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Orthodox Theology and Postmodernism: An Attempt to find Contact

Abstract

This article is an attempt to critically understand the relation of Orthodox theology to modern thinking, based on an analysis of the views of two prominent Orthodox theologians of the 20th century, Sergei Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky. The study shows that the vision of both thinkers is based on the Orthodox apophatic tradition, the specificity of which is the “epistemological openness” towards its contemporary philosophical discourse in each individual epoch. Based on



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the research, I argue that this specificity of the apophatic tradition provides a great opportunity to connect Orthodox theology with postmodern thinking.

Keywords

20th Century Orthodox Theology, Modern Philosophy, Apophaticism, Postmodernity, contingency.

1 Introduction: Modernity, Postmodernity and Modern Theology

Tensions between Religion and Modernity were considered to be something self-evident by most scholars of Western social theory of the 20th century.¹ Nowadays, after the postmodernity declared the end of “the great narratives,”² all the key concepts and narratives of Western social theory, including modernity, modernization or secularization, have been put in doubt.³ As Niklas Luhmann points out in his “Observations on Modernity,” the modern society in postmodernity has perceived the contingency of its “self-description.”⁴ For Luhmann, the main feature of postmodernity is contingency, that is the idea that everything that happens is neither necessary nor impossible, and therefore

¹ Cf. Karl Gabriel "Jenseits von Säkularisierung und Wiederkehr der Götter." *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 52/2008 (2008): pp. 9-15; see also: Christel Gärtner, Gert Pickel (eds.), *Schlüsselwerke der Religionssoziologie*, (Wiesbaden : Springer-Verlag, 2019), pp. 5-8.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³ Christel Gärtner, Gert Pickel (eds.), *Schlüsselwerke*, pp. 6-7.

⁴ Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen der Moderne* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1992), p. 7.

might be otherwise (“ist auch anders möglich”).⁵ It is perhaps no coincidence that this “quasi-theological”⁶ concept has suddenly embraced the realms of modern law, economics, and technology, as well as the political, social, and cultural sciences, and has almost unanimously been declared a meta-narrative of modernity.⁷

Although postmodernism (as well as modernism) is the offspring of European thinking, tensions between Western theological discourse and modern and postmodern philosophical discourse continues ever since.⁸ Western Christian churches have long been sceptical of modernity and modernist values.⁹ Postmodernism, which focusses on the alleged entire lack of

⁵ Niklas Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 187.

⁶ Niklas Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), p. 332.

⁷ See e.g. Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, p. 93; Hans Joas, “Das Zeitalter der Kontingenz,” in: Katrin Toenls, Ulrich Willem (eds.) *Politik und Kontingenz* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012), pp. 25-37; Markus Holzinger, *Kontingenz in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft: Dimensionen eines Leitbegriffs moderner Sozialtheorie* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015); Michael Makropoulos, “Kontingenz Aspekte einer theoretischen Semantik der Moderne,” *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 45/3 (2004), pp. 369-399; Richard Rorty, Christa Krüger, *Kontingenz, Ironie und Solidarität*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993); Michael Th. Greven, *Kontingenz und Dezision: Beiträge zur Analyse der politischen Gesellschaft* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2000).

⁸ See James K. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 18-19; Russell Ronald Reno, “The Return of Catholic Anti-Modernism,” *First Things* 18 (2015), <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/06/the-return-of-catholic-anti-modernism> (accessed 22 July 2020)

⁹ See e.g. Darrell Jodock (ed.), *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

confidence and contingency, has often been demonized by modern Western theologians and described as “anti-humanism,”¹⁰ “anti-Christianity,”¹¹ “moral relativism,”¹² etc. However, there also are more constructive approaches, which are predominantly imbued with existential, phenomenological, and deconstructionist philosophical traditions.¹³

On this background, it is not surprising that Orthodox theology and the Orthodox Church, which for a long time has been cut off from Western thinking due to historical and political circumstances, are sceptical of modern and, moreover, postmodern thinking. The Orthodox Church is often criticized in modern scientific and public discourses for its “anti-modernist”, “anti-Western”, “anti-rationalist” sentiments.¹⁴ Many scholars also

¹⁰ Thomas Storck, *Postmodernism: Catastrophe or Opportunity-or Both?*

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=4061> (accessed 2 July 2020); Kenneth L. Schmitz, “Postmodernism and the Catholic Tradition,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 73/2, (1999), pp. 233-252.

¹¹ See Brian D. Ingrassia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God’s Shadow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6; See also William Grassie, “Postmodernism: What One Needs to Know,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 32/1 (1997), pp. 83-94.

¹² See David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999); Josh McDowell, Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Carol Stream IL: Tyndale House, 1998), p. 208.

¹³ See e.g. Carl A. Raschke, *Postmodern Theology: A Biopic*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017); Smith, *Who’s Afraid*.

¹⁴ See Vasilios Makrides, “Orthodox Anti-Westernism Today: A Hindrance to European Integration?,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 9/3 (2009), pp. 209-224; “_,” “The Barbarian West”: A Form of Orthodox Christian Anti-Western Critique,” in: Andrii Krawchuk, Thomas Bremer (eds.) *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness* (New York: Palgrave

criticize its tendency toward nationalism;¹⁵ they criticize the collaboration of local Orthodox Churches with the state, which seems to be contrary to the principles of modern secular state.¹⁶ In modern debates, issues such as the role of the Orthodox Church in social work, its attitude towards human rights, European values are also actively discussed.¹⁷

Macmillan, 2014), pp. 141-158; Kristina Stoeckl, "Modernity and its Critique in Twentieth Century Russian Orthodox Thought," *Studies in East European Thought* 58 (2006), pp. 243-269; See also: Vasilios N. Makrides, "Orthodox Christianity, Modernity and Postmodernity: Overview, Analysis and Assessment", *Religion, State & Society* 40:3-4 (2012) pp. 248-285, 258.

¹⁵ George E. Demacopoulos, Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Orthodox Naming of the Other: A postcolonial approach," in: George E. Demacopoulos, Aristotle Papanikolaou (eds.), *Orthodox Constructions of the West* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 1-22, 11; Vasilios N. Makrides, "Why are Orthodox Churches particularly prone to Nationalization and even to Nationalism," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54, 3/4 (2013), pp. 325-352.

¹⁶ See e.g. Daniel P. Payne, "Spiritual security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or cooptation?," *Journal of Church and State*, 52/4 (2010), 712-727; Nikos Chrysoloras, "Why Orthodoxy? Religion and Nationalism in Greek Political Culture." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 4/1 (2004), pp. 40-61.

¹⁷ See e.g. Giuseppe Giordan, Siniša Zrinščak (eds.), *Global Eastern Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics and Human Rights* (Cham: Springer, 2020); Vasilios N. Makrides, Jennifer Wasmuth, Stefan Kube (eds.), *Christentum und Menschenrechte in Europa: Perspektiven und Debatten in Ost und West, Erfurter Studien zur Kulturgeschichte des Orthodoxen Christentums* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2016); Andrii Krawchuk, Thomas Bremer (eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness: Values, Self-Reflection, Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Alexander Agadjanian, "Liberal individual and Christian culture: Russian Orthodox Teaching on Human Rights in Social Theory Perspective," *Religion, State, and Society*, 38/2 (2010), pp. 97-113.

Ironically enough, there is no official document that would express an unified position of the Orthodox Church on any of the above issues.¹⁸ The Orthodox Church has neither officially defined a unified position on modern society and modern values, nor on the status of the Pan-Orthodox Church of Crete 2016 and its resolutions¹⁹, nor even on the issue of Ukrainian autocephaly.²⁰ Furthermore, the Orthodox Church does not have an unified position on its own internal ecclesiastical canonical issues.²¹ However, these “open positions” of the Church are not the result of the growing complexity of modern society. ‘Vagueness’, ‘lack of system’, and ‘leaving things open’ deeply permeate through both Orthodox theology²², and its attitudes toward

¹⁸ See Vasilios Makrides, "Why does the Orthodox Church Lack Systematic Social Teaching?," *Skepsis. A Journal for Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Research* 23 (2013), pp. 281-312.

¹⁹ Răzvan Perșa, "The Canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church and the Holy and Great Council between Reception and Rejection," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai-Theologia Orthodoxa* 62/1 (2017), pp. 39-72; Vasilios Makrides, "Zwischen Tradition und Erneuerung. Das Panorthodoxe Konzil 2016 angesichts der Modernen Welt." *Catholica* 71/1 (2017), pp. 18-32.

²⁰ See Regina Elsner, "Orthodox Church of Ukraine: Challenges and Risks of a New Beginning," *Russian Analytical Digest* 231 (2019), pp. 9-13.

²¹ Lewis J. Patsavos, *The Canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church*, http://canonlaw.orthodoxfaith.net.au/index_files/PAGE2.htm (accessed 2 July 2020); Vasilios Makrides, "Why does", p. 298.

²² See John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 79; Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox dogmatic theology: A Concise Exposition*, trans. and ed. Hieromonk Seraphim Rose (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2009), p. 9, See also: Norman Russell, "Modern Greek Theologians and the Greek Fathers," *Philosophy and Theology* 18/1 (2006), pp. 77-92, 78.

the issues of different social, political, or cultural significance.²³ This seems even more contrasting and paradoxical on the background of the strictly defined dogmatic teaching of Orthodox theology.

The present study is an attempt to reconsider this ‘unsystematic’ or ‘inconsistent’ relationship to modern thinking and modern values of Orthodox theology, based on the analysis of the ideas of two prominent representatives of the 20th century Orthodox theological movement, Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944) and Georges Florovsky (1893-1979). I will try to present the aspects of ‘inconsistency’ and ‘ambivalence’ in the attitude of these thinkers towards modern thinking, which, on the one hand, calls for a creative interpretation and re-actualisation of Orthodox theology in the light of modern thinking and modern historical context, but, on the other hand, excludes the possibility of any logical, systematic, or methodological link between philosophical (rational) thinking and theology.

I will try to show that this ‘contradiction,’ or ‘inconsistency,’ does not only permeates the attitude of the Orthodoxy towards modernity but is entirely specific of the Orthodox perception of world, being based on apophatic tradition, that is, negative theology. Negative theology may be described through its specific ‘openness’ to the process of cognition; a kind of ‘perspectivism’ that arises from the assumption that cognition is not only an intellectual experience based on logical causality, but rather is the fact that human reason can also cognize through spiritual contemplation²⁴. Thus, the apophatic tradition evokes a “cogni-

²³ See Vasilios Makrides, “Why does”, pp. 281-312; Efthymios Nicolaidis, Eudoxie Delli, Nikolaos Livanos, Kostas Tampakis, George Vlahakis, “Science and Orthodox Christianity: An Overview”, *Isis* 107/3 (2016): pp. 542-566.

²⁴ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 77.

tive attitude” that constantly calls on the philosophical reason to ‘open up the perspective’ by ‘reminding’ it of the ‘possibility of being otherwise’ (“Auch-anders-möglich-Sein”). In this sense, the apophatic attitude comes very close to the consciousness of contingency that is characteristic of the postmodern world. The starting point for contingency is that everything happens and is known in the light of a possible alternative. Thus, what can be considered ‘unsystematic’, ‘contradictory’, or as ‘irrationalism’ from the perspective of modernism, becomes visible in a completely different dimension in the postmodern perspective. This view opens the way for us to understand and analyse the specificity of the positions and approaches of the Orthodox Church on various issues from the perspective of this ‘epistemological openness.’²⁵

The fact that contingency is really relevant in modern reality is evidenced by the current events caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is surprisingly consistent with the metaphor chosen by Niklas Luhmann for contingency: “Midas Gold of Contemporary Life,”²⁶ which, like COVID-19, is spread by one touch. The contingent reality and self-perception created in the conditions of the pandemic are really like “discourse without a future”.²⁷ On the background of this pandemic recent events have become evident to the modern public, which switched to ‘online’ platforms, these specific ‘indeterminacies’ or ‘inconsistencies’ of the Orthodox Church, whose response to the pandemic can be described as a contingent spectrum of decisions in which “mutually exclusive” decisions are placed side by side “without any hindrance”, for example: on the one hand, the

²⁵ See Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 60.

²⁶ Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, p. 94.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

closure of churches, the cessation of worship, and the postponement of the Easter (Greece, Romania), and on the other hand, giving Eucharist by a common spoon and maintenance of public worship in a completely unchanging manner (Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia)²⁸.

2 Methodology

In the present paper, I will analyse the vision of Sergei Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky on the tradition of the Holy Fathers and their relation to modern thinking in the light of the apophatic tradition. However, I consider Apophaticism from the perspective of both the philosophical and the theological traditions.

On the one hand, I will try to show that Orthodox apophatic teaching itself (which is often characterized as an anti-rationalist, or anti-philosophical approach²⁹) is in fact always meant to enter into dialogue with its contemporary philosophical visions and categories, and to define itself by these philosophical categories. This becomes evident in Ideas of both Bulgakov and Florovsky each of whom tries to present Orthodox Apophaticism from different traditions of Western philosophy. In this section, I discuss the differences of opinions between these thinkers on the relationship between modern thinking

²⁸ Catherine Newman, "Orthodox Christians celebrate Easter amid COVID-19 pandemic" <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-19/Bulgarian-Christians-celebrate-Easter-amid-COVID-19-pandemic-POOLofstoI/index.html> (accessed 10 July 2020).

²⁹ See Brian Duignan (ed.), *History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy: From 500 CE to 1500 CE*. (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2011), 27-28; See also: William Franke, "Apophysis and the Turn of Philosophy to Religion: From Neoplatonic Negative Theology to Postmodern Negation of Theology," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60/ 1/3(2006), pp. 61-76.

and the Orthodox theology (the tradition of the Holy Fathers). I will try to show that this difference of opinion, often interpreted as “pro-Western” and “anti-Western” narratives, is largely due to the influence of different Western philosophical traditions on them rather than their pro-Western, or anti-Western-based theology.

On the other hand, I will try to show that on the background of these differences of opinion, in the attitude of both thinkers we can reveal their unifying specific ‘openness’ to the process of cognition and interpretation, based on Orthodox apophatic teaching. This ‘openness’ is manifested in the specific ‘inconsistency’ and ‘ambivalence’ expressed in thoughts of these two thinkers, and to some extent makes secondary the difference of opinion that emerges between these two thinkers in terms of their philosophical visions. I will try to show that this specific ‘openness’ of the cognitive perspective is particularly visible from the perspective of postmodern thinking, in which it can be described through the concepts of *contingency*.

Understanding the Apophaticism from both a philosophical and a theological perspective can be seen as a methodological guideline of the present study. Based on this, I will try to look in depth at the specifics of this ‘lack of system’ and ‘inconsistency’ and show that Apophaticism also enters into dialogue with postmodern thinking, as latter opens new dimensions of reading of these specific ‘indeterminacy’.

In the present study, I refer to the works of Sergei Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky, and on their vision of modern philosophy, the tradition of the Holy Fathers, and an understanding of Apophaticism.³⁰ I may also refer to the material that the sec-

³⁰ Sergei Bulgakov, *Unfading light: Contemplations and speculations* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012);

ondary literature offers on the theological visions developed by these two thinkers. Furthermore, I endorse the view of the German sociologist and system theorist Niklas Luhmann, as well as that of the sociologist of religion, Hans Joas, and other authors' views on the phenomenon of contingency and its importance in Western postmodern thinking.

3 20th Century Orthodox Theology in Modern Discourse

The renaissance of Orthodox theology in the 20th century emerges from the desire for self-determination of Orthodox theology in relation to modern thinking and Western philosophy. It is associated with the names of two theological-philosophical movements that are closely related to each other, both historically and ideologically. One is a theological movement called the "Russian School"³¹ (also known as the "Russian Religious Renaissance"). The other one is the theological movement known as its successor, the "Neo-Patristic Synthesis." The 'Russian School' was founded at the end of the 19th

The Lamb of God (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008); Georges Florovsky, *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, Volume 1: Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, MA: Nordland 1972); *Volume 3: Creation and Redemption* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1976); *Volume 4: Aspects of Church History* (Belmont, MA: Nordland 1975); Georges Florovsky, 'Spor o nemetskom idealizme', *Put' 25 /12* (1930), pp. 51–80.

³¹ See Rowan Williams, "Eastern Orthodox Theology," in: David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 572–587, 572; Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Orthodox Theology in the Twentieth Century", in: Staale J. Kristiansen, Svein Rise (eds.), *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 53–64, 53–54.

century.³² Its main representatives are Russian philosophers and theologians who emigrated to Paris, including Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky, etc. The name of the representatives of this movement is connected with the establishment of the so-called “Paris Theological Seminary”, which was later joined by members of the movement known as the ‘Neo-Patristic Synthesis’: Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, John Meyendorff, Dumitru Stăniloae and others. According to a common view, the name ‘Neo-Patristic Synthesis,’ was given by Georges Florovsky to his theological program in order to separate its predecessor from the Theological-Philosophical School.³³ However, raising the issue in this way does not change the fact that the name of the Florovsky program itself reflects the main spirit that connects it with the predecessors – theologians.³⁴ The idea of ‘synthesis’ of the teaching of the Holy Fathers with the Western philosophy is first found in one of the first representatives of the ‘Russian School’, Vladimir Soloviev.³⁵ Despite of the differences of their opinions, the representatives of the ‘Russian School’ and ‘Neo-Patristic Synthesis’

³² Aristotele Papanikolaou, “Contemporary Orthodox Theology,” in: John A. McGuckin (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 142-146, 142.

³³ Aristotele Papanikolaou, “Contemporary”, 143; Rowan Williams, “Eastern”, pp. 574, 581.

³⁴ See Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 25, 38-39; Aristotele Papanikolaou, “Eastern Orthodox Theology” in: Chad Meister, James Beilby (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought* (London: Routledge 2013), pp. 538-548, 541.

³⁵ Dmitrij Belkin, *Die Rezeption V.S.Solov'evs in Deutschland [The reception of V. S. Solovyov in Germany]*, PhD Dissertation, Tübingen 2000, <http://hdl.handle.net/10900/46149> (accessed 10 July 2020), p. 15.

have in common the re-actualization of the tradition of the Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church.³⁶

One of the reasons why these two schools have long been considered as opposed to each other within the modern theological discourse refers to their affiliation with the Orthodox canonical tradition. Representatives of the 'Russian School', Vladimir Soloviev, Sergei Bulgakov and Pavel Florensky, often stay beyond the canonical tradition because of their sharp 'philosophical orientation,' while representatives of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis are often considered the 'authentic' successors of the patristic tradition³⁷. However, in recent discussions, such a distinction is less important and, in some cases, even rejected.³⁸

³⁶ Andrew Louth, "Sergei Bulgakov," in: Staale J. Kristiansen, Svein Rise (eds.), *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 341-351; Viorel Coman, "Revisiting the Agenda of the Orthodox Neo-Patristic Movement," *The Downside Review* 136/2 (2018), pp. 99-117; Calinic Berger, "Florovsky's " Mind of the Fathers" and the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Dumitru Stăniloae," *The Journal of Eastern Christian studies* 69/1-4 (2017), pp. 25-50, 26; See also Rowan Williams, "Eastern", 572; Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Orthodox Theology in the Twentieth Century," pp. 53-64.

³⁷ Cf. Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Eastern", 538; Brandon Galla-her, "Waiting for the Barbarians': Identity and Polemicism in the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky," *Modern Theology* 27/4 (2011), pp. 659-691, 660.

³⁸ Paul Gavrilyuk, Florovsky, 3; Calinic Berger, "Florovsky's", 26; Matthew Baker, "Theology Reasons'-in History: Neo-patristic Synthesis and the Renewal of Theological Rationality," *Theologia* 81 (2010), pp. 81-118; Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Orthodox Theology in the Twentieth Century," pp. 57- 58; Nikolaos Asproulis, "Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of Diokleia, between the Neo-patristic synthesis and the Russian Religious Renaissance: an example of the reception of the patristic tradition", *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 19/4 (2019), pp. 212-229.

While from the perspective of Orthodox canon, 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis' is given a certain advantage in terms of proximity to the patristic tradition, by contrast, many modern scholars prefer the 'Russian School' for its proximity to modern philosophical thinking.³⁹ Most scholars agree that the 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis' created the dominant theological paradigm within which Orthodox theology still invokes today.⁴⁰ However, the assessment of the activities of its representatives is still a controversial topic and for the most part it is considered in the context of the confrontation with the activities of the 'Russian School'.⁴¹ One of the main controversial issues relates the main task of 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis': is it about to understand the theological tradition in relation to the historical context of their modern era and thus bring it closer to the modern thinking tradition or, conversely, to restore the authentic tradition of the Holy Fathers through the "liberation" from Western influences and Western culture ('Babylonian captivity')? For example, Georges Florovsky considers a program of his 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis' to be "more than just a collection of Patristic sayings or statements." He argues that it should be rather the 'creative reassessment' of the "Mind of the Fathers" to be "addressed to the

³⁹ Cf. Matthew Baker, "Theology", 81; Paul Valliere, "Russian Religious Thought and the Future of Orthodox Theology," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 45 (2001), pp. 227-241, 232; Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "From the "Return to the Fathers" to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54/1 (2010), pp. 5-36.

⁴⁰ Brandon Gallaher, "Waiting", p. 659; Gavriilyuk, Florovsky, p. viii; Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "From the Return", p. 7.

⁴¹ Brandon Gallaher, 'Waiting', p. 660; Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "From the "Return", p. 7.

new age, with its own problems and queries.”⁴² But in other cases, Florovsky sees the liberation of Eastern Orthodox theology from Western “Babylonian captivity” and “pseudomorphosis” as the main task of ‘Neo-Patristic Synthesis.’⁴³ Whereas the first formulation represents a definitely modernist idea, the second one sounds, indeed, quite anti-Western and anti-modernist.

Consequently, some scholars believe that the ‘Neo-Patristic Synthesis’, as opposed to the representatives of the ‘Russian School’, established the anti-Western and anti-modernist paradigm of Orthodox self-determination, which still influences modern Orthodox identity.⁴⁴ Among them are scholars who analyse the anti-Western sentiments of ‘Neo-Patristic Synthesis’ from the perspective of a postcolonial approach. They link the attempt of representatives of ‘Neo-Patristics’ to portray the uniqueness of their tradition with their colonial (Ottoman and Soviet) experience.⁴⁵ On the other hand, there are scholars with the opposite opinion who do not support the strict separation of these two schools and believe that one cannot unequivocally call the ‘Neo-Patristic Synthesis’ an anti-Western or anti-modern movement.⁴⁶

⁴² See Andrew Blane, *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), p. 154; See also: Georges Florovsky, *Bible*, pp. 105-120, 105-108, 114;

⁴³ Georges Florovsky, *Aspects*, pp. 157-182.

⁴⁴ Cf. Brandon Gallaher, “Waiting”, pp. 660-663; Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “From the Return”, pp. 12, 20-21; Cf. Aristotele Papanikolaou, “Eastern”, George E. Demacopoulos, Aristotele Papanikolaou, “Orthodox Naming”, pp. 1-22.

⁴⁵ George E. Demacopoulos, Aristotele Papanikolaou, “Orthodox Naming”, pp. 1-22.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Paul Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky*, pp. vii, 3, 9-11; Calinic Berger, “Florovsky’s”, p. 26; Matthew Baker, “Neopatristic Synthe-

Remarkably, the Orthodox Church does not have a common position on this separation either. One of the most famous scholars of Orthodox theology, Paul Gavriilyuk, points to Sergei Bulgakov, and that there are mutually exclusive views within the Orthodox Church regarding the assessment of his activities: On the one hand, Bulgakov's teachings have been repeatedly accused by the Russian Orthodox Church of heresy, and on the other hand, there is a small group of Orthodox enthusiasts, who within the Patriarchate of Constantinople, consider the issue of canonization of Bulgakov as a saint.⁴⁷ There is an ambivalent attitude not only towards the representatives of the 'Russian School', but also towards the representatives of the 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis', who are generally considered to be thinkers closer to the Orthodox canonical tradition.⁴⁸

4 Apophatic approach as a methodological landmark

Modern academic discussions on Orthodox Theology of the 20th Century focus on the understanding (hermeneutics) and inter-

sis and Ecumenism: Toward the "Reintegration" of Christian Tradition," in: Andrii Krawchuk, Thomas Bremer (eds.) *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 235-260; Coman, "Revisiting", pp. 99-117; Matthew Baker, "Theology Reasons", pp. 81-118; Louth, "Sergei Bulgakov," pp. 341-351.

⁴⁷ Paul Gavriilyuk, "Bulgakov's Account of Creation: Neglected Aspects, Critics and Contemporary Relevance." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 4 (2015), pp. 450-463, 450.

⁴⁸ Cf. Athanasius Yevtich, "Fr. George Florovsky on The Boundaries of the Church," trans. Nicholas Pantelopoulos. <https://orthodoxethos.com/post/fr-george-florovsky-on-the-boundaries-of-the-church> (accessed 15 July 2020).

pretation of the tradition of the Holy Fathers.⁴⁹ In the view of the authors of both the 'Russian School' and the 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis', the Orthodox identity and its relation to the modern world are linked to the understanding of the tradition of the Holy Fathers.

According to the theologian Efthymios Nicolaidis, the legacy of the Holy Fathers has always been one of the main landmarks of the crisis period, according to which Byzantine theologians and thinkers tested the validity of spiritual, theological or philosophical visions of this or that era. However, Nicolaidis also points out that the attitude of the Holy Fathers themselves has never been consistent and unambiguous with regard to the philosophical tradition, in particular, in relation to Hellenistic or Pagan philosophy. Moreover, their attitude was often contradictory.⁵⁰

It is noteworthy that the call for a 'Return to the Holy Fathers' in the 20th century Orthodox theological movement is also linked to the self-determination of Orthodoxy in relation to the modern philosophy. In the present article, the views of the two thinkers Sergei Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky can also be considered as being contradictory to each other. However, their approaches are problematic from a methodological point of view. This problem is related to the eclecticism, ambiguity, and lack of system of these authors' thinking, which is reflected in the attempt to reconcile philosophical categories and methods with theological contents and theological approaches.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Cf. John A. McGuckin, "Patristics," in: John A. McGuckin (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 440-442; Pomazansky, "Orthodox", p. 9; Russell, "Modern", p. 77.

⁵⁰ Efthymios Nicolaidis *et al.*, "Science", pp. 548-549.

⁵¹ Cf. e.g. Rowan Williams, "Eastern," pp. 577, 582-583; Louth, "Bulgakov", 345; Paul Gavrilyuk, "Georges Florovsky", pp. 220, 263-264;

This eclecticism and contradiction is not only characteristic of the way of thinking of these theologians, but also of the specificity of the Orthodox patristic tradition in general.⁵² This specificity is often explained by the apophatic tradition of Orthodox theology, which differs substantially from the method of philosophical, rational reasoning.⁵³

Apophaticism, or negative theology, is a Christian teaching based on Neoplatonic philosophy (Plotinus), first found in Cappadocian Fathers in the IV century, and further developed systematically in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (V-VI centuries). In the Byzantine patristic tradition, we find the latest manifestation of Apophaticism in the doctrine of Gregory Palamas (XIV century). Apophatic theology, influenced mainly by the works of Dionysius the Areopagite,⁵⁴ is also developing in the Western Christian tradition (both scholastic and mystical), with thinkers such as John Scotus Eriugena, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa and Jakob Böhme. According to apophatic theology, the cognition of God is impossible in terms of notions, insofar as each notion makes its infinity definite, thus, the cognition of God is possible precisely through

Brandon Gallaher, "Georges Florovsky," in: Staale J. Kristiansen, Svein Rise (eds.), *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 353-372;

⁵² See Efthymios Nicolaidis *et al.*, "Science", pp. 547-548, Brandon Gallaher, "Waiting", 666-667; Matthew Baker, "Theology Reasons", p. 88; Georges Florovsky, *Creation*, pp. 21-40, 33.

⁵³ Cf. Matthew Baker, "Theology Reasons", 88; Vasilios Makrides, "Why does", pp. 297-299; Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox dogmatic theology: The Experience of God, Vol.1: Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), pp. 95-96.

⁵⁴ See Brian Duignan (ed.), *History of Philosophy*, pp. 27-31.

the negation of these definitions.⁵⁵ However, Apophaticism is not understood as a ‘denial’ of cataphatic (i.e., affirmative) theology, but as a ‘replenishment’ of it.⁵⁶ What is remarkable about the Eastern Orthodox apophatic tradition is its ‘hard-to-name’, ‘paradoxical’⁵⁷ content. If Apophaticism in the Western philosophical and theological tradition is predominantly speculative as a way of perception of God (*via negativa*), which uses negation as its ‘method,’⁵⁸ Apophaticism in the Eastern Christian tradition is not only a certain method, a theoretical category of cognition, but also a kind of “spiritual state,” “direct experience,”⁵⁹ “the existential attitude,”⁶⁰ which permeates theology and whose immediate purpose is ‘not to deny the content of any evidence, but to go beyond proving and refuting that content’.⁶¹ In the Eastern Christian tradition, Apophaticism is often under-

⁵⁵ Justin M. Lasser, “Apophaticism,” in: John A. McGuckin (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 38-39; Nicholas Bunnin, Jiyuan Yu (eds.), “Negative Theology,” in: *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 465-466; Elizabeth A. Livingstone (ed.), “Apophatic Theology,” in: *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 30.

⁵⁶ See Bunnin, Yu, “Negative Theology”, pp. 465-466; Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox*, p. 95.

⁵⁷ Justin M. Lasser, “Apophaticism,” pp. 38-39.

⁵⁸ Cf. Christos Yannaras, “On the Absence”, pp. 59-60.

⁵⁹ Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox*, pp. 95-96.

⁶⁰ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), pp. 39, 238; Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002), p. 230.

⁶¹ Vladimir Cvetković, “Maximus the Confessor’s View on Participation Reconsidered”, in: Daniel Haynes (ed.), *A Saint for East and West: The Thought of St. Maximus Confessor in Eastern and Western Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019).

stood as a personal relationship with God, man's 'mystical union with God,' which does not allow the mind to 'intellectualize' the divine revelation.⁶² Thus, Apophaticism is often seen "as a check on kataphatic or assertive theology or philosophy."⁶³

The rise of Apophaticism in modern Orthodox theological discourse is linked to the representatives of the 20th century theological movement,⁶⁴ who in turn were inspired by the Apophaticism of Gregory Palamas and the idea of re-actualizing it in the context of the modern era of his teachings.

5 Apophaticism in the Thinking of 20th Century Orthodox Theology

Most scholars of Orthodox theology believe that the new theological movement, especially the 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis', transformed an Apophaticism into a determinative category of the identity of Orthodoxy, as well as a source of understanding of the patristic tradition.⁶⁵

As far as Apophaticism is associated with refraining from rational reasoning in the Eastern Christian tradition, the special role given to this tradition by modern scholars is often interpreted as a tendency to separate Orthodox theology from West-

⁶² Vlasimir Lossky, *Mystical*, p. 28; Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Eastern", p. 544; Rowan Williams, "Eastern," pp. 579-580.

⁶³ Justin M. Lasser, "Apophaticism", pp. 38-39.

⁶⁴ See Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Contemporary", p. 144; Gavriilyuk, Georges Florovsky, pp. 143, 157.

⁶⁵ Cf. Matthew Baker, "Theology Reasons", 81; Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Eastern", p. 544; Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), pp. 32-33; Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "From the Return."

ern, philosophical tradition of thinking and its anti-rationalism.⁶⁶

However, we must consider one important aspect of this tradition. The method by which both the Holy Fathers and modern Russian theologians discuss Apophaticism and highlight its special role in theology is not apophatic, but rather cataphatic, that is, based on positive (affirmative) reasoning. As Aristotele Papanikolaou points out about Apophaticism of one of the representatives of Neo-Patristic Synthesis, Vladimir Lossky, "Ironically, Lossky the anti-rationalist presented a well-reasoned, highly speculative apophatic theology."⁶⁷ Indeed, all that is debated in the reasoning of these authors about Apophaticism is, in fact, a cataphatic way on Apophaticism. Cataphatic way in itself is nothing more than a positive discussion of theological truths, which are mainly based on the categories or methods borrowed from philosophy.⁶⁸ Thus, any attempt to discuss Apophaticism from the outset requires its linking to philosophical categories.⁶⁹

Indeed, all that is to be found in the theological reasoning of Bulgakov and Florovsky at the same time resonates with the philosophical categories, visions, and representations of their modern epoch. The method of reasoning of both of them, as well as the conceptual apparatus, is largely nourished by modern thinking. Their 'spoken language' is built on the categories of their modern philosophy, such as: antinomy, synthesis, sub-

⁶⁶ Cf. Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "From the Return"; George E. Demacopoulos, Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Orthodox Naming," p. 16; Valliere, "Russian Religious Thought", 299-300; Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Eastern", pp. 544-545.

⁶⁷ Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Eastern", p. 545.

⁶⁸ See Efthymios Nicolaidis *et al.*, "Science", pp. 548-549; Matthew Baker, "Theology Reasons", p. 88.

⁶⁹ See Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence*, p. 60.

jectivism, existentialism, historicity, historicism, etc. It is on the basis of these philosophical categories that Bulgakov and Florovsky try to convey theological content and offer synthetic concepts such as “Church as the Presence of Christ in History”⁷⁰ (Bulgakov), “Antinomic Reality of History and Eschatology”⁷¹ (Bulgakov), “Catholic Consciousness of Holy Fathers”⁷² (Florovsky), “The Existential Character of the Holy Fathers’ Tradition”⁷³ (Florovsky), “Christ as a Historical Person”⁷⁴ (Florovsky), “Pseudomorphosis of Eastern Theology”⁷⁵ (Florovsky), and others.

As many scholars point out, the influence of the ideas of German idealism on the Russian religious renaissance is particularly important.⁷⁶ Theologian Rowan Williams notes that the direction of the development of Russian religious thinking in the 20th century was largely determined by the philosophy of Hegel and Schelling. At the same time, Williams emphasizes the influence of the ideas of Neoplatonism and German mysticism on the representatives of German idealism. “German idealism arrived in Russia in close connection with German mysticism – both the Catholic mysticism of the medieval and post-medieval Rhineland and the quasi-hermetic Protestantism of Jakob Böhme.”⁷⁷ Neoplatonism and Germanic mysticism, as mentioned above,

⁷⁰ Sergei Bulgakov, *The Lamb*, p. 409.

⁷¹ Sergei Bulgakov, *Unfading*, p. 207.

⁷² Georges Florovsky, *Bible*, p. 44.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁷⁵ Georges Florovsky, *Aspects*, p. 21.

⁷⁶ Aristotele Papanikolaou, “Contemporary”, p. 142; Rowan Williams, “Eastern,” p. 572; George E. Demacopoulos, Aristotele Papanikolaou, “Orthodox Naming,” p. 14; Paul Gavrilyuk, Florovsky, pp. 14-15, 96.

⁷⁷ Rowan Williams, “Eastern,” p. 572.

are the main sources of the Western apophatic tradition. Thus, it should come as no surprise that their influence on the philosophical thinking of German idealism also resonated with the Orthodox apophatic tradition of Russian theology. Consequently, it is conceivable that the idea of the re-actualization of Apophaticism in 20th-century Orthodox theology is not only based on the theological tradition of “returning to the Holy Fathers”, but also can be motivated by philosophical ideas introduced through German idealism. In this sense, the religious renaissance of the 20th century can be said to be a kind of a meeting point between the Western and Eastern traditions of Apophaticism.

On this background, it is difficult to discern where the line runs in Russian theological thinking between these two traditions: which ideas come from the West and which ones come from the East. In this context, the figure of Gregory Palamas and his doctrine are a kind of watershed, as the teaching of Palamas is linked to one of the most recent dogmatic disputes between the Western and the Eastern Christianity. The Western Church did not canonically recognize the doctrine of Palamas. Perhaps this is one of the additional reasons why the re-actualization of Gregory Palamas’ Apophaticism by Russian theologians provoked anti-Western associations. Palamas’ doctrine is related to the ancient distinction between the essence and energies of God. Whereas the essence of God remains completely unknown and inaccessible to man, man’s cognition of God, his deification (*theosis*), is possible through the sharing of divine energies, that is in an apophatic way, through mystical union with God. This knowledge of God, according to Palamas, “becomes recognizable as not only an “intellectual” experience of the mind alone but also as a “spiritual sense,” which conveys a perception neither purely “intellectual” nor purely material. In Christ, God

assumed the whole of a man: soul and body; and the man as such was deified.”⁷⁸

Thus, Russian theologians try to construct the cataphatic way of the Apophaticism of Palamas, through modern philosophical concepts and categories, which, in turn, are imbued with the tradition of Western Apophaticism. In doing so they try not lose the basic idea that underlie Palamas’ teachings: their attempt is to create synthetic concepts that go beyond this “intellectual experience” that at the same time does not completely leave the realm of the reason.

In this endeavour, each thinker views the task of re-actualizing the Apophaticism of Palamas from a different philosophical tradition. If Bulgakov is closer to the tradition of German idealism,⁷⁹ and tries to find a matching Apophaticism in the metaphysical dimension, Florovsky looks at the idea of “Christian philosophy” with more scepticism that is characteristic of existentialism, and, following in the footsteps of Kierkegaard, sees the first task of the re-actualization of Palamas’ Apophaticism in escaping “the intellectualism” characteristic of German idealism.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine*, p. 77.

⁷⁹ See Paul Gavrilyuk, *Florovsky*, p. 119; Paul Gavrilyuk, “Bulgakov, Sergius (Sergei) (1871–1944)”, in: John A. McGuckin (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 77-78; Louth, “Sergei Bulgakov,” pp. 341-351, 341.

⁸⁰ See. Georges Florovsky, “Spor”, pp. 51–80.

6 The idea of Apophaticism and its re-actualization with Sergei Bulgakov

Sergei Bulgakov devotes the First Section of his first systematic work *Unfading Light* entirely to apophatic theology, in which he reviews both Eastern and Western traditions of Apophaticism. It is noteworthy that in Western Apophaticism he also discusses the philosophy of Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling. In this review, the author's focus is on the specifics of Western Apophaticism, in relation to which and in the light of which Bulgakov wants to highlight the specifics of Eastern Apophaticism. For Bulgakov, the specificity of Western Apophaticism, as well as the Hegel and Schelling's interpretations of Apophaticism, is that their systems close the process of cognizing God in the speculative, intellectual realm and leave no place beyond the reason, due to which God is no longer transcendental, but becomes completely immanent to the human reason.⁸¹ Bulgakov notes on Hegel's interpretation of Apophaticism: "If there is a mystery in Divinity or ignorance about it, it is only because it has not succeeded in completely revealing itself — in generating itself in the world process or basing itself in the totality of logical thinking."⁸²

This aspect reflects for Bulgakov the main difference between the Western and the Eastern apophatic traditions, which can be traced back to the teaching of Palamas. The specificity of Western speculative Apophaticism, which, as Bulgakov points out, is still based on Meister Eckhart,⁸³ is the 'transfer' of God and the process of his cognition entirely to the realm of the speculative

⁸¹ Sergei Bulgakov, *Unfading*, pp. 145, 151-152.

⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 151.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, pp. 167-170.

reason,⁸⁴ where there is no difference between essence and energy, the unknowable and knowable; There is no difference between a creator and a creature.⁸⁵ Thus, Western Apophaticism leads to the idea of rational cognition of God: "Here God lets himself be known, he showed what he is; here he is disclosed."⁸⁶ It is noteworthy that Bulgakov criticizes Soloviev for the same thing as the representatives of German idealism: "In this respect Vladimir Soloviev unexpectedly draws near them, and, in general, sins by the excessive rationalism in his theology."⁸⁷

Bulgakov actually unites the whole of Western Apophaticism under one philosophical tradition, one model of thinking: "Without exaggeration one can say that in Eckhart the whole spiritual development of the new Germany is deposited as in a kernel, with its Reformation, mysticism, philosophy, and art: in Eckhart is included the possibility of Luther, Böhme, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Hartmann-Drews, Wagner, and even Rudolph Steiner"⁸⁸

As we can see, Bulgakov is trying to show that the Western Apophaticism cannot take us beyond the "intellectual realm" to which Palamas refers: "Here in principle there is no place for that "inaccessible light" in which God lives. Here there are no boundaries separating the people from Mount Sinai, where even the "friend of God" Moses is given to see only "the back of God."⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Ibidem, pp. 151-152, 170

⁸⁵ Ibidem, p. 145.

⁸⁶ Ibidem, pp. 151-152.

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 152.

⁸⁸ Ibidem, p. 170.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, p. 151.

Although Bulgakov's attempt to distinguish between Western and Eastern Apophaticism can be considered successful, he himself is inclined to turn Apophaticism into theological-philosophical concepts. Bulgakov tries to build Palamas' Apophaticism in the form of philosophical metaphysics based on sophiology (at the time developed by Soloviev).⁹⁰ In this sense, Bulgakov still remains somewhat in the tradition of German idealism. It was Bulgakov's sophiology that became the main subject of criticism by representatives of Neo-Patristic Synthesis, Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky. According to the assessment of the latter, this doctrine eluded the Orthodox theological dogma and tradition, as its origins were not Christological but philosophical.⁹¹

7 Re-actualization of the idea of Apophaticism by Georges Florovsky

Georges Florovsky takes the task of re-actualization of Gregory Palamas' teachings to a completely different dimension: for him, the manifestation of specificity of Orthodox Apophaticism is no longer associated with its philosophical foundation, but rather with the release of this idea from philosophical and metaphysical 'captivity.' The latter undermines the revelational character of apophatic theology and its feasibility in the process.⁹²

However, Florovsky almost does not change the conceptual apparatus and the conceptual framework developed by the 'Russian School,' rather he constructs his own argumentation

⁹⁰ Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Eastern," pp. 540-542.

⁹¹ See Georges Florovsky, *Aspects*, pp. 175-177; See also Brandon Gallaher, "Waiting", 661; Papanikolaou, "Eastern," p. 544. Paul Gavriluk, *Florovsky*, p. 221.

⁹² Georges Florovsky, *Creation*, pp. 21-40, 24.

around them.⁹³ Florovsky's criticism of German idealism in many ways echoes Bulgakov's criticism that is linked to its radical rationalism and formalism.⁹⁴ Following in the footsteps of Bulgakov, Florovsky also criticizes the speculative theology developed by the representatives of German idealism that aimed to achieve absolute cognition of God and the world, and sought to philosophically establish the Christian faith.⁹⁵ The notion of history, first introduced by Bulgakov into Orthodox theological discourse, also plays a central role in Florovsky's thought. Most importantly, it is Florovsky who shares the idea from Soloviev and Bulgakov about the re-actualization of the teachings of the Holy Fathers and the need for "creative return to Patristic sources."⁹⁶ What is new in Florovsky's thinking, is the paradigm shift, as Paul Gavrilyuk calls it in his book *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance*: Florovsky goes beyond the metaphysical tradition of German Idealism and offers us a qualitatively different way of thinking. Whereas For Bulgakov each concept elaborated by him is important and valuable as the part of his theological-philosophical system, which have to offer a "creative interpretation" of the Palamas' Apophaticism⁹⁷, for Florovsky, by contrast, the meaning of each concept is defined in relation to its historical context: the value of each concept is measured by how well it meets the needs of the modern era. As Florovsky points out, the theology of the Holy Fathers is not only about cognition, but also about the

⁹³ See Paul Gavrilyuk, Florovsky, pp. 3-4.

⁹⁴ Georges Florovsky, "Spor," pp. 51-80.

⁹⁵ Ibidem, p. 51.

⁹⁶ Georges Florovsky, *Aspects*, p. 173, Cf. Paul Gavrilyuk, Florovsky, pp. 38-39, 113.

⁹⁷ The concept of antinomic relation of reason and faith, philosophy and religion, history and eschatology is important as a means for exposing the antinomy of cataphatic and apophatic ways.

unity of cognition and life. Florovsky calls this the “existential character” of Patristic Theology.⁹⁸ In the doctrine of Gregory Palamas, too, Florovsky attaches great importance to his existential character:

“What is the theological legacy of St. Gregory Palamas? St. Gregory was not a speculative theologian. He was a monk and a bishop. He was not concerned about abstract problems of philosophy, although he was well trained in this field too. He was concerned solely with problems of Christian existence. As a theologian, he was simply an interpreter of the spiritual experience of the Church. Almost all his writings, except probably his homilies, were occasional writings. He was wrestling with the problems of his own time.”⁹⁹

In this sense, Florovsky approaches the tradition of existentialism, and he shares to some extent even its aphistorical, anti-rationalist stance.¹⁰⁰ The influence of existentialism is also reflected in the liberal Protestant theology of this period, which is predominantly associated with one of the most important figures of the Protestant movement of the 20th century, Karl Barth. It is also important to note that Florovsky had a personal acquaintance with Barth and also expressed some sympathy towards his views.¹⁰¹ In this sense, Florovsky’s call for a neopatristic program, in which he speaks of the “intellectual captivity to the philosophical paradigms of the West”¹⁰² and which is often interpreted as an anti-Western narrative, is very close to the visions of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Heidegger on the crisis of European thinking, and resonates with the criticism of exis-

⁹⁸ Georges Florovsky, *Aspects*, p. 17; Georges Florovsky, *Bible*, p. 108.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁰⁰ Georges Florovsky, “Spor.”

¹⁰¹ See Rowan Williams, “Eastern,” 581; Matthew Baker, “Theology Reasons”, p. 112.

¹⁰² Paul Gavriilyuk, Florovsky, p. 224.

tentialism towards German idealism.¹⁰³ However, although Florovsky shares the criticism of existentialists: Kierkegaard, Barth, and his contemporary Russian existentialist Lev Shestov on German rationalism, he also distances himself from this “Protestant criticism” insofar as the latter, in Frolovsky’s view, cannot go beyond the dualistic perspective posed by the dichotomy of philosophy-theology.¹⁰⁴ In his essay “On the Crisis of German Idealism”, Florovsky notes that obviously one will not be able to escape the idealism by negation. The only way out is to return to the Holy Fathers.¹⁰⁵

In this sense, Florovsky’s approach to particular concepts borrowed from ‘Russian School’ or existential philosophy, such as history, antinomy, existentialism or subjectivism, is neither systematic nor consistent, nor does he aim to build a systematic vision.¹⁰⁶ For Florovsky, the starting point for the “creative reassessment” of the patristic teachings is to enter “The Mind of the Fathers”,¹⁰⁷ that constantly resonates with the historical needs of that era. This can be achieved, however, not in a form of systematic knowledge, or through philosophical speculation, but apophatically, in the form of direct contact with God, only and exclusively within the experience of the church and living Tradition.

“[T]he teaching of the Fathers is a permanent category of Christian existence, a constant and ultimate measure and criterion of right faith. Fathers are not only witnesses of the old faith, testes

¹⁰³ Cf. Matthew Baker, “Theology Reasons,” p. 86, See also: Paul Gavrilyuk, Florovsky, p. 201.

¹⁰⁴ Georges Florovsky, “Spor”; Cf. Matthew Baker, “Theology Reasons,” pp. 85-87; Paul Gavrilyuk, Florovsky, pp. 106-109.

¹⁰⁵ Georges Florovsky, “Spor,” pp. 52, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Paul Gavrilyuk, Florovsky, pp. 108; 202-203.

¹⁰⁷ Georges Florovsky, Bible, p. 107.

antiquitatis. They are rather witnesses of the true faith, testes veritatis. "The mind of the Fathers" is an intrinsic term of reference in Orthodox theology, no less than the word of Holy Scripture, and indeed never separated from it."¹⁰⁸

8 Apophaticism as a connective link

On the background of these different philosophical traditions and perspectives, what unites both thinkers when discussing the apophatic tradition (in cataphatic way) is the *specific purpose* of their reasoning. It is this purpose that essentially distinguishes their reasoning from purely philosophical research, and connects it to the apophatic tradition of the Holy Fathers. Whereas philosophical reasoning is intended to explain and define something logically and methodologically based on a particular philosophical perspective, the theological (cataphatic) reasoning of the Holy Fathers is intended to expand the perspective of human cognition in order to realize the dimension of spiritual contemplation.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the specific purpose of cataphatic way is to demonstrate the boundaries of rational, philosophical reasoning and to "give way" to Apophaticism.¹¹⁰ This aspect also manifests the subtle difference between the Western and Eastern traditions of Apophaticism. If the cataphatic way on Apophaticism in the Western tradition serves to define

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁹ See Sergei Bulgakov, *Unfading*, pp. 79-101; Georges Florovsky, *Bible*, pp. 108-199, Georges Florovsky, *Creation*, pp. 21-40; See also Efthymios Nicolaidis *et al.* "Science," p. 548.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, pp. 39-40; 238-239; Dyonisius the Areopagite, *On Divine Names*, 4. XI. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_03_divine_names.htm#38 (accessed 21 July 2020)

Apophaticism, in Eastern tradition, cataphatic way is only a kind of 'reference' to Apophaticism as the 'possibility of cognition to be different', without the latter's logical or methodological foundation. Christos Yannaras, a successor of the Neo-Patristic School, states: "It is precisely the emphasis on the *possibility* of knowledge that sets Apophaticism apart from any *positivism* about knowledge, that is to say, from any norm of absolutizing of the rules of presuppositions needed for ascertaining the validity of any formulation of knowledge."¹¹¹

The main purpose of both Bulgakov's and Florovsky's discussions is to show the limitations of their reasoning, and not to deny the importance of the reason, or rational thinking, but to maintain the 'openness' of the cognitive perspective, which serves to give way to spiritual foresight for Apophaticism. It is this purpose that can be derived from the reasoning of both theologians. This 'reference' to Apophaticism, is the moment when logical reasoning seems to cease and there appears a certain 'openness' to the process of cognition.¹¹²

This moment becomes particularly visible in the hermeneutical vision of each thinker regarding the method of "creative interpretation" of the Holy Father's tradition. Neither Bulgakov nor Florovsky offers answers to the questions: What method may we apply to provide a creative interpretation of the tradition of Holy Fathers? What method is there to enter the "Mind of the Fathers"? What method should the patristic hermeneutics be based on?

Bulgakov, who tries to develop a philosophy (metaphysics) of the personal relationship with the God of man,¹¹³ at the same time points out the impossibility of a personal relationship with

¹¹¹ Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence*, p. 60.

¹¹² *Ibidem*.

¹¹³ Cf. Aristotele Papanikolaou, "Eastern", p. 540.

the “living God” through philosophy and philosophical method. “[...] for philosophy only an abstract absolute exists, [...] and with its own powers, without a leap over the abyss, philosophy cannot cross over from “intellectual God,” and “intellectual love for him,” to personal love for the living God.”¹¹⁴ What does this abyss mean, and what could Bulgakov have in mind in the metaphor “leap over the abyss” that he repeatedly uses in his book?¹¹⁵ It is noteworthy that this metaphor is found in the work of Dionysius the Areopagite “On the Divine Names”, which speaks of the “leap” from the intellectual contemplation of God into spiritual contemplation, as the logical transition from the first to the second is impossible.¹¹⁶

It is in this sense that Bulgakov uses the metaphor of the abyss to indicate a “discontinuity” between rational thinking and belief, which he interprets as a relationship between cataphatic and apophatic theology.¹¹⁷ It is this abyss, this discontinuity, or antinomy that exists between Apophaticism and cataphatic way. Whereas cataphatic way remain within the realms of “intellectual experience” while indicating the boundaries of human reason, the basis of Apophaticism, as Bulgakov points out, is a mystical contemplation: “All of it is a mute negative gesture directed towards heaven.”¹¹⁸ The purpose of Bulgakov’s cataphatic way, as the realization of the limits of own reason, is well seen in his reasoning, where he speaks of the “fatal antinomy” of philosophical consciousness and of “mythical or dog-

¹¹⁴ Sergei Bulgakov, *Unfading*, p. 81.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 10, 15, 107, 110, 154.

¹¹⁶ Dionysius the Areopagite, *On Divine Names*, 7. III. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_03_divine_names.htm#38 (accessed 21 July 2020); Cf. Sergei Bulgakov, *Unfading*, pp. 153-154.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 106-110.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

matic basis” of every authentic philosophy.¹¹⁹ He notes: “there never was and never can be a noncontradictory rational metaphysics that has to do with the ultimate problems of the world’s being.”¹²⁰ According to Bulgakov, the main task of the reason is not to solve this antinomy or to escape from it, but to “accept it.” “The task of thought here is precisely to lay bare the antinomy, to stumble into its cul-de-sac and to accept with the spiritual effort of the humility of reason that it is above reason: this will be the highest act of understanding.”¹²¹ However, for Bulgakov, realizing this antinomy does not mean giving up philosophical thinking within the realms of theological endeavour. Rather, for him, it means philosophical thinking based on “intellectual honesty” recognizing the intuitive, super-rational origin of own foundations.¹²² Thus, for Bulgakov, religious philosophy is precisely this “leap into ignorance”: “Philosophizing, like any creative activity, demands courage from the human being: he must leave the shore and set out swimming into the unknown; the result is not assured. It is possible that he will not return to shore, be lost and even perish in the waves. But only such a journey promises some kind of discovery. The freedom of philosophizing, like any freedom, has in itself a certain risk, but its regal dignity consists in freedom.”¹²³

As for Florovsky, the “openness” of the perspective appears in another dimension. He does not even make this event the subject of philosophical discussion, but tries to turn this “openness” into his own approach to the ideas of the ‘Russian school.’ According to Gavrilyuk, Florovsky constantly avoids the philo-

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 104, 91.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 197.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

¹²² *Ibidem*, pp. 90-94.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

sophical approach of the ‘Russian school’,¹²⁴ while at the same time consciously maintaining the very conceptual apparatus and the same problems that they pose.¹²⁵ Moreover, despite his attempts to separate himself from the ‘Russian school’, which he linked to the initiation of a ‘Neo-Patristic program’, he called his theological program, in line with Soloviev’s idea, a ‘Neo-Patristic Synthesis’. It is conceivable that Florovsky’s goal in this case is not a principled rejection of the philosophical approach of the ‘Russian school’,¹²⁶ but rather a call for the openness for Soloviev and Bulgakov’s sophiology, which is prone to the closure. By maintaining the same conceptual apparatus and the same problems and only changing the relation to them, Florovsky tries to free these notions from the shackles of their ‘systematics’. As Gavriilyuk notes, the philosophy of Florovsky’s history contradicts his own theological epistemology, although he did not attempt to eliminate this inconsistency.¹²⁷ If Bulgakov still tends to be systematic, Florovsky, on the other hand, on the example of his own ‘lack of system’ or ‘inconsistency’ shows an example of the ‘openness of perspective’ that Bulgakov speaks of and the explanation of which he considers as one of the main goals of his philosophical attempts of sophiology. In this sense, Florovsky does not oppose Bulgakov, but he rather tries to leave Bulgakov’s approach open.

Paul Gavriilyuk describes Florovsky’s ‘Neo-Patristic’ approach to the tradition of the Holy Fathers as an endless, ongoing hermeneutical effort: “[...] the patristic synthesis remains incomplete and requires a genuinely new synthesis to be undertaken in

¹²⁴ Paul Gavriilyuk, Florovsky, pp. 91-92.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 91-92, p. 133.

¹²⁶ Aristotele Papanikolaou, “Eastern”, p. 543; Paul Gavriilyuk, Florovsky, pp. 118-119, pp. 132-156.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 230-231, p. 264.

each generation. Thus, Florovsky did not complete his synthesis because he could not do so in principle, because the neo-patristic synthesis required an ongoing hermeneutical effort."¹²⁸

This open perspective is the starting point for the patristic hermeneutics that these two theologians of the 20th century lay the groundwork for. This is hermeneutics without a definite method, the purpose of which is understanding, creative interpretation, but not by a pre-determined method, but by a living, ongoing process, without any foresight of the future.

9 Apophaticism in a post-modern perspective?

How can we describe the specifics of Orthodox Apophaticism from the perspective of modern thinking, or what can we compare it to? Above we have talked a lot about the understanding of Apophaticism in different traditions and with different thinkers. Obviously, this knowledge gives us some idea of Apophaticism, although it is still far from our historical context and only leads to a certain approximation to it as a more or less abstract concept, but not as a living experience given in a particular historical context. It is this notion that underlies the calls of Bulgakov and Florovsky: the need for the translation of patristic teaching into the language of modernity and its creative understanding in a given historical context. It can be said that the 'creative reading' proposed by these authors themselves is a historical contextualization of the tradition of the Holy Fathers, as a new dimension of patristic hermeneutics.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Ibidem, p. 97.

¹²⁹ Cf. Calinic Berger, "Florovsky's", p. 26.

However, how can this creative understanding be achieved if there is no logical, systematic, methodological connection between rational thinking and spiritual contemplation? Many researchers in modern discourse draw attention to this methodological insufficiency.¹³⁰ However, it is noteworthy that it is this methodological ‘uncertainty’ that brings their approach closer to the contemporary post-modern self-perception, from the perspective of which it is possible to read this ‘uncertainty’ in a completely new dimension.

The specificity of this methodological ‘indeterminacy’ is that on the one hand Apophaticism (i.e. cataphatic way on Apophaticism) is always meant to enter into dialogue with its contemporary philosophical thinking, and to describe itself by particular philosophical categories, however, as Apophaticism implies going beyond “intellectual experience”, its description is always intended to leave the cognitive perspective open. This openness of the perspective is manifested alongside logical reasoning, as an unfounded assumption of spiritual experience (such as “leap into ignorance”, “enter the Mind of the Fathers”, etc.) which is perceived from the perspective of the reason as neither inevitable nor impossible, therefore contingent. This ‘epistemological openness’ does not contradict rational thinking and logic,¹³¹ but draws the focus from logical causality to “otherwise possible”; from the way of thinking, which is prone to closing its perspective – to the possibility of its ‘openness.’ This specificity, however, becomes more visible and perceptible from the perspective of postmodern thinking, since the latter, besides rational reasoning, leaves the space for the optional and the possible, which is, essentially, contingency. As the philosopher Karen

¹³⁰ Ibidem, pp. 27-28; Paul Gavrilyuk, Florovsky, p. 220; Rowan Williams “Eastern”, p. 577.

¹³¹ Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence*, p. 60.

Gloy points out, postmodernism has replaced the notion of a “one reason” with a “plurality of types of reason” without even having defined them.¹³² This is the specificity of the postmodern approach: its purpose is not to establish, to define, but to leave these borders open, with reference to the possibility of the optional “being otherwise”.

10 Postmodernism – as an age of contingency

Modern thinking is almost inconceivable without considering the pluralities that, as Gloy points out, are called “plurality of types of reason” and “plurality of rationalities”. When any knowledge or particular concept is characterized by an infinite variety of variations and versions,¹³³ modern times are increasingly described with concepts such as *unfinishedness*, *ambiguity*, *multiplicity*, *liquidity*, etc.¹³⁴ Among them is the notion of contingency, which has been described by modern social theorists as one of the most symptomatic events of the modern era.¹³⁵ Niklas Luhmann, one of the first social theorists to portray con-

¹³² See Karen Gloy, *Vernunft und das Andere der Vernunft*. Abstract (München, Freiburg: Alber, 2001), p. 4.

¹³³ See Gerhard Gamm, “Die Flucht aus der Kategorie,” in: Heinz O. Luthé, Rainer Wiedenmann (eds.) *Ambivalenz: Studien zum kulturtheoretischen und empirischen Gehalt einer Kategorie der Erschließung des Unbestimmten* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1997), pp. 35-63.

¹³⁴ See e.g. Jürgen Habermas, *Die Moderne-ein unvollendetes Projekt* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1994); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); Shmuel Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129/1 (2000), pp. 1-29.

¹³⁵ Markus Holzinger, *Kontingenz*, 13; Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, p. 93, Toens, Willems (eds.), *Politik*, p. 11; Michael Makropoulos, “Kontingenz”, p. 398; Greven, *Kontingenz*, p. 15.

tingency as the starting point for the functioning of the social system,¹³⁶ calls contingency “Modern Society’s Defining Attribute” (“Eigenwert der modernen Gesellschaft”).¹³⁷ After Luhmann, a number of theorists began to talk about the so-called contingent era of modernity. Philosopher Gerhard Gamm talks about the uncertainty of modern times and points to the paradoxical process of simultaneously growing differentiation and diffusion: ‘the more differentiated, accurately and more variably we can describe objects and events, the more indeterminate, difficult to predict and ambivalent is our knowledge of how systems or objects will actually behave’.¹³⁸ Sociologist Hans Joas points out that the modern era is marked by a special increase in “sensitivity” to contingency.¹³⁹ It is noteworthy that the “high sensitivity” to the contingency, as a novelty of the postmodern era, is emphasised by Joas in the context of the “antiquity” of the *concept* of contingency, which is still found in Aristotle’s *Hermeneutics*.¹⁴⁰ In doing so, the author seeks to draw our attention to a new dimension of contingency. According to Joas, in modern era contingency becomes visible in the form of increase in the capacity and the options for individual action.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Niklas Luhmann, *Funktion*, pp. 187-188, See also Michael Makropoulos, “Kontingenz,” p. 370; Oliver Jahraus, Armin Nassehi, Mario Grizelj, Irmhild Saake, Christian Kirchmeier, Julian Müller (eds.), *Luhmann-Handbuch: Leben-Werk-Wirkung* (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler 2012), pp. 75-76.

¹³⁷ Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, p. 93.

¹³⁸ Gerhard Gamm, “Die Flucht”, p. 35

¹³⁹ Hans Joas, “Das Zeitalter,” pp. 25-37, p. 27

¹⁴⁰ See Peter Vogt, *Kontingenz und Zufall: Eine Ideen- und Begriffsgeschichte* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011), p. 21.

¹⁴¹ Hans Joas, “Zeitalter,” pp. 33-34.

Aristotle defines contingency (“*endechomenon*”) as an event that is “neither necessary nor impossible.”¹⁴² Even in this definition, its negative nature is seen, which, on the one hand, frees it from the realm of the necessity of the “reason” and, on the other hand, takes it beyond the limits of “natural causality”.¹⁴³ From the Enlightenment onwards, contingency has been viewed as an unequivocally negative phenomenon, having no “essence”, as something imperfect to be improved by “human science and technology.”¹⁴⁴

As Michael Makropoulos points out, the positive connotation of the notion of contingency in modern thinking, its “*de-dramatization*” is linked to Niklas Luhmann’s name: contingency no longer appears to him as a “curse” that has to be “overcome”.¹⁴⁵ This concept is gradually invading political, social and cultural theories as an inseparable reality of modernity, and at the same time a necessary category and meta-narrative of the perception of this reality.

The specificity that modern authors attribute to modern manifestations of contingency is, on the one hand, related to the growing contingency of reality in society and, on the other hand, to the ever-increasing prospect of understanding it. Contingency, as a concept, can be said to be contingent in itself as

¹⁴² See Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, p. 96; Hans Joas, “Vorwort,” in: Peter Vogt, *Kontingenz und Zufall: Eine Ideen- und Begriffsgeschichte* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011), pp. 11-16, p. 12.

¹⁴³ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion*, p. 187; idem, *Beobachtungen*, p. 96.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Ludwig Siep, “The Value of Natural Contingency,” in: Marcus Düwell, Christoph Rehmann-Sutter, Dietmar Mieth (eds.), *The Contingent Nature of Life: Bioethics and Limits of Human Existence* (Dordrecht: Springer 2008), pp. 7-15, p. 9; Makropoulos, “Kontingenz,” pp. 378-380; Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, p. 56.

¹⁴⁵ Michael Makropoulos, “Kontingenz,” p. 370.

Luhmann wisely points out:¹⁴⁶ we can freely call it by another name, or we can find a prototype of a modern understanding of contingency in another notion, such as antinomy, paradox, ambivalence, etc. However, the novelty that postmodernity has added to this event from its historical and cultural context is that it has shifted the focus from the definition of this concept to what remains beyond this definition in the form of ellipses (...). It can be said that this is the essence of the modern understanding of contingency.¹⁴⁷

Thus, in the study of contingency, the emphasis turns from its conceptualization, historical-philosophical or genealogical analysis to the process of direct relation to contingency.¹⁴⁸ In this sense, contingency can be described as being in an ongoing process of life and thinking that intersect with each other contingently.

As Joas points out, 'one does not have to share the specific premises of 'postmodernism' in order to consider more convincing the view of history, society and self, which pays the greatest attention to the possible towards the real and to the non-obvious and not necessary character of the real.'¹⁴⁹

In this sense, contingency is also characterized by intersubjectivity, insofar as it is perceived as an event even without its description and definition as a unified historical context. According to Luhmann, it is this intersubjectivity that creates the impetus for understanding contingency and thus trying to overcome it. However, the paradox of this intersubjectivity is that as soon as we begin to search for any "necessity" (be it values,

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Oliver Jahraus *et al.* (eds.), Luhmann, p. 76.

¹⁴⁸ See Toens, Willems (eds.), *Politik 15*. Joas, "Zeitalter," pp. 34-35.

¹⁴⁹ Hans Joas, "Vorwort", p. 11.

truth, validity, etc.) in it, we are immediately led to contingency.¹⁵⁰

Thus, one of the main problems in the modern study of contingency is the methodological complexity of its “grasping” insofar as it is constantly strained by empirical analysis. In contrast, empirically, contingency is increasingly being felt, and the perception of contingency is growing.¹⁵¹

On this background, what Luhmann’s system theory gives a modern understanding of contingency is a new concept of the “Kontingenzbewältigung” (“coping with contingency”), which implies not an ontological confrontation with contingency, but a friendly relationship with it.¹⁵² As Luhmann points out, under the conditions of contingency, growing complexity “[T]he premise of organization is the unknownness of the future, and the success of organizations lies in the treatment of this uncertainty”¹⁵³ The concept of coping with contingency, offered by Luhmann, implies overcoming of contingency in a way which does not eliminate the perception of contingency.¹⁵⁴

Hans Joas notes that “the result of “sensitivity” to contingency is not relativism, but “contingent certainty”, which provides insight into the contingency of one’s own existence.”¹⁵⁵ The description of this state of contingency, according to Joas, is no

¹⁵⁰ Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, p. 94.

¹⁵¹ Toens, Willems (eds.), *Politik*, p. 13, p. 17; Markus Holzinger, *Kontingenztanz* pp. 11-12.

¹⁵² Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, 103-104; Oliver Jahraus *et al.* (eds.), *Luhmann*, pp. 66, 76.

¹⁵³ Niklas Luhmann, *Organization and Decision*, trans. Rhodes Barrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. X.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, p. 95; Oliver Jahraus *et al.* (eds.), *Luhmann*, pp. 76-77; Niklas Luhmann, *Organization*, pp. 134, 149.

¹⁵⁵ Hans Joas, “Zeitalter,” p. 35.

longer possible in the old-fashioned way, using historical-philosophical meta-narratives, but its description is possible only in the form of a description that is characterized by “contingent certainty”. It is in this sense that Joas calls modernity the era of contingency.¹⁵⁶

In the modern discourse of contingency, the emphasis of the research turns from the methodological issues to the direct relationship with contingency, the process of “dealing with” it,¹⁵⁷ whereby the personal dimension of this relationship is accentuated.¹⁵⁸ The personal dimension of “dealing with” contingency represents the way in which contingency is approached from the perspective of the possibility, and not from the perspective of the necessity.

11 In lieu of a conclusion

From the perspective of postmodern thinking, which is characterized by “high sensitivity” to uncertainty and contingency, we can comprehend Apophaticism and its role in the self-perception and everyday practice of the modern Orthodox Church. The perception of contingency may resemble the return of the idea of Apophaticism and its re-actualization in postmodern thinking. The philosopher Kurt Wuchterl also mentions this in his book “Contingency or the Other of Reason”, in which he cites negative theology as one of the forms of encounter with

¹⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 36.

¹⁵⁷ Toens, Willems (eds.), *Politik*, p. 15., Oliver Jahraus *et al.* (eds.), *Luhmann*, p. 76; Joas, “Zeitalter,” p. 35.

¹⁵⁸ Hans Joas, “Zeitalter;” Oliver Jahraus *et al.* (eds.), *Luhmann*, p. 54; Kurt Wuchterl, *Kontingenz oder das Andere der Vernunft: Zum Verhältnis von Philosophie, Naturwissenschaft und Religion* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2011).

contingency ("Kontingenzbegegnung").¹⁵⁹ From a postmodern perspective, Apophaticism can be described as a 'cognitive attitude' that can be characterized by the awareness of the possibility of cognition 'being different', characteristic of contingency. In this sense, what can be taken from the latest approaches of the study of contingency to the modern study of Orthodox practices is the emphasis on the current process and the observation of Orthodox practices from the perspective of the ongoing process. This type of observation would focus not on defining "indefinite" issues, positions, and approaches specific to the Orthodox Church, but on the process, forms, and practices of "leaving them open". The focus of the observations would have been transferred to the growing world of rationalization to study the forms of "coexistence with these indefinite states" or "indefinite positions", as well as "dealing with them", which we might encounter in the practice of the Orthodox Church.

This paper is a kind of suggestion on the basis of which we can observe Orthodox practices in a new way, the "inconsistency" and "lack of system" that characterize them, to which certain analogies and a new apparatus of description (a new cataphatic way) can be found from the perspective of postmodern thinking. The notion of contingency itself is in this case only an approximate orientation to describe the phenomenon that can be found in Orthodox practice.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Kurt Wuchterl, *Kontingenz*, pp. 236-266.

¹⁶⁰ I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the supervisors of my thesis, Ms. Ketevan Gurchiani and Mr. Johannes Weiß, for the tremendous help provided in the research conducted to create this article, for their consultations, as well as for my constant inspiration and encouragement in the process of research, without which it would be unthinkable to create this paper. In addition, I would like to thank each and every respondent of my research, a cleric or a

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