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This book is an important study in twentieth-century intellectual history and the history of religious thought. The author holds the Aquinas Chair in Theology and Philosophy at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota. His main subject is Georges Florovsky, who, along with Vladimir Lossky and others, set the course of Orthodox theology in the second half of the twentieth century. Florovsky is commonly regarded as the mastermind of the “return to the Church Fathers” in twentieth-century Orthodox theology. In his time (1893–1979), he was a prominent representative of Eastern Orthodoxy, perhaps even “the leading Orthodox voice on the international scene” (267). Gavrilyuk deals not only with this central and pivotal figure, but with the whole development of twentieth-century Russian religious thought and its impact on Orthodox theology more generally. The book is very clearly written and a great pleasure to read, no small virtue given the complexity of its topics.

Gavrilyuk states his thesis in the first paragraph of the book:

Twentieth-century Russian religious thought is commonly represented in terms of a sharp dichotomy between the modernism of Russian religious philosophers, epitomized in Sergius Bulgakov’s work, and the neopatristic direction of Georges Florovsky and his followers. In this study, I propose to re-evaluate this dichotomy by demonstrating how the neopatristic revival emerged out of the spiritual renaissance of Russian culture at the turn of the twentieth century (vii).

While the dichotomy has been widely accepted as the standard narrative, Gavrilyuk deems it polarizing and in need of revision.
At one level, it is obvious that the neopatristic revival emerged out of the Russian Religious Renaissance, since Florovsky was a child of that renaissance and advanced his neopatristic program in opposition to its modernism. But there are two other reasons why Gavrilyuk thinks that the standard and polarizing narrative should be revised. First, he argues—and this is his main task, superbly executed—that Florovsky’s neopatristic program was not merely a negative reaction but was positively shaped by his formative experience in the Russian Religious Renaissance. Florovsky not only “appropriated many of the guiding themes and questions of the Renaissance,” but he read modernist ideas back into the patristic sources (3-4). These ideas included those of paramount importance to his theology, such as personalism (the defense of personhood and of human dignity) and an open, non-determinist conception of history.

The second reason that the standard and polarizing narrative needs to be revised goes beyond the question of Florovsky’s intellectual development to normative theological considerations. Though Gavrilyuk does not put it quite so starkly, clearly he believes that the standard narrative leads to bad theology. It does not promote the richest possible understanding of the divine and human, which requires all available resources—patristic and modern, theological and philosophical, and even more broadly cultural. For that, we need to return to what Gavrilyuk calls, in the last lines of his book, “the magnificent polyphony of the twentieth-century Russian Religious Renaissance”—a renaissance that all along included patristic theology (271).

What accounts for Florovsky’s neopatristic turn in the first place? Gavrilyuk indicates that personal psychological factors played a role. Florovsky had a difficult and authoritarian personality. He felt that he was entitled to speak on behalf of the church and to function as a guardian of orthodoxy. “Whatever he said,” Gavrilyuk writes, “Florovsky always projected unshakable confidence in the soundness of his cause, the theological dimension of which he characterized as entering and acquiring the mind of the Church Fathers” (44). Another factor, far more important, was the overwhelming historical circumstances of the Russian Revolution, Bolshevik totalitarianism, and the exile of many of Russia’s leading religious philosophers. As Gavrilyuk succinctly puts it: “His theological vision, like that of his contemporaries, was born out of the experience of crisis and dislocation” (45). One response to this experience, for Florovsky and others in his generation, was to conclude that their task was to preserve and defend Orthodox Christianity abroad, since it faced destruction in Russia—to preserve and defend it, moreover, in its traditional form, rather than modernized and reformed (54). This type of response contributed to Florovsky’s neopatristic turn, but it does not fully explain it, since others (e.g., Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergius Bulgakov) in the Russian religious-philosophical emigration remained committed to modernism.

I would emphasize, perhaps even more than Gavrilyuk does, still another factor: the importance of Florovsky’s interpretation of the origins of Russian communism. Understanding these origins was, naturally, a task that preoccupied many émigré Russian religious thinkers. Indeed, Gavrilyuk suggests that it was a type of theodicy for them (264). In 1937, the same year as the publication of Florovsky’s The Ways of Russian Theology, Berdiaev published The Origins and Meaning of Russian Communism (Gavrilyuk does not specifically refer to it in this context). Berdiaev’s approach was to emphasize the combination of Russian and Western factors: the Russian autocracy had prevented the development of Russian civil society and led to the rise of the Russian intelligentsia, which proved highly susceptible to utopian
ideologies, including, of course, Marxism. The subordination of the Russian Church to the autocracy was a crucial element of Berdiaev’s interpretation; such subordination increased the appeal of secular utopian ideologies in Russia. Freeing the church from state control and rejuvenating Russian spiritual life had all along been part of the modernist project, beginning with Aleksei Khomiakov and Ivan Kireevsky. In short, for Berdiaev, as perhaps for most historians, the main underlying cause of Russian communism was the Russian autocracy.

Florovsky’s interpretation was very different. He succumbed to “the Eurasian temptation” (the title of the book’s third chapter) to put all the blame on the West. “The Eurasians saw the Bolshevik Revolution as the epitome of western influences wreaking havoc in Russia,” Gavrilyuk writes (65). He argues persuasively that Florovsky’s Eurasian moment, though relatively short-lived (the early 1920s), nonetheless resulted in his henceforth permanent theological anti-Westernism and his own type of “exodus to the East.” In Gavrilyuk’s reading, The Ways of Russian Theology recasts Eurasianism in theological terms: the “western captivity” of Russian theology—its intellectual separation from the Greek patristic heritage—had caused its “pseudomorphosis.” Indeed, this isolation from the Byzantine East was, in Florovsky’s words, “the main cause of all interruptions and spiritual failures in Russian development” (75).

In the modern period, the Western captivity of Russian theology took the form of subservience to German idealism, Florovsky’s bête noire. Though (as Gavrilyuk indicates) his understanding of it was undifferentiated and inadequate, he condemned German idealism as monistic, pantheistic, and inimical to human freedom, dignity, and personhood. In it he saw the intellectual roots of utopianism, Marxism in particular. German idealism was an obvious example of the type of thinking that he examined in his essay, “The Metaphysical Premises of Utopianism,” begun in 1923. Florovsky’s critique bears a certain similarity, I would suggest, to that of his contemporary, the conservative political theorist Eric Voegelin, for whom twentieth-century totalitarianism was the deadly culmination of the tendency toward the “immanentization of the eschaton” in modern European intellectual history.

The article on utopianism refers to a certain “scheme of ontological all-unity.” As Gavrilyuk indicates, this is likely an indirect reference to Vladimir Solovyov, whose thought (for Florovsky) bears all the defects and more of his German idealist predecessors. Florovsky arrived at this judgment by about 1924. Before then, he had admired Solovyov and esteemed his neo-idealist theory of integral knowledge as forming a truly original Russian school of religious philosophy. But in the 1920s, what Gavrilyuk calls the “originality narrative” shifted to the “pseudomorphosis narrative,” which would be fully deployed in The Ways of Russian Theology. “Solovyov’s philosophy became the ultimate ‘dead end,’ joining the long line of other dead ends, all genetically linked to various western influences,” Gavrilyuk writes (161). In his estimation, the rejection of Solovyov was “possibly the single most profound intellectual revolution of Florovsky’s thought” (109). It, too, was the result of the Eurasian (and Slavophile) binary opposition between East and West that Florovsky adopted in the wake of the Russian Revolution. His direct correlation of “western captivity,” idealism, and Bolshevism led him to condemn Solovyov in the sharpest terms: “Florovsky rightly saw in the malignant atheism of the Bolsheviks the same totalitarian impulse and the same suppression of freedom for the sake of future ideal humanity that he discerned in Solovyov’s theocratic utopia” (111). (It is true that the meaning of Solovyov’s “free theocracy” remains a matter of debate, but Gavrilyuk’s
endorsement of Florovsky's judgment here strikes me as a rare incongruous moment in the book.) Florovsky's neopatristic turn also consigned Solovyov's followers, most prominently Sergei Bulgakov, to the "pseudomorphosis narrative."

Thus, the reasons for Florovsky's neopatristic turn are mainly historical and mainly flawed. But, why else does Gavrilyuk press for revision of the standard narrative of a sharp dichotomy between Russian religious modernism and the neopatristic movement? As I mentioned earlier, he thinks that normative or systematic theological considerations are at stake. In an important statement, he writes: "Florovsky constantly conflates the criterion of religious identity (Byzantine Orthodox modes of theological expression) with the criterion of theological truth. To apply the patristic and Byzantine norm in such a manner was to perpetuate a genetic fallacy. The widespread acceptance of this fallacy in present-day Orthodox theology does not make it any less problematic" (190). Florovsky's conflation of these criteria is all the more striking because he understood the criterion of theological truth to consist in, or at least deeply to involve, universal values of personalism—human freedom, dignity, and personhood, in relation to the divine. In short, he understood the criterion of theological truth to consist in divine-human personhood, as classically formulated in Chalcedonian Christology, which for Florovsky expressed the very essence of Christian Hellenism and made it philosophia perennis.

This criterion was the basis of his critique of idealism, which he thought collapsed the transcendent into an immanent monism and so deprived the person of its necessary ideal. The criterion is sound, even if his criticism of idealism was highly indiscriminate and even if he committed a genetic fallacy in identifying the criterion exclusively with Byzantine patristic theology. Moreover, he arrived at his understanding of the criterion of theological truth not initially through the patristic sources, but during his formative experience in the Russian Religious Renaissance, when he was especially influenced by Solovyov, whose central concept, bogo-chelovechestvo (divine humanity), was a modern philosophical development of Chalcedonian Christology. In repudiating Russian neo-idealism (Solovyov's school) because it was "western," Florovsky thus deprived himself of invaluable resources for the defense of the universal, divine-human truth to which he nonetheless remained committed. Gavrilyuk has written a brilliant study of how the complex interplay of theological, philosophical, historical, and personal factors in Florovsky's thought led to this paradoxical result.

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The main objective of the Modern Greek Studies Yearbook is the dissemination of scholarly information in the field of modern Greek studies. The field is broadly defined to include the social sciences and the humanities, indeed any body of knowledge that touches on the modern Greek experience. Topics dealing with earlier periods, the Byzantine and even the Classical, will be considered provided they relate, in some way, to aspects of later Greek history and culture. Geographically, the field extends to any place where modern Hellenism flourished and made significant contributions, whether in the “Helladic space” proper or in the Diaspora. More importantly, in comparative and contextual terms, the Mediterranean basin and Europe fall within the province of the Yearbook’s objectives. Special attention will be paid to subjects dealing with Greek-Slavic relations and Eastern Orthodox history and culture in general.

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