

## Introductory Remarks To Father Georges Florovsky's *Faith and Culture*

To better appreciate Father Florovsky's article the reader must always remember that the material presented is the product of a theological and philosophical synthesis. While Florovsky's treatment of culture may at times appear ambiguous and tentative the reader should bear in mind that the questions posed are derived from a response to philosophical movements that influenced the theology of both East and West. *Faith and Culture* is a theological response that has been honed by philosophical enquiry. What the article may lack in clarity relative to the definition of culture is made up in how Florovsky perceives the challenges culture has placed before the Church from its beginnings to the present time and the vision needed to respond to these challenges.

As a theological and philosophical synthesis the reader can detect Florovsky's lack of confidence in two major philosophical movements that had made an impact on how culture came to be understood and accepted. For Florovsky, these movements specifically German Idealism and Positivism superseded the freedom of the person. Both movements helped to provide a metaphysical and therefore permanent basis for culture that bore the potential to either restrict or eliminate *personal* creativity and divine sovereignty.

While German Idealism re-presented the Platonic realm of eternal and immutable ideas that maintained a metaphysics of natural law, Positivism, having rejected the metaphysical and transcendental, provided the foundation for science to become its own law from which all social and natural phenomena would be defined. For the Positivists such as August Comte (1798-1857) there occurs a progressive change in how history and reality are viewed. This change can be traced from the theological, to the metaphysical to the positive. Theology sought to explain natural phenomena by referring to "spiritual and anthropomorphic beings" while metaphysics depersonalized these beings into forces and essences that would hold the ideal pattern for all existence. According to Robert N. Beck, positivism "holds that thought should confine itself to the data of experience and reject all transcendent, metaphysical and abstract speculation." (p. 76) Data of experience is culled from scientific experimentation from which proceed its own laws governing all phenomena. Both movements subordinate the person and the freedom of the person to fixed laws.

Father Florovsky's *Faith and Culture* is a theological response (p. 15) that is based on what I would call a synthesis of Christian Hellenism and American Pragmatism. Having made himself familiar with the neo-Kantians and neo-positivists and their influence on epistemology and the philosophy of science (especially biology) Florovsky, influenced by Benedetto Croce and Collingwood affirmed the "autonomy of the historical disciplines and a sharp critique of deterministic and materialistic pre-suppositions, taken from the realm of natural sciences, in matters spiritual and intellectual." (Cf. Raeff, p.206) In addition to Croce and Collingwood, it is the American Pragmatists (Peirce and Dewey) and the French philosopher Renouvier who also influenced and supported Florovsky's perception of history and culture.

John Dewey (1859-1952) together with Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and William James (1842-1910) have been considered the chief spokesmen of Pragmatism. According to Dewey, Pragmatism is “the theory that the processes and material of knowledge are determined by practical or purposive considerations – that there is no such thing as knowledge determined by exclusively theoretical, speculative, or abstract intellectual considerations.” Dewey also points to the contribution of Darwin and his emphasis on the “priority of *transition over permanence*, of *becoming over being*.” (my emphases, see Beck, p. 321) For the Pragmatists there are no eternal forms, no unchangeable laws of nature, no fixed or permanent social and cultural structures. For all intents and purposes, knowledge for the Pragmatists must be cross-examined i.e. knowledge must be tested. Hence, Peirce’s coining of the term “laboratory method.” Within this method ideas are synonymous with hypotheses or “proposed solutions to ... problems.” (Beck, p. 321) Consequently, the hypotheses, which predict consequences, are to be verified by scientific experimentation. However, unlike the Positivists, scientific experimentation for the Pragmatists was couched in what Florovsky had referred to as logical relativism. For the Pragmatists this meant that even when an experiment provided a solution to a particular social problem the solution was not absolute. Unlike the Positivists, Pragmatism does not give scientific experimentation the final word since science and experimentation are ongoing.

By 1914 we have in Russia, via its academic philosophers and the contributions made to *Vekhi* (Signposts) the surfacing of a “critique and rejection, as passionate as had been the earlier faith in it, of nineteenth century materialistic positivism and the belief in the deterministic nature of human history in the model of the evolutionary science of nature.” (Raëff, p. 206) Given this critique on the part of the Russian intellectuals it should be stressed that Florovsky is among the first to affirm the autonomy “of the historical disciplines and [to offer] a sharp critique of deterministic and materialistic presuppositions, taken from the realm of natural sciences, in matters spiritual and intellectual.” (Raëff, p. 206) With regards to culture, Florovsky saw that it had no hypostasis of its own and therefore bore no marks of historical, sociological and, by extension, metaphysical permanence. Florovsky’s insistence on the freedom of the person not only supersedes but may, and in fact, rebels against any deterministic philosophy, culture, ideology and even theology. It seems to me that Father Georges saw permanence in the personal relationships (περιχωρησις) of the Trinity and the never ending human/divine relationships made possible by the incarnation of the Logos and the descent of the Spirit.

Given what has been said thus far, Florovsky’s *Faith and Culture* presents an ongoing challenge for the Orthodox Christian in as much as the dynamic of faith and culture is always in process. What is consistent in Father Florovsky’s *Faith and Culture* is the tension – sometimes creative - that is derived from the Church’s presence in the world. Broadly speaking, it seems that the tension manifests itself in how the Church responds to the world. Within the Orthodox Church and Christianity as a whole two basic responses have been and continue to be given. On the one hand Christianity engages the world and utilizes the culture of the world to further the Gospel. Within this creative tension there gradually evolved the so-called Christian culture and civilization. On the other hand

movements throughout the history of Christianity have retreated from the world perceiving culture as irrelevant “to the fulfillment of man’s personality” and being “no more than an external garb which may be needed on occasions, but which does not organically belong to the essence of human existence.” (Florovsky, p. 12) Indeed, what has Jerusalem to do with Athens and Banaras?

What is most challenging for me about Father Florovsky’s article comes from acknowledging the responsibility of the Orthodox Church to respond to the mutability of culture. Inherent in the dynamic of faith and culture is the need for an ongoing theological response. Yet, to do this the Orthodox Church will inevitably have to proclaim the immutable and saving Truth of the Gospel by responding to the present culture it lives in differently and maybe, at times, in opposition to how it responded in the past.

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