

UNIT 2C TRADITION

59: ORTHODOX TEACHERS AND SAINTS OF THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

Introduction - Breaking the Bonds

After the failure of the Council of Florence and the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 the Christian east began to slide into a period of prolonged decline. Bemused by the Reformation which had racked the West yet lacking the theological and spiritual vigour which might have insulated the Church from corrosive Western influences, Orthodoxy began to imitate western manners and culture. Most notoriously, the Ecumenical Patriarch, Cyril Lukaris, (1572-1638), in his struggle against the growing dominance of Rome, resorted to Protestant Calvinism and his teaching was condemned by no less than six local councils between 1638 and 1691. In an attempt to fight fire with fire and as a direct response to the career of Lukaris, two Confessions of Orthodox faith were issued by Peter Mogila, Metropolitan of Kiev (1633-1647) and Dositheus, Patriarch of Jerusalem (1669-1707), both Confessions being consciously adapted from Roman Catholic sources and both works being part of a wider disastrous program of westernisation.

The 18th century, therefore, saw Orthodoxy in the East increasingly incarcerated within a western mindset which debilitated its spiritual life. The hierarchy in Russia not only looked to Rome as the model for efficient church administration, (urged on by Peter Mogila), but in the person of Patriarch Nikhon (1605-1681) it looked also to contentious models for liturgical reform. In 1652 to 1653 this policy triggered in Russia a tragic split between those who would not submit to the new ritual, the so-called Old Believers, and the reformers, a schism which has not been properly healed to this day. At the beginning of the 18th century, Tsar Peter the Great, himself enamoured by Protestant ecclesiastical polity, abolished the Patriarchate and submitted synodical life of the Russian Church to State control. In Asia Minor,

the Ottoman Yoke severely constrained Church life and in areas controlled by the Venetian empire, Catholicism began to subvert Orthodoxy from within; at least until the middle of the 18th century.

The spiritual decline of Orthodoxy in the East might have continued to its hypothetical irretrievable nadir if it had not been for the monastic life, and in particular that which was sustained by the Holy Mountain, Mount Athos. Here it was, in this bastion of the evangelical Christian life, that godly and scholarly men were raised up to rescue the Church from its slumber, torpitude and neglect. Two men in particular are key to this renewal, St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite (1748-1809) and St. Paissey Velichkovsky (1722-1794) - although there were many others who worked with them and beyond them to renew the life of the Church in the 18th and 19th centuries. Essentially their work contributed to the beginning of the modern neo-patristic movement which sought to return Orthodoxy to its ancient roots and practice in the Scriptures, Holy Tradition and the teaching of the Fathers. They constituted the living link between the hesychasm of the Palamite 14th century and the starets or spiritual elders of the 19th century. Without their witness it is doubtful whether there would have been a Russian missionary movement in the 19th century or a revival in Greek Orthodoxy during and beyond the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This is why it is important that we consider the life and work of these great monastic pioneers in the 18th and 19th centuries.

St Nicodemus the Hagiorite (1749 - 1809)

St Nicodemus was born in 1749 on the island of Naxos. As a young man he showed exceptional faith, perception and intellectual ability. His first teacher was the wise and prudent Archimandrite Chrysanthos, the brother in fact of the New Martyr and Apostle St Kosmos Aitolos (of whom we shall speak later). After spending some time completing his education in Smyrna, Nicodemus returned to Naxos where he served as the secretary and assistant to the Metropolitan. It was at this time that he met and associated with the priest-monks Gregory and Niphon and it was this contact

that was to prove so influential in his subsequent ministry. Fathers Gregory and Niphon were members of the Kollyvades movement, an Athonite group that resisted the growing practice of serving memorials for the departed on Sunday rather than Saturday as being the appointed day. The Kollyvades Fathers, perhaps more significantly in retrospect, stood for the frequent reception of Holy Communion, an observance of the canons of the Church and an intense spiritual life. Most of its leaders were highly educated men and their stance, although initially resisted, even by many on Mount Athos, was eventually endorsed by the Ecumenical Patriarch Theodosius II, Sophronios Patriarch of Jerusalem (both in 1772) and the martyr Patriarch Gregory V (1819). Essentially the movement was reacting against the infiltration of Western Enlightenment principles into Orthodox faith and culture. In this regard and positively it represented a '*back to the Fathers*' renewal in Orthodoxy that was to endure well into the 20th century and beyond.

St Macarios of Corinth (1731 - 1805) and the Philokalia

Perhaps the greatest of the original Kollyvades pioneers was St Macarios of Corinth, who as Archbishop of that city was driven out by the Turks after the Russian-Turkish War of 1768. St Macarios received permission from the Ecumenical Patriarch to become a travelling bishop, and he met eventually St Nicodemus with whom he struck up a great spiritual friendship. Both men ended up on the Holy Mountain and dedicated themselves to prayer and the publication or theological and liturgical texts. Most famously they collaborated on the Philokalia, a massive collection of primarily ascetical texts from the Fathers published in Venice in 1782. This publication has had an incalculable effect for good in the spiritual life of the Orthodox Church ever since for it made accessible to subsequent generations as a compendium of the Christian life as lived by the saints in every age. It must be said, however, that its impact at the time on the Greek speaking world was limited and it was not until the second half of 20th century that Greek theology was influenced by its precepts. It was in the Slav world, however, that the Philokalia initially came into its own. A second slightly different collection was brought

together by our other notable saint here, St. Paissy Velichkovsky, a contemporary of St Nicodemus, and this was published in Moscow in 1793. It is sad perhaps that having learned of St. Paissy, St Nicodemus set out from Athos to meet him but was prevented by a storm.

The continuing power and relevance of the Philokalia can be linked to the practice of the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”) in a highly personal manner:

The primordial condition and absolute necessity is to know oneself. To gain this knowledge the beginner must learn to be alive to the many-sided possibilities of the ego; and he [or she] must eliminate all obstacles, personal as well as external, to acquire the best conditions for success. Silence and quiet are indispensable for concentration. Practice of the Jesus Prayer is the traditional fulfilment of the injunction of the Apostle Paul to ‘pray always’ [or ‘pray constantly;’¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:17]; it has nothing to do with mysticism which is the heritage of pagan ancestry.¹

The reawakening required in the 18th century is still necessary today:

Whenever human consciousness begins to be alive to the questions Who am I? Whence do I come? Whither do I go? Then there arises the possibility of taking and following the narrow, long, blessed path to wisdom. By and by circumstances show that our individual capacities are quite insufficient, and Supreme Help is vitally needed.²

As the translators note, in “the interaction in everything of grace and freedom,” there is “the perception of the power of God’s Providence overall and one’s own final and irrevocable surrender into God’s hand.” This is an ongoing process, because “as [our] personal experiences of spiritual life accumulate, indications

¹ *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, translated by E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 5.

² *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, p. 7.

derived from experience, which had been noted down by the holy fathers, gradually become more clear and intelligible to [us].”³

St Kosmas the Aetolian (1714-1779)

Before leaving the Greek Church and the Kollyvades we should mention that the brother of St Nicodemus's first teacher, the new martyr and apostle St Kosmas the Aetolian (1714-1779). The impoverished ill-educated character of Orthodox Christianity under the Ottomans has perhaps been overstated, but nonetheless it is true that after centuries of being classed as second-class citizens in their own land by their Turkish overlords the Greek people had been severely weakened in their faith by constant and often hostile attrition. One man was to make a significant contribution for good in this depressing situation, a man whom Metropolitan Kallistos has called the ‘John Wesley’ of the Orthodox Church, St Kosmas the Aetolian.⁴ The saint made it his business to travel all over Greece from village to village preaching the gospel, establishing schools, building churches and encouraging the faithful. In each village to which he went he would set up a simple cross in the square and crowds of ordinary folk would gather to hear what it meant to be a Christian. His contribution to the regeneration of the Greek Church was incalculable. Eventually of course the Turks were alerted to the significance of his ministry, and he was executed. If St Nicodemus was the intellectual and monastic pioneer of Orthodoxy in the closing period of the Ottoman Empire, St Kosmas was its Apostle.

St. Paissy Velichkovsky (1722 - 1794)

St. Paissy was Ukrainian by birth but fled Kiev so repelled had he become by the secular and soulless faith that was taught there by the Theological Academy. Like Nicodemus who was his contemporary he became a monk on Mount Athos and he

³ *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, p. 14.

⁴ *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, Revised Ed., 1993), p. 101.

adopted much the same programme of renewal as had the Kollyvades before him. He eventually moved to Romania in 1763 and became abbot of the monastery of Niamets. He made this a great spiritual centre attracting more than 500 brethren who joined him in the task of prayer, work and a translation of the sayings of the ascetic early Fathers which he assembled into the Slavonic edition of the Philokalia. It was through his labours and piety that authentic Orthodox spirituality was able to regenerate the Russian Church transforming its hitherto somewhat moribund state. In his approach he managed to combine the radical and simple discipleship of the Russian ‘non-possessor’ tradition as represented by St Nilus of Sora with the liturgical and social justice tradition of the Josephites. After his death in the 19th century monasticism flourished in the Russian Empire and this became the golden age of Russian missions. We shall consider these great missionary saints of the Russian Church in Year 3, Lecture 89. In this final section we need to consider the impact of the Philokalia, spiritual eldership and the Jesus Prayer on the Russian Church in the 19th century.

The Russian Renaissance

Arguably the first and greatest pioneer of eldership and a type of Athonite ascesis and prayer in 19th-century Russian was the great **St Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833)**. Much has been written of this saint but for our purpose we need simply to note the classical character of his vocation to retreat into the ‘desert’ to commune with God, his transformation by the Holy Spirit in the forests of Sarov and his return to the world in the manner of St Anthony, wherewithal he transformed the lives of many, and still does. He was very strict with himself in the manner of his ascesis but with his spiritual children he was compassionate and gentle without being either sentimental or indulgent. The classic account of his meeting with his spiritual son, Nicholas Motovilov one winter’s day in the forest of Sarov (<http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/wonderful.aspx>) shows how enduring the experience of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit and the Uncreated Light of God has been from the Transfiguration itself in the New Testament to the saints

of the modern era.⁵ Note in the account how transfiguration is described as applying to the body as much as the mind or the soul. Neither man is 'out of his mind' in this event, rather each can speak coherently of his own experience of being in the Holy Spirit.

After St Seraphim's death this tradition was sustained for nearly 100 years by the fathers at the hermitage of Optina (1829-1923). Its most famous elders were **Leonid (1768-1841), Macarius (1788-1860) and Ambrose (1812-1891)**. All these fathers stood as St Seraphim had in the tradition of St. Paissy but each had its own distinctive character and charism. The Optina fathers profoundly influenced the course of Russian literature in the 19th century and most notably impacted on such authors as Gogol and Dostoyevsky. The Philokalia continued to be the mainstay and inspiration for Orthodox praxis and this even more when St. Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894) translated the work, not into Slavonic but into Russian.

The Russian Renaissance was not limited to the monastic centres or teachers. Those who were led by the same Light were often to be found amongst married clergy and the laity (as is most proper). Perhaps **St. John of Kronstadt (1829-1908)** is the most famous example in the first category. A tireless worker for Christ, a man of intense personal prayer and liturgical devotion and a wonderworker of extraordinary power and insight, St John represents the best of what ministry can be when lived out in the fullness of the faith. The people themselves recognised this and flocked to him in their thousands. Interestingly, in the spirit of the early Church and the Kollyvades before him he also stressed the importance of the frequent reception of Holy Communion. Would that the voices of these men be heard in our own generation, where such lessons still need to be learnt!

Consider, for example, St John's explanation of how to receive God's grace:

⁵ See <http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/wonderful.aspx>.

All you who draw near to serve God in prayer, learn to be like Him, meek, humble, and true of heart.... The Lord seeks in us that which is like and akin to Himself, on to which His grace may be grafted. Remember that not a single word is lost during prayer, if you say it from your heart; God hears each word, and weighs it in a balance.⁶

It is evident that St John believed all Orthodox Christians could attain this grafted grace from Christ and should be prepared to succeed in their quest to draw closer to God:

Brethren! Prepare yourselves for union with God. Give up earthly vanity. Apply yourselves to the great work of self-purification and self-improvement. Love to progress in faith and virtue, and not to progress in the things of this world. Even here on earth we prepare ourselves to see there in eternity the Maker of every visible and invisible creature, the Beauty of all.⁷

Moreover, St John's understanding of grace is realistic, not sentimental:

Sometimes grace carries us like children or guides and supports us as though by the hand. Then it is twice as easy for us to do works of virtue; whilst sometimes it leaves us alone to our weakness, in order that we should not become slothful, but should labour, and by our labour become worthy of the gift of grace. At such times we ought, as free beings, to spontaneously show our amendment and zeal to God. It would be foolish to murmur against God for depriving us of His grace; for when the Lord pleases He takes away His grace from us, fallen and unworthy creatures. At such times we must learn patience and bless the Lord: 'The Lord gave [His grace], and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1:21).⁸

⁶ *My Life in Christ: Extracts from the Diary of St John of Kronstadt*, translated by E. E. Goulaeff (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1994), pp. 85-86.

⁷ *My Life in Christ*, p. 523.

⁸ *My Life in Christ*, p. 544.

No doubt, St John was a great saint; and he “always particularly loved children, probably because of the fact that, although they were not sinless, the image of God was [often] more visible in them than in [many] adults;⁹ however, the greater saint who has not been recognised is possibly his wife Elizabeth:

After his marriage to Elizabeth Constantivna, he said to her, ‘There are many happy families, Lisa, enough without us; let us work for the unhappy ones. You and I will dedicate ourselves to the service of God.’ And he thereafter lived in virginity with his wife, as with a sister. She would later call him ‘Brother John.’ Initially, however, she was upset and complained. Eventually the local bishop heard of it and called the couple to him. Quoting the canons of the Church and the usual standard of the married clergy, he ordered Father John to give up his idea and dismissed them. Immediately, the bishop began to cough and could not stop. Being a spiritually sensitive man, he realized his action, although ‘normal,’ was displeasing to God. Sending someone after Father John, he rescinded his episcopal order. Immediately his cough ceased.¹⁰

We all live our lives to the best of our ability, under the sovereignty of God.

Amongst the laity in this period in Russia, **Alexis Khomiakov (1804-1860)** stands out as the most distinctive and influential theologian. The neo-patristic revival in the Church which had radiated outwards from Mount Athos since the 18th century had encouraged Orthodox Christians to stand back from the sterile conflicts and debates of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches in order to refine a doctrine of the Church that was dependent on neither but which, rather, was thoroughly based on the biblical and patristic model. Khomiakov realised that the Orthodox Church stood above such disputes and must never therefore be dragged into them. Indeed, he saw the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches as but two sides of one

⁹ St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, *A Companion Index for My Life in Christ by St John of Kronstadt* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1997), p. 13

¹⁰ St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, *A Companion Index for My Life in Christ by St John of Kronstadt*, p. 11.

coin since both traditions were based on similar heterodox assumptions that emerged in the West after the Schism. His position recruited many to his cause and these followers became known as the Slavophile circle. This movement had a significant impact on the development of subsequent Russian theology, particularly in the Revolutionary and early Soviet period.

Conclusion

It is truly remarkable how Orthodox Christianity managed to struggle free and break the bonds of its captivity after the 16th century when politically and socially it was so subject to alien control, active repression and occasionally, outright persecution. Subtler perhaps was the poisoning of its wells by alien modes of thought and practice which initially at least only monastic renunciation proved capable of purifying. Theologically Orthodoxy threw itself back on its own resources in God which proved to be (and have ever proven to be) Scriptures, the Fathers and the living Tradition of the Church in the Holy Spirit. Orthodox Christianity today continues to be formed and shaped by such spiritual resources. Doubtless many may have to learn such lessons anew, but with such bearers of the Spirit in full view it will be difficult now not to see the remedy. Getting people to take the remedy however is another matter entirely! As these fathers have taught us, the remedy is repentance and faithfulness.