

An Introduction to Father Georges Florovsky's "The Slyness of Reason"

I

In 1920 Florovsky with other members of his family left Odessa and settled in Sophia, Bulgaria. There he along with Prince Nicholas Trubetskoy, George Vernadsky, Semeon Frank, Anton Kartashev and others became part of a group known as the **Eurasians**. Unlike the **Slavophiles and Westerners**, this small group of intellectuals sought to recover an appreciation for the contributions made by the Tatars to the Russian peoples and culture. For them Asia was a significant contributor to the "building up of a multi-national state with religious and racial tolerance as its basis."¹

Florovsky presented "The Slyness of Reason" to the Eurasians in 1921. His association with the group was brief. Not only did he reject the Eurasian acceptance of the Communist Revolution as an "organic event in the evolution" of the Eurasian people but his concern lay with the inheritance of Byzantine Orthodoxy on Russian life and culture.

For Florovsky the return to an authentic Orthodoxy manifested in the life and writings of the Greek Fathers was the greatest legacy of the Russian peoples. Here it should be stressed that Florovsky's interest and passion for the Greek Fathers provided the escape from pre-determined and closed philosophical systems that deprived the human person of ultimate freedom and **sobornost** within the context of history and eschatology.

II

In 1965, George Hunston Williams of Harvard Divinity School wrote an article honoring his friend and colleague Father Georges Florovsky. The article is entitled "Georges Vasilievich Florovsky: His American Career (1948-1965)."² In this article he gives the following introduction to "The Slyness of Reason": "Florovsky's grappling with the truth of philosophy and his groping for a redefinition of Christian Truth that sets man free from self and society in the fellowship of the Church was first publically recorded in his essay entitled "The Cunning of Reason." It was here ...that Florovsky erected a much more open and spacious philosophical framework for all his future thought. Within the nominal context of his Eurasian circle, he was criticizing Western rationalism and determinism in order to set the stage for a more creative philosophy of personal accountability in the Orthodox-patristic sense."³

These few lines capture the spirit and scope of the article before us as well as the life and work of one who coined the phrase "neo-patristic synthesis." In many respects "The Slyness of Reason" is a sign post in bold letters pointing to Florovsky's critique of

¹ Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century*, Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1967, p.222)

² *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, vol.xi, no. 1, 1965.

³ *Ibid.* pp.17-18.

Western philosophy, culture and religion and how these movements and trends affected the understanding of self (or person), society and ecclesiology.

The lens through which Father Florovsky hones and articulates his response is through the Orthodox patristic tradition. In his magnum opus, **The Ways of Russian Theology** (1937), Florovsky offers a fundamental hermeneutic for reading, understanding and continuing the Greek Patristic tradition as an ongoing rebirth of Orthodox theology for Russia and throughout the world. He stresses that “[r]ecovery of the Patristic style is the primary and fundamental postulate for Russia’s theological renaissance. Renaissance does not mean some sort of ‘restoration’ or some repetition of or return to the past. ‘Following the Fathers’ always means moving forward, not backwards, it means fidelity to the patristic spirit and not just to the patristic letter. One must be steeped in the inspiration of the patristic flame and not simply be a gardener pottering around among ancient texts. **Unde ardet, inde lucet!** (light is emitted from what burns.) One can follow in the path of the Fathers only through creativity, not through imitation”⁴

III

From the perspective of the development of theology in Russia, “The Slyness of Reason” is an explosive critical out pouring of overlapping and co-existing ideas and movements that ultimately deprived Orthodoxy of its true identity and spirit. For this reason the article is difficult to read. In a short amount of space Father Florovsky brings to the surface in abrupt fashion aspects of Russian thought and culture that had no basic commonality with the Greek patristic heritage.

For our purposes, references to the philosophies of history – particularly those of the Positivists and Marx; the exaltation of rationalism expressed in the Scholastic, Reform and Masonic methods; the neo-mysticism of Protestant Pietism and the subsequent rift of Christianity from its ecclesial and **sobornal** context; the apotheosis of the Mosaic and Natural laws which placed stress on ethics and morality and not the person are understood by Florovsky as contributing to the undoing of an existential, personalist Christianity.

The philosophies of history espoused a pseudo utopia ultimately depriving the human person of freedom. For the Positivists, Hegelians and Marxists it was history that made the person and not the person who made history. These secular utopias as well as the theocratic utopia of Vladimir Soloviev possessed an inherent dynamism that led to a predetermined **telos or eschatos**. For Florovsky all of these utopias stripped man of his personhood and freedom. This was clearly manifested in the Marxist/Leninist utopia of the Soviet Union.

The exaltation of rationalism was for Florovsky the basis of “original sin.” Man’s rebellion against God was rooted in his choice to deify the powers of his own reasoning. This rebellion turned man away from an eternally unfolding communion with God.

⁴Trans. by Robert L. Nichols Vol.II.,p.294 of the Collected Works, vol. VI, Belmont, MA. 1987.

As utopias and reason became entrapped in their own logic there emerged a Christianity of the individual. Russian piety and mysticism, especially that of the post-Petrine Protestant vintage rendered the Church superfluous. Reason joined with the laws of the Old Covenant and nature were the means to salvation – a salvation of enlightenment and not a salvation of personal deification. Ethics replaced Christ and his Church. The intercommunion of persons within the ecclesial context was replaced by the solitary individual who became the measure or standard of all truth.

While “The Slyness of Reason” attempts to expose man’s self imposed imprisonment it also points to the plenitude of freedom, truth and deification within the perichoresis of persons.

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