The *Philosophia perennis* of Hellenistic Christianity: Theological and Ecumenical Implications of Fr. Georges V. Florovsky's View

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This article presents the features and meaning of the phrase „Christian Hellenism”, as it has been elaborated in the thinking of the Russian patrologist Georges V. Florovsky. He has based his thesis, namely that of the “radically Christianized” or “Churchified,” “New Hellenism” on three main points: 1) faith is always asserted in a “philosophical system”; 2) Semitic thinking is not radically opposed to Hellenism, because Judaism itself in Jesus's time was a Hellenised Judaism; 3) Greek philosophy was the fertile, even providential environment in which Christianity could formulate and express its own experience. The result was a philosophia perennis, „something eternal and absolute in the thinking” of the Church. As closure of the study we briefly reflect upon the actuality, and the possibilities and limitations which are implied today in the notion of “Christian Hellenism”. The implications of Florovsky's vision are thus assessed, both in what concerns the relationship between theology and culture, and in what concerns the ecumenical dialogue.

Keywords: *Christian Hellenism, Patristic Tradition, Church Mission, Georges V. Florovsky*

Preamble

Touching upon the appointment of John Meyendorff (1926-1992) as rector to the St. Vladimir Institute, Bradley Nassif wrote in the *Introduction* to a volume in his memory that, along with Georges Florovsky and Alexander Schmemmann, a triad has taken shape that could be named the *American Fathers*; he was thus referring directly to the three great Cappadocian fathers of the 4th century.¹ In fact, the three great Orthodox theologians were remarkable examples of the both tragic and extraordinary political, cultural and religious phenomenon which was the formation of the Russian

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¹ Bradley Nassif (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Theology. Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff*, Grand Rapids – Cambridge, WBE Publishing Company 1996, p. xvi.

diaspora in Western Europe and in the USA. (It is estimated that between 1920-1922, because of soviet pressure, formalized a decree of Lenin, one up to two million dissidents went into exile, everywhere in the world, and the most important centres of this diaspora were Sofia, Belgrade, Prague, Berlin, Paris or New York).²

In the particular context of Russian theology, but also in the general context of 20th century Orthodox theology, a major direction was the *neopatristic movement*, which was generally connected especially to the name of Fr. Florovsky (1893-1979).³ Indeed, at the first congress of Faculties for Orthodox Theology, which took place in Athens in 1936, Florovsky presented two programmatic papers. In the first one, entitled *Western Influences in Russian Theology*, a critical reference was made to the *double pseudo-morphosis* of Orthodoxy. Namely, heterodox influences were denounced – first of Roman-Catholic nature, later of Protestant origin – imposed upon Orthodoxy in general and upon Russian theology. In the second paper, *Patristic and Modern Theology*⁴, the Russian theologian and patrologist asserted the necessity of turning to the Fathers of the Church. This condition for the renewal of Orthodoxy was closely connected to assuming „Christian Hellenism” as an everlasting category of the Church.

The purpose of this article is to present, in the first part, the features and the meaning of the phrase “Christian Hellenism”⁵, as it has been deve-

² Ciprian Iulian Toroczka, *Teologia rusă din diaspora. Context istoric; principalii reprezentanți și originalitățile lor teologice*, Sibiu, Agnos 2005, pp. 83.

³ For more details on the work and life of this patrologist, historian, philosopher and professor for slavistic, see: Ciprian Iulian Toroczka, *Tradiția patristică în modernitate. Eczeziologia Părintelui Georges V. Florovsky (1893-1979) în contextul mișcării neopatristice contemporane*, 2nd Edition, Sibiu, Astra Museum/Andreiană 2012; Andrew Blane, *Georges Florovsky, Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman*, Crestwood - New York, SVSQ 1993; Chrysostomos of Etna, “Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky”, in: *Orthodox Tradition* 2 (1994), p. 28-29; Christoph Künel, *Totus Christus. Die Theologie Georges V. Florovskys*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1989; Yves-Noel Lelouvier, *Perspectives russes sur l'Eglise. Un theologien contemporain: Georges Florovsky*, Paris, Editions du Centurion 1968; George Williams, “Georges Vasilievich Florovsky: His American Career (1948-1965)”, in: *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 11 (1/1965), p. 7-107; Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014.

⁴ Hamilcar Alivisatos (ed.), *Procès-Verbaux du Premier Congrès de Théologie Orthodoxe*, Athens, Pyrsos 1939, p. 212-231 and p. 238-242.

⁵ On Christian Hellenism in Florovskian theology, see Y.-N. Lelouvier, *Perspectives russes*, p. 127-129; C. Künel, *Totus Christus*, p. 269-276; Aidan Nichols, *Light from the East. Authors and Themes in Orthodox Theology*, London, Sheed & Ward 1995, p. 135-136; P. L. Gavrilyuk, “Harnack’s Hellenized Christianity or Florovsky’s «Sacred Hellenism»: Questioning Two Metanarratives of Early Christian Engagement with Late Antique Culture”, in: *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54 (3-4/2010), p. 323-344; Matthew Baker, “«Theology reasons» - in History: Neopatristic Synthesis and the Renewal of Theological Rationality”, in:

loped in the Florovskian thinking, and in the second part, to briefly reflect upon both the actuality, and the possibilities and limitations that it implies.

The Revelation and the Scriptures

When analysing the relationship between Scripture, Tradition and Church, Fr. Florovsky took as a starting point the capacity of the human being to receive the divine Revelation: created with likeness to the Image of God, the Word Itself (Logos), the man is capable of receiving, perceiving and keeping the godly Word. The God of the Bible is not a *Deus absconditus*, but a *Deus revelatus*. Revelation is actually “the voice of God speaking to man”, is theophany, and the scripture is nothing else but the written record of this Revelation. The inspired feature of the Book means that God reveals Himself in human language, without diminishing through this, to any extent, the absolute character of the revelation.

The Word of God is therefore not diminished when it resonates in human language. On the contrary, human language is transformed or transfixed because God liked talking the language of the human being⁶. In effect, in the intimate connection between God and the human being, as “intimacy of the covenant, of choice and adoption”, one may hear not only the voice of God, Who comes to reveal Himself to the human being, but also the voice of the human being, who answers. “The Paradox of the revelations”, therefore, is the divine-human dialogue, the covenant of the two partners, “the sacrament of the true meeting between God and the human being”, or, more exactly, the descent of God so that the human being may be uplifted to Him.⁷

The written transposition of this Revelation, which is the Bible, has had several stages. Many periods of a unique holy history (*Heilsgeschichte*)

Θεολογία 81 (4/ 2010), p. 81–118; Brandon Gallaher, “«Waiting for the Barbarians»: Identity and Polemicism in the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky”, in: *Modern Theology* 27 (4/2011), p. 659–691; Ciprian Iulian Toroczkai, “Hellenism and Romanianism: a Comparative Look on the Thinking of Fathers Dumitru Stăniloae and Georges Florovsky”, in: *Revista Teologică* 23 (3/2013), p. 130–146; P. L. Gavriluk, “Florovsky’s Neopatristic Synthesis and the Future Ways of Orthodox Theology”, in: George E. Demacopoulos, Aristotle Papanikolaou (Eds.), *Orthodox constructions of the West*, New York, Fordham University Press 2013, p. 102–124; M. Baker, “Neopatristic Synthesis and Ecumenism: Towards the «Reintegration» of Christian Tradition”, in: Andrii Krawchuk, Thomas Bremer (Eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness: Values, Self-Reflection, Dialogue*, New York, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2014, p. 235–260; P. L. Gavriluk, *Georges Florovsky*, p. 5–6 and p. 201–219.

⁶ George Florovsky, “Revelation, Philosophy and Theology”, in: *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 3, Belmont, Nordland Publishing Company 1972–1989, p. 21–22. (*The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, 14 vol., are henceforth referred to with the abbreviation CW)

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 22. See also idem, “Revelation and Interpretation”, in: CW, vol. 1, p. 20–21.

which starts with the creation and will end once the new sky and the new earth are revealed, and the whole created existence is transformed in its totality. In these two moments there is a *dynamic tension* that the Scriptures have recorded. But even if this diversity and variety must not be ignored, one must say at the same time that the ultimate message of God was always the same. It is not by chance that a varied anthology of writings, written in various times by different authors, has come to be thought of as one book. *Ta biblia* is certainly a plural, but *Bible* is an obvious singular. The *Scriptures* do make up *one* Holy Scripture, one Holy Writing. There is a central theme and a main message that is emphasized along the whole history⁸. As surprising as this term may seem (story), Fr. Florovsky does not hesitate to use it, underlying that the Bible itself is this story, the history of God's relationship to his chosen people". The Revelation, he adds, is the history of the Covenant. The recorded revelation, the Holy Scripture, is, therefore, mostly history⁹.

The historical perspective upon Revelation and Scripture is defended by Fr. Florovsky by using the fundamental problematic of biblical exegesis, of theological hermeneutics. This can contain a double perspective: the Scripture regarded "from outside history" or as "history".

The first mode of interpretation, specific to the Alexandrine school, considered the Bible *a book of eternal and sacred images and symbols*. Without risking falsity, the allegorical method set aside somehow the human being, drawing upon itself the risk of altering the *realism of the Revelation* and of reducing history to mythology. But the Revelation is not a mere ensemble of divine words, but an ensemble of divine acts. The texture of the Scripture is a historical one, Fr. Florovsky shows us, adding that the fullness of the Spirit of the Scripture, its richness, may be kept only through an historical perspective as well.

Symbolism or scriptural *allegorism* belongs rather to a prophetic dimension, which implies history as well. The symbol, as sign directing towards the future, demonstrates that „Scripture has an historical *teleology*: everything strives toward an historical boundary-point, upward toward the historical *telos*." In Revelation, the destiny of man is discovered, and the Word of God does not ask him to deny himself, but to go forward towards communion with Him through a real rebirth and transformation which is called „deification" (*theosis*)¹⁰.

Consciously brief in his publication of 1931, „Revelation, Philosophy, Theology", G. Florovsky addresses again this reflection; he adds further de-

⁸ G. Florovsky, "Revelation and Interpretation", in: *CW*, vol. 1, p. 19.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

¹⁰ G. Florovsky, "Revelation, Philosophy and Theology", p. 22-26.

tails and explanations on the meaning of biblical hermeneutics and on the relationship between the two exegetical methods, the allegorical and the historical. Referring to the relation between *system* and *history*, he redefines the two interpretations¹¹, emphasizing the perspective that each of them opens¹², but also the need to keep them in balance, as it has been in the tradition of the primitive catechetical Church. Even then the problematic of hermeneutics was acknowledged in its primary importance – in the *admirable expression* of St. Hilary of Poitiers, „the Scripture doesn't consist in reading, but in understanding” (*scripturae enim non in legendo sunt, sed in intelligendo*) (*Ad Constantinum*, II, 9, P.L., col. 570). (All biblical and patristic references belong to Florovsky himself. Consequently, we will thereafter mark these references in the body of the text, and not in footnotes.) But Biblical interpretation couldn't take place elsewhere but within the Church – being totally inaccessible to heretics, as Tertulian¹³ showed – according to *a criterion of truth* that is no other than Christ himself. It was the Church, therefore, the one who had the mission to preach Christ, and not the “Scripture”, because Christ is the Truth, spring and criterion of truth.

In our presentations of Tradition one can see that it is not the oldness of a tradition that which automatically conveys authority or validity within the Church. Tertullian shows again that habits (*consuetudines*) must be examined in the light of truth – *Christ, Our Lord, revealed himself not as habit, but as truth*, (*Dominus noster Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem, cognominavit*); St. Cyprian took it up (*Epist.* 74, 9) and also the Council of Cartagena (256, where it was proved that *oldness without truth is an old error* (*nam antiquitas sine veritate vetustas erroris est*); blessed Augustine used the same expression as Tertullian – „In the Gospel, the Lord says: «I am the Truth». He did not say: «I am the Tradition (habit, in text, n.n.)».” (*In Evangelio Dominus, Ego sum, inquit, veritas. Non dixit, Ego sum consuetudo*) (*De baptismo* III, 6, 9)¹⁴.

After strongly asserting the importance of the *typological* way of interpretation as means of keeping and revealing the historical character of the Revelation¹⁵, G. Florovsky comes again to the question of the Word of

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 25: “One must distinguish between symbolism and typology. In symbolism one abstracts from history. Typology, however, is always historical...”. Idem, “Revelation and Interpretation”, p. 30.

¹² Idem, “Revelation and Interpretation”, p. 32.

¹³ Idem, “The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church”, in: *CW*, vol. 1, p. 75-76. The Scriptures were the *possession of the Church*, and the rule of faith always had the upper hand (*regula fidei*), the only key for the Scriptural meaning.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 83-85.

¹⁵ One may ask here to what extent G. Florovsky's view that typology belongs to history is correct.

God. The Word „is preserved in the human spirit as a seed which sprouts and brings forth fruit”, namely to the fact that „the truth of divine Revelation must unfold within human thought, must develop into an entire system of believing confession, into a system of religious perspective – one may say, into a system of religious philosophy and a philosophy of Revelation”¹⁶. (One must not only declare, but also convincingly argue why a system is necessary. Does every manifestation of the Revelation, which comes into patterns of thinking, take already the shape of a system? And then, is it an eternal, unchanging system? Within our theme, this raises a problem for each ecumenical dialogue, when a Church designates a specific, cultural, unchangeable and valid system.) The main idea is that, if the Revelation *system* could not set aside, in order to keep its thoroughness, the historical feature, this, at its turn, cannot set aside the faith *system* as testimony for experience, descriptive recording of facts. Only thus one can correctly understand the already mentioned distinction between different times of the Revelation.

One has to say from the very beginning that, in the history of redemption, the Old Testament, with its choice of Israel as chosen people and the foundation of a real, albeit temporary priesthood, was a period of promise and waiting, a time of covenants and prophecies. Its perspective was the future, the prophecies continued to remind it of the coming of Messiah. And finally, the prophecies have been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ – *the centre of the Bible*, precisely because He is the beginning and the End; the fulfilment of the Revelation is Jesus Christ, precisely because he belongs to covenants, the new and the old. Consequently, Christ is the force of cohesion and the fundamental unity of the New and Old Testaments – without overlooking the differentiation between the two testaments, which must never be confounded. The Augustinian expression *The Old Testament opens into the New one* (*Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet*) reveals the exact meaning: *patet* signifies *reveals itself, opens itself, perfects itself*, suggesting the fulfilment without annihilation of something old into something new. The attitude of the Christians towards the Old Testament is a positive one: old-testament books must not be relinquished or overlooked. But they speak about the history of redemption; they still testify about Christ, they are to be read in the Church as a book of holy history¹⁷.

Fr. Florovsky emphasizes, of course, that the New Testament is more than a book, as the Incarnation gives it another basis – not only teachings,

¹⁶ Idem, “Revelation, Philosophy and Theology”, p. 27.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

commandments, and words, but especially facts, events, works¹⁸. The coming of the Son of God as *King of Life* and *Great Priest* (so not as only teacher or human prophet) enables for the first time religious and full knowledge: *Knowledge of God has become possible through that renewal of human nature which Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection. This renewal was also a renewal of human reason and of the human spirit. That meant again the renewal of man's vision*¹⁹.

The Scripture and the Church

The New Testament is more than a book, even as *Holy Book* or *Book of Books*, because the Gospels have been written and preserved in the Church, in the Body of Christ, as the unity of the life of the spirit. A long quotation will eloquently point out the intimate connection between the Scriptures and the Church, the way in which divine Revelation becomes in the Church an *inner Revelation*:

„It is very important to remember that the New Testament writings are younger than the Church. These writings are a book written *in the Church*. They are a written record of the faith of the Church, of the faith which is preserved in the Church. And the Church confirms the truth of Scripture, confirms its authenticity – verifies it by the authority of the Holy Spirit who dwells in the Church. [...] In the written Gospels the image of the Saviour is held firm [...] in the living memory of the Church, in the experience of faith – not just in the historical memory but in the very memory of faith. [...] Because we know Christ not just from memories and accounts. Not only is his image living in the memory of believers – he himself abides among them, standing always before the door of each soul. It is precisely in this experience of the living community with Christ that the Gospel becomes alive as a holy book. Divine Revelation lives in the Church – how else should it be able to preserve itself?”²⁰

On another occasion, Fr. Florovsky strengthened what he had previously presented, thus answering a question that was actually rhetorical: the Church is itself an integrant part of the message of the New Testament; the Church itself is part of the Revelation – the history of the *whole Christ* (*totus Christus: caput et corpus*, in Augustine's expression) and of the Holy Spirit²¹.

¹⁸ A relevant fact, as the historical perspective is always decisive in theology for Florovsky. See, for example, idem, “Revelation and Interpretation”, p. 24-25.

¹⁹ Idem, “Revelation, Philosophy and Theology”, p. 28.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 28-29.

²¹ Idem, “Revelation and Interpretation”, p. 25-26.

I will emphasize the vivid interpretation in the Church (with Christ living in its midst, as a continuation of the history of Redemption), which necessarily leads to the affirmation of an eternal validity of thought forms (Hellenistic) which have been extremely influential in the time of Church formation – not everywhere, as we will mention below, as we should not forget the Syrian. As far as I am concerned, it is precisely the opposite: if Christ is alive in the Church, from this divine spring new thought patterns may emerge, in new ages and in other geographical spaces, as valid forms of Christian life – not against the tradition of the fathers of the Church, and always on the basis of the Scriptures, but in new shapes.

It is clear now that hermeneutics is not an occasion of intellectual speculation, of purely philosophical, metaphysical nature, but an inherent necessity of the Church to interpret the words of the Scripture as confession of the spiritual experience. After the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit remains in the Church to guide the faithful „into all truth” (*In* 16, 13); these have therefore „the anointing by the Holy Spirit, and know all ... and have no need that any one should teach them” (*1 In* 2, 20) or, in the words of St. Irineu, they have the „unction of truth” (*charisma veritatis*). Therefore, „in Christ the possibility and the path of spiritual life opens itself to man. And the height of spiritual life is knowledge (*gnosis*) and vision (*theoria*)”²².

The ecclesiastic experience of the believer does not lead to subjectivity, to an arbitrary individual understanding – belief manifests itself in the Church and that is why it is profoundly rooted in the apostolic message. This was the conviction of Basil the Great, who showed that divine reality may be manifested in various ways (images and parables, in poetic language or in the language of religious art, in liturgical hymns or actions etc.) that could be distinguished as *kerygmata* and *dogmata*. The first mode of transmission of *the good news* (the Gospel) coincides with the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church; the second mode has „the same strength” as the first one and coincides with the written teaching, with the doctrinal corpus of the Church²³, and we will give it a closer look below.

In the conception of Fr. Georges Florovsky the dogma is a testimony of experience, the symbolic expression in concepts and definitions of divine reality that was revealed and that has been contemplated in experienced faith. In other words, it is a „logical image”, a „logical icon” in which that

²² Idem, „Revelation, Philosophy and Theology”, p. 27-28.

²³ On Basil the Great and the Unwritten Tradition, idem, „The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church”, p. 85-89.

„inner word” acquires „force in its external expression” (this is why the external aspect of dogma – its wording – is so essential)!²⁴

The revelation is complete and definite in Christ. Therefore, the dogma does not illustrate in any way a new Revelation, it is only a testimony of the same truth – „the Church does not know Christ today better that it did in the beginning”. One cannot talk about an evolution of the dogma, of a progress of ecclesiastic knowledge: first, dogmas are unchangeable and unalterable, even in what concerns their exterior aspect (as expression); secondly, once they have been expressed, they do not develop further, they remain firm as a *rule of faith* (*regula fidei*). What is developed throughout the Christian era is not truth itself, but the testimony of the Church. The creation of *new terms*, after the formula of St. Gregory of Nazianz, does not entail compromising Revelation. The Church does nothing else but translating in new language the confession of the same unique, divine reality.

The dogma is in no way a discursive axiom, accessible to future logical development. It is a rational confession that expresses the mystery of faith, an intuitive truth. As G. Florovsky showed, the greatest peril is to *rationalize*, which can lead to the substitution of faith through the rule of faith. By quoting further M. Melioransky, Fr. Florovsky emphasizes that dogmatic definition is indeed important, as criterion of faith and the way to Christianize human intellect: „The Church gives no fixed plan of the City of God to her members but rather she gives the key to the City of God. And he who enters, without having a fixed plan, may occasionally lose his way; yet, everything he sees, he study the City according to plan, without possessing the key to the actual city, will never get to the City”²⁵.

Thus, Fr. Florovsky rejects indirectly the opinion that dogmas have appeared only as a negative stand, to reject heresies and to delineate Christian truth (this is also the basic meaning of the word *horoi*)²⁶. He emphasizes the positive role that they have played and still play: they would issue and establish the new concepts or categories that could be the appropriate conceptual frame in presenting Christian truth. It is thus a method to keep the ba-

²⁴ Idem, “Revelation, Philosophy and Theology”, p. 29-30.

²⁵ See *Ibidem*, p. 36.

²⁶ A similar position adopts Christos Yannaras, *Abecedar al credinței. Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, trans. Constantin Coman, Bucharest, Ed. Bizantină 1996, pp. 25-26: „[...] in its first three centuries, the Church did not have to present theoretical formulations of its truths, dogmas to express its faith. It lived its truth as life experience – what *is* (emphasis of the author) truth itself was lived by the members of the body of the Church directly and fully, without theoretical elaborations. Only later the Church reacts to heresies by marking the boundaries of its truth, delineating thus its life experience.”

lance between the apophatic and kataphatic theology – with the first having the task to control the latter, for divine can never be expressed in positive terms. Still, it is not about a superiority of the negative to the positive: these two modes of expression must continually be completed by each other²⁷.

The dogmatic controversies are not, for Florovsky, mere irrelevant discussions on metaphysical issues, but a *quest for terms*, finding clear and precise words, which may describe and express as exactly and correctly as possible the experience of the Church. *Spiritual sight* implied this *search for words*, because it is thus that human thinking transfigures itself, the essence of thinking itself is transformed and sanctified. Fr. Florovsky writes that it was not by chance that the Church has so fiercely rejected the heresy of Apollinaire, who advanced an erroneous anthropology– „the negation of human reason, the fear of thought”. And if reason cannot be cured, then it naturally results that it must be immolated in the person of the Man-God Jesus Christ. Consequently, „the rejection of Apollinarianism meant therefore ... the fundamental justification of reason and thought. Not in the sense, of course, that «natural reason» is sinless and right by itself, but in the sense that it is open to transformation, that it *can be healed*, that it *can be renewed*. And not only *can* but also *must* be healed and renewed. Reason is *summoned* to the knowledge of God. The «philosophizing» about God is not just a feature of inquisitiveness or a kind of audacious curiosity. On the contrary, it is *opus supererogatorium* –but a necessary and organic moment of religious behaviour”²⁸.

(I agree that there is no preaching without dogma. The same goes for the intertwining of apophatic and kataphatic speech. But we are still left with the main problem: can the *linguistic form* (speech form), in which a dogma has been once formulated, be defined as unique and eternally valid? Hence the repeated necessity for new translations of the biblical text, so that it answers to the necessities of every generation. Does one not thus overlook the human being’s inability to change these forms of language? Isn’t this unnecessary and forcibly artificial? It doesn’t, therefore, corres-

²⁷ G. Florovsky, “Revelation, Philosophy and Theology”, p. 30: „Revelation *discloses itself* and is received in the silence of faith, in silent vision – this is the first and apophatic step of the knowledge of God. The entire fullness of truth is already contained in this apophatic vision, but truth *must be expressed*. [...] The *silentium mysticum* does not exhaust the entire fullness of the religious vocation of man. There is also room for the expression of praise. In her dogmatic confession the Church expresses herself and proclaims the apophatic truth which she preserves. [...] This is necessary because *the truth of faith* is also the truth *for* reason and for thought – this does not mean, however, that it is the truth of thought, the truth of pure reason. The truth of faith is fact, reality – *that which is*”.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

pond to truth, as we use words which in our system of thought may not preserve the same meaning. Can therefore in truth Florovsky pretend that he actually lives in this Hellenistic form of thought or that he has returned to it – or is it only an illusion (or even ideology), as such a return is rightly impossible?) Regarding the „philosophizing” of the Church, Father Florovsky will later refer to the nature and significance of the concept of Christian „Hellenism”.

Christian Hellenism as *philosophia perennis*

Polemicalizing with the „simplifying” theory of the „acute Hellenization” of the Semitic „biblical Christianity” promoted by Adolf von Harnack, Father Florovsky focused his thesis about the „drastically Christened” „new Hellenism” on three main points: 1) faith is always stated through a „philosophical system” 2) Semitic thinking does not radically oppose Hellenism because even the Judaism in the time of Jesus was a Hellenized one 3) Greek philosophy was the right, even the providential environment in which Christianity was able to make and show its own experience²⁹.

Contrary to the current opinion about the „Hellenization of the Revelation”, G. Florovsky thinks that it would be more appropriate to talk about a „Christianization of Hellenism”, a “Churchification” (*Verkirchlichung*) of Hellenism that is related to the translation of the Revelation from the poetic and prophetic Hebrew to Greek (the dogma). The non-recognition of the Deity and Messiahship of Christ by Israel amounted to transferring the „promise” to the Gentiles: the Church is first of all, „the Church of the Gentiles” (*ecclesia ex gentibus*). In the Russian patristic and theologian’s opinion, the „calling of the nations” means that Hellenism became blessed by God - it was not a „historical accident,” but a providential divine work like the Old Covenant, the selection of Israel as the „chosen people” of Yahweh. „In any case - adds Fr Florovsky - what is certain is that the Gospel was given to all the people and it was given in Greek. This is the language in which we hear the Gospel in all its fullness and integrity. This does not mean and cannot mean, of course, that the gospel is untranslatable- but that „it is always translated from Greek”³⁰.

Becoming a permanence of the tradition of the Church, a *sine qua non* category in formulating and exposing its doctrine, it cannot be said that the presentation of Revelation in the language of the historical Hellenism „restricts” it in any way. Rather, „it proves precisely the opposite – that this lan-

²⁹ C. Künnel, *Totus Christus*, p. 271.

³⁰ G. Florovsky, “Revelation, Philosophy and Theology”, p. 32.

guage has certain powers and resources which helped to expose and formulate Revelation.” There is a transformation, a transfiguration of the human language which makes all those words not to be dogmatic definitions „just words” which can be substituted, but „eternal words” which are impossible to replace. Consequently, there is a *philosophia perennis*, „something eternal and absolute in the thinking of the Church”³¹.

The ideas stated above should not mean that the Church has „immortalized” a particular philosophical system –Father Florovsky says. (But can it be that precisely this is stated above, through the expression *philosophia perennis*? For sure, Florovsky did not refer to Hellenistic philosophy as eternally divine, but to the Hellenism that Christianity has changed. But in this form, he nevertheless advocates for eternal validity of this synthesis. And this is precisely what makes every ecumenical understanding rather difficult to reach, as the Syriac, the Romans and the modern Protestants cannot “force” themselves into the Hellenistic form of thinking.)

The Christian dogma itself is the only adequate „philosophical system” and its „eclecticism” resides in the fact that, although there were some specific topics belonging to the Hellenic philosophy which came to be accepted and perceived, it is because of their perception that they were essentially modified. The Greek philosophical terminology is intended to meet issues related to a completely different experience and therefore Hellenism regarded Christianity as something external to it, the Christian Gospel being „folishness” (*moria*) for it (I Corinthians 1.23). Then, G. Florovsky even lists some of the themes which are essentially different: the idea of creation of the world, the Christian intuition of the history as a unique creative fulfilment in the sense of a movement from a beginning to an end, namely by understanding man as a person, which was unthinkable in the Greek thinking, for which *prosopon* was a simple mask; finally, the message of the Resurrection of the body, which caused „fear” to the Greeks (see St. Paul in the Areopagus speech)³². Even if we talk about a „synthesis” between Christianity and Hellenism, the exact meaning of it is the following: „The Christian reception of Hellenism meant not only a servile absorption of an undigested pagan heritage. It was rather a *conversion* of the Greek mind and heart. [...] Hellenism was terribly cleaved by the sword of the Christian Revelation and it was thus entirely polarized”³³.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 34.

³³ Consequently, although Origen or Augustine could be described as “Hellenistic”, they are not “Hellenistic” like Plotin or Julian (the Apostate). See idem, “Christianity and Civilization”, in: *CW*, vol. 2, p. 123.

Conclusions

We must conclude with an observation. Fr. Georges Florovsky, when he presented his conception about Christian Hellenism and its importance in the history of Christianity, assumed reality as a starting point. Hence, on the one hand, the writings of the Holy Fathers, such as the Cappadocians, conclusively show how Christian theology has undertaken and adjusted necessary elements from ancient Greek culture, so that the message of the Gospel received universal features. On the other hand, this Christian Hellenism made it possible that the Russian spirit be filled by the harmony of the antiquity, for the Russian people's embrace of Christianity was made through embracing the fathers of the Church³⁴. It would be thus totally incorrect to formulate this as an accusation against the Russian patrologist, an expert on Eastern Christian history.

Nevertheless, at the same time, the necessity of avoiding idealism makes us notice a few limits that the declaration of *Christian* Hellenism as universal (and hence unavoidable?) implies in the history of Christianity.

Aidan Nichols³⁵ outlined two of the criticisms of the Christian „Hellenism” promoted in Florovsky's thinking: firstly, the way in which the „mind of the Church”- defined by Florovsky as a Greek intrinsic, in the case of the Fathers who are not Greek- manifested in the constitutive experience of their own culture (e.g. the Syriac tradition); secondly, Florovsky saw the Father's consent as a „monolithic block” of Greek origin, adopting the words of St. John of Damascus: „a Father does not struggle against Fathers, for they all get „one mind” through the Holy Spirit. However, Florovsky himself launched a genuine challenge for the future Orthodox theology to achieve a (neo) patristic „synthesis”, which proved that this alleged coherence of the patristic thought was not yet (fully) achieved.

Moreover, Ch. Künnel noted that even as long ago as 1931 Karl Barth saw in Florovsky an overbidding of the historicity of theology which included the „Christian Hellenism”, with a softening of the eschatological dimension of the Church³⁶. Perhaps it is precisely at this point that Father Florovsky's defence of his conception about the „Christian Hellenism”

³⁴ M. Konțevici, *Dobândirea Sfântului Duh în Vechea Rusie*, trans. Paul Bălan, Galați, Egumenița 2004, p. 193.

³⁵ A. Nichols, *Light from the East*, p. 135.

³⁶ C. Künnel, *Totus Christus*, p. 272 note 52. Similarly, G. Florovsky critically observes the attempt to “separate from history” (*Entgeschichtlichung*) the Revelation in Barth. Anyway, the author quotes a letter sent by him to E. Thurneysen (dated 2 July 1931), preserved in the “Karl Barth” Archives in Basel, which includes some comments on Florovsky's communication. See *Ibidem*, p. 254 note 447.

mattered: it is pressing *historical evidence* in the history of the church and it cannot be evaded. Simultaneously, he was aware of, and he repeatedly stated the fact that „dogma does not exhaust experience, just as Revelation is not exhausted in the «words» or «letters» of the Scripture. The experience and knowledge of the Church is broader and richer than its dogmatic articulation. „The „dogmatic” theology cannot abolish or replace the „kerygmatic” theology. In the view of the *Eschaton*, the fullness of knowledge and understanding that the Church possesses is only gradually and partially disclosed and confessed; however, the „incompleteness” of our knowledge here and now does not affect the authenticity and apodictic character of the teaching of the Church³⁷, as resulted from the next exposure dedicated to the Holy Tradition.

Other critiques have in view how Florovsky’s theory could be associated with the politics of *hellenocentrism*, in connection to the patriarchate of Constantinople. The re-Hellenization of Orthodoxy could therefore encourage an ill-timed nationalist triumphalism. Still, his intention was neither to glorify pre-Christian Hellenism³⁸, nor to advance a cultural-religious chauvinism, but outreaching ethnical isolationism that dominated the 20th century Russian diaspora. From a different perspective, this has led to another extreme, such as minimalizing the Hebrew component of the Revelation. According to Georges Florovsky, once cast into a Hellenistic form, the Hebrew mould of the New Testament³⁹ – as well as other non-Hellenistic forms of Christianity – retain no enduring theological meaning in the Church. If we were to judge this from the perspective of fascist developments in Europe, the Florovskian theory was problematic from a historical point of view and morally hazardous. (One may explain in a similar vein Florovsky’s overlooking – as well as that of other representatives of the neopatristic movement – issues raised by modern biblical critique.)

Moreover, we must not forget that Florovsky’s reassessment of Hellenism has been made in opposition to the theory of Hellenization of Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). If the latter was a supporter of de-Hellenization, the former tried to renew orthodox theology through re-Hellenization. We must also notice that they both advanced a historiography of misrepresen-

³⁷ See G. Florovsky, “Revelation, Philosophy and Theology”, p. 35-36; idem, “Le Corps du Christ vivant. Une interprétation orthodoxe de l’Eglise”, in: *La Saint Eglise Universelle – Confrontation Oecuménique*, Neuchatel, 1948, p. 45-48.

³⁸ According to Methodios G. Fouyas, “Bilateral Theological Dialogues: An Orthodox Assessment”, in: *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 41 (1996), p. 187.

³⁹ As the Old Testament as well, for *it does not belong to the jews, but to the Church*. See Georges Florovsky, „The Fathers of the Church and the Old Testament”, in: *CW*, vol. 4, p. 32.

tation – while Harnack asserted the misrepresentation of the Gospels by Greek philosophy, Florovsky saw Orthodox theology being compromised by Western theological-philosophical influences. And still, couldn't Western thinking equally claim the appropriation of Christian Hellenism, just as can Eastern Christianity? According to Paul Gavriluk, the question has a positive answer, and labelling Christian Hellenism as *Philosophia perennis* by Florovsky should be understood within the context which was created by French Catholic theologians in 1930-1940 (Emile Brehier, Etienne Gilson etc.) based on *Christian philosophy*.

We cannot conclude this study without highlighting the ecumenical aspect of Fr. Florovsky's⁴⁰ view. The meaning of the patristic *age* shows that, although the position of the apostolic *age* was unique, this was only the beginning. One cannot say that the age of the Fathers has concluded – such as it was asserted in the West (and, after metamorphosis processes, also in the East) – later replaced by the *age of scholastics*. We would adopt thus an unacceptably restrictive formula (irrespective of the length of time for which the reduction is made – one, five or eight centuries). One must also avoid a *theology of repetition: the fulfilment of time* has been assumed by the Fathers with the meaning that, considering the cultural and philosophical milieu of their time, they have succeeded in passing along the message of the Gospel in the mental categories of their time. The result was that Christianity is both actual and perennial; these are two dimensions that the mission of the Church must also take into consideration. The contemporary human being must not fear *renewal*, just as one must not get stuck in an unintelligible – and therefore sterile – language. The way theology must use contemporary philosophy to an *existential synthesis of Christian experience* is shown by the Fathers of the Church themselves. (To keep the *existential* feature of patristic theology, one must not separate it from a life of personal and liturgical prayer, and of practicing virtue.) As witnesses of an all-embracing Tradition, they have a perennial relevance for all circumstances.

⁴⁰ On Georges Florovsky's ecumenical efforts, see especially: *CW*, vol. 13: *Ecumenism I. A Doctrinal Approach* and *CW*, vol. 14: *Ecumenism I. A Historical Approach*. Constantine Cavarinos, *Father Georges Florovsky on Ecumenism*, Etna, California, Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies 1996. See also: C. Künkél, „The true Church is not yet the perfect Church». Ökumenisches Denken und Handeln bei Georges Florovsky», in: Karl Christian Felmy et al. (Eds.), *Tausend Jahre Christentum in Russland. Zum Millennium der Taufe der Kiever Rus'*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1988, p. 583-590; Daniel P. Payne, „Barth and Florovsky on the meaning of «Church»», in: *Sobornost* 26 (2/2004), p. 39-63; W.A. Visser 't Hooft, „Fr. Georges Florovsky's Role in the Formation of the WCC», in: *SVTQ* 23 (3-4/1979), p. 135-138; Aurel Pavel, Ciprian Iulian Toroczkai, *Adevăratul și falsul ecumenism: perspective ortodoxe asupra dialogului dintre creștini*, Sibiu, Ed. Universității Lucian Blaga 2010, p. 17-68.

In what regards the responsibility of the Orthodox for extending the patristic legacy to all Christians, we will refer to the ecumenical vision of G. Florovsky, a fervent participant for decades to several ecumenical meetings – be it within meeting with the Anglican Church (*Fellowships of St. Alban and St. Sergius*) or within meetings that were organized by the World Council of Churches. This vision was labelled by Fr. Florovsky himself as *ecumenism in time*. It is a vision that is based on the conviction that there was once a Tradition that was common to all Christians⁴¹. Hence the critique on ecumenical dialogue as a limitation only to a *working together* of different Christian factions: for Florovsky, ecumenism is not so much a social activity, as it is union in One Church. This is why another type of ecumenical dialogue – *ecumenism in space* – that he declared as insufficient – must be complemented by an *ecumenism in time*, which coincides with the return to a *common* history of *divided Christianity*⁴². More than uniform reunification of *denominations* in *agreement* one needs to be reinitiated in Tradition (*paradosis*), our common way back towards it. And the Orthodox Church, through its unique position as continuator of the Apostolic Church⁴³ of the first centuries, does not have a privileged position in the ecumenical dialogue, but mostly a great responsibility, of offering, through *Vivid Tradition*, the coming together in one *Christian mind*. (What Florovsky wants to say here is: a Hellenistic mind? If so, then there is one path of ecumenism, namely that all reflect upon this Christian Hellenism. But could it be, culturally and historically, that this is simply impossible?)

To conclude, Florovsky has suggested that the re-Hellenization of Christianity is not a task for the Orthodox alone. Christianity would need a *return to the Fathers*. Mission impossible? Utopia? The future alone will confirm or deny this... Anyhow, at least one question arises more: return to which of the Fathers? One must not forget that for Florovsky even the fathers

⁴¹ Idem, “Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church”, in: *CW*, vol. 4, p. 28-29.

⁴² One must remind here the opposition between Florovsky’s views on ecumenism and that of some of his dialogue partners, such as Henry P. Van Dusen. For details, see Alexander Mirkovic, “One Nation under God: Georges Florovsky and the End of Anglo-Orthodox Ecumenical Dialogue”, in: *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 59 (1-4/ 2014), p. 55-80.

⁴³ In Fr. Florovsky’s view, the Orthodox Church has been and is the true Church, in spite of some hostile historical factors. He goes against Gass’ opinion, for whom the Eastern Church is a *new Church, confessional in nature*, different from the Old Church through a long process of deviation, and asserts the doctrinal identity of the Church today with „the Church of all times and especially of the primitive Church (*Urkirche*)”. Therefore, the Orthodox Church *is not one of the Churches, but the Church in its true being*. G. Florovsky, “Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church”, in: *CW*, vol. 4, p. 13-14.

after Fotie lack any relevance whatsoever, the most conclusive example being that of Grigorie Palama (1296-1359). Consequently, Georges Florovsky's theory on the Christian Hellenism as perennial philosophy has not ended yet. His specification and explanations raise at least as many unsolved issues. The essential problem remains: returning to the Fathers means going back to the Christian Hellenism of there are other hermeneutics to be found?