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Faith and Knowledge in the Thought of Georges Florovsky

Georges Vasil'evich Florovsky was one of the most prominent theologians and philosophers of the 20th century. He is known not only in Russia, but also abroad (in Western Europe and USA), primarily as an author of the *neopatristic synthesis* – a project of renewing of thought of the Church Fathers in the 20th century and its adaptation to modern philosophico-theological issues. In this article we will discuss the question of the relationship between knowledge and faith, philosophy (and science) and theology that was the integral part of the aforementioned synthesis.

Science and religion

Florovsky had been interested in philosophy and theology as well as in science since his youth. During his studies at the Historico-philological Faculty of Novorossiysk University in Odessa he strove, on the one hand, to achieve the mystical unity with God, and, on the other, he undertook rational and empirical research. Amongst his professors was the positivist Nikolai Lange, and it was under his influence that Florovsky criticized the speculative metaphysics developed by Russian philosophers of the so-called Silver Age, such as Vladimir Solovyov, Paul Florensky, Sergey Bulgakov and others until the end of his days, having the opinion that philosophy “begins

with experience and explains experience.”¹ His student work entitled *On the Mechanism of Reflex Salivary Secretion* was appreciated by professor Ivan Pavlov who recommended publishing it in English in 1917.² For his other work (*A Critical Analysis of the Modern Concepts of Inferences*, 1916), written under the influence of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism (H. Cohen, P. Natorp), G. Cantor and E. Husserl, Florovsky won a gold medal. Florovsky was also the secretary of the Biological and Philosophical Scientific Societies.

After graduating from the university, Florovsky taught logic, philosophy, history and psychology at various schools in Odessa. In 1919, he defended his MA thesis and started working at his *alma mater* delivering a course of lectures entitled “Logic of the Natural Sciences.” In the next year Florovsky, in view of the political situation in Russia, left his homeland and went abroad, at first to Prague and afterwards, at the invitation of Sergey Bulgakov, to Paris where he took a job at the new-created Orthodox Institute of St Serge.

In 1926, Florovsky received a proposal to deliver a course on so-called scientific and natural apologetics. Although this project was never completed, it is worth quoting Florovsky’s words from his letter addressed to Bulgakov:

I imagine a series of lectures or rather discourses on the theme of the relationship between science and faith. In these lectures one must discuss the following questions: the proofs for the existence of God (and negation of His existence), the religious nature of the scientific knowledge and its types, creation or eternity of the world, the miracles and “rules of nature,” the existence and the immortality of the soul, the origin of man, nature’s purposes, the purpose and the order of the world

¹ Г. Флоровский, *К обоснованию логического релятивизма*, “Ученые записки Русской учебной коллегии в Праге” 1924, 1, 1, p. 93. See F.L. Shaw, *The Philosophical Evolution of Georges Florovsky: Philosophical Psychology and the Philosophy of History*, “St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly” 1992, 36, 3, pp. 240–242.

² G.B. Florovsky (Florovskij), *On the Mechanism of Reflex Salivary Secretion*, “Известия Императорской Академии Наук” 1917, VI, pp. 136–157.

process. In other words, one should pose and clarify some questions for which “science” gets such a kind of answers that seems contradictory to Christian faith and Revelation, and also explain the Christian responses. (...) Conditions of the time require paying special attention to “materialism” which has been preached in the USSR nowadays.³

As we can see Florovsky, who since his student days had been interested in religious issues as well as in positive sciences, searched for the road towards reconciliation between the different branches of knowledge. It should be noted that the courses of scientific and natural apologetics which were included in the *ratio studiorum* of the pre-revolutionary ecclesiastical academies, demonstrated the priority of religion over science.⁴ In the same way, Florovsky stressed that all scientific theories are nothing but the symbolic (or approximate) descriptions, not accurate explanations of the world. They have a relative nature because they have been permanently transforming or even replacing other theories. Science uses some presuppositions which are capable of constructing coherent concepts, but these presuppositions themselves have a hypothetical nature and can be amended. As Florovsky explained in 1924:

An *idea* of evolution which is capable, clearly and harmoniously, of embracing and connecting different biological and paleontological data, *as if* the whole of animated nature has only one parent, from whom all species (paleontological as well as modern) originate, *as if* there is struggle for existence and natural selection etc. All of them are principles of explanation and connection, but not the “actual” events.⁵

³ The Letter of George Florovsky to Fr. Sergey Bulgakov from the beginning of 1926 (*Письма прот. Георгия Флоровского прот. Сергию Булгакову*), “Вестник русского христианского движения” 2011, 198, pp. 47–48.

⁴ See T. Obolevitch, *The Issue of Knowledge and Faith in the Russian Academic Milieu from the 19th to the 21st Century*, [in:] *Between Philosophy and Science*, eds. M. Heller, B. Brożek, Ł. Kurek, Copernicus Center Press, Kraków 2013, pp. 239–255.

⁵ Г. Флоровский, *К обоснованию логического релятивизма...*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

Implicite accepting the theory of evolution, Florovsky claimed that the destination of man (as the “crown of creation”) is not just to improve his natural abilities, but to achieve deification (*theosis*) or likeness to the Creator. In this perspective, scientific explanation is nothing else but an element or *preludium* of theological investigations. Science deals with a narrow fragment of the reality, namely the created world, which is “an ‘*exterior*’ object of Divine thought, and not thought itself.”⁶ In spite of its unquestionable value, science is subordinated to theology.⁷

Florovsky did not trust the rationalistic, speculative attempts to reconcile faith and reason which had been taken by the above-mentioned Russian philosophers of Silver Age. According to him, theology as an academic discipline in Russia had been created in the image of Western scholastics, whereas true theology, based on the faith of the Holy Fathers, remained aloof from intellectual life. Prayers and ascetic practices did not go hand in hand with philosophical deliberation.

As a result of the rationalisation of theology, the roads of faith and reason diverged. Theology had not been expressed the vivid, daily faith anymore and became an useless academic, “scholastic” discipline.

The neopatristic synthesis

As an answer to this situation, Florovsky proposed the program of the neopatristic synthesis, or the renovation of the early Christian thought in the modern world. It is believed that the “official” date of the birth of this project was 1936, when the Russian theologian delivered two lectures during the First Congress of Orthodox Theology in Athens:

⁶ See G. Florovsky, *The Idea of Creation in Christian Philosophy*, http://www.father-alexander.org/booklets/english/creation_florovsky_e.htm.

⁷ See T. Obolevitch, *Synteza neopatrystyczna a nauka*, “*Filozofia Nauki*” 2012, 4, pp. 88–90.

“Westliche Einflüsse in der Russischen Theologie” and “Patristics and Modern Theology.” Whereas in his first talk Florovsky criticized the condition of Russian theology of that time, in the second contribution he devised some positive solutions concerning not only Russian thought, but also the whole Orthodox world.

Florovsky called for a return to the legacy of the Fathers of the Church which remains a true treasure of theology also in his time. As he wrote, “The teaching of the Fathers is a permanent category of Christian existence, a constant and ultimate measure and criterion,”⁸ and:

“*Following the Holy Fathers*”... This is not a reference to some abstract tradition, in formulas and propositions. It is primarily an appeal to holy witnesses. Indeed, we appeal to the Apostles, and not just to an abstract “Apostolicity.” In a similar manner do we refer to the Fathers. The witness of the Fathers belongs, intrinsically and integrally, to the very structure of Orthodox belief.⁹

Florovsky explained that the expression “return to the reverend Fathers”¹⁰ does not mean simply “go back.” On the contrary, it assumes a fruitful continuation of the patristic tradition: “I would risk a suggestion that St. Athanasius and St. Augustine are much more up to date than many of our theological contemporaries.”¹¹ The renewing of patristics must not be done according to the letter, but according to the spirit. One should not only “re-open” the thought of the early Christian writers, but also develop it in the direction indicated

⁸ G. Florovsky, *St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers*, [in:] *idem*, *Collected Works*, vol. 1: *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont 1972, p. 107.

⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 106–107.

¹⁰ G. Florovsky, *Patristics and Modern Theology*, [in:] *Procès-verbaux du Premier Congrès de Théologie Orthodoxe à Athènes*, ed. H.S. Alivisatos, Pyrsos, Athens 1938, p. 3.

¹¹ See G. Florovsky, *The Lost Scriptural Mind*, [in:] *idem*, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

by them. In his book *Ways of Russian Theology* (1937) Florovsky quoted John Henry Newman's words: "The Fathers are our teachers, but not our confessors or casuists; they are the prophets of great things, not the Spiritual directors of individuals (*Essays*, II, 371)."¹² Using the phrase of St Irenaeus of Lyon, the Russian thinker wrote that the patristic legacy is *depositum juvenescens* – a living tradition¹³ and by no means a petrified gift, since the Church is always in the process of creation, *im Werden*.¹⁴ "Following the Holy Fathers" is not the same as simply quoting their works. It implies the reception of the mind and will (φρόνημα) of the Fathers; so it should be theology *ad mentem patrum*.¹⁵

The task of theology lies not so much in translating the Tradition of faith into contemporary language, into the terms of the most recent philosophy, but lies rather in discovering in the ancient patristic tradition the perennial principles of Christian philosophy; this task lies not in controlling dogma by means of contemporary philosophy but rather in re-shaping philosophy on the experience of faith itself so that the experience of faith would become the source and measure of philosophical views.¹⁶

¹² Г. Флоровский, *Пути русского богословия*, Издательство Белорусского Экзархата, Минск 2006, p. 496.

¹³ See G. Florovsky, *The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church*, [in:] *idem, Collected Works*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 79; *idem, St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers...*, *op. cit.*, p. 106; *idem, The Lost Scriptural Mind...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ See G. Florovsky, *The Church: Her Nature and Task*, [in:] *idem, Collected Works*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, pp. 58, 68.

¹⁵ See G. Florovsky, *Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, [in:] *idem, Collected Works*, vol. 4: *Aspects of Church History*, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont 1975, p. 18. Cf. *idem, St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers...*, *op. cit.*, p. 109. See also P. Ladouceur, *Treasures New and Old: Landmarks of Orthodox Neopatristic Theology*, "St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly" 2012, 56, 2, p. 196.

¹⁶ G. Florovsky, *Western Influences in Russian Theology*, trans. T. Bird, R. Haugh, [in:] *idem, Collected Works*, vol. 4, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

What is more, Florovsky paid special attention to the experience, the mystico-ascetical dimension of the Father's activity, which should be developed in the theology of the 20th century as well, opposing speculative modernism. "Apart from the life of Christ, theology carries no conviction, and, if separated from the life of faith, theology may easily degenerate into empty dialectics, a vain *polylogia*, without any spiritual consequence."¹⁷

In Florovsky's opinion, the authority of the Church Fathers is not *dictatus papae*; the early Christian writers "are guides and witnesses, no more."¹⁸ In this way, Florovsky suggested undertaking more intensive studies on the creativity of the Father's, as well as to adapt their thought to the cultural conditions of the 20th century. The contemporary follower of the neopatristic synthesis, Sergey Horuzhy, described this position with Heidegger's notion of *Kehre* which means a "return which is a condition of an advance," but whereas for the German philosopher "Origin is in pre-Christian and even pre-Socratic Greek thought; for Florovsky it resides in Greek patristics."¹⁹

The Origins: patristic syntheses

The neopatristic synthesis of Florovsky was an attempt to construct the new synthesis of the philosophico-theological thought modelled on the "classical" syntheses elaborated by the Church Fathers. Let us consider some of the most important ideas proclaimed by the early Christian writers that inspired Florovsky.

¹⁷ G. Florovsky, *Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church...*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁸ The Letter George Florovsky to Dobbie Bateman from 12.12.1963 (*A Previously Unpublished Letter of Georges Florovsky to Dobbie Bateman*), "Sobornost" 2005, 27, p. 62.

¹⁹ See S.S. Horuzhy, *Neo-Patristic Synthesis and Russian Philosophy*, "St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly" 2000, 44, 3–4, pp. 317–318.

The doctrine of the divine essence and energies

First of all, the Church Fathers took up the challenge of the reconciliation of the truths of Christian faith and Ancient Greek philosophical thought. This task was not the goal in itself. This simply enabled Christian writers to express the revealed truths in the philosophical language more precisely and thereby defend them from inappropriate, heretical interpretations. In this way, the first patristic syntheses were constructed – initially by St Athanasius of Alexandria and the Cappadocian Fathers, later on by St Maximus the Confessor and St John of Damascus. At the same time, early Christian thinkers taught about impossibility of the cognition of God. This antinomy of His knowledgeability and unknowledgeability the Eastern Christian Fathers expressed in the terms of the divine essence and the divine energies which are different from His nature, although belong to God. This very doctrine was a core of the last theologico-philosophical synthesis of the patristic era as well as the neopatristic synthesis postulated by Florovsky.

Reflecting on the possibility of the cognition of God, the early Christian theologians stressed that God itself, or His essence (*resp.* nature) should not be achieved by any man or angel. We would not perceive it in either this empirical life or in the future. Cognition (also contemplative) of God is possible only due to the manifestation of His attributes – the so-called the divine energies (*resp.* *logoi*) or powers. The divine essence/nature and energies/powers are not two “parts” of God. They only express His transcendence and immanence perceived as two inseparable aspects. Florovsky reminded us that the doctrine of differentiation (διάκρισις) of the divine essence and energies was introduced in the 4th century by St Athanasius the Great. Although this distinction can be traced back to ancient thought (Philon of Alexandria and Plotinus) as well as in the teaching of the first Christian apologists and Clemens of Alexandria, it was Athanasius who gave these terms a totally new connotation.²⁰

²⁰ See G. Florovsky, *St. Athanasius' Concept of Creation*, [in:] *idem, Collected Works*, vol. 4, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–51.

“It serves now a new purpose: to discriminate strictly between the inner Being of God and His creative and ‘providential’ manifestation *ad extra*, in the creaturely world.”²¹ It was particularly important in the context of the doctrine of creation of the world that is a result of the divine energies/powers/*logoi* or the divine grace. The distinction between the unknowable essence/nature of God and His energies delimits two areas: theology concerning God-in-himself, or the Holy Trinity, and the so-called economy pertaining to the divine energy which manifests and operates in the created world. In this context, Florovsky wrote about the double mystery: the mystery of the unknowable divine essence (theology *sensu stricto*) and mystery of creation (the realm of the divine economy) which means that the world is a product of the independent, inexplicable act of the divine will.

The Orthodox doctrine of the divine energies was not a result of speculation but of the personal meeting with God. St Gregory of Palamas and his successors (as well as predecessors: the Cappodocian Fathers, St Maximus the Confessor and others) simply tried to justify – in the philosophical language borrowed from Aristotle’s dictionary – their mystical experience:

St. Gregory was not a speculative theologian. He was a monk and a bishop. He was not concerned about abstract problems of philosophy, although he was well trained in this field too. He was concerned solely with problems of Christian existence.²²

Florovsky postulated that the whole of theology in general should be determined by the experience of faith, not by abstract notions. It does not mean that Fr George discredited the value of reason for theology. He only stressed the primacy of faith and prayer over the vast speculative constructions which very often had determined

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

²² G. Florovsky, *St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 113–114.

the development of the philosophico-theological thought in the West and Russia. The return to the Greek and Byzantine Church Fathers, and consequently to the lost Orthodox heritage, is equal to the return to the practice of confession and transmission of the Christian faith which is an appropriate source of theology.

Christian Hellenism

The neopatristic synthesis assumes a certain model of the relationship between philosophy and religion, philosophy and theology. Florovsky picked this topic in 1923 in his previously unpublished article entitled *Philosophy and Religion*. In this text we can observe that the thinker gave up *stricte* philosophical issues and turned to religious problems.²³ Florovsky questioned the possibility of the rationalisation of the revealed truths, i.e. giving any arguments for the existence of God or the logical explanation of the phenomenon of religion. As he wrote,

“Rational” justification of faith means its destruction: *faith justifies itself*. (...) Religion and philosophy, faith and knowledge have different and autonomous nature (...). The believing thinker should strictly guard the borders between *divina* and *humana*, between the other world and our world.²⁴

In Florovsky’s opinion, faith and knowledge are situated at different levels. Faith is unproved, unreasonable because it is given only in the experience. In another text he insisted that

²³ See O.T. Ермишин, *Неизвестная статья Г.В. Флоровского в контексте современной “философской теологии”*, “Философские науки” 2013, 10, pp. 93–99.

²⁴ Г.В. Флоровский, *Философия и религия*, “Философские науки” 2013, 10, pp. 101, 103.

It is impossible to build up a universally recognized system of religious philosophy. There could not ever be a *philosophia perennis*. For true reality is not in knowledge but in the religious test.²⁵

Florovsky objected both to Western rationalism and the speculative attitude of Russian religious philosophy. As a remedy for the rationalisation of the truths of faith, Florovsky indicated the need to renew the awareness of the unsolved mystery of God and, in this connection, “weakness of reason.” “Theologizing in its roots must be intuitive, defined as the *experience of faith*, vision, and not as a self-satisfying dialectic of inert concepts.”²⁶ True philosophy should take into consideration a concrete spiritual situation of man who searches for God and prays to Him. Yet spiritual experience shows that God is transcendent as well as immanent. God is not – contrary to Solovyov and his school – “All-unity,” in which the world is immersed. Indeed, there is a transparent border (or, using the language of the Fathers – “diastema”) between God and the world. It could be crossed not due to certain ontological concept which “equates” the empirical and super-empirical dimensions (as it has done in the teaching on Sophia of Solovyov or Bulgakov), but only through prayers and ascetic practices.

Our cognitive abilities, especially concerning God, are limited. As a consequence, the whole of theology has an antinomical nature. The antinomies and paradoxes take place even in mathematics – the most accurate science; *a fortiori* it pertains to the religious sphere deals with the relationship between God and man. In the face of the unreachable Mystery, all philosophical deliberations are inadequate, incommensurate, disproportionate. The human cognition gradually

²⁵ G. Florovsky, *Religious Experience and Philosophical Confession*, manuscript, 36pgs, [in:] Georges Florovsky Papers, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Quoted from M. Baker, “*Theology Reasons*” – in *History: Neo-Patristic Synthesis and the Renewal of Theological Rationality*, “ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΑ” 2010, 4, p. 82.

²⁶ G. Florovsky, *The House of the Father*, <http://thoughtsintrusive.wordpress.com/2013/12/25/the-house-of-the-father/>.

approaches its object yet never exhausts it completely. Florovsky, who had been involved in the ecumenical movement, quoted in this context the sentence of the Catholic Cardinal, John Henry Newman:

Theology is occupied with supernatural matters, and is ever running into mysteries, which reason can neither explain nor adjust. Its lines of thought come to an abrupt termination, and to pursue them or to complete them is to plunge down the abyss.²⁷

Therefore, if a theologian claims that his theses have an obligatory, universal character, he would fall into heresy.

At the same time, Florovsky stressed that apophatic theology by no means excludes the cataphatic approach. Instead, it requires some positive explanation of Christian truths.²⁸ Florovsky warned against fideism (by which he understood so-called “Judaism” or “Hebraism”) – the attitude of the omission of philosophical reflection and basing only upon the Sacred Scripture. In his opinion, “Human language in no way reduces the absolute character of Revelation nor limits the power of God’s Word,”²⁹ because “the God of the Bible is not *Deus absconditus*, but *Deus revelatus*.”³⁰ Using the Church Fathers’ distinction between the unknowable divine essence and his energies, he emphasized not only the first element of that schema (thesis on the unknowability), but also searched for some ways of cognition of God.

Thereby Florovsky promoted the attitude of the “Christian Hellenism” – the philosophizing on God which is “carrying out of the re-

²⁷ G. Florovsky, *The Ever-Virgin Mother of God*, [in:] *idem*, *Collected Works*, vol. 3: *Creation and Redemption*, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont 1976, p. 185.

²⁸ Cf. P. Kalaitzidis, *La théologie comme science et doxologie: logocentrisme, apophatisme et théologie mystique chez quelques auteurs orthodoxes contemporains*, “Contacts. Revue française de l’orthodoxie” 2013, 241, p. 107.

²⁹ G. Florovsky, *Revelation, Philosophy and Theology*, trans. R. Haugh, [in:] *idem*, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁰ G. Florovsky, *Revelation and Interpretation*, [in:] *idem*, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

religious duty and vocation of everyone.”³¹ He recalled that even Tertullian, considered to be the “pioneer” of fideism, “himself could not avoid ‘inquisition’ and ‘disputation,’ and did not hesitate to use the wisdom of the Greeks in the defence of the Christian faith.”³² In turn, St Gregory of Nazianzus criticized the decrees of Julian the Apostate which prohibited Christians from teaching arts and science.³³ Finally, St John of Damascus among other heresies mentioned the so-called “gnosomachy” or “strugglers with knowledge.” As Florovsky stressed, the Church had not rejected ancient culture; what is more, it had perceived it as *Praeparatio Evangelica*. The defence of Christian truths against heretical interpretations could be impossible without the achievements of Greek philosophy. Theology itself arose as a result of the process of the application of ancient philosophical reflection to the Christian faith.

For the Christian thinker there is no separation whatsoever between faith and reason. Christian philosophy begins with the truths of faith, and finds therein the light of reason. One can say that the Christian dogma contains by way of premises the entire metaphysics, metaphysics true and certain. The Christian philosopher has to find, define and explain these premises. Christian philosophy is a speculative exegesis of the Christian fact. There is a certain asceticism of knowledge a preliminary ascetic teaching, which is more than methodology. In practical piety, the experience of the philosopher is transformed and this transformation is qualitative. And since Jesus Christ is the principal object of dogmatic experience, it is possible to say that the entire

³¹ Г. Флоровский, *Богословские отрывки*, “Путь” 1931, 31, p. 14. See also P.L. Gavriilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 5–6.

³² G. Florovsky, *Faith and Culture*, [in:] *idem*, *Collected Works*, vol. 2: *Christianity and Culture*, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont 1974, p. 23. Cf. Tertulian, *De poenitentia*, 1.

³³ See G. Florovsky, *Christianity and Civilization*, [in:] *idem*, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

Christian philosophy is a speculative interpretation of Christological dogma, the dogma of Chalcedon.³⁴

On the one hand, the Russian thinker stressed the disproportionality of faith and reason, on the other – their connection. One can pose the question of whether Florovsky’s thought is consistent and coherent. In order to give a proper answer, we should remember the context of his statement. Formulating the thesis on the antinomy of faith and knowledge (or reason) Florovsky controverted the approaches of the intellectualists of the Silver Age who had philosophized within the Revelation and – *nolens volens* – had treated faith instrumentally, sharing the opinion that it needs to be “justified” or “proved” by reason (according to the principle *fides quaerens intellectum*). Florovsky, in turn, defended the thesis on the absolute priority of faith over reason and hence its independence and autonomy. At the same time, he encouraged the following of the attitude of the early Christian Church Fathers, strived for the “churchfying” of reason and, consequently, acknowledging its value with the stipulation that faith retains a leading position, purifying, ennobling, and sanctifying the human mind. As Florovsky wrote, “Faith illuminates the reason,”³⁵ according to the principle *intellectus quaerens fidem* or *credo ut intelligam*. It is worth mentioning that in the patristic period both formulas were known. Florovsky opposed them to each other simply in order to demonstrate the confrontation between the Silver Age projects of the rationalization of faith and the neopatristic synthesis (stressing the “churchfying” of reason).

All patristic syntheses did not assume a reconstruction of any ancient philosophical system. On the contrary, they elaborated a new type of reflection. True philosophy is nothing but Christian dogma-

³⁴ G. Florovsky, *The Idea of Creation in Christian Philosophy*, [in:] Georges Florovsky Papers, Manuscripts Division Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Quoted from M. Baker, “Theology Reasons” – in *History: Neo-Patristic Synthesis and the Renewal of Theological Rationality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

³⁵ G. Florovsky, *The Ever-Virgin Mother of God...*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

tism, or “sacred philosophy,” “a philosophy of the Holy Spirit.”³⁶ The Church Fathers’ thought could not be classified as either Platonism or Aritotelianism etc., but just as Christian Hellenism that had used particular philosophico-theological categories.³⁷

We have to distinguish carefully philosophies and Philosophy. Clement of Alexandria was very strict about that. (...) Ancient Philosophers may have erred, and have indeed most dangerously erred. Yet Christians must be philosophers themselves. For Philosophy means simply the vocation of the human mind to apprehend the ultimate truth, now revealed and consummated in the Incarnate Word.³⁸

Thereby Florovsky did not refuse the significance of philosophy itself, however *expressis verbis* treated it as equivalent to theology.

Proclaiming the idea of Christian Hellenism, Florovsky controverted the thesis of a Swedish theologian, Anders Nygren, who in the spirit of Luther had emphasized the exclusive character of the Bible and rejected any attempts at the expression of the revealed truths in ancient philosophical language,³⁹ as well as the similar project of the 19th-century theologian Albrecht Ritschl.⁴⁰ By contrast, according to the Russian author,

The Church has never claimed that there is *nothing* in common between Jerusalem and Athens, between the “Academy” and the Church. It is a deeply meaningful fact that the Greek language became the

³⁶ See G. Florovsky, *Revelation, Philosophy and Theology...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33, 35.

³⁷ See G. Florovsky, *Patristics and Modern Theology...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁸ G. Florovsky, *Ad lectorem*, unpublished preface to *In Ligno Crucis: The Patristic Doctrine of the Atonement*, typescript, 1939/1948, pp. 5–7. Quoted from M. Baker, “Theology Reasons” – in *History: Neo-Patristic Synthesis and the Renewal of Theological Rationality...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–103.

³⁹ See A. Golitzin, “A Contemplative and a Liturgist”: *Father Georges Florovsky on the Corpus Dionysiacyum*, “St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly” 1999, 43, 2, pp. 131–132. Cf. G. Florovsky, *The “Immortality” of the Soul*, [in:] *idem, Collected Works*, vol. 3, *op. cit.*, pp. 213–214.

⁴⁰ See Г. Флоровский, *Пути русского богословия...*, *op. cit.*, p. 499.

predominant language of Christianity. It will remain unchanged forever because it is the language of the New Testament... In a sense, for this reason the Hellenistic element, the Hellenistic spiritual way was sanctified.⁴¹

In Florovsky's opinion, even the Greek language – the language of the Bible and the first Church Fathers – had a very special significance. Not accidentally, he listed Christian Hellenism, in other words, the proclamation of faith inspired by Greek intellectual culture, as one of the essential features of the neopatristic synthesis. It concerns not only the categories of Hellenistic thought, in which the dogmas of faith had been formulated, but also the heritage of the Church Fathers in general. For Florovsky this kind of Hellenism was a criterion of orthodoxy: “if a theologian starts thinking that ‘the Greek categories’ are archaic, he automatically will lose the rhythm of Catholicity.”⁴² As Florovsky said, “let us to be more Greek means to be truly Catholic, to be truly Orthodox.”⁴³

It should be added that Florovsky, accentuating the privileged role of Greek language and culture for theology, did not neglect the heritage of the Latin Church Fathers. In his writings he quite often cited St Cyprian of Carthage, St Irenaeus of Lyon, St Hilary of Poitiers, and especially St Augustine (despite the fact that the bishop of Hippo had not accepted the difference between the divine essence and energies introduced or rather applied by the Cappadocian Fathers). What is more, in the archival documents of the library of Heythrop College in London there is an offprint of Florovsky's lecture from the First Orthodox Congress in Athens in 1936 “Patristic and Modern Theology” with a note written on the margin and probably addressed to the British Jesuit Fr Maurice Bévenot. The author of the

⁴¹ Г. Флоровский, *Спор о немецком идеализме*, [in:] *idem, Христианство и цивилизация. Избранные труды по богословию и философии*, Издательство РХГА, Санкт-Петербург 2005, p. 421.

⁴² Г. Флоровский, *Пути русского богословия...*, *op. cit.*, p. 499.

⁴³ G. Florovsky, *Patristics and Modern Theology...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

neopatristic synthesis admitted that the Christian tradition contains both Greek and Latin Fathers' legacy.⁴⁴ Hence, the notion of Christian Hellenism does not have a narrow nationalistic character. It expresses an idea of the necessity of the return to the patristic heritage common to all Christians, even if the priority still belongs to Greek language and thought.

Conclusion

The neopatristic synthesis of Florovsky is neither a complete nor a coherent project. Some orthodox thinkers like Fr Alexander Schmemmann reproved him for the fact that this “prominent historian” eventually “had not explained an essence and – what is more important – a method of the ‘neopatristic synthesis’.”⁴⁵ Indeed, as Brandon Gallaher noticed, Florovsky had used

a primary set of terms as subjects (Church, Fathers, tradition) undergoing, being characterized by or possessing a second set of terms (i.e. “experience,” “faith,” “image,” “vision,” “witness,” “memory,” “freedom” and especially “mind”). This takes the form of stock phrases that reappear throughout his work, such as “the experience of the Church,” “the mind of the Fathers” and “the vision of the Fathers.”⁴⁶

In this way, Florovsky formulated quite suggestive postulates to “follow” the above-mentioned attitudes that had some pastoral significance in his time. However, these postulates did not provide any

⁴⁴ See I. Noble, *A Latin Appropriation of Christian Hellenism: Florovsky's Marginal Note to Patristic and Modern Theology and Its Possible Addressee*, “St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly” 2012, 3, pp. 269–270, 280–286.

⁴⁵ See the letter of Alexander Schmemmann to Nikita Struve from 10.04.1980 (*Письма сотрудников “Вестника” начала 1950–60-х годов Н.А. Струве*), “Вестник русского христианского движения” 2006, 190, p. 118.

⁴⁶ See B. Gallaher, “*Waiting for the Barbarians*”: *Identity and Polemicism in the Neopatristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky*, “Modern Theology” 2011, 27, 4, p. 670.

concrete philosophico-theological content (except for a general observation concerning the leading role of doctrine on the divine essence and energies proclaimed by the Cappadocian Fathers and St Gregory of Palamas).

Whereas a proposal of renewing the Fathers' thought is understandable and worthy of attention, detailed elaboration of this project and its application to the different theological and philosophical issues brings a number of difficulties. There is no doubt that the Church Fathers' approach to searching for the solution to various problems, such as a constructive dialogue with the contemporary intellectual culture, should also be taken into account nowadays. However, it is not easy to discover how to re-read the thought of early Christian writers (which is – as Florovsky correctly noticed – neither homogeneous nor coherent), so that it would be still valid in the amended historico-cultural context. It turns out that some solutions that are allegedly made “in the spirit of the Fathers” are controversial and mistaken. This problem has been noticed in the case of Florovsky himself who, on the one hand, had postulated “readiness to hold dialogue with modern philosophical ideas,” and, on the other hand, “had ignored and had not appreciated the main directions of philosophical thought of his time.”⁴⁷ The uncritical application of the neopatristic synthesis to each sphere of intellectual life, even in its weak version – following the Church Fathers “not according to the letter, but according to the spirit,” is a quite risky undertaking. In this connection, R. J. Sauvé warned: “Though he [Florovsky – T.O.] never meant the Fathers to become a fundamentalist authority, Florovsky opened the door to the danger of a fundamentalist treatment of the Fathers by his absolutizing of the neopatristic method.”⁴⁸

Undoubtedly, the project of the neopatristic synthesis has a great heuristic potency. Sergey Horuzhy characterized this paradigm of the-

⁴⁷ See A.В. Черняев, *Г.В. Флоровский как философ и историк русской мысли*, ИФ РАН, Москва 2010, pp. 93–94.

⁴⁸ R.J. Sauvé, *Florovsky's Tradition*, “The Greek Orthodox Theological Review” 2010, 55, 1–4, p. 236.

ologizing as the “discourse of energy”⁴⁹ (used terms of “energy,” “*logoi*” etc.), opposing it to the Western “discourse of essence” (used categories of “essence,” “idea,” “principle” etc.). As we could see, this kind of discourse is able to express the mystery of unknowable God as well as the possibility of our cognition of His attributes. Hence, Florovsky’s re-discovery of the Church Fathers’ teaching on the divine essence and energies can explain some aspects of the problem of the relationship between faith and reason – under the condition, that theologians would also be sensitive to the modern philosophical and scientific problems. As Fr A. Schmemmann wrote, “Orthodox theology must keep its patristic foundation, but it must also go ‘beyond’ the Fathers if it is to respond to a new situation created by centuries of philosophical development.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See S.S. Horujy, *Breaks and Links. Prospects for Russian Religious Philosophy Today*, “Studies in East European Thought” 2001, 53, 4, pp. 279.

⁵⁰ See A. Schmemmann, *Russian Theology: 1920–1972. An Introductory Survey*, “St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly” 1972, 16, 4, p. 178.

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