Theological Academy, where the new philosophy instructors were trained for the Moscow and Kyiv Academies. Of course, a fully patristic approach would have subordinated cognitive philosophy to the experience of revelation in accord with the Church’s Tradition rather than vice-versa as in scholasticism. What generally occurred instead in nineteenth-century Russia was a renewed divorce between dogma and the performance of good works through the application of the metaphysics of German idealism.<sup>54</sup> Certainly nothing could be farther from the patristic ethos than the “abstracted cosmic agnosticism of Kant.”<sup>55</sup>

Ironically, as the use of Latin declined in theological education, there was a rush on the part of students to learn German so that they could read such philosophers as Kant, Schelling and Hegel. More ironic was the fact that even when the philosophy curriculum was withdrawn from the secular universities of Russia in 1850 because of its perceived “rebellious” nature, it remained intact in the theological academies. When the philosopher N.V. Stankevich began his own Kantian studies, he mused how an individual could “search for a seminary professor or priest to help and explain what could not be understood in Kant.” At the Moscow Academy, students not only attempted to master Kant’s philosophy but also labored over the proper translation of the technical terms found in his thought as well as examining the writings of those other thinkers whom he inspired.<sup>56</sup>

The over-emphasis on philosophical studies in the academies might have sounded the death-knell for patristic studies had there not also occurred a strengthening of historical studies beginning in the 1830’s. At that time, the study of the Church Fathers within a historical context was introduced as a more significant aspect of the curriculum. Despite this historical context, patristics was presented not as something “theoretical” belonging to the past but as possessing vital importance for the present.<sup>57</sup> Filaret Gumilevskii, a professor at the Moscow Theological Academy, expanded upon this view when he noted in the introduction of his three-volume textbook on patristic studies that there could be no chronological limitation placed upon the Church Fathers. In other words, patristic writings did not belong merely to the past but could be produced in the present and in the future.<sup>58</sup> Already in the 1840’s, the training of specialists in patristics had reached the point where academic chairs were being created.<sup>59</sup> The only ingredient missing from this patristic revival were vernacular translations of the patristic texts themselves so that they could be made accessible to any interested reader.

Just as he was involved with scriptural translation and the reorganization of the theological curriculum, so too did Filaret Drozdov provide impetus for a steady stream of patristic translations into Russian. Already in 1821, the Saint Petersburg Theological Academy, which he had reorganized, published the initial issues of *Christian Readings*, many of which included translations of patristic texts into Russian. In 1835, Filaret Gumilevskii proposed to Metropolitan Filaret Drozdov that a patristic series should be published regularly that would make texts available in Russian. Thus, at Moscow from 1843 until 1917, the journal entitled *Works of the Holy Fathers* was published, becoming “the most systematic series on the subject in the nineteenth century.” Later, even another series was created with the title, *Supplements to the Works of the Holy Fathers*. And it should also be

remembered that in this same period, the Optina Monastery had published over 200,000 copies of various patristic translations.<sup>60</sup>

It will be recalled that in the centuries-long development of the Church of Russia, the sanctity manifested through illumination/glorification had become disconnected from dogmatic theology in the minds of the faithful. The patristic renaissance of the nineteenth century certainly began the process in helping to heal this breach. Just as serious was the rift that had developed between the spiritual life and the performance of good works conceived as “morality” but the influence of Kant had only reinforced the gravity of this problem. The reminder given by nineteenth-century Russia’s greatest ascetic Father, Serafim of Sarov, helped set the proper tone at the beginning of the patristic revival: The true aim of life consists in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit rather than “moralism.”<sup>61</sup> According to Archbishop Porfirii Uspenskii, writing in the *Supplements to the Works of the Holy Fathers*, within the context of the Church’s life, the authority of the Church Fathers themselves depended neither upon their knowledge nor their good works but directly upon their sanctity.<sup>62</sup> Uspenskii also noted that the broad knowledge of the Fathers demonstrated that both “open minds” as well as “open hearts” remained important components of the patristic inheritance.<sup>63</sup> This underlined the need for constant attention to a theology of culture that assumed the Church’s intersection with all social, intellectual and scientific developments in every era.

But in nineteenth-century Russia, it was the Slavophile movement that initially attempted to construct such a theology of culture although the end-product more resembled an ahistorical “religious philosophy of culture.”<sup>64</sup> Despite all its emphasis on the peasant commune and rustic customs, Florovskii attributed the psychological inspiration of Slavophilism to the Freemasonry of Catherine the Great’s reign.<sup>65</sup> Through the eventual inspiration of German idealism, there was created a hope among the Slavophiles that an “indigenous philosophy” could be created for Russia.<sup>66</sup> Despite both the philosophical presupposition and disposition of Slavophilism, the Slavophiles realized that they could not ignore the Church as a principal ingredient of Russian culture. Even those of their number not especially attracted to the Church such as Koshelev and Herzen were reading patristic texts in the 1840’s.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, any attempt at grafting theoretical philosophy with the existential witness of the Church Fathers in Slavophilism was ultimately doomed to failure as the contrast of the careers of the two Slavophiles, Ivan Kireevskii and Alexis Khomiakov, will demonstrate.

Kireevskii’s ideas for a Russian philosophy had been strongly influenced by the German idealist philosopher Schelling who emphasized the unity of man and

nature.<sup>68</sup> Despite this, Kireevskii was heavily involved in not just the reading but also the publication of patristic translations. This was accomplished through his association with the Optina Monastery. First, the translations that had been made by Paisii Velichkovskii and his disciples were published there and these were followed by the publication of even more patristic translations made by the monastic brotherhood at Optina.<sup>69</sup> Despite Kireevskii's involvement in this process, it was not so much a theological revival based on patristics that interested him as the "emergence in Russia of a true philosophical language in accordance with these writings."<sup>70</sup>

Kireevskii hoped for a Russian theoretical philosophy that would be comparable to the western European intellectual tradition yet distinct from it.<sup>71</sup> Of course, the churches and monasteries of Russia had never been meant to serve as universities. They were dedicated first and foremost to the hope that the life of the Spirit might be nurtured in them through purification, illumination and deification. Thus, their existential intention was far from Kireevskii's goal of theoretical knowledge.<sup>72</sup> As a Slavophile philosopher, he sought a synthesis of theology and philosophy that was intellectually not really that different from what had been attempted in scholasticism during the Middle Ages. Since the presupposition of such a synthesis was philosophy rather than theology and led to a philosophical theology, it could not be considered patristic in inspiration.

In contrast with Kireevskii, and because he saw the obvious inferiority of speculation when compared with experience, Alexis Khomiakov's career as a Slavophile proved somewhat different. From very early on, he was far less inclined than Kireevskii in allowing the Slavophile cultural project to be influenced by western philosophical thought.<sup>73</sup> Just as dismissive of Kant's view that the human mind is knowable but not reality itself as he was of Hegel's belief that reality has no existence independent of what humans think about it, Khomiakov's thought nonetheless retained a touch of Schelling. This "touch" came from the idea that knowledge arises not out of isolation from or confrontation with the world but through a coming together with it. But Khomiakov's concept of *sobornost'* was not so much philosophical as patristic: Through the experience of God, not only was there a possibility of community among men, but between men and objects as well.<sup>74</sup>

Khomiakov read many patristic texts and also spent a great deal of time studying Augustine. His great insight certainly has been confirmed by his conclusion that Augustine was the "true father" of scholasticism rather than a Church Father in the most Traditional sense.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, such insight should not be misconstrued to

mean that Khomiakov himself always strictly adhered to patristic theology although he was certainly more cognizant of it than the other Slavophiles. As Romanides has noted, it was instead the fact that the layman Khomiakov, possibly more than any ecclesiastic in nineteenth-century Russia, paved the way for a real return to the Church Fathers.<sup>76</sup> He did this through his call for a return to “the forgotten path of experiential knowledge of God.”<sup>77</sup> Khomiakov realized that the guide on this path could never be provided by the speculations of “religious philosophers” that many Slavophiles desired but only by the existential witness of the Church Fathers themselves.

In the 1860’s, Khomiakov’s emphasis on an empirical theology of experience clearly had influenced Church life in Russia, especially within the theological academies themselves.<sup>78</sup> Even so, the struggle for a fully patristic theology had certainly not achieved victory in the Church-at-large. While it might be easy to recommend that theology draw upon the living experience of the Church, it proved not as easy for many to apprehend just how steep and narrow the path of a genuine patristic theology was to travel. Still, unlike western Europe in the nineteenth century, where research on scripture and the early Church had led to the disavowal of many aspects of Church life and dogmatic theology in particular, at least in Russia the very opposite had occurred.<sup>79</sup> But even the best intentions in developing a patristic consciousness could not always succeed in circumventing the continuous injection of western European ideas and attitudes into Russian life. Nonetheless, it still remained the Church’s responsibility to provide an adequate critique of these influences when they undermined the patristic Tradition.

Yet again, it was a member of the laity, the writer Feodor Dostoevskii, who attempted to shoulder this burden in the mid-nineteenth century. While Dostoevskii’s writings certainly sought to address the western European intellectual and social milieu from what he perceived as an eastern Christian perspective, the results, at least from a patristic viewpoint, remain mixed. While there can be no denying his literary accomplishment, the anthropological and theological implications of his work remain questionable. His recurring emphasis on personal guilt, a moralistic attitude absent from the Church Fathers, reveals that moralism certainly had not yet been purged from Russian Christianity. Despite the ecclesial trappings of Dostoevskii’s novels, the after-taste of a Christian pietism remains: It is morality, albeit a Christian one, rather than deification (*theosis*) that prevails in his view of the Christian life.

By the final quarter of the nineteenth century, it became ever more obvious that the division between theology and “morality” still had not been overcome in the

Russian consciousness despite the thrust of the patristic revival. That the moralism of Lev Tolstoi could attain enormous notoriety within the society of that time demonstrated with what ease even Dostoevskii's own brand of Christian pietism could be discarded and a fully "secularized pietism" could be embraced in the place of the far more sober theocentric anthropology of the Church Fathers. It was only a matter of time before such "faith" in a "religion within the limits of reason alone" that Tolstoi himself espoused would resurrect interest in the philosophy of Kant yet again.<sup>80</sup> Kant's own defense of the independence of moral decisions from any theological context fit perfectly into this viewpoint.<sup>81</sup> Many who did not accept the possibility of such "natural law" instead generally aligned themselves with Marxist philosophy, the most current by-product of Hegelianism. This was because Marxism, in effect, stood diametrically opposed to such a moralistic world-view.<sup>82</sup> With its new-found enthusiasm for the existential witness of the Church Fathers, the Church of Russia, caught between these two extremes, had its work cut out for itself. As the twentieth century dawned, it could never have been imagined how this existential witness would be severely tested not so much by philosophical moralism as by the political and social upheavals that lay ahead.

### **An End and a New Beginning**

*Fin de siecle* Russia certainly possessed all that it needed for a patristic consciousness to take deep root in its theology. Availability of vernacular patristic texts as well as access to them no longer posed a problem but the government's strangle-hold on the Church meant that a truly patristic ecclesial identity could not blossom. The government-appointed Church administrator was no longer even chosen from the episcopacy but had long been a member of the laity. Under the aegis of the reactionary Konstantin Pobedonostsev, any attempt on the Church's part to breath in patristic air was smothered. Because of the growing social unrest in the country, Pobedonostsev was concerned least with theology but rather that the Church's institutions such as the seminaries should become "bulwarks of anti-revolutionary propaganda and bastions of patriotism and monarchism."<sup>83</sup> Not only did the incomprehensibility of the church services due to the use of a dead language not bother him; he felt that theology itself was not essential to what he saw as the true "Russian Orthodoxy," i.e., the popular faith of the people. Thus did Lev Tolstoi's "secularized pietism" receive its official application.<sup>84</sup>

This transformation of dogma, an integral part of Tradition, into something that was "spiritually unnecessary" meant that the Church had to justify dogma's empirical basis, something the Church Fathers took for granted.<sup>85</sup> But rather than an exposition upon the acquisition of the Holy Spirit through the experience of

purification, illumination and deification, contemporary Russian thinkers chose instead to link “morality” and “dogmatics.” The challenge of the contemporary concept of conscience via Kant had proven too difficult to ignore.<sup>86</sup> Because of this, instead of providing a fully patristic alternative, it was evidently felt that the limits of the current moral vision could only be transcended by demonstrating that dogma was somehow related to it.<sup>87</sup> Of the practitioners of this type of “moral theology,” Antonii Khrapovitskii and Vladimir Soloviev stand out as probably its most notable practitioners but with far different results.

Khrapovitskii, who held many positions in the Church, culminating in his appointment as Metropolitan of Kyiv, had been particularly zealous in a movement cultivating greater pastoral awareness and sensitivity among the clergy.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, it does not surprise that he would attempt a more practical approach to theology but despite his many patristic references, it must be asked whether the end-result was much different from Kant’s. If, as Khrapovitskii says, “Christianity is a religion of the conscience,” how far behind can practical reason be?<sup>89</sup> The fact that Khrapovitskii spoke of each dogma exhibiting a “moral idea” places these ideas more in the philosophical realm of the mind than the empirical realm of the Fathers. Uniting this dogmatic moralism with an emphasis on Christ’s suffering as grief for humanity’s sins added a very unpatristic sentimentalism to Khrapovitskii’s viewpoint.<sup>90</sup> After he escaped Russia following the 1917 Revolution, his authority did not end but continued, influencing ecclesiastics such as Serbia’s Nikolaj Velimirovic.

The layman Vladimir Soloviev also attempted to escape a theology with philosophical presuppositions by embracing a moral theology of activism, claiming that philosophy as abstract theoretical knowledge had completed its development and was now consigned to the past.<sup>91</sup> This left Soloviev with the concept of freedom of conscience which he complemented with the idea of Godmanhood. From the patristic perspective, this was the principle problem in Soloviev’s outlook: It is the *idea* of Godmanhood rather than the reality and experience of the incarnate Christ that motivated him. This somewhat Platonic attitude was actualized through the principle of Sophia (Wisdom), which unites God and the creature, thereby leading to “Godly behavior.” This constant emphasis on eternal ideas to bridge the gap between the Creator and creation remains the major problem for Soloviev’s “sophiology.”<sup>92</sup> Nowhere in his anthropology can any actual experience of the divine grace leading to deification be discerned.<sup>93</sup> This remains a little maddening, especially since Soloviev was not without knowledge of patristic theology. He could certainly be insightful into the unity of the Old and New Testaments by proclaiming, “we are separated from the Jews because we are

not fully Christians and they are separated from us because they are not fully Jews,” yet so far off the mark in conveying the existential content of the Gospel.<sup>94</sup>

Most of Soloviev’s disciples came from the Marxist intelligentsia who had reconciled with the Church prior to the 1917 Revolution, perhaps attracted by the absence of moralistic overtones in his system. Most prominent among these was Sergei Bulgakov, who would carry the message of sophiology beyond Russia after the Revolution. Outside this group of Marxists was the mathematician Pavel Florenskii who, because of his obviously empirical training, did add a more existential character to Soloviev’s message but hardly in a recognizably patristic manner. Florenskii spoke of Sophia in a Trinitarian context as a “fourth person” although one that is not consubstantial with the Trinity and “admitted to divine life through condescension.” With some stretch of the imagination, such a conceptualization could be considered another way of expressing deification by grace but sophiology’s gnostic overtones were certainly not overcome in Florenskii’s hands.<sup>95</sup> Although he survived the Revolution, living for many decades afterwards in the new Soviet Union, there was little need for Florenskii’s sophiology in an atheistic milieu where his talents as a mathematician-scientist were more highly valued.

Despite the heavy-handed control of the Tsarist government over the Church, somewhat miraculously in 1905, the Tsar gave consent for the convocation of a local council of the Church of Russia. Despite the fact that no date was finalized, a pre-conciliar commission was set up to make preparations. One over-riding concern was that the current system allowing government control and interference in the Church’s life needed to be brought to an end.<sup>96</sup> In addition, everything from the long-overdue use of a vernacular liturgy to the restructuring of the ecclesiastical education system from a patristic perspective came within the perimeters of the pre-conciliar commission. Especially important for Antonii Khrapovitskii was the need for the future council’s retraction of aspects of the Moscow Council of 1666-67 that had created the break with the so-called “Old Believers” over differing ritual practices.<sup>97</sup> Within the patristic context, such differences (diaphora) had little importance for the content of Tradition. It was a very hopeful sign that despite the struggles of previous centuries, a long-overdue patristic consciousness could be re-established in the Church of Russia through the convocation of such a council. In the midst of the revolutionary ferment within Russian society at the time, however, the government just would not trust the Church to go its own way and the euphoria quickly came to an end when the pre-conciliar commission was shut down at the end of 1906.<sup>98</sup>

The detrimental effect of the “Tsar-*episkopos*” and his lay administrator on the life of the Church of Russia certainly was confirmed by the fact that it was only after the first had abdicated and the second was abolished that the Church had the freedom to hold its council. Even before it convened in Moscow in August, 1917, the shape of things to come became evident as new bishops were elected in some dioceses by popular vote in keeping with the early Church’s Tradition.<sup>99</sup> As the council met in the midst of the 1917 Revolution, it would all sadly prove to be too little too late. While The Church of Russia did succeed in restructuring itself, it faced a far worse situation with the new atheistic government than it had as the “Department of the Orthodox Confession” under the Tsar-*episkopos*. Despite the persecution of the Church and the closing of monasteries, parishes and educational institutions, this did not entirely end the rediscovery of the Church’s Tradition . At least until 1925, this rediscovery continued among the intelligentsia of Moscow and Saint Petersburg.<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, however, any large-scale change was now beyond the capacities of the Church of Russia and the struggle for the exposition of a truly patristic theology could only continue within the freedom of the émigré community abroad.

Both because of his placement in France after the 1917 Revolution as well as his prolific output, Soloviev’s disciple, Sergei Bulgakov, was recognized not just as a spokesman for Russian theology abroad but for Orthodoxy in general. Because his entire theology was based on sophiology, this was perhaps not the best contemporary development from the perspective of patristic Tradition. Like Soloviev, Bulgakov felt the dogma of the incarnation somewhat insufficient. Unlike Florenskii, his use of Sophia was never meant to introduce a fourth *hypostasis* into God. Still, Bulgakov did identify Wisdom both with the divine essence itself and also with created wisdom.<sup>101</sup> Of course, both viewpoints were absolutely non-patristic since, for the Fathers, neither can the divine essence ever be named nor can an analogy be made between it and anything created. Consequently, Bulgakov never succeeded in explaining how there can be an empirical experience of the uncreated God on the part of the created human being.

In contrast, much of the output of another Russian émigré, Georges Florovskii, Bulgakov’s colleague in Paris, was designed to reassert a fully patristic theology. Indeed, practically all of Florovskii’s writings on patristics were directed against Bulgakov although he is never mentioned by name.<sup>102</sup> Also important in illuminating the centuries-long deterioration of Russian theology into a “religious philosophy,” was Florovskii’s monumental *Ways of Russian Theology*, a great aid and inspiration in what has been written in this brief overview. From Florovskii’s perspective, when theology allows itself to be imprisoned by philosophical

presuppositions, this leads to the error that Truth can be reached through thought. But in patristic theology, Truth makes itself accessible to thought only through existential witness and this witness is provided by the Fathers and those who become like them.<sup>103</sup> The reiteration of the continuing oscillation in Russian theology between philosophical and moralistic constructs helps demonstrate how “thought” had taken precedence over “experience.” Unfortunately, this proved true throughout the entire Orthodox Church as well. For this reason, Florovskii proclaimed at the First Congress of Orthodox Theologians in Athens in 1936 that it was time for a new beginning. Not only did Russian theology need to rediscover its patristic roots but so too did all of Orthodoxy.

### **To Be or Not to Be Patristic?**

That very few followed the path of Bulgakov while many others turned to a more patristic-oriented theology in the mid-twentieth century underlines the success of Florovskii’s work. This development was not limited to Russian émigrés such as Basil Krivocheine and Vladimir Losskii but spread much farther. The phenomenal growth in the study of Gregory Palamas’ theology with special attention given to the significance of the energy/essence distinction brought a renewed sense of the existential character of patristic Tradition. Had such an awakening occurred on just this one point within the Church of Russia at an earlier date, how different things may have been! The irony in all of this was that the involvement of Russians in the “neo-patristic synthesis” happened largely outside the Church of Russia. Now that that Church is once again free to follow its own destiny, will it learn from the mistakes of the past or will it repeat them?

Will the future Church of Russia be a patristic Church or will it not? At present, the outlook is mixed. Certainly the neo-patristic approach has been embraced in many quarters but it still remains possible to detect the influence of Soloviev in the works of a writer such as Aleksandr Men as well as an over-emphasis on a word-oriented theology in the work of Vladimir Zelinskii.<sup>104</sup> The continuing intransigence of Church leaders in allowing the full use of the vernacular in the liturgy also harkens back to hardened nineteenth-century attitudes. There can be no denying that the weight of the past has been difficult to throw off and there has remained a tendency to prefer the re-establishment of the status quo as it existed prior to the decades of persecution. Especially prominent among these attitudes there survives the belief that it was the true calling of “the Russian school” to move beyond patristic Orthodoxy to a philosophic Orthodoxy.<sup>105</sup>

Even someone as deeply rooted in the Church's liturgical Tradition as Alexander Schmemmann felt that Orthodox theology had to go beyond the Fathers "to respond to a new situation created by centuries of philosophical development." For Schmemmann, this meant that "in this new synthesis of reconstruction, the western philosophical tradition (source and mother of Russian religious philosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) rather than the Hellenic must supply theology with its conceptual framework."<sup>106</sup> This was probably an over-reaction to Florovskii's equation of patristic theology with "Christian Hellenism," which frankly, he often did overstate and over-emphasize. To call patristic theology a form of Hellenism merely because of its use of a particular classical terminology makes it no more Hellenistic than the New Testament because it was written in Greek. Florovskii perhaps was guilty of this over-emphasis because he was loathe to dismiss the existential witness of history. This contrasted with the Slavophiles, whom he accused of desiring nothing more than a return to a native primitivism that resulted in pietism rather than patristic witness to the ecumenical and catholic Tradition.<sup>107</sup> For Florovskii, in order to truly follow the path of the Fathers, this had to be done creatively and not through mere imitation.<sup>108</sup> Even so, this had to be accomplished without philosophical presuppositions for this was not a part of the Fathers' "method."

This lack of philosophical presuppositions especially galls those who wish to reactivate the tradition of Russian religious philosophy. For them, an authentic theology of culture cannot be constructed without these presuppositions. Paul Valliere, a contemporary scholar of Russian Orthodoxy, has gone so far to say that "neo-patristic theology" does not "have the intellectual and spiritual power to shape or govern the future of Orthodox theology." According to him, a theology of engagement with the secular world cannot be provided through patristic theology because it was never about this. In contrast, this was what he feels Russian "school theology" was always about.<sup>109</sup> A Father such as Maximus the Confessor would certainly be surprised to hear such an attitude, especially considering how he engaged not just with the philosophy but the science of his own time. Indeed, in today's culture, with its scientific-technological worldview, the very relevancy of philosophy in any form as a presupposition to theology needs to be questioned. Even when it leaves philosophy behind, the trend in contemporary Russian thought at the end of the twentieth century to emphasize *kenosis* ("the humanity of God") over *theosis* (deification) creates a lopsided perspective that obscures the patristic experience of the unity of the Old and New Testaments through Christ as both Lord of Glory and Messiah.

Both the Church of Russia as well as the entire Orthodox Church must learn from the mistakes of the past. The rejection of the isolation which a total emphasis on reason brings results instead in the patristic possibility of synergy (cooperation) with God. This experience cannot be explained in either Platonic or Cartesian categories. It becomes instead a sharing in the same empirical experience as that of the Fathers themselves and can culminate in the same existential witness as theirs. All who participate in such a manner travel what S.S. Horuzhy has rightly called “the path of endless patristics.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> J. Meyendorff, **Byzantium and the Rise of Russia** (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1981), 18

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- <sup>3</sup> J. Meyendorff, **op. cit.** , 28
- <sup>4</sup> G.P. Fedotov, **The Russian Religious Mind: I. Kievan Christianity, the Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 42
- <sup>5</sup> G.P. Fedotov, **op. cit.** , 44-46
- <sup>6</sup> G.P. Fedotov, **op. cit.** , 58
- <sup>7</sup> J. Meyendorff, **op. cit.** , 20
- <sup>8</sup> G.P. Fedotov, **op. cit.** , 91
- <sup>9</sup> G.P. Fedotov, **op. cit.** , 47, 113
- <sup>10</sup> G.P. Fedotov, **op. cit.** , 153
- <sup>11</sup> G.P. Fedotov, **op. cit.** , 202ff.
- <sup>12</sup> J. Meyendorff, **op. cit.** , 21
- <sup>13</sup> J. Meyendorff, **op. cit.** , 119-120
- <sup>14</sup> A.J. Sopko, "Greek Letters and the Slavic World," in **Essays in Tribute to Hellenic Letters**, ed. F.K. Litsas (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1985), 154
- <sup>15</sup> J. Meyendorff, **op. cit.** , 124-125
- <sup>16</sup> J. Meyendorff, **op. cit.** , 129
- <sup>17</sup> G. Florovsky, **Ways of Russian Theology** (Belmont, Massachusetts.: Nordland, 1979), 1:16-17
- <sup>18</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:25
- <sup>19</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:62, 67
- <sup>20</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:85
- <sup>21</sup> V. Arzhanukhin, "Greek Patristics in Russia of the 17<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> Century," Greek Orthodox Theological Review 44 (1999), 569
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> V. Arzhanukhin, **op. cit.** , 568
- <sup>24</sup> N. Zernov, **The Russians and Their Church** (London: SPCK, 1968), 103-104
- <sup>25</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:284, n. 105
- <sup>26</sup> V. Arzhanukhin, **op. cit.** , 570
- <sup>27</sup> J. McKenna, **Eucharist and Holy Spirit: The Eucharistic Epiclesis in Twentieth Century Theology (1900-1966)** (Great Waking: Mayhew-McCrummon, 1975), 58
- <sup>28</sup> V. Arzhanukhin, **op. cit.** , 570
- <sup>29</sup> V. Arzhanukhin, **op. cit.** , 572
- <sup>30</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:119
- <sup>31</sup> G.A. Maloney, **A History of Orthodox Theology Since 1453** (Belmont, Massachusetts: Nordland, 1976), 44
- <sup>32</sup> V. Arzhanukhin, **op. cit.** , 573
- <sup>33</sup> G.A. Maloney, **op. cit.** , 45
- <sup>34</sup> V. Arzhanukhin, **op. cit.** , 573
- <sup>35</sup> G. A. Maloney, **op. cit.** , 46
- <sup>36</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:142-146
- <sup>37</sup> V. Arzhanukhin, **op. cit.** , 573
- <sup>38</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:160
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- <sup>40</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:178
- <sup>41</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:147-48
- <sup>42</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:199
- <sup>43</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:212
- <sup>44</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:239
- <sup>45</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:215
- <sup>46</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:190
- <sup>47</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:124
- <sup>48</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:123
- <sup>49</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:207
- <sup>50</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:138
- <sup>51</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:267

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- <sup>52</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:210
- <sup>53</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:138
- <sup>54</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:5
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- <sup>62</sup> S. Deicha, **op. cit.** , 578
- <sup>63</sup> S. Deicha, **op. cit.** , 579
- <sup>64</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:19, 21
- <sup>65</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 1:149
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- <sup>88</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:201
- <sup>89</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:207-209
- <sup>90</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:211-212
- <sup>91</sup> G. Florovsky, **op. cit.** , 2:78
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- <sup>100</sup> N. Zernov, **op. cit.**, 205-207
- <sup>101</sup> J. Meyendorff, **op. cit.** n. 92, 31-32
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