

FLOROVSKY AT THE CROSSROADS: IMAGINING RUSSIAN RENAISSANCE FROM MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS*

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Abstract: This paper looks at Georges Florovsky, an influential religious historian, philosopher, theologian, and his ideological transformations as he came to New York City in 1948, in particular to Morningside Heights, to be a professor of Church history and dean of the newly founded St Vladimir Theological Seminary. At Morningside Heights, where a good number of various theological seminaries were located, Florovsky formulated his vision regarding what went wrong in Russia in 1917 and what needed to be done to get Russia back on the right path. Florovsky's ideas prefigure the critique of European Enlightenment and its Orientalist attitudes that were formulated in the 1970s by Edward Said. Florovsky argued that Russia gave up its own Hellenic heritage of Church Fathers, and replaced it with the trajectory of the Renaissance of ancient Hellenic philosophy in Western Europe. The remedy for this condition, which Russians imposed on themselves, was "the return to the fathers," establishing a direct philosophical connection with Russia's Byzantine and Hellenic heritage, thus by-passing the Western Renaissance. For this revival of Hellenic Late Antiquity Florovsky is most remembered in the world of Orthodox culture. The idea of Hellenic patristic revival had also run into some problems at Morningside Heights, specifically in the World Council of Churches and with the Union Theological Seminary, which was hosting St Vladimir Seminary at the time. Florovsky, always more focused on Russian and Orthodox issues than on the issues of ethnic identity in America, misread the changing political situation in the late 1950s. American theology was becoming influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, who was more interesting in

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improving the world by fighting sin through progressive social action, then in the niceties of Church History and the esoteric issues of doctrine. The new American priorities were the homogenization of ethnic churches into a progressive union, achieved under President Kennedy. Florovsky's ideas about the Russian religious revival, once popular at the height of the Cold War now seemed dated. Thus, Florovsky was removed from the deanship of St Vladimir Theological Seminary in 1955 and a more Americanized generation took over the leadership of this very important theological and intellectual institution in the Orthodox world.

Key Words: Florovsky, Orthodox Church, Russia, Russian Religious Revival, Renaissance, West, St Vladimir Theological Seminary, Morningside Heights, Hellenic heritage, Church Fathers, Cold War

*“Religion is sociologically interesting not because it describes the social order, but because it shapes it”
(Geertz 1973, 119)*

Clifford Geertz

FATHER GEORGES FLOROVSKY WAS A CONSERVATIVE Russian thinker of the 20th century émigré community. While not as famous and popular in the American conservative circles as Ayn Rand, Florovsky's ideas of ecclesiastical revival contributed considerably to the so-called conservative revolution (Reagan Revolution) in the United States and in the West in general. Furthermore, Florovsky's political and religious ideas had a crucial influence on the re-organization and ideological renewal of the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-communist period. It is no exaggeration to say that post-communist Russia has been shaped by Florovsky's vision of Russia as a revival of the Byzantine Hellenic Empire, a Christian nation different in its historical development from the West. This vision of new Russia developed first and in part in Paris, and more importantly in New York at St Vladimir Theological Seminary, originally founded at Morningside Heights in 1948 (Alfeyey 1999, 15–17). If we would like to understand the current resurgence of the Orthodox Church in Russia, its expanding influence on practically every aspect of social life, I believe we need to look at the Russian diaspora, which prepared the way for what appears to be almost magical resurrection of the Russian Orthodox Church in contemporary post-communist Russia, after seven decades of severe marginalization during the communist

In the life of one of the most important Russian religious émigré thinkers, Georges Florovsky, his coming to New York in 1948 plays a special role. Florovsky was called to New York from Paris by Theophilus, the metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church in America, in order to organize St Vladimir Theological Seminary. The new seminary was located at Morningside Heights. In those days it was renting a couple of rooms from Union Theological Seminary. At the St Vladimir seminary Florovsky was a professor of Church History and the first dean (1948–1955). During that time Florovsky constructed his dream of the Russian Renaissance that was to create the new Christian Russia after the fall of communism.

With the publishing of the “Ways of Russian Theology” in Paris in 1937, Florovsky not only diagnosed the main problem of Russian intellectual history, but also broke up with the émigré community in Paris over that issue. Claiming that the Russia’s intellectual wondering through the desert occurred when Russia in the 16th and 17th centuries broke from the Patristic tradition (Hellenic Christianity of Late Antiquity) and under the influence of the Western Renaissance ideas, began to look at its own Byzantine heritage as the “dark ages.” Accepting the Western Renaissance and secular ideology, a rift opened between the Russian elites, which were becoming more and more secular and Russian people, which kept the practice of Hellenic Byzantine Orthodoxy. This rift between the classes in Russia was the cause of the Bolshevik revolution. Once this judgment of the Russian intellectual history had been issued on the pages of the “Ways of Russian Theology,” Florovsky never came back to the diagnosis of the Russian problem of identity, but only worked toward fixing it (Blane 1993, 89). Florovsky came to New York to plan on how to correct that big Russian mistake.¹ The role of the dean of the newly founded St Vladimir Theological Seminary fitted perfectly his plans to reconnect Russian culture with the Hellenic Christian thought.

The role of Morningside Heights, a neighborhood situated between the Upper East Side to the south and Harlem to the north, plays an important role in this narrative. As a kind of American Vatican, Morningside Heights contains a large number of institutions closely linked to religious and political life during Florovsky’s tenure as the dean (1948–1955). First there was the World Council of Churches, in 1946 known as Church World Service and subsequently as the Interchurch Center, located at 475 Riverside Drive and West 120th Street. It was an ecumenical institution in which Florovsky was deeply involved. In addition, Morningside Heights could be seen as a symbolic center of American Protestant religious life, with Union Theological Seminary, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York Theological Seminary, the interdenominational Riverside Church, and

1 Florovsky used the words “the break from patristics and Byzantinism” (see: Florovsky 1979, 8).

finally nearby, the largest church in America, the Episcopalian (Anglican) church of St. John the Divine.

Florovsky came to New York because of his activities in the ecumenical movement and thus it is not surprising that he ended at Morningside Heights. His understanding of Russian Orthodoxy was very well received through his contacts with the Anglican Church in the period between the wars. First contacts with the English speaking world for Florovsky occurred through the ecumenical society of St Alban and St Sergius, a Russian-English club founded in 1928, which fostered the mystical leanings of high church Anglicans and the numerous Russian religious refugees. During these first meetings it became obvious that the English speaking members of the society, clearly preferred Florovsky over other members of Russian diaspora, because of his knowledge of the Bible and the Church tradition. Nicolai Berdyaev and Father Sergei Bulgakov, whose approach to Christianity was rooted more in the German idealistic tradition, where not so successful among the Anglicans.² These differences between the Parisian circle of Russian émigrés and Florovsky was going to become more apparent in New York. Florovsky intellectually matured in the Orthodox religious circles of Paris, he was a friend of Nicolai Berdyaev and Sergei Bulgakov, yet his vision for Russia, for a new Russia rising out of the revival of Hellenic religious thought matured only in New York, at Morningside Heights.

Florovsky came to New York at the beginning of the Cold War in 1948. While fully engaged in the intellectual movements of the 20th century, and an unambiguous Cold Warrior, a card-carrying member of the Republican Party, Florovsky was also a person who decades before Michel Foucault and Edward Said formulated his critique of the European and Russian Enlightenment program and clearly understood Western prejudices in dealing with Russia and the Orient in general. Florovsky was similar to many neo-conservative thinkers, who incorporated a good deal of their experience with liberal thought in the service of the conservative cause. But, as we shall see, Florovsky was not a reactionary and he slid into his conservatism pushed by the circumstances of the Cold War and the personal and generational choices that he made.

The ecumenical relations in American context are burdened with ethnic issues and many cultural prejudices. In particular, the relations between the West and Russia are laden with the heritage of Orientalism, a heritage of patronizing attitude of the West toward the East, in this case, Russia. Orientalism involves two particular, seemingly contradictory strategies, the one is the excessive praise and admiration of the East, the other involves the uncritical loathing of the East. In

94 2 Florovsky writes, "Father Bulgakov ignored completely the whole Biblican aspect, which was so important to the Anglicans." (See: Blane 1993, 64).

both cases, it is important to notice that the East is never treated as an equal, but as the other, made necessarily inferior by this rhetorical strategy. These attitudes play an important role in our story, especially because during the Cold War, Russia became the ultimate other.

Turbulent relations between the West and Russia have left many bruised egos and led to many misleading statements. Western Orientalism (in reality a form of racism) towards Russia dominated this discourse since the Russian Enlightenment of Peter the Great. Erich Auerbach, for example writes, “Russian coming to terms with European civilization... was significant not only for Russia. However confused and amateurish a process it often was, however much it was impaired by inadequate information, false perspective, by prejudice and passion, there was at work in it an extremely sure instinct for the things that were unsound and critical in Europe.” Georges Florovsky detested these kinds of statements which, while seemingly appreciating the Russian contribution to the West, unflatteringly placed Russia in the position of a pupil and the West in the position of a teacher, who by virtues of the teacher’s superior understanding of the human condition, has the perpetual right to evaluate the work of Russians.

During the first part of his life in exile (1920–1948), which he spent in Europe, Father Florovsky received a relatively cool treatment from other leaders of the Russian Religious Revival in exile.³ This cool treatment happened for many reasons, but primarily because the émigré community in Paris and in Europe between the wars consisted of people who were born in Russia and whose identity was not tied to the West. Florovsky grew up in Russia, but left fairly young. As Florovsky was advancing as a scholar and a priest, he came in a conflict with the leader of the Russian émigré community. His publication of the *Ways of Russian Theology* alienated him from Nicolai Berdyaev and this is a well documented public controversy. There were other controversies. In 1934–36, he was a participant in the heresy trial of the “sophiology” of Sergei Bulgakov, which proved fatal for their friendship and to his status in St Sergei Theological Institute in Paris, a Russian émigré institution. The heresy trial was a decisive in alienating Florovsky from the Russian émigré community in Paris. Sergei Bulgakov was already condemned both by the Russian Patriarchate (Red Russian Church) and by the White Russian Church in exile in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. When Father Florovsky agreed to be a member of the theological commission, appointed by his own jurisdiction,

3 By Russian Religious Revival I mean here the liberal revival movement before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, which, among other things, reconstituted the office of the Patriarch. The office was abolished by Peter the Great in 1721. Many members of this revival movement were Christian Socialist deputies in the Russian Duma, such as Sergei Bulgakov. The movement was opposed by the conservative higher clergy, led by metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky. The term was coined by Nicolai Berdyaev, one of the main figures of the movement.

the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, agreed that Bulgakov's teaching contained "serious errors" and his fate among the Russians in Paris was finished. Berdyaev was not a cleric and could not be disciplined in that way, but Father Bulgakov was forced to recant. In turn, father Florovsky decided to leave Paris.⁴ He first spent the war years in Yugoslavia, then running in front of the Soviet troops gradually liberating Eastern Europe, he ended back again in France and from there came to New York, in particular to Morningside Heights in 1948.

Whereas the heresy trial of Father Bulgakov opened the rift, it was the writing of the *Ways of Russian Theology* that cemented the fissure between Florovsky on the one hand, and Berdyaev and the older generation of Russian émigrés on the other hand. In the *Ways* Florovsky made the diagnosis of the problem of the many "whys" of the Bolshevik Revolution and never in his writings returned to the question of the diagnosis.⁵ At Morningside Heights and in America in general, Florovsky worked to fix the problem, but no longer wondered about why has the Russian intellectual development led to the Bolshevik Revolution. Florovsky's argument as to why so many wrong turns in the Russian intellectual tradition that caused the Bolshevik revolution is basically nationalistic. Russia needs to be rooted in its own heritage; otherwise it is on the wrong path. Later on Florovsky will discover that the heritage of Hellenic Orthodoxy is the true heritage of Russia. Berdyaev as a philosopher could not understand this nationalistic argument. For Berdyaev philosophy was not a national discipline. It could have national flavors, but it is essentially ecumenical and international. In fact, one could argue that the in *The Russian Idea*, Berdyaev argued that Russian messianic nationalist ideas, from the Third Rome to the Third International, were actually aberrations, errors against true philosophy and existentialist Christianity in which Berdyaev believed in. According to Berdyaev, the mistake of Russia was the obsession with great, imperialist, internationalist, messianic ideas. We would say today, Russia would have been better off building a civic society instead of an imperial program.

Thus in 1948, after the interlude of World War II, Father Florovsky arrived to New York with a dream in mind. This dream was, on the one hand, an example of Russian nationalism exemplified by old sentiments dating back to the times of Ivan III, right after the liberation from the Mongol Yoke. These sentiments pre-

4 "The teaching of Professor and Archpriest S.N. Bulgakov – which, by its peculiar and arbitrary (Sophian) interpretation, often distorts the dogmas of the Orthodox faith, which in some of its points directly repeats false teachings already condemned by conciliar decisions of the Church..." Moscow Patriarchate. 1935. *Decision No. 93*. Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. 1935. *Decision of the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad of the 17/30 October 1935 concerning the new teaching of Archpriest Sergei Bulgakov on Sophia, the Wisdom of God*.

96 | 5 The allusion here is the popular book by Richard Pipes (Pipes 1995).

sented Russia as the Third Rome, the heir of Byzantium. Florovsky's dream made a close fit with the US foreign and domestic policy during the Cold War, which wanted to see a Christian Russia in place of the atheist Soviet Union, and wanted to see Russian-Americans loyal to that anti-Communist idea. It should not be forgotten that Florovsky arrived to New York only a year after the annunciation of the Truman Doctrine, and after being rejected by the liberal wing of the Parisian émigré community. That dream of the Russian Christian Renaissance, which interestingly enough came true in the post-communist Russia, was not only to redefine the Orthodox Church, but also to redefine how Russians see and define themselves in relationships to the West.⁶ This dream also helped define the Orthodox Community in the United States. Florovsky's conflicts with the older generation of émigré leaders, such as Berdiayev and Bulgakov, were not personal in nature, even though some harsh words had been exchanged between the large egos (Berdyayev 1937). Florovsky believed that what were at stake in these debates of the Russian émigré community were the future of the Orthodox Church and the future of Russia after communism. Berdyayev and Bulgakov were men from the past, people still wage battles which they inherited from the Imperial Russia. All those battles between the liberals and conservatives in and around the Church are now, that is after the Bolshevik Revolution, irrelevant. Florovsky was probably the first in the émigré community to start looking toward the future, trying to determine what went wrong in Russia that led to the victory of the Bolsheviks and what will become Russian national ideology once the Bolsheviks are gone. With the help of his many disciples, Florovsky won this battle for Russian Orthodox identity, both in the West and eventually in Russia.

Florovsky was aware that he represented a new generation of thinkers, the next generation after the Russian Religious Revival of the early 1900s. Florovsky writes, Bulgakov as well as Berdyayev "belonged to the generation responsible for the so-called religious renaissance (of the early twentieth century). I was a youngster when it was going on... They could never forget this renaissance, for them it was basic and decisive." (Blane 1993, 61) This was very true. Members of the Russian Religious Renaissance were all on the left of the political spectrum. Before World War I, they grew up and fought the conservative hierarchy and the ideology of the Imperial Church, as exemplified by the work of the conservative chief procurator of the Holy Synod, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, who was forced

6 Florovsky's programmatic statement was delivered at a conference of Russian Orthodox Clubs in Philadelphia in September of 1949, just a year after his arrival. Two main points were, first, the claim that Orthodoxy is not a national, but an international, ecumenical, a catholic Church. (In the original Greek, the word catholic means, for all). Secondly, he predicted that America might become the only country where freedom of religion is preserved, since, "it is quite possible that this freedom will be lost on the whole European continent in the next generation." (Blane 1993, 93).

finally out of politics in the changed atmosphere after the Russian Democratic Revolution in 1905. For Berdyaev, Bulgakov, and others who constituted the Russian Religious Renaissance, this short Russian liberal summer, from 1905 to 1917, was the culmination of their life's work. Florovsky was a man who matured as an intellectual only after the Bolshevik Revolution, in particular in exile. This change of generations was not only characteristic of Russia. Similar change happened in Germany, where the 19th century tradition of liberal theology was replaced, after the appearance of Karl Barth, with a much more conservative dialectical and neo-orthodox theology. There is a reason why people of the time called World War I, the Great War. The war and revolution changed everything.

The strength and the ultimate success of Florovsky's vision lies in his understanding of the relations between Russia and the West.⁷ Unlike Berdyaev or Bulgakov, Florovsky was primarily a historian, and I would argue, a historian who, long before Edward Said's analysis of the historical development of Western Orientalism, developed his own critique of Western Orientalism. Florovsky believed that he had discovered the ways in which the West had "stolen" the mantle of Roman heritage from Russia. This had happened with the malicious invention of the term Byzantine for the ancient Greek and Roman heritage by which the West ensures its own direct line to Greco-Roman antiquity and ultimately to the sources of Christianity. This is very true; Byzantium never really existed; Byzantines always saw themselves as Romans. It was the German Renaissance scholar, Hieronymus Wolf (1516–1580), who invented the word Byzantine. Furthermore, with the help of many Russians, who much like Berdyaev or Bulgakov, embraced one or the other kind of the Western style philosophy, that theft of cultural property has been perpetuated to this day.⁸ Thus for Florovsky, the Renaissance is the crucial period, because it was during the Western Renaissance and, by mean of the Moscow Baroque, its importation into Russia that the Russians were convinced to forget their relations with Constantinople (Florovsky 1974b, 189).

These ideas of Florovsky were not just recycling of the old ideas of the nineteenth century narodniks or the twentieth century Eurasians, who were numerous among the Russian émigrés. The Eurasians, such as Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Dimi-

7 By ultimate success of Florovsky's vision I have in mind the fact that the post-communist Russia Orthodox Church has been revived largely by his vision and by the work of his followers. The goal of this article and other coming in this series is to trace the influence of Russian émigré communities on the revival of Orthodox Church in the post-communist Russia.

8 The words "stolen and theft" are mine. Florovsky was much more polite at least in his writings. He emphasized that the past is always an interpretation, a reconstruction, and that such a reconstruction can only be achieved through a certain interpretative framework. "True inquiry is prejudiced from the very start." Here Florovsky quotes Marc Bloch in support of this thesis, "every historic research presupposed that the inquiry has a direction at the very first step." It was in the work of Foucault and Said that his "direction" was clearly defined (Florovsky 1974a, 36–37).

tri Mirsky, believed that Russia is not and never has been part of the West. Thus Russia needed to develop its own Asian identity. In his comments on Eurasians, Florovsky said that they “raise the right questions, but offer wrong answers.”⁹ This was a very sophisticated analysis of the anti-western discourse in Russia. In other words, if you are opposed to something, that something that you oppose still defines who you are. Florovsky clearly understood the master-slave dialectics of Hegel. A slave can be held in bondage by the forced obedience as well as by the uncontrollable hatred of the master. Similarly, the Eurasians were still defined by the West, because of their uncontrolled anger towards the West and thereby they defined Russia again in Western terms.

In contrast to the Eurasians, who saw the future of Russia in Tibet, China, Florovsky called for a “return to Hellenism.” This is a little understood aspect of Florovsky’s thought. Often he is credited with the call to “return to fathers (patristic revival)”, but this is just a partial understanding of the radical nature of Florovsky’s main idea (Florovsky 1961, 165–176). What Florovsky wanted was not to create a new identity for Russia, like the Eurasians. Russia and the Orthodox Church already have a Roman (Hellenic) identity, which had been stolen from it by the West through a process that began with the Renaissance and continued to this day. John Romanides, Florovsky’s student, put it together rudely but very succinctly: the story of the West and Russia is not a story of continued rivalry between the Latin West and the Hellenic East. There is no West, says Romanides. The conflict is between the Romans and their heirs, the Orthodox nations, and the Franks and other barbarians (Romanides 1981). This is the summary of Florovsky’s ideas by Romanides, who defined the conflict practically in racial terms. Florovsky put it this way, “the Eastern Church is in an unparalleled position... Her voice is not merely voice of the Christian East, but a voice of Christianity antiquity.”

Florovsky was clearly ahead of his time with regard to the issues of Orientalism, Byzantine history and its relations to Russia, because he saw how the West appropriated for itself this ownership of antiquity, including the Christian antiquity. He saw the process that began with Gibbon which involved the two steps move. First step was the condemnation of the Orthodox and, by extension, Russian tradition of Late Antiquity. This was done by Gibbon, Voltaire and many other liberal thinkers of the Enlightenment. In his *Ways of Russian Theology* he documented how those ideas of the Enlightenment advocated by Gibbon (1735–1794) came to Russia. Once this connection between Russia and Hellenic thought is severed comes the second step. That was the idea that developed during the Renaissance, but flourished in the era of the Grand Tours and into the Romantic (Orientalizing) period, which defined the West as the product of the revival of the Greek Classical tradition.

9 Florovsky on Eurasianism, where does it come from?

By this two step approach Russia was severed from the Classical (Hellenic) tradition and relegated to the margins of Europe. That is why Florovsky advocated the neo-patristic approach and called for the return to Church Fathers. The Church Fathers, who were all steeped not only in the Christian religion but also were well versed in the Hellenic philosophical tradition, could and would bring Russia back to its roots. He believed in Greek Fathers and Late Roman Empire long before it became fashionable to argue for a reconsideration of Late Antiquity. In the 1970s, Peter Brown and other members of the Late Antiquity movement rebelled against the prevailing Gibbon's assessment of Eastern Roman Empire as a society in perpetual decline, a state that was in the process of dying out for over thousand years, was not accurate (Brown 1971).

Berdyaev was absolutely correct to assume that Florovsky, while putting on his priestly cassock, also became a political conservative. This political conservatism was not anti-Western, as Berdyaev believed. Florovsky was not opposed to Western ideas per se, but he was opposed to the false claims that the West introduced philosophy to Russia. He clearly understood that these Western ideas, while praiseworthy in and of itself, contained a Trojan horse, and that was the idea that the Roman tradition of Late Antiquity, which was the intellectual foundation of the Orthodox Church, was a way of thinking that represented an intellectual decline and that was pejoratively called Byzantine.

Florovsky also understood the second step in the process by which the West appropriated or "stole" the Hellenic Late Antiquity from the Orthodox. The first step was the labeling of the era of Church Fathers as an era of decline. The second step was the idea that the flowering of the ancient Hellenic culture, after the decline of the Dark Ages, was fully restored only through the Western Renaissance and the Classicism of the Enlightenment. In other words, the Ariadne's thread, which begins with the classical Hellenic schools, peripatetic, the skeptic, the stoic, was taken away from Plotinus, Gregory of Nazianz, the Cappadocian Fathers, and moved to the West, to the Platonic Academy of Florence, and the English Public Schools with their classical curriculum. This is how Florovsky understood the Grand Tour of the English aristocracy, as an attempt to take away the Hellenic heritage away from Russia, where it naturally belongs, and to appropriate it for England and for the West in general. Florovsky saw the underside of the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment that has not been noticed up until recently. As the crusaders plundered Constantinople in 1204 and took its relics to the West, in order to claim the mantle of apostolicity and antiquity, so have the thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Gibbon, first degraded the continuity of the Hellenic heritage and appropriated it for the West. This was for Florovsky an obvious historical spoliation, the intentional hiding of historical evidence for the benefit of Western

superiority. One has to wait till the appearance of Foucault and Said to encounter such a penetrating critique of the Enlightenment and the Western tradition.

It might seem at the first glance that Florovsky's understanding of what constituted the genuine Orthodox tradition was much more anti-Western than what was considered the real Orthodoxy by Bulgakov or Berdyaev. After all, Bulgakov was working within the tradition of German Idealism and Berdyaev is often called Russian existentialist. But, the West seems to have preferred Florovsky's definition of Russian Orthodoxy even though Florovsky was calling for expulsion of the Western influence from Russian Theology and a return to its Hellenic roots. Berdyaev had trouble understanding this, since he saw himself as a guardian of progressive Western ideas in Russia and an opponent of religious conservatism and obscurantism. Berdyaev believed that when Florovsky started wearing his priestly cassock, he simultaneously abandoned the progressive tradition in Russia. Berdyaev could not understand why the West would prefer Florovsky's more conservative vision over his own more liberal vision for Russia. There is a good evidence that such preference in favor of Florovsky and his more conservative vision already existed in Europe, and it was only enhanced once Florovsky crossed the Atlantic.

There are several reasons for this Western preference for the conservative self-definition of Russian Orthodoxy. Most importantly, after World War I, the West and Protestant theology in particular were in the middle of the neo-orthodox revival, symbolized by the figure of Karl Barth. Neo-orthodox movement was rejecting the liberal theology of the 19th century, to which Berdyaev also belonged. In addition, in the Anglo-American world the philosophical speculations along the lines of Continental Philosophy were never very welcomed, especially not among the ecclesiastical circles. Florovsky, always exceptionally sharp-eyed, noticed that during the Anglo-Russian meetings, Russian religious intellectuals often "ignored completely the whole Biblical aspect, which was so important to the Anglicans." (Blane 1993, 64) Furthermore, the neo-orthodox theology became tremendously ubiquitous in the West after World War II, when Karl Barth, for example, emerged as a rare and lonely German theologian who bravely stood up to the Nazis. It should also be mentioned that immediately after World War II, in other words, at the beginning of the Cold War, the West was not in the mood for the liberal criticism of religion. Thus the Cold War years, especially in America, reinterpreted the neo-orthodox theology as a religious revival and a shield against godless atheism.¹⁰ In short, in the 1940s and 50s the West, in particular the United States, was a fairly conservative place.

10 Karl Barth, the founder of Neo-Orthodox movement explicitly criticized American Cold War simplification of his teachings (see: McCormack 1995, 24–25).

As a dean of St Vladimir Seminary (1948–1955), Florovsky developed his program of neo-patristic synthesis, summed up by the slogan, “return to the fathers.” Florovsky believed that Hellenization of Christianity, accomplished in Late Antiquity by Greek Fathers of the Church, was a necessary and a positive thing. Simply put, Church Fathers preserved the best of Hellenistic philosophical tradition and the best of the revealed traditions of Judaism, namely the teaching of Jesus (according to Florovsky). For Florovsky this issue of Athens vs. Jerusalem was a simple issue. He believed in the truth of Christianity, which rested on Jesus and his Church, and both the teachings of the founder and of the Church were expressed in Greek. There was no contradiction there. Even the Jewish elements of the Christian tradition were mediated through the Greek language. This is the Hellenic tradition that Constantinople handed over to Russia at the time of her conversion. That tradition was gradually abandoned first during the times of the Moscow Baroque (which could also be called the Russian Renaissance) and finally jettisoned out of intellectual circles after Peter the Great. Florovsky then believed that Russia does not need a Renaissance to return to the Hellenic philosophy, Russia already had that tradition in its possession and it abandoned it by mimicking the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The West needed to re-discover Plato during the Renaissance, but Russia already had available the disciples of Plato in Gregory of Nazianz, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil the Great and therein lies the tragedy of Russian history. This is very different from Berdayev’s belief that the messianic idea in politics was the curse of Russia from the Third Rome of Ivan III to the Third International of Lenin and Stalin. Florovsky did not mind the Russian messianic tradition. Russia’s tragedy was that it abandoned its own Hellenic tradition in order to find that same rationalistic and idealistic tradition in the West. Florovsky’s question was very poignant, why travel to Athens by ways of Berlin and German Idealistic philosophy? Why not go through Constantinople instead?

It was not just the clarity of thought that characterized Florovsky that made him so popular in the Orthodox World. It was the way in which he restored dignity to the Orthodox tradition. He answered the insulting scrutiny posed by many Westerners when observing the Christian East, namely that Russia and Eastern Europe was the “wild East” because those regions had never gone through the periods of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (Wolff 1994, 25). Florovsky’s answer was that Russia did not need to get out of the Dark Ages, since it never was in the Dark Ages of medieval Europe. It was, up until the times of Moscow Baroque and Petrine Enlightenment, firmly in the fold of Hellenic Roman civilization. It was this simple statement of equality with the West that attracted the humiliated post-communist societies to Florovsky.

102 | After the Marxist experiment, when Russia adopted what was considered at the time one of the most progressive Western traditions and then failed as a

state, many Russians felt disoriented, in particular by the stiffness of the prejudice from the West toward Russia. In vain Michael Gorbachev pleaded for the idea of “Common European Home.” Russia was the other when it was Marxist; Russia remained the Orient even after the fall of Communism. It is not difficult to see why the Florovsky’s argument about Russia proud of its own Byzantine tradition, equal to the West, was so appealing to many after the fall of Communism. No matter how hard Russia tried to adopt the current progressive philosophy of the time, be it the Enlightenment philosophy under Peter and Catherine the Great, or Marxist philosophy under Lenin and Stalin, it always fails in Western eyes. Russia failed when it implemented Western Marxism; Russia failed again when it implements the free market reforms under the instructions from Western economists. In all of these cases, the blame is never assigned to the unsound Western ideas, but to the Russian flawed implementation. In the eyes of ordinary Russians this is a clear example of Western prejudices, if not outright racism. Racial inferiority is, after all, intrinsic; it cannot be superseded by learning and Russia seemed to have learnt nothing since the time of Peter the Great. Florovsky, interestingly enough did not blame the West for these racist attitudes that often permeate Western scholarly and popular views of Russia. He just pointed out that it was Russian themselves who fell into this trap, by rejecting their own Hellenic heritage and adopting the inferior Western version of the Renaissance.

Needless to say, Florovsky’s ideas are nationalistic, and that is one of the reasons why they are very popular in the post-communist Russia today. This kind of Russian patriotism is something that obviously the Russian people desire after the humiliating experience of the post-communist transition. However, this Russian nationalism was also the reason why Florovsky was eventually ousted from his position of the dean of St Vladimir Seminary at Morningside Heights. It is commonly asserted that Florovsky was ousted from St Vladimir Theological Seminary because he was too strict as a professor. Namely, Florovsky wanted to make Russians into Classical Hellenes. His insistence that all seminary students take courses in ancient Greek language became the stuff of anecdotes (Blane 1993, 95). Most seminary student at that time came from uneducated working families. They were often the first in their family to enroll in a degree granting college. It is not hard to imagine how these students reacted to the requirement to take two years of classical Greek. Ultimately, however, it was not the resentment toward the strict curriculum that brought Florovsky down from the position of the dean and founder of the seminary. He came into conflict with Reinhold Niebuhr, the foremost protestant theologian of 1950s and 60s and the creator of the influential political organization Americans for Democratic Action. This conflict was not direct or personal, but it was a conflict of two visions for the Orthodox Church in America and how would the Russian community fit into the assimilation process affecting all the im-

migrant communities. The conflict occurred within the confines of the ecumenical movement (World Council of Churches) where both men participated actively, but where Niebuhr was gaining ever stronger influence.

From the very beginning of his stay at Morningside Heights, Florovsky participated in the ecumenical movement where his best friend on the Protestant side was Karl Barth. After the war Barth enjoyed unequalled prestige among the German Protestants for his principled stand during the Nazi dictatorship and his active participation in the small but significant Confessing Church in Germany. Florovsky held a similar position with regard to Communism in Russia, a man of integrity who stood up for intellectual freedoms and against the oppressive regimes. The two men were sitting together for years on the *Faith and Order Commission* of the ecumenical movement. Both Karl Barth and Georges Florovsky were interested in the doctrinal theological issues and believed that true Christian unity only could be achieved through unity of what is believed in, the unity of faith. However, these were the concerns that were important in Europe. Florovsky and Barth fought battles that started before World War II. The reality in America changed considerably in the mid 1950s at the height of McCarthyism. Reinhold Niebuhr was trying to organize a broad based progressive political and religious coalition. That coalition was also to include various immigrant churches. The ideological basis of this coalition was not going to be the unity of faith, and the unity of liberal social action. Niebuhr was a conservative democrat, espoused progressive policies, but took a firm anti-communist line in the Cold War struggles. Niebuhr famously criticized Karl Barth for being “soft on communism” (Gorringe 1999, 220–221). Karl Barth, in turn believed that Niebuhr does not understand theology (Blane 1993, 107).

Niebuhr, since his experience of a pastor in Detroit during World War I, was a firm believer in the assimilation of German Protestants into the American mainstream. Now after World War II when he became the pre-eminent Protestant theologian in the country, he focused on the social gospel. As a member of the Justice Commission of the World Council of Churches, he had no patience for theological niceties of Florovsky or Barth. He even disliked the philosophical existentialism of Paul Tillich, his colleague at Union Theological Seminary, whom he brought from Nazi Germany to New York. For Niebuhr, sin was not an abstract theological issue, but a practical social issue. He saw the American capitalist self-centeredness as a sin and a root of social evil. The social problems were theological problems and they were to be solved by practical, decisive, political, and ultimately religious action. In a way, Niebuhr was a typical Puritan who wanted to create a society of hard working Americans, of all races and ethnicities, as an example of the shining city on the hill. According to Niebuhr, the theological differences were irrelevant; building of the Kingdom of God in America was everything. It was

important that all American Christians can agree to improve their societies and thus combat sin in very practical terms. Philosophically oriented Barth, Tillich, and Florovsky thought this was another American quick fix founded on the lack of real understanding of theology. Niebuhr saw their resistance as resistance to the will of God.

Father Florovsky was not opposed to social issues and Christian action on social issues. He was not anti-society in a way Ayn Rand was. However, for him the idea of the Orthodox Church as the bearer of the Hellenic spirit was a non-negotiable category. He found the assimilation of various American churches into a fuzzy communion of mainstream denominations, based on social gospel and the theology of the Serenity Prayer, repugnant.¹¹ Russian Orthodox community was being asked to accept the latest fad in the Western theological thinking, the social gospel. This was the Russian problem since the Moscow Baroque. Florovsky believed that the Orthodox Church was the true Church, universal in its mission and that Russian must be aware of this fact and proud of its universal mission. The agreement toward Church unity must be on the basis of theological unity. In other words, the Protestant Churches should return to the Orthodox Catholic Church of the Hellenic Fathers and Ecumenical Councils. This was in clear opposition with the American practice of assimilation, where various religious groups are incorporated into the American mainstream, by accepting the main philosophical tenets of American ideology, while retaining the ethnic flavoring. In short, Florovsky wanted a Hellenic Universal Church that would incorporate occasional American convert, but whose primary focus would be to restore Russian and by extension Orthodox dignity in the world. Niebuhr wanted the immigrant churches to become American, with an occasional Russian accented sermon and the intermittent shouting of “opa” as a sign of the ethnic flavor. There was to be no compromise between these two positions. Florovsky clearly lost and, after being removed from the deanship at St Vladimir, he found no place at Union Theological Seminary, where Niebuhr dominated. He moved, first to the Greek Theological Seminary in Boston and then in 1956 to Harvard Divinity School. Tillich also followed suit, left Union Theological Seminary and settled at Harvard.

Thus, with Florovsky leaving St Vladimir and Morningside Heights, ended a very important phase in the trajectory of Russian Diaspora. Florovsky’s students, such as John Meyendorff and Alexander Schmemmann, continued to pursue his call for the return to Hellenistic Christianity of Late Ancient Church Father. But nei-

¹¹ The Serenity Prayer is the common name for an originally untitled prayer by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971). It has been adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs. The best-known form is: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, The courage to change the things I can, And wisdom to know the difference.”

ther Meyendorff nor Schmemmann were blind followers of Florovsky. In the same way that Florovsky led the Russian émigré community during the Cold War period in 1950s, Meyendorff and Schmemmann led the St Vladimir Seminary through the turbulent era of 1960s and 70s. The seminary moved out of Morningside Heights, severed its links with Union Theological Seminary, and established itself in the New York suburb of Crestwood. The move to the suburbs was very symbolic. The seminary became much more middle class American. More about the contribution of Meyendorff and Schmemmann to the trajectories of Russian émigré community is to come, but here I can also say that these two men made the Russian Orthodox community in the United States more American. Florovsky did not understand that. Much like Berdyaev and Bulgakov, he was more interested in Russia than in America.

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