

Georges Florovsky and Sergei Bulgakov in dialogue:
The Church Fatehrs, the God-world relationship and theological method

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Two eternal enemies or a modern academic construction?

It is commonplace in contemporary Orthodox scholarship that there are two major, almost mutually exclusive, trends in 20th century Orthodox theology, the so-called neo-patristic theology, represented mainly by figures like Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) and the Russian Religious Renaissance, often labeled simply as the «Russian School», or «Paris school», represented primarily by Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), Sergius Bulgakov and Pavel Florensky (1882-1937). These two central trajectories of Orthodox theology both resulted from the Russian Diaspora in the West, insofar as most of the so-called founders of both “schools” belonged to the first or second generation of Russian emigrants. Notwithstanding their common, to some extent cultural and historical roots, there was considered to be a deep and often hostile separation defining the relationship between their eminent figures, with regards among others to their use and reception of the patristic heritage. This, sometimes divisive split in the main body of modern Orthodox theology between the «Russian» and the «neo-patristic» schools was firstly pointed out by the late A. Schmemmann, and more recently by Paul Valliere. This understanding, however, has been boldly critiqued as a naive oversimplification, based primarily on ideological bias or ignorance of the particular context, rather than on a careful reading of their work. The gradual growth of interest in the West in the work and theological heritage of the fundamental representatives of the Russian Religious Renaissance and at the same time the translation of their basic works into English has brought the great complexity of the whole question to a wide audience. The vast number of studies published in the last decade by eminent scholars such as Paul Gavrilyuk, Paul Ladouceur, Brandon Gallaher, Aristotle Papanikolaou and others seems to have provoked a severe split in the prevailing narrative, calling for a review of the relations between the two currents of thought within the context of contemporary Orthodox theology. In saying this it would appear that the time has come to question the normative narrative by making the hypothesis that to appreciate the patristic retrieval in contemporary Orthodox theology, a more inclusive conception is required which seeks to go beyond the prevailing division. Without going into all the details of the story, such a new and more balanced reading can be put forth by alluding to the major representatives of this debate, the late Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944) and Georges Florovsky (1893-1979) and their reception of patristic tradition, the God-world relationship and its consequences for theological methodology and the dialogue of the Church with the world.