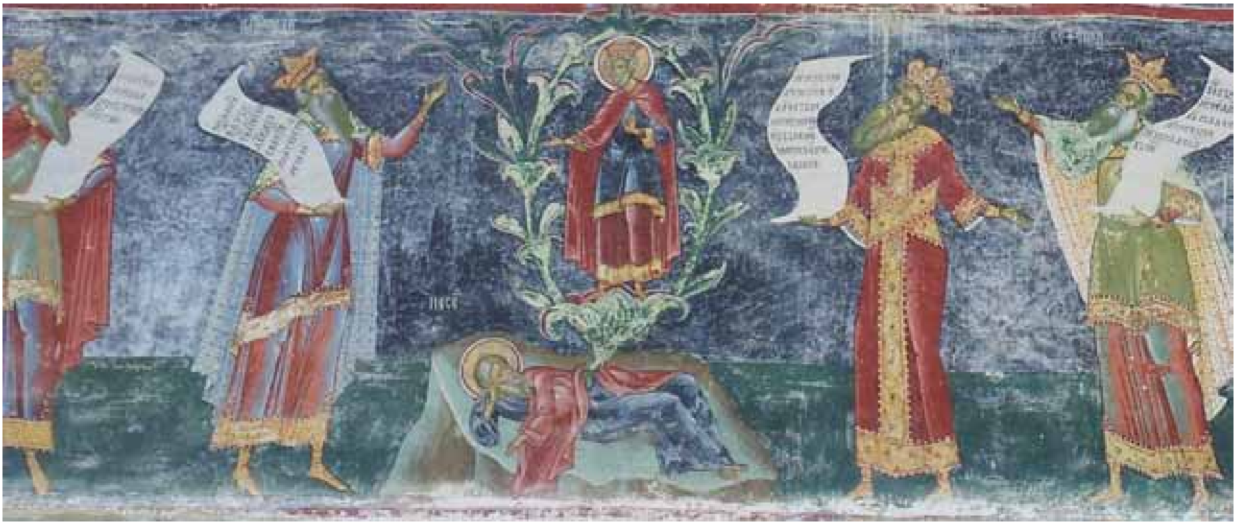

Sucevița Monastery, Romania. Scene from the *Tree of Jesse* fresco, depicting pre-Christian philosophers. Credit: Petra Steinmair-Pösel.

FAITH AND REASON

What Has Paris to Do With Byzantium?

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Many contemporary Orthodox theologians regard philosophy with suspicion, and this has encouraged the same attitude within the wider Church. Several of the texts of the so-called neopatristic synthesis indulge in repeated condemnations of "Western" and "scholastic" philosophy and instead laud the "mystical" approach of the Eastern tradition. Orthodoxy, on this telling, has no recourse to philosophy because it has direct experiential access to the mystery of faith, which not only requires no rational exposition but would actually be harmed by it. Philosophy destroys mystery. Thinking is antithetical to faith.

It was not always so. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of his sister Macrina as "the Philosopher," and for much of the early centuries of the Church a dedicated Christian life was called "philosophic." Philosophy, literally "love of wisdom," was characterized both by learning and by single-minded devotion to ascesis. Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria were philosophers in both senses of the term—lovers of wisdom in the broadest sense. Many of the great patristic thinkers and teachers of Orthodoxy (including the Cappadocians, Dionysius the Areopagite, Nemesius of Emesa, Maximos the Confessor, and John of Damascus) made extensive use of Platonic, Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and Stoic sources to articulate Christian faith and theology. Most of their arguments about the soul, the human person, the will, the moral life, providence, and the divine energies make little sense without at least a basic—and sometimes a fairly sophisticated—knowledge of ancient philosophy.

And Gregory the Theologian argued emphatically, against Emperor Julian "the Apostate," his earlier schoolmate from the Platonic Academy in Athens, that the philosophy and literature of ancient Greece was as much a Christian possession as a pagan one and that Christians should not be denied access to its wisdom for their own teaching. Philosophical treatises continued to be copied by scribes throughout the Byzantine era. In later centuries, thinkers like Photios the Patriarch of Constantinople and the monk, philosopher, and diplomat Michael Psellos were firmly dedicated to ancient learning and tried to reinvigorate it at a time of cultural and academic decline.

What about today? Does philosophy still have anything to say to Orthodox theology? Can Orthodox thinkers turn to philosophy for insight or maybe even for an articulation of Orthodox faith and practice? I want to suggest not only that Orthodox thinking can make good use of contemporary philosophy, but that drawing on philosophical sources and methods may help to articulate Orthodox faith and practice in a larger intellectual conversation, without betraying core theological insights or jeopardizing the "mystery" of Orthodox faith. Let me give three examples to illustrate this claim.

How might one examine the truth of faith? The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues that the best way to do so is to look at the language of faith, its discourse, that is, the way in which it articulates itself. In his view, the best place to look for this discourse is in the biblical texts, which he considers the most primordial and most basic sources of faith. The biblical texts open a world that we are invited to enter and where we are challenged to conceive of ourselves differently. These texts are characterized by the many voices of the variety of biblical genres (history, prophecy, wisdom, parables, etc.). We can learn to understand the texts and articulate their truth by assuming that these discourses are meaningful to the community of faith and by entering the particular world they create and set forth. In other places in his work Ricoeur recognizes that actions can also function as a form of discourse and meaningfully shape our identity. Life *prefigures* narrative, narratives *configure* life, and life is then *refigured* or transfigured via our appropriation of the narrative. Besides his analysis of the biblical texts, in his larger hermeneutic work Ricoeur focuses primarily on historical and fictional narratives. Yet his insights about how interpretation helps us understand discourses and how they shape our meaning and identity are eminently useful for articulating Orthodox faith and practice.

What is the "language" of Orthodox faith? What is its central discourse? Liturgy. And as Ricoeur explicates for the biblical texts, liturgy is even more obviously polyphonic: many voices interact, such as in the antiphons (usually based on texts from the Psalms), the *kontakia* (remnants of dramatic liturgical poems), the canons (poetic embellishments of biblical odes applied to the occasion or feast), the biblical texts assigned for the day, the litanies, the homily, and much more. All these discourses interact with each other to create a multiform world of meaning. Yet this is about much more than simple texts: liturgy is performed as dramatic action in processions and entrances (which in early Constantinople often included processions through large parts of the city and multiple stops at different churches), in the lighting of candles and the veneration of icons, in chanting and singing, all culminating in the Eucharistic action of breaking and sharing the bread. And these discourses—literal and figurative—open a world, a world that is both poetic and physical—think of the magnificent architecture of Hagia Sophia and the arrangement of liturgical space more generally.

We are invited to enter this liturgical world and are challenged to be transformed by its narratives. This is what Fr. Alexander Schmemann consistently emphasized about the Liturgy: it is entry into the Kingdom. And that is true not only of the Eucharistic liturgy but of every aspect of liturgical life. For example, the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, which helps us begin Great Lent (and sustains our energy in the fifth week) achieves this by parading before us endless biblical examples, while we reiterate over and over again: "Let me be not like..." but instead "let me be like..." Its message of repentance becomes intensely personal by creating a narrative world in which we are to take on the examples modeled, to imitate their repentance or refuse to imitate their sins. Historically, the dramatic kontakia of St. Romanos the Melodist, the colorful poetic hymns of St. Ephrem the Syrian, and the highly rhetorical homilies of SS. John Chrysostom, Jacob of Serug, Proclus of Constantinople and others functioned similarly, staging a narrative world before the congregation in sound, rhythm, and drama with which the hearers could identify and which they were called to imitate or appropriate. Moreover, the liturgical year as a whole mimetically creates a world that, in Ricoeur's language, helps us deal with the struggle between "discordance" (Lent) and "concordance" (Pascha) and refigures our identity by shaping us through its narratives. Liturgy reflects and articulates our struggles in all their existential depth, but it also narrates and performs a world that can in turn transform us. Several contemporary liturgical scholars affirm the idea that the Liturgy is "doing the world as it was supposed to be done." The Liturgy is a microcosm of the world, it "practices" the world and equips us for living out the core message of Christian faith: that God was in Christ—this is what the Liturgy "configures"—and that therefore we are to be in God through him—this is how the Liturgy "refigures."

Of course this does not happen automatically. The world of the Liturgy has to be entered and its narratives appropriated. Liturgy teaches us who we are and how we are to live in the world. It articulates and performs a narrative identity of Orthodox faith and practice. In doing so, it establishes a hermeneutic circle along the entire length of the liturgical year: we need both fasts and feasts, must continually enter the liturgical world anew to understand and appropriate its meaning more deeply, and cycle back and forth not only between the multiplicity of discourses, but also between our individual lives and the communal reality of the Liturgy. Practicing repentance during Lent and celebrating Pascha only once is not enough: it has to be lived and appropriated anew over and over again. The insights of contemporary hermeneutics not only help to make good sense of what liturgy does and how it works, but they may even aid in understanding why liturgy sometimes goes wrong or does not function as it should: when the liturgical world becomes too small or too insular, when its meaning is no longer practiced or appropriated, when identity is shaped more by the narrative world of consumerism or technology than by the poetic world of liturgy.

How is Orthodox faith experienced and how does experience become meaningful? Not only hermeneutic tools, such as those of Ricoeur, but also phenomenological ones may be useful for articulating Orthodox religious experience. Phenomenology began in the early twentieth century with a call to return to "the things themselves" and a desire to examine our conscious experience as carefully as possible, setting aside the modern preoccupations with proving objectivity or existence on purely empirical grounds. Thinkers such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger tried to take human experience seriously in all its complexity and to examine the meaning of our perceptions, judgments, memories, moods, or, more broadly, our ways of being in the world and with others. Phenomenological work has grown in depth and complexity throughout the past century, and several contemporary French thinkers, such as Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and Emmanuel Falque, have begun to apply its insights also to religious experience.

How might we examine an experience of God or articulate an experience of revelation? Marion, for example, contends that such an experience would have to be examined as it gives itself entirely on its own terms. The task of phenomenology is to unfold this experience in its abundance and excess, paying close attention to how it actually gives itself. Marion calls this a "saturated phenomenon" and often uses icons as his example. When I venerate an icon I do not impose my own gaze on it, but rather expose myself to the gaze that envisions me through the icon. In prayer I become vulnerable to the wholly other who calls me and comes to me. A new version of the self emerges in these philosophical treatments, a self that is no longer a strong Cartesian subject in control of the objects in the world, but a self that is called by the other, responds to the other, becomes devoted to the other in love. Marion's philosophy is intensely apophatic and firmly dedicated to protecting the mystery of God's utter alterity. We name the divine only in praise, not through propositional statements or proofs. At the same time, he provides an account of how God becomes manifest, how revelation is actually experienced here and now.

This sort of philosophy seems eminently more suitable for expressing the particular character of the Orthodox faith (indeed it might also be more useful for speaking of Christian faith more generally) than other modern philosophical trends, which tend to be preoccupied primarily with proving the existence of God, making sense of theodicy, or analyzing the compatibility of God's properties. One of the legacies of modernity has been a definition of faith solely in terms of personal adherence to doctrinal statements that is often separated from or at least ignores religious practice. Contemporary French philosophy recognizes that experience and practice are far more central to identity. Indeed, in the Orthodox tradition, doctrine is always deeply embedded in liturgical life and practice. It grows out of it and articulates it. For example, both the affirmation of hesychasm and the so-called "triumph of Orthodoxy" over iconoclasm were deeply rooted in experience. The iconoclasts fought an uphill battle against the common people's devotion to icons that was ultimately vindicated. The Palamite monks argued for a theology that most authentically represented their experience of the divine. The theological affirmations about Mary as Theotokos grew out of Marian devotion that preceded theological articulations. Hierarchical affirmations of sanctity usually come after the emergence of sustained local practices of veneration. Orthodox theology, then, is deeply rooted in experience and practice. In this sense it is much more akin to contemporary philosophical approaches than to those of modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant or Hegel.

A philosophy focused on analyzing experience, action, practice, and identity is thus far more appropriate for articulating how Orthodoxy is meaningful than one that focuses narrowly on rational faith statements or purely private belief. Yet, this does not mean that such reflection is therefore irrational or that it abandons rigorous thinking. Rather, this is a different kind of rationality, one that takes into account actions and practices, and tries to unfold and explicate how revelation is given and experienced. Focus on experience can easily become purely subjective, especially when dealing with something as intensely personal as faith and relation to God. A more rigorous phenomenological analysis may well help to prevent an account of religious experience from sliding into a purely arbitrary affirmation of my own personal, empirical experience and instead serve to articulate and explicate its larger (communal) structures of meaning.

These contemporary philosophical approaches are often (at least in the English-speaking world) identified with what is called postmodernism, a term taken up by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard to depict our increasing incredulity toward the modern grand narratives of communism, capitalism, consumerism, scientism, and technology. There is no longer one universal, overarching, abstract, coherent way of making sense of the world, based on some absolute, indubitable foundation. Rather, we increasingly live in multiple smaller narratives that are often incompatible and even in conflict with each other. Injustice results from the clash between narratives, when minority voices are drowned out or even eliminated by the larger narrative. Smaller stories get no hearing; sometimes their very languages are incompatible with the dominant discourse, which seeks to control all conversation by ensuring it happens only on its own terms. Lyotard tries to recover and make room for such minority voices, to give them a hearing without turning them into a new master narrative. Similarly, other philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault try to deconstruct the dominant discourse and to challenge structures of power. Central to late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century philosophical approaches are hospitality and care for the vulnerable, coming out of Emmanuel Lévinas's philosophy, which draws on the biblical injunction to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Richard Kearney points to Andrei Rublev's famous icon of the Hospitality of Abraham and to the closing hymn of Holy Friday Vespers—

Give me this stranger, who from his youth has been received as a stranger in this world. Give me this stranger, who has no place to lay his head. Give me this stranger, whom an evil disciple betrayed to death. Give me this stranger, the refuge of the poor and weary. Give me this stranger, whom his mother saw hanging upon the cross. . . .

—to illustrate the centrality of this theme in the Christian tradition. One could add many other examples, such as the establishment of *xenodochia* (hostels for travelers and strangers) in ancient Antioch and Constantinople, the founding of hospitals and orphanages, Chrysostom's constant exhortations of his audiences to generous almsgiving and hospitality to strangers, St. Basil the Great's homilies on care for the poor as the proper *leitourgia*, and St.

Gregory the Theologian's insistence that to embrace and care for the leper is to invite—indeed to touch—Christ. Hospitality to the stranger and care for the vulnerable other thus are at the very core of Christian identity and practice. St. Isaac the Syrian even argues:

Just as a grain of sand will not balance against a great weight of gold, such too is the case with God's justice when it is weighed against His compassion. When compared with God's mercy, the sins of all flesh are like a handful of sand thrown in the sea (Homily 50).

Instead of a "balance" between justice and mercy, as is often assumed in theological discussions, Isaac presents God's mercy as incomparably greater than God's justice and counsels compassion even to the most vulnerable creatures. Contemporary philosophies of hospitality and care for the stranger may help warn us against establishing meta-narratives that deny a voice to the other or an insular attitude of fear that is threatened by anything unfamiliar, and that instead recall us to the deeply Christian message of compassion and radical openness to others.

Philosophy, then, not only has had a significant role in the Church's past, but can also aid us today in articulating the Christian message for a new generation living in a postmodern culture, by providing rigorous tools for analyzing and articulating Orthodox practice in ways that are thoughtful and substantive, neither reducing the mysteries of the faith to abstract rationality nor giving in to anti-intellectual pietism or blind fundamentalism. In fact, Orthodox thinking is well situated for making an original contribution here: Ricoeur's Protestant background predisposed him to a fairly narrow emphasis on biblical texts in his hermeneutic approach, and the Roman Catholic and French Enlightenment background of most phenomenologists colors their insights significantly by focusing almost entirely on individual experience of the divine and ignoring more communal dimensions. Drawing on the rich Orthodox liturgical traditions in all their diversity can make a genuine contribution to broadening this narrow focus on individual spirituality in contemporary philosophical analysis. Hospitality to the insights of contemporary philosophy thus both enables considered and meaningful articulations of Orthodox self-understanding, identity, and practice, and makes possible genuinely Orthodox intellectual contributions to dialogue with the larger culture. Not only has Paris something to say to Byzantium, but if Orthodoxy is able to pursue the "love of wisdom" anew in all its contemporary rigor, Byzantium may have something to say to Paris in reply. ❋

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