CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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The volume in your hands presents a number of essays on different facets of philosophy in the context of Eastern Christianity. That this is so, however, gives rise to a number of questions. What, for example, is meant by the term 'Eastern Christianity'? How is philosophy in relation to Eastern Christianity different to philosophy in the West? And why should we dedicate our intellectual energies to understanding it? It is not as if the Christian world would be unaware of a certain diversity of approaches to philosophy; those familiar with theological history, meanwhile, will surely know that the earliest developments in doctrine come about as a result of apologists making sense of Christian claims using the language and methods of Greek philosophy. For all that, however, there is a heavy bias—at least among anglophone philosophers—to assuming that the philosophical enterprise is an inherently Western one, and that whatever conclusions might be drawn as part of that enterprise must inherently correspond with customary Western Christian conclusions. So, this volume is an attempt to

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redress the matter, and bring to the English-speaking world's attention a sample of the sort of thinking going on in the Christian East; and, importantly, to bring this thinking into conversation with contemporary philosophy.

But first, we need to define what we mean by 'Eastern Christianity'.

The Concept of 'Eastern Christianity'

There are, in fact, numerous Churches across the Eastern Christian world, including the primarily Byzantine Eastern Orthodox Churches; the Oriental Orthodox Churches representing various ancient rites, separated from their Eastern Orthodox counterparts as a consequence of theological and linguistic differences at the third and fourth ecumenical councils of the fifth century; and the Eastern Catholic Churches which, aside from one or two exceptions, were once either Eastern Orthodox or Oriental Orthodox, but which took the decision to enter into communion with the Catholic Church represented by the See of Rome at different points from the fifteenth century on. As different as each of these Churches might be, however, what they hold in common is an intellectual, theological heritage characterised by proximity to their Semitic birthplace, formation in a predominately Hellenic milieu, and their use of Greek philosophy in the elucidation of Christian ideas. But one of these features stands out as requiring further explanation, as what it represents for Eastern Christianity also bears on its relation to philosophy. We speak of the Semitic dimension.

That Christianity first emerges in Jewish soil is obvious, if often overlooked. That it did, however, means that it would be forever shaped in its approach to philosophy by its own Jewishness, and particularly a late Second Temple form forced to 'overcome' Greek influence. Indeed, the zeal of Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes in imposing Greek cultic practice on Judea in the second century B.C. seems to have had the effect of galvanising later Jewish determination to maintain intellectual and ritual purity at least through to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. Yet for all this, we should not assume an unconditional dichotomy between Judaism, its Christian offspring, and philosophy. It does signify the potential for tension, though, especially for Christians and Jews in diaspora forced to confront more acutely the challenges of a cosmopolitan empire and the emergence of Gnostic sects. We can conclude that what historical theologians call 'Jewish-Christianity'—that is, its first- and early

second-century form still closely connected with the wider Jewish tradition—was not an ideal locus for philosophical development. That would come later.

Nevertheless, by asking what Athens has to do with Jerusalem, second-century Church Father, Tertullian of Carthage, was expressing a critical question for Christians. Christianity, after all, as an heir to Jewish temple and synagogue, was a religion of revelation; it was not a religion of speculation. Indeed, the suggestion that philosophy might be part of the hermeneutical lens through which the experience of Jesus Christ could be read and understood was at least an incongruity, or worse. Or so it was perceived by some. The fact that G.L. Prestige, in the second part of the introduction to his book *God in Patristic Thought*, felt it needful to declare, 'I must make clear my fundamental outlook. I do not believe that the importation of Hellenic rationalism, to expound and explain the facts of Christian history, was illegitimate. Finite minds can never adequately theorise the infinite' (Prestige, 1964 p. xiii) suggests that the Christian tradition has never come to a unanimous attitude toward the marriage of philosophy and the terms of revealed faith. Against Prestige, meanwhile, is the fourth-century example of the great hymnographer, St Ephrem the Syrian, who denounced Greek philosophical method in relation to theology—preferring, rather, to cast his own, inherently Semitic, theological imagination in poetic form.[1] Yet, despite the apparent dichotomy between the two, there can be little doubt that the Apostle Paul, as a man of the Greco-Roman world of his time, was influenced by Platonic ideas and that, within two generations, Christian thinkers beginning with the likes of Justin Martyr were explicitly drawing on their Hellenic philosophical heritage to explain and further elucidate Christian ideas.

With the benefit of hindsight, there was an inevitability to this turn of events. For even at the most primitive stage in their respective developments, doctrines like the Trinity and the Incarnation presented difficulties that the language of simpler concepts just could not accommodate. So, for example, how God in his unity could be revealed as a plurality of persons, or how the witness of a human Jesus could be reconciled with a simultaneous divine nature: these fundamental Christian ideas each pose obvious hurdles to easy comprehension and linguistic conciliation. Consequently, the distinct implementation of philosophy in addressing

[1] Although, as we shall see in Chap. 2, St Ephrem's critique of Greek philosophy was not a wholesale repudiation of the pursuit of wisdom and the life of the mind.

such challenges might at first be seen in apologists such as Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, and Clement of Alexandria, but it is arguably in Origen of Alexandria that it bears its most remarkable fruit. The legacy of these pioneers (however shared between East and West the figures themselves might be), deploying philosophy as it does in the service of theology, is that the Eastern Christian intellectual tradition becomes virtually indistinguishable from the philosophical enterprise for a long time to come.

Despite such an auspicious beginning, however, it would not be unreasonable for the contemporary Western reader to assume that the Eastern Christian world had forsaken philosophy at some point, as so much recent literature produced by the Orthodox has been primarily historical-theological in nature. Ironically, this is due—at least in part—to a movement in Russia that intentionally withdrew from things it perceived as having been drawn from the Western, Latin tradition, including—and especially—a rationalistic approach to questions of faith. So, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Slavophiles, a group of intellectuals in Moscow, set out a view of Russia and its culture that they believed was irreconcilable with Western values and which, as far as it concerned Orthodoxy, eschewed what it cast as Western rationalism, individualism, and materialism. A corollary to this was the elevation of aesthetic practice and an emphasis on the thought of the ancient Church: the latter of which Georges Florovsky rendered a hundred years later as the 'neo-patristic synthesis'.

A prominent, if slightly older, contemporary of Florovsky and other proponents of this neo-patristic synthesis was Sergius Bulgakov, who, although sometimes enumerated among their number, was also subject to their criticism. Florovsky was particularly provoked by Bulgakov, due in part to the latter's sophiology—born, as it was, on an intellectual plain that entailed some openness to the Western philosophical tradition. But Florovsky also felt that Bulgakov's openness to greater ecumenical cooperation with non-Orthodox Christians, as limited as it was, went too far. This was despite Florovsky's own commitment to the ecumenical movement. So, in contending with their disagreements, Florovsky and Bulgakov can also be set against one another by the same people who group them together under the banner of the neo-patristic synthesis. And this can, in turn, leave the enquirer bereft of anyone to identify as a representative of Eastern Christian philosophy. Yet as curious as this paradox might seem, upon reflection it is not so confusing. For Bulgakov and Florovsky were both philosophers. They disagreed, but they also shared an interest in

being informed by patristic sources without being limited to the letter of a given source, and they believed in the reassertion of an authentically Eastern (read: Greco-Russian) theological mind and method. Both, it seems, may be looked to as representatives of Eastern Christian philosophy, even if the way in which they are categorised or eclipsed by controversy means that one or the other can end up neglected or obscured.

There is, undoubtedly, such a thing as Eastern Christian philosophy. It was the default means for thinking about the complexities of the Holy Trinity and the nature and work of Christ, almost from the dawn of the Christian religion. It impelled the Church's thought through the conciliar period: dominated, as most of the councils were, by questions specific to the Christian East, together with the language and method of philosophy to answer them. But a fog descended between East and West. Their respective development meant that they took on different shapes, and when, after centuries of little intellectual contact, the fog lifted, the West had affected a rationalism the East did not recognise (represented, of course, by Aquinas), while the East affected an asceticism in terms that did not figure in the West (Palamas being the herald). Then over the following centuries, even with the Palamite legacy to draw on, the East would fall under heavy Western influence, and much of what was characteristically Eastern was forgotten. The nineteenth century, however, saw the emergence of the Slavophiles in Russia, who sought to re-assert an authentic Orthodox identity over and against the Christian West, which included the rejection of what they saw as the Western intellectual presuppositions: individualism, rationalism, materialism, and authoritarianism. The Slavophile movement, in turn, prepared the ground for Florovsky and Bulgakov alike, the latter of whom especially represented a new Russian religious philosophy, even while the two shared similar concerns. The philosophical landscape in the Christian East ever since, though, has largely been dominated by them—either in terms of those who have followed and repeated, those who have sought to respond critically to what they represented, or those who are not yet satisfied that their deposit has been sufficiently understood. That is not to say that there has been no Eastern Christian philosophy outside of the Russian sphere; it is only to say that the Russian enterprise has loomed largest in terms of what we have received in the English-speaking world.

Perhaps it is indicative of the diverse, and often disparate, nature of the Eastern Christian world that we should be limited in what we recognise as Eastern Christian philosophy. There are simply too many languages and

traditions which, for much of history, have been forgotten in the West, due to a combination of historical, social, political, and geographic factors. Yet even these traditions—Oriental and other Eastern Orthodox alike—have felt the impact of the neo-patristic synthesis and the new Russian religious philosophy. It is clear, however, that there is more to be discovered. Among converts and 'cradle' Orthodox alike, there are many philosophers seeking to contend with the challenges of the contemporary world. It is the intention of this volume to foster some of those, to contribute to the proliferation of Eastern Christian voices in the English-speaking world especially, and to engender a conversation that is richer in the sources it might reference than would be the case were 'Christian philosophy' simply equated to 'Western'.

The Structure of the Book

The volume is structured as follows. Part I primarily focuses on *metaphilosophy*; which is to say, it focuses on the nature, aims, and methods of philosophy from an Eastern Christian perspective. As we noted above, there is a heavy bias to assuming that the philosophical enterprise is an inherently Western one, and that whatever conclusions might be drawn as part of that enterprise must inherently correspond with customary Western Christian conclusions. One of the major goals of this section is to challenge this assumption by showing how philosophy was creatively appropriated by several significant ancient Eastern Christian thinkers. A careful examination of how ancient Syrian and Greek Christians engaged with late antique thought, to produce original ideas, both provides justification for the project of Eastern Christian philosophy and, importantly, invaluable insights into how the Eastern tradition might fruitfully engage with philosophy today.

In Chap. 2, Andrew Hayes explores the thought of St Ephrem the Syrian who is often, and quite mistakenly, believed to have been a proponent of anti-intellectualism or *fideism*. To the contrary, Hayes demonstrates that despite some of his criticisms of Greek thought, St Ephrem heavily engaged with, reacted to, and borrowed from many ideas and themes found in late antique philosophy. He does this by analysing St Ephrem's understanding of the purpose of cognitive activity. Hayes shows that, for St Ephrem, the pursuit of wisdom is the very aim of our cognitive faculties. He also explores the role of sensation or perception in St Ephrem's thought and explains how his ideas anticipate and even offer

fresh insights into Marshall McLuhan's theories about media ecology. In so doing, Hayes not only provides us with a striking overview of St Ephrem's approach to philosophy, but with an example to emulate, a roadmap for how Eastern Christian thought might fruitfully be brought into conversation with contemporary philosophy.

In Chap. 3, Anna Zhyrkova challenges the conventional narrative that often pits a rational Christian West against a mystical Christian East. She does so by showing that the Scholastic stance towards the relationship between philosophy and theology was already at work informing the Christological debates of the sixth century that took place in the Eastern part of Christendom. Specifically, she demonstrates that the distinctive features of Scholastic philosophy can be found in the writings of John the Grammarian, Leontius of Byzantium, and Leontius of Jerusalem. Through a careful examination of how they appropriated Neoplatonic and Stoic philosophical concepts to address Christology, she not only provides historical justification for the project of Eastern Christian philosophy but provides yet another insightful look at how ancient Eastern Christians creatively engaged with the intelligentsia of their day to develop original solutions to pressing problems.

In Part II we shift our attention to matters of metaphysics and philosophical theology. This section will be of particular interest to those working within the fields of philosophy of religion, analytic theology, and ontology. In Chap. 4, Joshua Matthan Brown contrasts the concept of God assumed by most analytic philosophers, what he refers to as *theistic personalism*, with that of the apophatic conception of God endorsed by Eastern Christian thinkers. He argues that the most powerful and economical response to contemporary arguments for atheism is to reject theistic personalism and adopt apophatic theism. Apophatic theists believe there is a lot we *cannot* say about God, taking the divine nature to be completely ineffable. Brown develops a coherent account of divine ineffability and provides reasons for adopting this oft misunderstood view. Importantly, he draws upon apophatic theology, and its commitment to divine ineffability, to proffer an undercutting defeater for virtually every contemporary argument for the nonexistence of God. He also anticipates and responds to several significant objections.

In Chap. 5, James Loxley Compton dives deeper into the Eastern Christian conception of God by exploring the doctrine of divine impassibility. Compton notes that there has been a '*passiblist* turn' in Western philosophy which has become hostile to the traditional notion that God is

impassible. With very few exceptions, the contemporary debate over divine impassibility has taken place in what he calls a 'Western arena' with very little input from the Eastern tradition. To fill this lacuna, Compton draws upon the resources of the Eastern Christian tradition to offer an original response to contemporary critiques of the doctrine of divine impassibility. He does this by exploring two key thinkers, Origen of Alexandria and Gregory Thaumaturgus, and bringing a nuanced discussion of their concept of impassibility into conversation with contemporary philosophy of religion.

Following this, in Chap. 6, Beau Branson rounds out the previous two chapters, by exploring the doctrine of *inseparable operations ad extra* in the writings of St Gregory of Nyssa. This doctrine says that all the activities of the three hypostases of the Trinity, at least insofar as they relate to things outside of ('ad extra') the Trinity, are not only qualitatively identical but numerically identical. Importantly, Branson focuses his attention on Gregory's theory of action and the individuation of events that emerges from his theological defence of the doctrine of *inseparable operations ad extra*. Through a heavy engagement with contemporary metaphysics, Branson shows that Gregory's philosophy of action is not only coherent, anticipating current trends in the ontology of actions and events, but may provide novel solutions to longstanding problems in this field.

In Part III we focus our attention on epistemology and philosophy of language. This section will be of special interest to scholars and students working on religious epistemology and theories of meaning. In Chap. 7, Tyler Dalton McNabb and Michael DeVito develop a 'thoroughly original and Orthodox model for how Christian belief, and, even specifically Eastern Christian belief, can be warranted'. They do this by creatively bringing recent work on religious experience, in the context of the Divine Liturgy, into conversation with Alvin Plantinga's well-known explication of Reformed Epistemology. What emerges is a distinctly Eastern Christian approach to warranted Christian belief, that modifies and, arguably, improves upon Plantinga's original model.

In Chap. 8, Christoph Schneider sets about the task of developing a compelling Eastern Christian philosophy of language. His point of departure is what he calls the *triadic* understanding of semiosis which is grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity. According to this distinctively Christian *schema*, a convincing theory of meaning must take into consideration the object in the world that a term or linguistic sign refers to (i.e., *reference*), the relationship between the sign and the sign-user (i.e., *use*),

and the sense or aspect under which the object is being interpreted (i.e., *sense*). According to Schneider, the twentieth-century's re-discovery of the pragmatic dimension of meaning, which heavily emphasises the relationship between a sign and a sign-user, may lead to an uncritical acceptance of a post-Kantian finitism that is unamenable, and even hostile to Orthodox religious language and metaphysics. Drawing heavily on the writings of Russian religious philosophers such as Soloviev, Florensky, and Bulgakov, Schneider sets out to show how Orthodox philosophers might respond to this challenge, paving the way for future work in this important area.

In Part IV we turn our attention to ecological philosophy and bioethics. Readers who are broadly interested in moral philosophy and applied ethics, as well as those more specifically concerned with ecological philosophy and Christian bioethics, will find this section illuminating. In Chap. 9, Christina M. Gschwandtner looks to the Syriac tradition for ecologically inflected insights into the problem of agency and responsibility. One significant issue vexing environmental ethicists and philosophers of ecology is that environmental problems, such as water pollution and climate change, seem to transcend the standard categories of individual agency and responsibility that traditional ethics is largely concerned with. Gschwandtner contends that the Eastern Christian tradition may provide the resources for a notion of agency that avoids the problems typically associated with standard treatments of agency in the West. To develop her thesis, she draws upon an oft neglected dimension of the Eastern tradition, namely, Syriac hymnography.

In Chap. 10, E. Brown Dewhurst considers what philosophical insights we can glean from Byzantine theology, regarding transhumanist and transgender conceptions of the body. She accomplishes this by, first, carefully exploring St Macrina the Younger, St Gregory of Nyssa, and St Maximus the Confessor's writings on pre-lapsarian and resurrected bodies. After thoroughly developing their concept of the human body, she draws upon their work to engage with two closely related issues. Frist, to engage with the notion that sex is an unchanging and essential phenomenon, and second, to interact with transhumanist desires to alter the body or give it access to 'beyond human' capabilities. Dewhurst shows that the desire to alter one's body is often met by a specific form of criticism, generated by normative belief in what should and shouldn't be considered an acceptable change introduced into one's body. According to Dewhurst, the grounds for such normativity are rejected in the theologies of SS Macrina, Gregory, and Maximus.

We conclude the volume, in Part V, by focusing on matters of social and political philosophy. Those with interests in modern social philosophy, the philosophy of race, and human rights will be particularly drawn to this section. In Chap. 11, Clemena Antonova brings the highly original thinking of the Russian polymath, Pavel Florensky, to bear on the looming sense of social and political crisis permeating the first decades of the twenty-first century. In her exploration of Florensky's thought, Clemena defends two contentious claims. First, she argues that, in contrast to what many scholars believe, Florensky was not a theologian but, rather, a religious philosopher. Second, she argues that much of Florensky's work can be thought of as translating theological language into the language of philosophy. She especially focuses on his work translating the theological dogma of *consubstantiality* into the Russian philosophical concept of *full unity*. After developing these ideas, Clemena draws upon them to address contemporary issues related to the sense of crisis pervading the twenty-first century; namely, theories of multiple modernity, secularisation, and communitarian philosophy.

In Chap. 12, Nathan Placencia addresses the problem of race in the afterlife. He begins by canvassing several major contemporary theories of race, namely, racialist accounts, skeptical accounts, socialrace theory, and minimalist accounts. After explicating these different conceptions of race, Placencia argues that only the minimalist account of race is compatible with Eastern Christianity. Building upon this argument, Placencia further demonstrates that the minimalist account of race is congruent with a strong current of Eastern Christian theology, as exemplified by St Theodore the Studite, which emphasises the embodied character of the afterlife. He concludes by carefully considering the implications of this view. Among other things, Placencia maintains that 'the existence of race in the afterlife avoids the racial homogeneity found in alternate accounts of heaven, it presents a moral challenge to those who seek racial reconciliation in this life or the next, and it gives us a perspective from which we can consider what minimalist races might offer humanity in a world without racism'.

In our final chapter, Chap. 13, Nathaniel Wood develops an Eastern Christian approach to human rights that is grounded in the crucial theological concept of *theosis*. Wood begins by acknowledging that Orthodox Christians have fallen behind their Catholic and Protestant counterparts when it comes to serious engagement with the challenges of political secularisation and liberalisation (issues that are closely related to the topic of

human rights). By and large, says Wood, the Orthodox reaction to liberalism, and especially to the concept of human rights, has been negative. This is especially true of the current patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Kirill of Moscow, who has expressed scepticism about the compatibility of human rights and Orthodox theology. In response to this, Wood turns to the religious philosophy of Vladimir Soloviev to develop a vision of human rights according to which rights are meant to assist human beings in the realisation of their deification, or union with God.

We shall conclude the introduction by addressing several potential concerns readers might have. The first concern regards how we have structured the volume. Ancient philosophers, historians, and those coming from a religious studies background may be worried that we have anachronistically used contemporary categories like 'metaphilosophy', 'philosophy of religion', 'philosophy of language', and so on and so forth to label the five parts of our book. We wish to assure the concerned reader that we, by no means, believe the Eastern Christian thinkers covered in this volume—especially the ancient Syriac and Greek patristic authors—would have divided up the various philosophical disciplines in the way that we have. It is important to remember, however, that this volume is not merely interested in historical critical analysis, exegesis, or hermeneutics. Its *primary* goal is to bring Eastern Christian thought into serious engagement with contemporary philosophy. It is to that end, and for the sake of attracting the attention of contemporary philosophers, that we decided to label each part of the book the way that we have. Indeed, we believe this is very much in keeping with the spirit of the Eastern Christian tradition, whose thinkers have always borrowed from and creatively engaged with the philosophy of their time to articulate an authentic Orthodox worldview.

The second concern has to do with several inconsistencies in language and style that the astute reader might notice throughout the volume. To cite but one example, some of our contributors (the present authors included) use the name 'Soloviev' whilst others prefer to use 'Solovyov' when referring to the great Russian religious philosopher. There are a number of minor inconsistencies similar to this throughout the book. These inconsistencies have occurred precisely because this book came about as a result of a rare collaboration of philosophers hailing from vastly different scholarly traditions. For example, Andrew Hayes and Anna Zhyrkova are scholars of late antique history and philosophy, Beau Branson and Tyler Dalton McNabb are analytic philosophers of religion, whereas contributors like Christina M. Gschwandtner and Clemena Antonova are

trained in continental philosophy. We believe these inconsistencies are inconsequential and have decided to retain them, rather than smooth everything out, precisely to highlight and, indeed, celebrate the monumental feat of bringing together such a diverse range of scholars to create this book.

Reference

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