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Scripture and Dissent: Engaging with the Neo-Patristic Paradigm of Modern Orthodox Theology

Abstract

This article discusses the legacy of the Neo-Patristic paradigm in American Orthodox theology by examining the recent work of three contemporary American Orthodox theologians: John Behr, Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, and Theodore Stylianopoulos. It begins by first outlining the main conceptual bases of the Neo-Patristic paradigm as established by Georges Florovsky and others, and then discusses some important recent criticisms of this dominant theological mode in contemporary Orthodoxy. The article also explores how categories of identity and authenticity are used theologically in Neo-Patristic projects, and situates these efforts in the context of a broader critique of Enlightenment reason.

The article argues that recent works in American Orthodox theology, such as that of Behr, Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, and Stylianopoulos,



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exhibit a complex engagement with the Neo-Patristic paradigm, and subtly reformulate or even challenge certain of its bases (such as the use of categories of identity and authenticity) by appealing to certain theologies of scripture. These engagements constitute an important effort to engage with the contemporary foundations of Orthodox theology in America, and reveal specific ways in which these Neo-Patristic foundations are being re-interpreted in a contemporary context.

Keywords

Neo-Patristic paradigm, Orthodoxy in America, identity, authenticity, theologies of scripture, gender

1 Introduction

Numerous scholars have pointed out that the “Neo-Patristic Synthesis” forcefully propagated by Georges Florovsky (1893-1979) and his contemporaries constituted the overriding intellectual paradigm of 20th century Eastern Orthodox theology.¹ Florovsky’s life reflects the intellectual journey of the Orthodox Church in the 20th century as a whole; born in Odessa under the Russian Empire, he spent much of his life away from Russia due to persecution, war, and revolution. His career included teaching and research positions at nearly every major Orthodox theological center in the modern West, including the Institute of St. Sergius in Paris from 1926 to 1941 where he

¹ B. A. Gudziak, “Towards an Analysis of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky”, *Logos* 41-42 (2000-2001), p. 203; P. Kalaitzidis, “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54:1 (2010), p. 7.

authored his most influential works including his history of Russian theology and his study of the Greek patristic and early byzantine Church Fathers. His dogmatic condemnation of the theology of the Russian priest Fr. Sergei Bulgakov, who was at the time the highly respected and beloved spiritual leader of the Institute of St. Sergius, made his continued presence in Paris untenable and he left Europe in 1948 for the United States to take a position at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, then as now the flagship seminary of the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church in America. He became dean of the seminary in 1951 but was expelled from his post in 1955 due to conflicts with the students and the administration. Until the end of his life in 1979 he held positions at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary in Brookline, Massachusetts, Harvard, and Princeton.

Florovsky's life as a perpetual emigrant, having set the agenda for his own work, exemplified the experience of Orthodox theology in the East European context for nearly the entirety of the 20th century, forced as it was to take root and flourish outside its "native soil" due to the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent rise of East European Communism. Indeed, the experience of exile, encounter, and persistent or perceived otherness resonates throughout the theological categories of modern Orthodox theological reflection. Once an exiled church, then a diasporic church in the "West," the modern Orthodox confessional community has made conceptualizations and considerations of identity, and therefore authenticity, central to its theological concerns.

Drawing on the important critiques of this school by Pantelis Kalaitzidis and others, this study will attempt to understand the role of considerations of identity as a theological category, and perhaps even theological method, in this tradition. In order to focus the analysis, this paper will discuss specifically how this Neo-Patristic paradigm is being engaged by contemporary American Orthodox theologians. The understanding of scripture in these interventions will form a point of comparison

between the Neo-Patristic reflection of the 20th century and the emerging Orthodox voices of theology in American in the 21st century. This analysis will therefore attempt to understand how this paradigm is being engaged or even challenged by work of American Orthodox theologians in the 21st century.

2 Georges Florovsky and the Neo-Patristic Synthesis

Florovsky argued that Christian theology found its most authentic expression and embodiment in the thought of the Greek patristic age, which he felt was brought to its culmination in the dogmatic theology of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). Theology, and Orthodox theology in particular, needs therefore to return to these authentic roots to ground any further consideration of theological method.² Through his study of these figures, Florovsky elaborated certain key theological distinctions that would remain normative for Orthodox theologians that came after him in the latter half of the 20th century, both in the West and the East.

According to Florovsky, “There are two aspects of religious knowledge: *Revelation* and *Experience*.”³ In the most basic sense, revelation is constituted by the actual historical events narrated by Christian scripture: “The Gospel is history. *Historic events* are the source and the basis of all Christian faith and hope. The basis of the New Testament is facts, events, deeds—not only teaching, commandments or words.”⁴ Experience is

² B. A. Gudziak, “Towards an Analysis of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky”, p. 203.

³ G. Florovsky, “Revelation, Philosophy, and Theology”, *Zwischen den Zeiten*, Heft 6 (München 1931); trans. Richard Haugh in *Volume Three of the Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1976), p. 21.

⁴ G. Florovsky, “Revelation and Interpretation”, in *Biblical Authority for Today*, ed. A. Richardson and W. Schweitzer (London and Philadelphia,

foundational for religious knowledge because it is the proper mode of the understanding of (religious) Truth: “Dogma is the testimony of thought about what has been seen and revealed, about what has been contemplated in the experience of faith—and this testimony is expressed in concepts and definitions.”⁵ Religious truth is discursively expressed in terms of human doctrines and the concepts that structure them, but insofar as religious truth refers to the ineffable it cannot be confined by human mental formulations and is experienced through the grace of the divine itself. As perpetual witness to an eternally true experience, then, “Dogmas do not develop; they are unchanging and inviolable, even in their external aspect—their wording.”⁶ This is the logic underpinning Florovsky’s absolute prioritization of the doctrinal language and thought of the Greek fathers: their dogmatic formulations are irrevocable precisely because of their status as witness to unchangeable truth. The ineffability of their referent somehow grounds their theoretical and even linguistic permanency.

How then can certain dogmatic formulations be rendered definite? And if truth is inadequately approached through them in rational terms, how can truth be approached? The answer to both questions lies in the Church: the working of the Holy Spirit in the Church guarantees the infallibility of the doctrinal decisions of the fathers and the councils, and it is only through our participation in the life of the Church that truth can be fully accessed. Religious truth, the truth of revelation and scripture, is then experiential, but can only take place in the context of unbroken continuity with the interpreters of this truth:

“Revelation is preserved in the Church. It was given by God to the Church, not to separate individuals. (...) Revelation is given, and is accessible, only in the

1951); reprinted in *Volume One of the Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), p. 24.

⁵ G. Florovsky, “Revelation and Interpretation”, p. 29.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

Church; that is, only through life in the Church, through a living and actual belonging to the mystical organism of the Body of Christ. This means that genuine knowledge is only possible in the element of *Tradition*. (...) Tradition is the inner, mystical *memory of the Church*.”⁷

This mystical memory of the Church that is Tradition constitutes the experiential ground of the reception of truth by the Christian, truth that is witnessed to by dogma by not contained conceptually by it. Experience can be the only way of access to truth due to truth’s ineffable character as a reference to *the Ineffable*; yet, truth must be experienced within the very community that refers properly to truth in the first place, and this is the Church. Tradition is the content of the Church that refers to the Church’s own ultimate reason for being, which is truth as such. It is in this sense that scripture is, for Florovsky, necessarily inscribed in the linguistic and conceptual interpretative matrix of the Greek patristic period, the period of Christian dogmatic elaboration par excellence in his view.

For Florovsky, legitimate hermeneutics then can only be located in the theology of the patristic period and its traditional derivatives: “But already in the Apostolic age itself the problem of ‘interpretation’ arose in all its challenging sharpness. What was the guiding hermeneutical principle? At this point there was no other answer than the appeal to the ‘faith of the Church,’ the faith and *kerygma* of the Apostles, the Apostolic *paradosis*.”⁸ Scriptural hermeneutics, and thus theology itself as a meditation on the truth of Christ as delivered in the scriptures, must then take place in the Church, the specific historical (and

⁷ G. Florovsky, “Revelation and Interpretation”, p. 36.

⁸ Idem, ‘The Authority of the Ancient Councils and the Tradition of the Fathers’, in: *Glaube, Geist, Geschichte: Festschrift für Ernst Benz zum 60. Geburtstag am 17. November 1967* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967); reprinted in: *Volume One of the Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), p. 98.

mystical) community of faith that has referred to the experience of the Apostles as norm and criterion since the time that these events occurred.

For Florovsky, the theological vision of Gregory Palamas, the fourteenth century Byzantine monastic and dogmatic theologian, epitomizes and brings patristic theology to its final stage of explicit development. Florovsky argues that (certain) Byzantine theologians continued the authentic patristic witness and Palamas continues this tradition of authentic theological elaboration. Palamas' explicit focus on mystical experience of truth is highly important for Florovsky: "As a theologian, [Palamas] was simply an interpreter of the spiritual experience of the Church."⁹ Palamas' grounding in the "Life in Christ" and his ultimate stress on the experiential character of truth mark his thought as authentically Christian for Florovsky, for patristic theology points in the final analysis "to the vision of faith, to spiritual knowledge and experience."¹⁰ Florovsky sees in Palamas the continuation of an explicit legacy of patristic theology that defines human salvation as the mystical experience of God in this life and the next, the process of *theōsis*, or divinization. On this point Florovsky cites both Athanasius ("He became man in order to divinize us in Himself) and Irenaeus ("Who, through his immense love became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself") while referring the reader to the other authors he takes to be absolutely normative, among them Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, and Symeon the New Theologian.¹¹

⁹ G. Florovsky, "St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers", *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 2 (Winter, 1959-1960); reprinted in: *Volume One of the Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: 1971), p. 114.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

Yet, this conception of salvation fails to address human reason directly, as does all absolute truth: “Indeed, man cannot simply “become” god. But the Fathers were thinking in “personal” terms, and the mystery of *personal* communion was involved at this point. *Theosis meant a personal encounter.*”¹² Palamas’ distinction between the deifying “energies” of God and the essence of God as such solved this problem in a dogmatic sense. But Florovsky insists that Christian theology must adhere to this personalistic, rather than ontological, focus it inherited from the Greek fathers in order to faithfully witness to the authentic mystical experience of truth itself.

Other influential Orthodox theologians of the 20th century took these basic propositions as normative for their own work. We will here focus on Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) and John Zizioulas (b. 1931), both younger contemporaries of Florovsky and foundational figures for the theological work done in contemporary Orthodox theological reflection. Both Lossky’s and Zizioulas’ work represent elaboration of the Neo-Patristic framework that has since served as an important point of reference for contemporary Orthodox thinker in the United States in particular. Lossky’s important work *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, originally published in French in 1944 and later translated into English in 1957, dwells in depth on patristic theology as a system of dogmatic theology oriented particularly toward mystical spiritual experience. Along with Florovsky, Lossky writes: “We must live the dogma expressing a revealed truth, which appears to us as an unfathomable mystery, in such a fashion that instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding, we should, on the contrary, look for a profound change, an inner transformation of spirit, enabling use to experience it

¹² Ibidem

mystically.”¹³ As such, *Orthodox* theology (which is Lossky’s explicit subject of investigation) is founded on apophaticism, and its entire mode of theological reflection points to truth indirectly in a conceptual sense, but apprehends it directly in the sense of spiritual experience.

Insofar as theology is the conceptual expounding of the human spiritual path to union with God (theosis), theology concerns the being of God who exists in Trinity: “Trinitarian theology is thus a theology of unity, a mystical theology, which appeals to experience, and which presupposes a continuous and progressive series of changes in created nature, a more and more intimate communion of the human person with the Holy Trinity.”¹⁴ Christ’s incarnation makes possible this process of human salvation and participation in the divine life by transfiguring human nature, for as Gregory of Nazianzus makes clear “what is not assumed cannot be deified.”¹⁵ This saving action of God re-initiates the plan of salvation that was disrupted by Adam and restored by Christ, and in a cosmic sense transfigures the whole of creation through the progressive sanctification of the human race.

On an individual level, salvation occurs as a process of “synergy” between humankind and God that is begun in this life and achieved in the next; the Holy Spirit in this sense is active in the divinization of the human person in tandem with human spiritual self-purification and preparation.¹⁶ Human spiritual life takes place in the spiritual center of the person, the heart, through the cultivation of the spiritual faculty (*nous*) that

¹³ V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 154.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

distinguishes the human person as such.¹⁷ This spiritual movement is facilitated by concrete practices such as Eucharistic communion in the church, repentance, prayer, and various degrees of asceticism. Most importantly for our purposes, Lossky conceives this process of spiritual perfection to be intimately bound up with theological truth. Dogma is the “outward expression” of the spiritual life: it is “the only objective evidence of an experience which the Church confirms.”¹⁸ It is here important to note that Lossky, like Florovsky, leans very heavily on Greek patristic notions of theological anthropology in a conscious contrast with the theology of more liberal Russian thinkers such as Bulgakov and Soloviev.¹⁹ This focus on theological anthropology as the locus of meditation the experiential character of truth constitutes another facet of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis, and is elaborated in great detail by John Zizioulas in particular.

Zizioulas expands on the notion of divine personhood by outlining its conception as an ontological category in Greek patristic thought. Zizioulas critiques Lossky’s excessive emphasis on apophaticism and contends that in doing so Lossky fundamentally misinterprets the patristic doctrine of the Trinity. In contrast to Lossky’s intense reliance on monastic philosophies of individual spiritual cultivation discipline, which therefore necessitates his heavy emphasis on Palamas’ discussion of divine energies which explicitly concerns the problem of the deification of the individual believer, Zizioulas “is able to ground epistemologically his trinitarian ontology in the eucharistic experience of the personal existence of the

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 201. On Lossky’s conception of the human person see also N. Lossky, “Theology and Spirituality in the Work of Vladimir Lossky”, in: *Ecumenical Review*, 51:3 (July 1999), (288–293), p. 291.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 236.

¹⁹ S. S. Horuzhy, “Neo-Patristic Synthesis and Russian Philosophy”, in: *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 44 (2000), p. 316.

Triune God.”²⁰ While both theologians, like their contemporary Florovsky, identify theosis as being central to their theological vision, Zizioulas’ project can be understood in contradistinction to Lossky as an “[attempt] to understand salvation in terms of an ontology of personhood.”²¹

In the important collection of his work titled *Being and Communion*, Zizioulas identifies two main theses of patristic thought on the being of God:

There is no true being without communion. Nothing exists as an “individual,” conceivable in itself.

Communion which does not come from a “hypostasis,” that is, a concrete and free person, and which does not lead to “hypostases,” that is concrete and free persons, is not an “image” of the being of God. The person cannot exist without communion; but every form of communion which denies or suppresses the person is inadmissible.²²

Zizioulas takes seriously the constitutive dimension of relationships in human existence, seeing in them a mirror image of the relational nature of the existence of God. The end of human spiritual life in theosis is therefore conceived in terms of the configuring of human individual and communal life to best reflect the relations of the divine persons in the Godhead. Insofar as human individuality, the very thing that is transfigured through salvation, must of necessity exist in communion with others, spiritual life is then experienced to its utmost within the eucharistic communion of the church. That individuality makes no sense without a context of relations is the philosophical insight hit upon by the patristic thinkers that best describes both the being of God and therefore the salvation

²⁰ A. Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood: Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas Conceiving the Transcendent and Immanent God,” *Modern Theology* 19:3 (July 2003), p. 378.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 358.

²² J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Contemporary Greek Theologians Series, No 4), (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1997), p. 18.

of the human being called to participate in the life of this Triune God: "The eternal survival of the person as a unique, unrepeatable and free 'hypostasis,' as loving and being loved, constitutes the quintessence of salvation."²³

The safeguarding of human and divine freedom is therefore crucial for Zizoulas, as it is for Lossky, concerned as they are above all with the salvation of the human being through spiritual life and experience. According to Zizioulas, locating the basic ontological substrate of the human (or God) in being as such has the effect of eliminating basic freedom by immediately positing existence as a necessary prior category: "The ultimate challenge to the freedom of the person is the 'necessity' of existence."²⁴ The grounding of human freedom in a concept that is necessarily given makes human being from the start conditioned by necessity, and thus not basically free. However, grounding human being in the context of relations (i.e. as person, rather than as general essence) actually has the paradoxical effect of making freedom absolutely primary because personhood posits at the start the freedom of the irreducible individual. To make primary an ontology of general being produces the Cartesian dualism between the knower and the object of knowledge, and this split in fact constitutes the "natural" and hence fallen state of the world: "the fall consists in *the refusal to make being dependent on communion*, in a rupture between truth and communion."²⁵ This is precisely the state of affairs that the incarnation of Christ remedies: the incarnation of the divine person enables and grounds our ability to exist authentically as persons in communion, mirroring the exact nature of the divine being which exists as the communion of the persons of the Trinity. This is why, as for Lossky and Florovsky, "Christology is the sole starting point for a Christian

²³ Idem, p. 49.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 42.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 102.

understanding of truth.”²⁶ Zizioulas, however, makes Christology central due to the role of Christ in effecting the human return to authentic life in communion with other persons, made possible by the incarnation of one of the persons of the divine hypostases. While Lossky elaborates the ontological conditions within the Godhead and the divine economy necessary for success in the individual spiritual life, Zizioulas defines salvation as the human’s achievement of authentic existence, defined ontologically as *communion* due to the communal being of God in God’s self. While Lossky’s outline of theosis culminates in individual spiritual union conceived through the terms of individual spiritual faculties, for Zizioulas the process of theosis is best understood with a heavier focus on the ecclesial and eucharistic being of the human individual, precisely because the human cannot be called truly individual without the attainment of communal, ecclesial, and eucharistic being.

3 Neo-Patristic Dichotomies

The Neo-Patristic vision of Orthodox Theology as outline above in the works of Florovsky, Lossky, and Zizioulas rests on certain key distinctions that turn out to be best understood as reified dichotomies. I propose that the Neo-Patristic synthesis rests fundamentally on two sets of opposed principles that in reality express the same opposition in different terms: experience/reason and East/West. The former is the theological content of the latter and the latter is the historical instantiation of the former in the Neo-Patristic schema. As we have just seen, Zizioulas explicitly contrasts his theology with a Cartesian dualism that he takes to be characteristic of the Western theological tradition. Lossky also affirms that Western thought is more properly “rational” while the Eastern

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 67.

theological tradition is more attuned to the nature of truth as experiential and accessed as mystical apprehension.²⁷

As Lossky famously declares, in the “Eastern Church” mysticism is “theology *par excellence*.”²⁸ Implicit in this statement, and indeed in the entire book that follows it, is the proposition that Western theology follows a staid rationalistic development that never attains to authentic knowledge of the truth; for Lossky as much as Zizioulas, Western thought is fatally focused on general metaphysical notions of being and ignores the mystical truths of personhood and salvation.²⁹ John Meyendorff sums up very well this basic tenet of Neo-Patristic (theological) self-understanding: “Because the concept of theologia in Byzantium, as with the Cappadocian Fathers, was inseparable from theoria (‘contemplation’), theology could not be— as it was in the West—a rational deduction from ‘revealed’ premises...rather, it was a vision experienced by the saints, whose authenticity was, of course, to be checked against the witness of Scripture and Tradition.”³⁰

The contrast between East and West in these theological terms is so ubiquitous in modern Orthodox theological literature that it has come to be for many Orthodox theologians the basis of self-identification for Orthodox theology in the modern world. That this need for self-identification is so key in the first place is a topic worth considering. I would like to suggest here that modern Orthodox writers engage with many of the same problems of modern Western intellectual and theological history but often choose to do so in the language of identity and authenticity. For instance, as many have pointed out, Zizioulas and other Neo-Patristic thinkers bear a strong resemblance to existentialist thinkers who also grappled with the limits of

²⁷ V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 62.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

³⁰ J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1983), pp. 8-9.

Enlightenment reason and its legacy in 20th century philosophy and theology. Thinkers like Florovsky make no attempt to hide this similarity, but instead challenge Enlightenment rationalism with interpretations of the Greek patristic legacy rather than through direct philosophical engagement with the Christian West. Zizioulas, for instance, clearly lays out his assessment of existentialist thinking: “Kierkegaard’s discovery of the authentic moment of existence struck the greatest blow against the West’s subject-object structuring of truth, but led only to an identification of truth with doubt.”³¹ This is the content of much of the critique of Zizioulas’ work, that it merely reproduces in patristic terminology the substance of existentialist philosophy. As Turcescu points out, “Unlike contemporary thinkers, the Cappadocian fathers were not aware of the dangers of individualism and perhaps this is why they did not make many efforts to distinguish between person and individual.”³² According to Turcescu and others, Zizioulas is more indebted to existentialist (and indeed perhaps Heideggerian) invective against Enlightenment reason and Cartesian dualism than he is to “authentically” patristic ontology. Elsewhere Zizioulas’ formulations seem to closely mirror the fundamental tenets of Heideggerian metaphysics: “true knowledge is not a knowledge of the essence of the nature of things, but of how they are connected with the communion-event.”³³

The theological methodology of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis can, then, be broken down into its philosophical concerns and its more specifically theological concerns. Philosophically, the Neo-Patristic Synthesis seeks to oppose the hegemony of Enlightenment rationalism understood as the tyranny of human

³¹ J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 104.

³² L. Turcescu, “‘Person’ Versus ‘Individual’ and Other Modern Misreadings of Gregory of Nyssa”, *Modern Theology* 18:4 (October 2002), p. 536; and in response: A. Papanikolaou, “Is John Zizioulas an Existentialist in Disguise? Response to Lucian Turcescu,” *Modern Theology* 20:4 (October 2004), pp. 601-607.

³³ J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 106.

reason over authentic experience (much in the same way this dualism is construed by the Romantics, Heidegger, and many others). Theologically, the Neo-Patristic Synthesis seeks to reanimate the Greek patristic period as the normative criterion for Orthodox theology; this interpretation of the Greek patristic heritage is then filtered through its primary philosophical concerns of opposing the “West,” construed as restrictive and inauthentic philosophical and theological rationality. This is the basis for our claim that Neo-Patristic thought often employs confessional identity as a theological methodology.

Philosophically, the Neo-Patristic project leans heavily on the notion of “tradition,” as seen above. This notion of (Orthodox) theological tradition is deployed as both theological method and the guarantor of theological truth as such: for theology to be authentic it must take place within the conceptual space of the authentic witness to divine truth that is the Greek patristic tradition. This is the guarantee of its fundamental “truth,” here understood as its capacity to most adequately refer to that which cannot be rationally described. This notion of tradition is absolutely foundational to all of Neo-Patristic theology and the subsequent development of contemporary Orthodox theology and therefore deserves detailed analysis.

It is perhaps helpful to understand this employment of the concept of tradition in the terms outlined by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his hermeneutical magnum opus *Truth and Method*. Like Gadamer, Neo-Patristic thinkers rebel against Enlightenment rationalism as a fundamentally inadequate account of the human approach to truth. Against the Enlightenment “prejudice against prejudice itself” Gadamer demonstrates how preconception is indeed the necessary precondition for human knowing, and in this sense “*understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in and event of tradition.*”³⁴ For Gadamer understanding is a process of

³⁴ H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 291.

hermeneutical understanding that is always anticipatory and therefore participatory in preconceptions and “prejudices” that enable the progress of knowledge: “interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation.”³⁵

The philosophical presuppositions of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis share with Gadamer a fundamental aversion to Enlightenment rationalism and Cartesian Dualism, often conflated in both accounts. Like Gadamer, this system is open to the epistemic validity of appeals to conceptions of experience, authenticity, and authority as a way out of the confining and ultimately illusory nature of the subject-object distinction. For both the Neo-Patristic thinkers and Gadamer, knowledge is in some sense experiential and participatory, rather than fundamentally observational and deductive. The Neo-Patristic Synthesis may, however, have more in common with the Romantic epistemologies critiqued by Gadamer, who points out that Romanticism posits tradition as “something historically given, like nature.”³⁶ This attitude is not at bottom a-rational, but is “a particular critical attitude [that] again addresses itself to the truth of tradition and seeks to renew it. We call it traditionalism.”³⁷

These important conceptual similarities with Romanticism notwithstanding, the Neo-Patristic Synthesis’ focus on identity (a focus so well illuminated by P. Kalitzidis)³⁸ reveals its attempt to insert itself into the space opened up by the post-modern critiques of thinkers such as Gadamer. This attempt is undertaken in order to reinvigorate conceptions of tradition and authenticity as a heuristic device that at one and the same time address the problems of Western philosophical modernity

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 269.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 282.

³⁷ Ibidem

³⁸ See below.

and refounds and reformulates the theological claims of the Orthodox Church within the actual and intellectual diasporic space of Orthodox theological reflection in the 20th century. Kristina Stoeckl makes this point by noting that “elements of a communitarian and postmodern critique of liberalism are interwoven” in the work of certain contemporary émigré Orthodox thinkers in both Greece and Russia such as Sergej Khoruzhij and Christos Yannaras.³⁹

4 The Critique of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis: Toward a New Orthodox Theological Paradigm?

Pantelis Kalaitzidis, director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, elucidates a trenchant criticism of the dominant Neo-Patristic theological paradigm by citing its tendency toward ahistoricism, its dismissal of dissenting theological methodologies such as the Russian school of Fr. Bulgakov (who was so vehemently condemned by both Lossky and Florovsky), its institutionalization of a kind of “Orthodox fundamentalism of tradition,” its scholarly isolationism, and its overall divisive tendency vis-à-vis its manipulation of the categories of East and West. Kalaitzidis sums up the overall oeuvre of this school well: when Western Christian theological trends “were ultimately being created within the framework of modernity, the corresponding Orthodox movement of ‘return’ that was represented by the neo-patristic school (...) served as a bulwark against modernity.”⁴⁰ Kalaitzidis theologially intensifies the insights of the work of Stoeckl, who argues that Russian Orthodox theology represents a mode of confrontation

³⁹ K. Stoeckl, *Community After Totalitarianism: The Russian Orthodox Intellectual Tradition and the Philosophical Discourse of Political Modernity* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 133.

⁴⁰ P. Kalaitzidis, P. Kalaitzidis, “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology”, p. 12.

with modernity conditioned most specifically by the encounter with totalitarianism. Stoeckl distinguishes among contemporary approaches between thinkers such as Ilarion Alfeyev, who advocates a level of critical social engagement, and more fundamentalist streams of Russian Orthodox thought that call for the pre-revolutionary union of church and state.⁴¹ Incidentally, as Stoeckl points out, these fundamentalist currents that are openly nationalist (and often even anti-semitic) constitute the dominant understanding of Russian Orthodoxy in Russian today; in this context the work of both the Neo-Patristics and the Russian school of religious philosophy and theology are marginalized.⁴²

Addressing the potentially fundamentalist tendencies of the Neo-Patristic paradigm, Kalitzidis calls instead for an Orthodox theology rooted in its past but oriented eschatologically and contextually toward the explicit problems of Western and global modernity such as gender, hierarchy, church and state, interreligious relations, etc... His explicit attention to social issues such as gender, hierarchy, and the political status of the church is found in a number of contemporary Orthodox theologians of the 21st century in the United States in particular. This phase of our analysis will address some examples of this work and how it engages with the Neo-Patristic paradigm, specifically through the discussion of the place of scripture in Orthodox theology. As Kalitzidis notes, the Neo-Patristic paradigm has in fact led to a certain under appreciation and even outright “neglect” of the Biblical text: “Ultimately, in practice, the authority and the study of the patristic texts—the vast majority of which are essentially interpretive commentaries on the Bible—has acquired greater importance and gravitas than the biblical text itself.”⁴³

⁴¹ K. Stoeckl, *Community After Totalitarianism*, p. 126.

⁴² *Ibidem*

This stage of our analysis will therefore attempt to understand the use of scripture by certain prominent 21st century Orthodox theologians and ultimately ask how these understandings of scripture engage with the Neo-Patristic paradigm on this contested point.

Theodore Stylianopoulos' *The Way of Christ: Gospel, Spiritual Life, and Renewal in Orthodoxy* (2002) forms a useful starting point for our meditation on these issues. Stylianopoulos's career is an outstanding example of the renewed interest of Orthodox theologians in scriptural studies as a discipline: he is emeritus professor of New Testament at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, MA, the flagship seminary of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in the United States. He has authored important works on New Testament Orthodox exegesis and was one of the editors of the highly popular Orthodox Study Bible (first published in 1993, itself evidence of this renewed emphasis on scripture in the church). In *The Way of Christ* Stylianopoulos addresses directly a number of the issues at stake in the Neo-Patristic Synthesis, in particular the focus on identity. The title of the work itself is suggestive, indicating the Neo-Patristic theme of authentic renewal within the context of Christo-centric theology combined with a focus on the scriptural nature of Orthodoxy. Stylianopoulos begins the very first page of the work with this question:

What is distinctive about Orthodoxy? What features define Orthodox identity in the context of contemporary pluralism, secularism, and post-modernism? [...]The issue of identity is integrally connected to our mission: who we are defines what we are to do and how to do it. The dynamic task of defining both identity and mission apply equally to individual Orthodox Christians, specific parishes, and the Church as a whole.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ T. Stylianopoulos, *The Way of Christ: Gospel, Spiritual Life, and Renewal in Orthodoxy* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2002), p. 1.

Stylianopoulos' work then sets out to answer these questions, ones that are clearly contiguous with the concerns of the Neo-Patristic paradigm, and in the process elaborates what he views as the uniquely Orthodox approach to scriptural authority and hermeneutics. Like Florovsky and many others, Stylianopoulos argues that the Orthodox Church is animated by Holy Tradition, what he calls the "inner fire" of the church.⁴⁵

Despite his deliberate and highly approving engagement with the identity concerns of the Neo-Patristic paradigm, Stylianopoulos reorients the substance of this paradigm through his focus on scripture. While Neo-Patristic theology is undoubtedly Christo-centric, Stylianopoulos' theology is Christo-centric in an explicitly biblical way that subsumes patristic theological authority under the authority of the scriptural Christ. Stylianopoulos rejects any construction of Orthodox identity that is narrowly Byzantist, ethnocentric, or excessively traditionalistic and places Christ at the center of proper Orthodox discourse on self-understanding, calling for "a renewal of identity centered on Christ and the fundamental Orthodox truths, which defines in any case [Orthodox Christians'] baptismal identity."⁴⁶

Stylianopoulos' exegesis of New Testament verses relevant to Trinitarian theology (what he calls "triadic texts") serves as a useful model for his methodology.⁴⁷ These texts include Jesus' command to his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:16-20); the baptism of Jesus which occasions the voice of the Father and the descent of the Spirit (Mt. 3:16-17), and numerous others.⁴⁸ Stylianopoulos highlights the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity for Orthodox theology and spiritual life, but immediately grounds its authority in the words of the New Testament, a move that

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 174.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 71-73.

highlights his commitment to the understanding of Orthodox dogmatic theology in primarily scriptural terms. What authorizes this move back to scripture to ground theological doctrines conceived many centuries after the death of Christ is Stylianopoulos' conception of communal, i.e., traditional, authority:

“All these texts originate not from one author or one congregation but from the entire life of the early Church, to which they bear testimony. In other words, the Christian understanding of God as Trinity arises from *primary revelatory ground*, the corporate religious experience of the early Christians in response to the ministry of Christ and the gift of the Spirit.”⁴⁹ [italics mine].

This passage well illustrates Stylianopoulos' subtle engagement with the Neo-Patristic theological paradigm. Though elsewhere Stylianopoulos affirms the primary authority of the patristic authors in theological exegesis,⁵⁰ this passage makes it clear that the theological notion of the Triune God is to be conceptually understood as primarily scriptural and revelatory; its proper interpretation and elucidation is a function of the corporate religious experience of the church. This experience, reminiscent of the primacy of the theological epistemology of the Neo-Patristic paradigm, is rooted in the experience of revelation and is at bottom a reaction to it. Therefore, Stylianopoulos retains the authority of the fathers in dogmatics and hermeneutics while conceptually distinguishing scriptural revelation from dogmatic formulation in an attempt to emphasize the final authority of the former over the latter, no matter how “organic” and indissoluble their connection may be. Stylianopoulos' understanding of scripture does not exist in any strong tension with the Neo-Patristic paradigm, but is best understood as a formulation of its terms that seeks to answer

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 73.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 40.

the kinds of criticisms made explicit later by Kalaitzides. His engagement with the terms of this paradigm, however, does represent an effort to sharpen its impact and better expound its questions of identity and church community. Stylianopoulos in fact uses the authority of *revelation* to emphasize the absolute finality of *patristic* theological formulations: "In the case of classical theology, however, there are a number of deep and abiding truths and values which are not open because they are grounded in revelation, that is, the self-disclosure of God Himself as a gift to be received by the community of faith but not controlled by human will, reason or skill."⁵¹

The community itself is the guarantee of truth, and thus revelation must take place within the tradition, but its authority must remain conceptually primary within this tradition. Revelation as such is not primarily scriptural, but actually "traditional." Stylianopoulos therefore confirms the Neo-Patristic thesis but interprets its being traditional as primarily being scriptural.

John Behr, current dean and professor of patristics at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary (where Florovsky served as dean from 1951-1955), explores the implications of the scriptural grounding for traditional authority in more systematic detail in his well-received systematic theology *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (2006). As an intellectual voice at one of the most influential centers of Orthodox theology in the United States, his work constitutes a powerful voice in contemporary Orthodox theology. Behr seeks to outline Christian theology (significantly, not just Orthodox theology) as an encounter with Christ as presented in the scriptural narrative, for this is the mode in which the apostles reflected on the crucified and risen Christ. As is made clear in Acts 2:36 (Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 129.

you crucified)⁵² the task of Christian theology is to witness to Christian truth in the way that the first Christians did, through encounter with Christ.⁵³

Behr describes his approach as a “postmodern reappropriation of a premodern perspective” that seeks to address the mythologized and historicized tendencies in modern theology.⁵⁴ Behr’s explicitly rejects the notion that scripture alone is authoritative or that scripture is contained within the tradition; scripture is instead the source of the encounter with Christ that is itself the content of Christian truth. As Behr explains, “scripture is...a compendium of the words and images with which we, as it were, articulate the mystery of Christ, the Christ proclaimed in accordance with the scriptures.”⁵⁵ Theology derives its meaning from the encounter with Christ through the scriptures, not through the scriptures themselves: “The main concern of early Christians was not to determine the exact boundaries of sacred scripture; this only acquires the importance it has today if we assume that meaning and authority reside within the text itself.”⁵⁶ Rather, for Behr, “‘meaning’ resides in the person of Christ who is himself the truth (Jn 14.6).”⁵⁷

Behr thereby preserves the experiential epistemology of the Neo-Patristic model but makes it primarily scriptural in a way that is more radical than the formulation of Stylianopoulos for instance. Behr defines Christianity itself in terms that are so Christo-centric that they attempt to move beneath the distinction between scripture and tradition from the very outset: In Christian truth “the faith delivered (‘traditioned’) to the saints once and for all (Jude 3) is preserved in an

⁵² All scriptural citations are taken from the NRSV translation.

⁵³ J. Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006), p. 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 180.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

orientation, a particular manner of approaching the mystery of Christ, which St. Irenaeus encapsulates in terms of the mutuality of scripture, canon, tradition, and succession, all bearing witness to Christ and his gospel.”⁵⁸ It is this orientation toward the crucified Lord that is primary for Behr, making his focus so “scriptural” that it in fact goes beneath scripture itself and refers to the originary truth contained within it, which is Christ. The narrative of scripture and the salvation history that it elucidates is not history strictly speaking since it is occasioned by the activity of the truth itself, the eternal Word that is the metaphysical first principle.⁵⁹ The actual truth of the scriptural narrative is pre-eternal, and from this standpoint, sin and redemption are one cosmic movement, “simultaneous” rather than linear.⁶⁰

Behr frequently cites Irenaeus on his understanding of salvation history and the work of Christ, which Irenaeus calls at one point “the work of God in refashioning the human being.”⁶¹ This perfecting of the human being is a deeply embodied process that involves the “enclosure” of the “incorporeal” within bodily reality. Moreover, this process takes place along the lines elaborated by the ascetic theology so favored by Lossky and other Neo-Patristic luminaries: the human spiritual goal is *apatheia*, or “the eradication of the sinful abuse of [human] faculties, the ‘passions,’ in a reaffirmation of their proper, God-given, use.”⁶² Behr’s theology therefore begins with a radical paradigm shift away from the starting points of the Neo-Patristic paradigm, but finally climaxes in its unique construal of Byzantine ascetic theology. Behr also inveighs against Western theology but from a different angle: he vaguely accuses Augustine, Peter Lombard, and Karl Rahner as all

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 167.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 165.

somehow indicative of the attempt to bypass scriptural witness and exegesis before engaging in Trinitarian theology.⁶³ In the final analysis, Behr's approach signals a radical refounding of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis along explicitly scriptural lines that at one and the same time fundamentally reorients its method but in the end manages to reinscribe as normative is specific theological conclusions and dichotomies.

To close our analysis, it will be instructive to analyze one important instance of engagement with the Neo-Patristic synthesis along concretely transformative lines. Using the theological bases established by Zizioulas, Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, a psychologist and adjunct professor of theology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, attempts to demonstrate in *Persons in Communion: A Theology of Authentic Relationships* that patristic theology of personhood implies the necessity of equal participation of women in the Orthodox Church, such as in the restoration of the female diaconate. Karidoyanes Fitzgerald makes scriptural encounter central at the beginning of her work where she writes: "The life of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels shows us that He was a person in relationships."⁶⁴ Like Zizioulas, Karidoyanes Fitzgerald makes relationship primary as an ontological and spiritual category and argues that God exists ontologically in a context of trinitarian relationships. Human persons, likewise, exist from the outset of their being in relationship to others and human life is called to imitate the life of the Holy Trinity in its process of salvation.

The saving work of Christ is fundamentally that of relationship: the restoration of the proper relationship between God and humankind.⁶⁵ According to Karidoyanes Fitzgerald theosis is "the process by which we deepen our relationship with the

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 173.

⁶⁴ K. Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, *Persons in Communion: A Theology of Authentic Relationships* (Berkeley, CA: 2006), p. 1.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, pp. 10-11.

Triune God together with the other relationships, responsibilities and obligations in this life."⁶⁶ To grow in relationship with God and humankind means to cultivate authentic relationships with others, which are relationships that properly respect each person as such and refer most primarily to their unique personhood.

Authentic relationships are "life-giving" as in Jn. 10:10 (where Jesus says "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly").⁶⁷

Inauthentic relationships, by contrast, are "life-effacing" and "de-personalizing" in that they ignore the fundamental freedom and uniqueness of each human being and the fundamental relationship that they possess with the Holy Trinity that grounds their humanity and personhood in the first place.⁶⁸ These relationships are fundamentally a violation of the commandment of Mt. 23:39: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."⁶⁹ Significantly, Karidoyanes Fitzgerald bases her critique of the contemporary place of women in the Orthodox Church on this personalist theology that is deeply influenced by the Neo-Patristic perspective of Zizioulas. However, Karidoyanes Fitzgerald argues that women are all too often in the contemporary Orthodox Church treated inauthentically by the church hierarchy. Women are rendered "invisible," one of the primary modes of inauthentic relationship for Karidoyanes Fitzgerald. She condemns this state of women in the church in the strongest possible terms: "Whenever Christians ignore, minimize, intimidate or oppress other followers- female or male- who are striving to respond with humility and courage to a genuine call from God, a grievous sin is being committed. And this is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit."⁷⁰ Karidoyanes Fitzgerald's

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 42.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 53.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 55.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 53.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 84.

utilizes the scriptural witness to authentic relationships between God and humankind to bypass the authority of those who would attempt to distort or suppress these relationships for any reason, and in doing so she appeals to the experience of women feeling called to the diaconate as evidence for the necessity of its reinstatement.

The importance of Karidoyanes Fitzgerald's approach lies in its use of scripture to legitimize female spiritual experience as such, without reference to any intermediary. However, the metaphysics that enclose this powerful methodology are drawn from the Neo-Patristic thought of Zizioulas.

For Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, the patristic theology of personhood must be activated in the world, and its inactivation constitutes the very basis of sin itself (i.e., blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the unforgivable sin). Yet the theological thrust that propels her analysis beyond the realm of Neo-Patristic dogmatics is the appeal to the ethical and spiritual witness of the scriptures and their distinction between relationships that respect personhood and relationships that trample upon it. Karidoyanes Fitzgerald's theology succeeds in vindicating women's spiritual experience as such (if only with reference to a rather modest goal in broader terms, the restoration of the female diaconate). While Kalaitzidis's recent call for a complete paradigm shift in contemporary Orthodox theology has not been completely embraced in the United States, Karidoyanes Fitzgerald's efforts in particular represent an attempt to fundamentally reimagine the legacy of patristic authors. Karidoyanes Fitzgerald's work demonstrates that gender issues may be precisely the place where the Neo-Patristic paradigm is most easily, and most urgently, called into question.