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Patristic Tradition in the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Theologians Georges Florovsky and Dumitru Stăniloae

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Abstract

In this study we aimed at understanding the concept of Tradition in the thinking of theologians Georges Florovsky and Dumitru Stăniloae. I propose to highlight the main contributions of these theologians regarding the importance of Tradition in the current theological approach. Although the writings of the Holy Fathers weren't unfamiliar to the Orthodox theologians before these two fathers, as well as to the theologians from their time, the difference consisted of the way of relating to the patristic work and thought. Georges Florovsky is the theologian who officially announced at the Athens Congress of 1936 the need to restructure Orthodox theology on its patristic foundations by returning to its origins, to patristic thinking unaltered by rationalism, abstract scholasticism, idealism, syncretism, and religious individualism. Although he didn't elaborate a proper synthesis, he laid down the foundations of a new method in theology: the neo-patristic method. On the other hand, Father Stăniloae rediscovers the importance of Palamite theology, Hesychasm, and Philokalism, and he accomplishes a true neo-patristic synthesis, able to free the Orthodox theology from those Western influences that Father Florovsky pointed out in his writings. The present study aims to expose the main directions of the neo-patristic synthesis related to the dynamic and creative updating of the Church Tradition in the works of Fathers Georges Florovsky and Dumitru Stăniloae.

Keywords

Church Fathers, Church Tradition, Dumitru Stăniloae, Georges Florovsky, neo-patristic synthesis,

I. Introduction

The twentieth century marked in all Christian denominations the beginning of an approach to renewal, rediscovery, and redefinition. In Orthodox Dogmatic Theology this renewal is masterfully achieved through a new orientation, a neo-patristic orientation, understood as a renewed appeal to the Church's Tradition, to the writings of the Holy Fathers, to synthesize an Orthodox identity of theology by liberating it from the Western captivity. Returning to the Fathers, the modern Orthodox theologians will not remain indifferent to the dialogue with science, culture, and historical issues. Born in the Russian diaspora and with only one official representative behind it, the Orthodox neo-patristic movement becomes the essential paradigm shift of the second half of the twentieth century, as the most authentic update of the Patristic Tradition in modernity.

II. Father Georges Florovsky - the Initiator of the Neo-Patristic Movement

Orthodoxy consists of the fidelity to the teaching of the Church, dogmatically formulated in the Ecumenical Councils by the Holy Fathers assisted by the Holy Spirit and the application of this teaching in the concrete life of successive generations of Christians. Father Florovsky emphasized the importance of the work of the Church Fathers in the process of interpreting the teaching of the Holy Scripture in order to formulate the teaching of faith. He concludes that the Holy Fathers were the true inspiration of the Church, and not the Councils. Those who *followed the Holy Fathers* they followed the Holy Spirit Who worked through them and thereby they kept the teaching of the Church intact, new and the same, from the Apostles to the present day¹. The Councils promulgated the dogmas, but the Holy Fathers were the ones who inspired and explained the dogmatic formulas adopted in the Ecumenical Councils².

The expression *Church Fathers* acquires a restrictive meaning in Father Florovsky's thinking. The Church Fathers are those people whose activity

¹ Preot Georges FLOROVSKY, *Biblie, Biserică, Tradiție, O perspectivă ortodoxă*, transl. Radu Teodorescu, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2016, p. 144.

² See G.L. PRESTIGE, *Fathers and Heretics*, London, 1940, p. 8.

took place in the Church, for the good and in the name of the Church, they exposing the faith, and keeping the Tradition and the testimony of truth and faith. By this, the neo-patristic theology is a theology of return, more to the existential values of the Fathers than to a strictly intellectual understanding of their theology.

The method and vision of neo-patristic synthesis is officially announced by Father Florovsky in two papers (*Western Influences in Russian Theology* and *Patristic and Modern Theology*) at the Congress of Theology of the Faculties of Orthodox Theology in Athens in 1936. These directions are deepened and developed in his fundamental work, *Ways of Russian Theology*, in which he elaborates the main directions of a school whose purpose is not to disregard and abolish the Roman Catholic and Protestant influences in Orthodox theology, but to find the essence of an authentic Orthodox vision. He notes that Orthodox theology, in its content, has suffered throughout history a *double pseudomorphosis*, going through a *Babylonian captivity*, under the influence of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. This influence began after the fall of the Roman Empire under Turks in 1453 and gradually intensified in the following centuries, continuing today with the Russian religious renaissance. Florovsky identifies the inability of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Orthodox theology to escape Western influence, and he announces the need for recourse to the theological tradition of the Greek Fathers, which he finds to be the sure path to the meaning of Revelation³. In this sense he campaigned for a theological renewal that would bring back to the attention of theologians the truth of Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition of the Church. Contemporary theologians must develop a new synthesis, similar to that developed by the Greek Fathers, who subjected Greek philosophy to the Christian faith and who formulated new terms for its expression. In this approach it is necessary to assimilate the Byzantine heritage of Orthodox theology and to rediscover the Palamite theology and the permanence of Tradition throughout history.

Father Florovsky remarks that the recourse to the Fathers does not involve the repetition or imitation of the past or a denial of the present and history, but it is about a creative return and an encounter between the spirit

³ See Jonathan SUTTON and Wil van den BERCKEN, *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe*, Peeters, Leuven-Paris-Dudley, 2003, p. 14.

of the Fathers and the creative welcome of the future⁴. Orthodox theology can come out of Western influence only through a spiritual return to its patristic origins and sources. Returning to the Fathers it does not imply the abandonment of the present; the patristic experience must not only be preserved on the basis of a traditionalist fundamentalism, but discovered and brought to life. The future is not simply something exact or expected, but something that is created. The Christian message inspires us exactly with the responsibility of the mission, because Orthodoxy is not only a tradition, it is also a task⁵.

In this sense, the neo-patristic movement initiated by Father Georges Florovsky it constantly appeals to the concept of Church Tradition, especially to the dynamics of Tradition. Orthodox theology must preserve its patristic origins, but it must also go *beyond the Fathers*, in order to adequately answer the new problems that have arisen in history. The independence of the Orthodox theology from Western one, it does not imply an alienation from it, and therefore, in developing an appropriate response to the historical context, the Orthodox theologians must appeal to Western culture and philosophy if need be, in order to supply theology from another conceptual framework. Like the Greek Fathers, who subjected the Greek philosophical language to the theology of the Church, today the theologians must transpose theology into a *new key*⁶. This transposition is considered one of the main requirements and vocations of a neo-patristic theology.

Father Florovsky campaigned for the need for a new incarnation of the Word and the eternal truth of the Gospel and outlined the main directions to follow to achieve this endeavor. A theology of repetition, of self-sufficiency, of *hiding* behind the authority of the Fathers, it cannot respond to the many challenges of the pluralistic postmodern world. It is therefore necessary to develop a neo-patristic synthesis based on interfaith and intercultural theological dialogue and an interception of post modernity by transfiguring it from within⁷.

⁴ Georges FLOROVSKY, *Ways of Russian Theology*, Collected Works, vol. VI, translated by R. Nichols Publishing, Vaduz: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987, pp. 208-209.

⁵ Georges FLOROVSKY, Ways..., vol. VI, p. 301.

⁶ See Alexander SCHMEMANN, “Russian Theology: 1920-1972. An Introductory Survey”, in *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 16 (1972), pp. 172-194, at p. 178.

⁷ IGNATIUS IV, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, *Orthodoxy and the Issues of Our Time*, translated from arabic by S. O’Sullivan, Balamad: Publications of the University of Balamad, 2006, pp. 222-224.

Being actively and intensely involved in the Ecumenical Movement, and being a prominent representative of the Orthodox Church in the dialogue with other Christian denominations, Father Florovsky speaks of the unseen unity of the Church of Christ, emphasizing that there is one Church-body of Christ and all Christians belong as distinct members of this body to the Church of Christ. What separate Christians need to achieve now it is the distant goal of visible unity, which is why he used the phrase *ecumenism in time*⁸. Ecumenism in time is the solution for finding unity in the common Tradition of the Holy Fathers. Through this direction the neo-patristic synthesis is also the correct form of orthodox ecumenism.

Father Florovsky deepens the meaning of returning to patristic sources, by announcing the need for an existential assimilation of the theology of the Fathers and for a penetration into their minds by entering the communion with them in the ecclesial space⁹. Although when he outlined the directions of a neo-patristic synthesis and announced it in the Congress of Athens, and later in the work *Ways of Russian Theology*, Father Florovsky was the only representative of this direction. In the second half of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the 21st century, his theological program and the method of returning to the Fathers, understood as a neo-patristic synthesis, it became the main concern of Orthodox theology and the ecumenical movement. The renewal movement of Orthodox theology proposed by G. Florovsky it was continued in different directions by his students and disciples, who are today the most famous names in modern Orthodox theology: John Mayendorff, Ioannis Romanides, Ioannis Zizoulas, Sophrony Sakharov, Vladimir Lossky, Alexander Schmemann, and Kallistos Ware.

In a letter discovered after his death, Father Florovsky talks about the purpose of his theology, which, although unfulfilled, it includes three great ideas, which can summarize his whole thought: a) Orthodox theology must be a historical theology, because Tradition is history. Christians do not believe in abstract ideas, but in a Person, Jesus Christ, Who is thus a historical person, present in history from creation and Who continues to be

⁸ Peter A. CHAMBERAS, “Georges Vasilievich Florovsky (1893-1979). Russian Intellectual Historian and Orthodox Theologian”, in: *Religious Historians, East and West*, vol. 45, Wilmington, 2003, pp. 49-66, at p. 61.

⁹ Willem B. DRESS, Hubert MEISINGER, Zbigniew LIANA, *Wisdom Or Knowledge?: Science, Theology and Cultural Dynamics*, T&T CLARK INTERNATIONAL, A Continuum imprint, London-New York, 2006, p. 74.

present until the end of time; b) theology involves the study of divine works and the conclusion to be reached is that the salvation of the world made by Jesus Christ it is preached throughout the world through Hellenism. The Christian message was formulated in Greek categories. Old Hellenism, the pagan one, was baptized, regenerated, converted to become the Christian Hellenism of our dogmatics, from the New Testament to St. Gregory Palamas and even to our time; c) theology must be used not to satisfy our intellectual curiosity, but to order our lives, to be truly alive and to feed on the source of life, which is not a system of ideas, but a person, Jesus Christ. And in this endeavor the Church Fathers are certainly our true guides¹⁰.

The concept of Christian Hellenism brought Florovsky the most criticism. The theology of the Church is being renewed. If we consider the eschatological character of the Tradition, we will be able to say that Christian Hellenism cannot be considered an eternal and unalterable category of Christian existence, but rather the paradigm of the Church's relationship with the world. By virtue of this paradigm, the mission of today's theologians is to approach a contextualized patristic theological system, which presupposes the ability of theologians to examine other traditions in order to understand them and not just to abolish them. This is a non-identification of the Tradition to Hellenism, or at least a summary of it to the contribution of the Greek Fathers, but it is a synthesis in which the Byzantine, Latin, Syriac, and Russian traditions are included and kept together. The era of the Fathers it continues, for our period is no less patristic than in antiquity, and therefore the Holy Spirit creatively inspires the theology of the Church even now, as He did in the past. We just need to identify the message of the Spirit and to transcend the answers from the old writings to new ones, elaborated under the authority of the Tradition and of the faith of the Church. Father Florovsky is the theologian who stressed the importance of the Tradition's diversity. The best example of this diversity it is today the neo-patristic synthesis. Within this synthesis one can identify a conglomeration of theological visions, each with its own methods and principles of organization. The common point of these visions is that they maintain fidelity to Tradition while approaching the Fathers creatively.

¹⁰ See Andrew BLANE, *Georges Florovsky, Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1993, pp. 135-155.

III. Father Dumitru Stăniloae or the Greatest Orthodox Neo-Patristic

Father Stăniloae was the first theologian who brought a significant contribution to the liberation of the Orthodox theology from Western influences and the first to creatively rediscover the theology of St. Gregory Palamas. For a decade, he studied, translated, and synthesized the precious manuscripts of St. Gregory's work in the great theological centers of Athens, Munich, Berlin, Paris, and Belgrade, implementing the neo-patristic method that Father Florovsky announced at the Congress of Athens.

He brought the Orthodox dogmatics out from under the influence of school textbooks through an existential and patristic approach to the dogmatic theology. This approach was achieved through the trilogy *Dogmatic Theology* (3 volumes, 1978), *Orthodox Spirituality* (1981), and *Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy* (1986).

In *The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Father Stăniloae adopted a spiritual approach to dogmas and he got rid of the scholastic method and of abstract theoretical expression. The dogmas of Revelation, of Trinity, of Church, of Sacraments, of anthropology, and of eschatology, all of them are expressed in a unitary framework. The teaching of the Church is exposed by the interrelation of dogmas, all leading to the illustration of divine love and man's communion with God in the space of love. The eternal dialogue between man and God, it begun at creation, it was fully revealed in Christ, and it has continued in the Church; this dialogue has in view the ultimate reality of the existence, namely its eternal dimension, understood as loving personal communion of people with God and with each other, in new heaven and on new earth.

In *Orthodox Spirituality*, he charismatically synthesized the whole essence of the *Philokalia*, which became to him a way of life and theology. The asceticism and mysticism encountered in the lives of the Saints, Stăniloae integrated them in the elaboration of a pastoral, soul-building theology. He used the teaching of the Tradition in elaborating the answers to the problems of his time, by adapting, and integrating, and creatively transforming their teaching, against the background of the current experience of the Church.

In *Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy*, Father Stăniloae made a commentary on the mystical-symbolic explanation of

the Holy Liturgy and the symbolism of the Church, and he presented the experimental-sacramental dimension of the ecclesiology. In the Church, through worship, the faithful experience and share in the grace of the Most Holy Trinity and live in advance the Kingdom that will be, progressing personally and communally towards union with God.

Father Cristinel Ioja says, regarding to Father Stăniloae, that:

“the purpose of his research is neither existentialism, nor Protestant theology, nor even the writings of Russian theologians in the diaspora or those of the representatives of Romanian Orthodoxy in the Middle Ages, but it is the relationship between dogma and theology, and the life, according to the method and spirit of the Experimental Tradition of the Christian East. The theological-methodological effort of Father Stăniloae aimed at the actuality of the Tradition in modernity, the testimony of the Tradition in the context of the modern world. He is aware of the methodological and content errors of scholastic theology after first forming in the theological framework influenced by it. Starting from here, we can say that the purpose of Father Stăniloae ‘s theological work it was to unify the Orthodox theology by overcoming scholastic abstractivism and re-assuming the patristic thinking in understanding the soteriological dimension of man’s experience and union with God, in the historical and cultural context of the twentieth century. In this endeavor he surpasses not only the western dogmatic systems, but also the orthodox systems influenced scholastically and the orthodox theologians caught in the scholastic theological schemes”¹¹.

The neo-patristic character of Father Stăniloae’s theology it can be identified in the textbook of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, which Andrew Louth states about: “is the first attempt that corresponds in detail to what this synthesis should be”¹². Also found in his Dogmatics is the substantiation

¹¹ See Cristinel IOJA, *Dogmatică și dogmatiști. Prolegomena privind aprofundarea Teologiei Dogmatice Ortodoxe în România în a doua jumătate a secolului al XX-lea și începutul secolului al XXI-lea*, Editura Doxologia, 2017, p. 94.

¹² Andrew LOUTH, “The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology of Dumitru Staniloae”, in: *Modern Theology*, 2 (1977), p. 253-266, at p. 265. See Andrew LOUTH, “The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology of Dumitru Staniloae”, in: *Dumitru Staniloae: Tradition and Modernity in Theology*, edited by Lucian TURCESCU, The Center of Romanian Studies, Iași, Oxford, Palm Beach, Portland, 2002, pp. 53-70, at p. 57.

of the dogmas in the Holy Trinity, a novelty brought in comparison to the School Dogmatics of Andrutsos or M. Bulgakov¹³. Mariology is included in soteriology. In cosmology he rediscovers St. Maximus the Confessor, being considered “the most authoritative interpreter of St. Maximus in our time”¹⁴. In the elaboration of his theological system, Father Stăniloae summed up three interrelated elements: the dogmatic theology, the philocalic spirituality, and dialogue with the culture¹⁵. In this sense, the theologian Ștefan Lucian Toma stated:

“the way which Fr. Stăniloae knew how to combine these aspects in, the dynamic dimension of the Church’s Tradition, the actuality of the message of the works of the Holy Fathers in the contemporary human problems, by capitalizing on Hesychasm and philocalic spirituality, as well as on culture by and large, determined the patristic character of his theological thinking. His name should be among those considered today to be neo-Palamite theologians, along with George Florovsky, Iustin Popovici, John Meyendorff, Ioannis Romanidis”¹⁶.

Father Stăniloae was a theologian of balance, who capitalized on the Tradition of the Church in a creative, dynamic, and orthodox way. He liberates, through his work, the Orthodox theology both from traditionalist exaggerations and from abstract rationalist abuses, by emphasizing the dynamism of the Tradition and the personal and contemporary interpretation of the Church Fathers. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware stated about the concept of Tradition in the work of Father Stăniloae, that it is not a sum of memorized sentences, but a living experience¹⁷.

Penetrating through the spirit of the Fathers into the infinite content of the Tradition, it is certain that new answers and new perspectives can

¹³ Karl Christian FELMY, *Dogmatica experienței eccliale*, transl. Ioan Ică, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1999, p. 82.

¹⁴ A. M. ALLCHIN, *Participation in God*, Morehouse-Barlow, Wilton, Connecticut, USA, p. 71.

¹⁵ Ștefan TOMA, „Teologul A.M. Allchin, un prieten sincer al Ortodoxiei românești”, in: *Telegraful Român*, nr. 33-34 (2004), p. 4.

¹⁶ Ștefan Lucian TOMA, *Tradiție și actualitate la Pr. Dumitru Staniloae*, Ediura Agnos, Sibiu, 2008, p. 71.

¹⁷ Vezi Kallistos WARE, “Tradition and traditions”, in: *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, WCC Publications, Geneva, First Edition- 1991, p. 1017.

be found in all human turmoil by delving into the revealed truth. Father Stăniloae was the theologian of dialogue, of a non-discriminatory and non-abusive dialogue. Although he always maintained the importance and the reality of the centrality of Orthodoxy among other Christian faiths, he remained open to the traditions of other Churches, he entered the dialogue with their theologians, he appreciated some, he criticized others, but he presented the balanced fullness of Tradition to all.

The neo-patristic synthesis offered by Father Stăniloae it can be considered the standard of any current neo-patristic approach. It masterfully unites patristic thinking with modern thought, including in its synthesis the positive reception of human thought from the perspective of the doctrine of *the rationalities* of St. Maximus, the incorporation of the thought of Latin Fathers, the description of the importance of experience in theology - from the personal contribution to *Philokalia* and from personal experience of life -, the pastoral openness to contemporary problems, and the theological creativity springing from the language with infinite meanings of the Tradition.

IV. Conclusions

In conclusion we can say that the specificity of the neo-patristic synthesis consists of the fact that it does not imply the mechanical replication of the Fathers, but it is the creative fruiting of their thinking. A specific feature of the neo-patristic synthesis it is the existential relating to the concept of Tradition and the overcoming of theological rationalism and speculative romanticism or pietism¹⁸.

The Orthodox neo-patristic movement had two major representatives: Father Georges Florovsky and Father Dumitru Stăniloae. Father Stăniloae can be placed in the series of Russian theologians in exile. Like Father Georges Florovsky, who developed the concept of neo-patristic synthesis, Father Stăniloae campaigned for the liberation of the theology from the tutelage of academic rationalism and dominant scholasticism in Orthodox theological schools from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both fathers urged for the renewal of Orthodox theology through the recourse

¹⁸ Ioan ICĂ jr., “Stăniloae, Dumitru (1903-1993)”, in: Trevor A. HART (ed.) *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, Paternoster Press, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, pp. 527-531, at p. 528.

to Tradition, the rediscovery of the writings of the Holy Fathers, and of the spirit which they theologized in, and the reconsideration of Palamite theology.

While Father Florovsky officially initiated the neo-patristic movement and called for neo-patristic synthesis, Father Stăniloae concretized this in his *Dogmatics*, elaborating a spiritual and pastoral theology, through the recourse to the living Tradition of the Church and “the permanent updating of the Christian faith and its irreplaceable uniqueness”¹⁹.

Regarding the activity of rediscovery and capitalization of the concept of Tradition by Father Stăniloae in his *Orthodox Dogmatics* in the three volumes, to which is added the translation and editing of the *Philokalia* and the *Lives of the Saints*, it can be said that it takes place in parallel and not in the continuation of the neo-patristic project of Father Georges Florovsky, especially given that, while Florovsky announced the main directions of the neo-patristic program, Father Stăniloae did so by rediscovering Palamism and Hesychasm.

Seeking to summarize the common aspects encountered in the life and work of these theologians we must mention here that both theologians: a) were involved in the neo-Patristic movement and fought for the assertion of the identity of the theology of the Orthodox Church; b) they talked about the relationship between dogma-cult-spirituality-life; c) they elaborated and militated for an existential theology in a patristic spirit d) they were open to the western culture and theology; e) have as central aspect of the dogmatic system the concept of deification and Christology, and in soteriology they include Mariology; f) combating wrong teachings such as Bulgakov's sophiology, V. Lossky's total apophatism, Afanasiev's Eucharistic ecclesiology, Hrapovitschi's soteriology and Berdiaev's Gnosticism; g) have been involved in the ecumenical movement; h) affirmed social principles, but none elaborates a concrete social program, on the first plane of their theological preoccupations being the problems of faith.

If Father Florovsky is considered the founder of the Orthodox neo-patristic, Father Stăniloae can be considered the greatest neo-patristic theologian of the twentieth century because of the recourse to the patristic tradition of the Church in the work of Father Stăniloae it was much broader than in the case of any other theologian of the twentieth century.

¹⁹ Dan-Ilie CIOBOTEA, “O Dogmatică pentru omul de azi”, in: *Studii Teologice*, XXXVIII (1986) 6, pp. 87-107, at p. 99.