

INTRODUCTION

More often than not, Orthodox theology is said to be contextually insensitive. In a way, this judgment is a sweeping generalization because it does not take full account of the scholarly work made by a number of excellent Orthodox theologians over the last 25 years. Besides, it hardly does justice to theology as a conceptual and discursive enterprise. For every theology is necessarily context-bound and seeks to take up challenges raised by this context. Nevertheless, this appraisal seems to be partly justified at least by the fact that Orthodox theology, for decades, has been favoring patristic and dogmatic matters to the detriment of questions shaped by our multifaceted contemporary world. Georges Florovsky's (1893-1979) call for a *neo-patristic synthesis* may serve as an illustrative example. Initially conceived as a restoration of the "spirit" of the fathers, yet without minimizing the urgency of grappling with questions posed by Western modernity, Florovsky's urge has frequently been construed and implemented as a mere revitalization of the writings of the fathers and a slavish repetition of their ideas. Certainly, justice demands to state that the understanding of tradition fostered by the *neo-patristic synthesis* itself was already more sophisticated than that of many simple-minded followers. However, it can hardly be denied that Orthodox theology still evinces relatively little engagement with what is really at stake in postmodern theology such as gender issues, ecology, church and society, theology and politics, or ecumenism. Accordingly, the question of how Orthodox theology relates to the context must be raised anew, unbiasedly, and far from apologetic clichés.

An international theological conference *Neo-Patristic Synthesis or Post-Patristic Theology: Can Orthodox Theology Be Contextual?*, held in Volos, Greece in 3-6 June 2010, tried to meet this challenge by raising, for the first time, the question of Orthodox theology and contextuality on a large scale. It was jointly organized and sponsored by the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University, the Chair of Orthodox Theology at the University of Münster, and the Romanian Institute for Inter-Orthodox, Inter-Confessional and Inter-Religious Studies (INTER) in Cluj-Napoca. As suggested by the title, a central focus of interest throughout this conference was a critical reassessment

of Florovsky's neo-patristic program. Yet a number of papers deployed also valuable efforts to go beyond Florovsky's vision and to open up new horizons as to the relationship between Orthodox theology and contextuality. Although the proceedings of this conference are yet to be published, it was widely and controversially debated in Orthodox circles and proved to be highly seminal in terms of probing the ability of Orthodox theology to tread new paths.

It did not take the organizers of this conference too much time to know how their initiative had to be furthered. After the 'overture' in Volos, the need for an investigation of the relationship of Orthodox theology and contextuality nourished by concrete examples was profoundly felt. More specifically, this investigation had to explore the extent to which new approaches in Orthodox theology have been contextual thus far. The product of this reflection was the international conference *Can Orthodox Theology Be Contextual? Concrete Approaches from the Orthodox Tradition* (23-26 May 2013), which was hosted by the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca and supported financially by the Orthodox Metropolis of Cluj. While the initial organizational core remained unchanged, the project was joined by several other institutions such as Saint Andrew's Biblical Theological Institute (Moscow), the Christian Cultural Center (Belgrade), the Institute for the Study of Culture and Christianity (Belgrade), and the European Forum of the Orthodox Schools of Theology (Brussels). Most of the papers read at this conference appear, in revised form, in the present issue of the *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* (JECS).

The proceedings of the conference published here consist of two parts, entitled respectively *Concrete Approaches* and *Perspectives*. This division corresponds to the fact that, when it comes to its relationship to the context, Orthodox theology displays a sort of tension between what has already been achieved and what is yet to be done. The first part examines cases of contextuality in Orthodox theology and seeks to uncover their theoretical underpinnings and underlying principles. In this regard, it seems inevitable to start with Florovsky. Yet instead of turning back once more to his *neo-patristic synthesis*, Paul Gavrilyuk pays heed to his epistemology and attempts at grasping its various threads in context. Whereas Florovsky is regarded to have provided the theoretical frame of reference of neo-patristic thought, Dumitru Staniloae (1903-1993) is often said to have produced a *neo-patristic*

synthesis. In his contribution on Staniloae, Calinic Berger tries to answer the question of how Staniloae has adapted patristic thought in a transformative way to man's needs in our contemporary world. An integral part of the debate on the *neo-patristic synthesis* has manifestly been the so-called theology of personhood, which has been mainly associated with Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) and John Zizioulas (born 1931) who, together with Staniloae, are deemed the pillars of neo-patristic thought. For Aristotle Papanikolaou, the Orthodox theology of personhood *is* an example of contextual theology inasmuch as it aims at responding to the challenges of the moment by absorbing contemporary patterns of thought. Further cases of contextual theology are probed into by Assaad Elias Kattan and Pantelis Kalaitzidis. Whereas the former seeks to unpack Georges Khodr's (born 1923) approach to Islam as an innovative example of contextual theology, the latter explores the case of the Romanian priest and man of letters Nicolae Steinhardt (1912-1989), arguing that literature may play a mediatory role between theology and secular thought. Conversely, by arguing that the current economic crisis in South Eastern Europe has also cultural and ecclesial roots, Michael Hjälm attempts at sketching a *reversed* case of contextuality, pointing to the fact that the Orthodox Church gives often the impression of belonging to a pre-modern world with a focus on holistic views. Finally, Vasilios Makrides connects the aforementioned concrete approaches to a more general discourse about theology and context, thus anticipating somehow the second part of the present volume. Moved by his conviction that genuine contextual theology is unimaginable without engaging with social sciences, Makrides paradigmatically surveys how Orthodox theology has related to social sciences over the last decades.

The second part reflects on the impediments of contextualization and explores avenues of a more creative engagement with the context. In his paper, Rastko Jovic picks up on Orthodoxy's reluctance to engage with society and history, already addressed by Makrides. Pleading for a *theology with a human face*, Jovic argues that what is really at stake is less contextuality than creativity. The remainder of the papers in this second part is more specific, yet no less perspective-oriented. Christina Gschwandtner sheds light on the relevance of philosophy for the Orthodox tradition and invites to a stronger engagement with hermeneutics and phenomenology. After this philosophical prelude, four papers lavish attention on the classical branches

of theology making a strong case, though in different ways, for new approaches. Taking a cue from Jerome's and Augustine's exegesis, John Fotopoulos urges the Orthodox biblical scholars to resort to the scholarly tools available today and to interpret the Scriptures in context. Along similar lines, Dionysios Skliris shows how elements of Maximus the Confessor's ontology and anthropology may prove fruitful for a dialogue with some aspects of postmodern philosophy and psychoanalysis. Petros Vassiliadis asks about the relevance of Eucharistic ecclesiology to a post-patristic contemporary world. Gregorios Papathomas, in turn, sketches a frame of reference to help make a distinction between the unalterable and the changeable in church canons. Beyond the strict canon of theology, Spyridoula Athanasopoulou-Kypriou and Davor Džalto address respectively the issues of sexual difference and contemporary art. While Athanasopoulou-Kypriou highlights the liberating potential of Eastern Orthodox tradition as to discrimination on the basis of sexuality, Džalto analyses why art and religion went separate ways and reflects on how Orthodox theology and contemporary art may come to a fruitful dialogue and learn from each other.

In a sort of epilogue to this conference, Ingeborg Gabriel articulated in Cluj-Napoca retrospectively a number of critical remarks from the vantage point of a Roman-Catholic woman theologian. This final paper was meant not only as an *avis œcuménique* and a tangible sign that all the speakers involved are committed to an ecumenically-oriented Orthodox theology, but also shows how important it was for them to perceive their own thoughts in the mirror of the other. This is the reason why this paper is published here as well.

To try to summarize all the outcomes of this conference would certainly go beyond the scope of this relatively short introduction. More importantly, it may prejudice the reader's freedom to make his/her own judgment. Yet one may not be far from the truth in stating that the papers made available here show that, despite its incontestable indebtedness to tradition, Orthodox theology has been contextual in manifold ways since the beginning of the 20th century. However, this by no means lessens the importance of its present and future duty both to become more contextual as well as to sharpen its awareness of the implications of such a paradigm shift. It is in this spirit that the papers published here offer a critical evaluation of the thought of a number of church fathers and Orthodox theologians from the perspective of contextuality.

At the very end, some words of thanks may not be out of 'context'. Over the last two years, Katharina Linnemann (Münster) has been indefatigable whenever the manuscript had to be adapted, reshaped, and reviewed. Furthermore, the editors of the present volume are deeply grateful to Prof. Dr. Joseph Verheyden (Leuven), Prof. Dr. Heleen Murre-van den Berg (Nijmegen), and Prof. Dr. Alfons Bruening (Amsterdam/Nijmegen) for publishing these papers in this journal. This publication will unquestionably contribute to a broader and better reception of the scholarly work documented in this volume.

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