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978-0-521-09147-3 - Theology in the Russian Diaspora: Church, Fathers,  
Eucharist in Nikolai Afanas'ev, (1893-1966)

Aidan Nichols

Excerpt

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## I

*The background: Russian theology and the  
idea of the Church*

History knows of no absolute beginnings. To place the emergence of Afanas'ev, and his distinctive theological sensibility, in their appropriate context, it is necessary, therefore, to investigate the background of Russian theology and, in particular, its ideas of the Church. Three aspects of this background are of relevance – indeed, these three aspects together constitute this background. And they are: the learned Scholasticism which formed the official theological tradition of the great pre-revolutionary Academies; the Slavophile movement of the nineteenth century; and that variegated, brilliant, efflorescence of original theologising which marked the closing decades of the Tsardom, here referred to as the '*fin de siècle* revival'. In the context of the present work, there can be no question of offering a *précis* of all Russian theology: by such a grand standard, what follows would be hopelessly inadequate. The aim is, rather, to present the main lines of its historic development, and to identify those features of the Russian theological tradition which throw light on the peculiar problems, and special opportunities, that faced the theologians of the twentieth-century Diaspora – most notably in their thinking about the Church.

The theological world of the Russian Orthodox Church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – on the eve, that is to say, of its cataclysmic dispersion – was full of life.<sup>1</sup> Pride of place must go, in a description of that world, to the historically minded Scholastic theology of the Russian Academies. Although,

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as will be shown in the second, biographical, chapter of this study, Afanas'ev's turn to theology followed on the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War, and hence post-dated the destruction of those Academies by the Bolshevik State, a considerable portion of their personnel, as well as of their libraries, made its way to the West, and exerted a continuing influence wherever theology was taught through the medium of the Russian tongue. Secondly, there was the Slavophile movement, whose aim was to create a distinctively Russian theology from native sources of life, worship and spirituality. That movement provided, in a second and third generation, some of the most original, and impressive, voices of Russian theology in its new, diaspora situation. Finally, there were a series of personal contributions made by men who, in many cases, had undergone the experience of unbelief in a Marxist, Idealist or Positivist form. All of these set their mark on ecclesiology. Indeed, it is not too much to say that ecclesiology was the great testing-point of their aspirations and anxieties. The reason for this lies in the general atmosphere of Russian culture towards the end of the Tsarist period. The question which taxed all reflective people, from the radicalised intelligentsia to the ideologues of the Tsarist civil service, among whom must be counted the Procurator of the Holy Synod of the Russian church, was the question of the right ordering of society. The quest for the true form of human society had as an obvious analogue a concern for the right forms of the Christian community, the 'divine society.'<sup>2</sup> It may be assumed without question that a university student, finding himself in an educated, and indeed politicised *milieu*, in the reign of Nicholas II, could not escape discussion of such ideas – the more so in that he would also be required to respond to the searing events of 1917 and their aftermath.

The ecclesiological tendencies of the movements already mentioned can be documented from the theological literature left by the nineteenth-century Church in Russia, as well as by the exiles of the Russian Diaspora in the West after the Revolution of 1917. More elusive is the specific spiritual physiognomy of the Russian Christian mind and sensibility. Among the devout adherents of the Orthodox Church, and in the monastic settlements which

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played such a vital rôle in sustaining spiritual and sacramental awareness, certain characteristic traits may be found to be of properly ecclesiological significance.<sup>3</sup> Their influence on a young man growing to maturity in the closing years of the Russian *ancien régime* may well be as profound as it is unchartable.

### **Russian Scholasticism**

Russian Scholastic theology, like Scholastic thought in the West, was a systematisation and rationalisation of inherited patristic and early mediaeval materials in the light of a clearer conceptual analysis of a quasi-philosophical kind. Given the Byzantine origins of Russian Christianity, the natural assumption might be that, while Western Scholasticism would build on the Latin Fathers and on early mediaeval Western sources, its Russian parallel would be constructed on the foundation of the Greek Fathers and mediaeval Byzantine, as well as indigenous, writing. In point of fact, the Western development was organic, though periodically enriched by translations of the Greek church Fathers, but the emergence of Russian Scholasticism in the late sixteenth century is very much a new start, drawing so heavily on Western models and materials that the principal historian of Russian theology has not hesitated to term it a 'pseudomorphosis' of the Eastern tradition.<sup>4</sup> In the Russian middle ages, which are conventionally described as the eleventh to fifteenth centuries, theological literature in the Russian language had been largely a matter of translation from the Greek, supplemented by a certain amount of homiletic and polemical writing. But, Scripture and Liturgy apart, translations of Greek Christian authors, mediated by the southern Slavonic lands and notably Bulgaria, were chiefly of an ascetic, moral and canonical nature. This was perhaps understandable at a time when the principal task facing the infant Russian church was organisational, coupled with the need to set ethical and spiritual standards befitting a newly Christianised people.<sup>5</sup> As J. Meyendorff has written:

There is no doubt that the immediate needs of the Church were satisfied as a first priority: the entire New Testament, passages of the Old

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Testament which are a part of the liturgical cycles (particularly the *Psalms*), the texts of the Eucharist and the sacraments, as well as the immense corpus of Byzantine hymnography were already accessible in Kievan Russia in the tenth and eleventh centuries. In addition to these texts, which were necessary on a daily basis, a number of hagiographic texts – required as readings in monastic communities – monastic rules and some encyclopaedic reference books, such as chronicles, the *Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes, and the *Physiologus* – were also translated. Equally significant is the translation, initiated in Bulgaria, of Byzantine legal texts.<sup>6</sup>

Just occasionally, the native material is of dogmatic and, more especially, ecclesiological interest, as with the lengthy sermon *O zakone, Moisean dannom, i o blagodati i istine* of Hilarion of Kiev.<sup>7</sup> What mediaeval Russians learned from Byzantium was principally, however, its art, music, liturgical life and ideal of ascetic holiness, whilst the speculative, theological and philosophical achievements of Christian Hellenism ‘were accepted only passively and on a very limited scale’.<sup>8</sup> It is notable that, despite what many Slavophiles would have liked to believe, the mediaeval Russian church was eager to underpin its common life by a solid legal structure. Of this avidity the *Kormchaia Kniga*, a Slavic translation by St Sava of Serbia of the Byzantine *Nomocanon* and introduced among the *Rus'* by Cyril of Kiev, one of the few native-born metropolitans of the early mediaeval period, is the principal monument.<sup>9</sup> Its chosen materials, which include the canons of the first seven ecumenical councils, canons of certain regional synods of the Eastern Mediterranean churches and pertinent elements of civil legislation, like the *novellae* of the Byzantine emperor, Alexis Comnenus, were regarded by later Russian churchmen as providing definitive norms for ecclesiastical discipline.<sup>10</sup>

The reflective, as distinct from vital, continuity of Russian Christianity with Greek is better attested, but only falteringly so, in the Mongol period (c. 1240–c. 1480) when the centre of gravity for the peoples of the Russian lands shifted from Kiev through Vladimir-Suzdal to Muscovy. In the age of the Riurikid grand princes, those portions of the Greek patristic corpus most beloved

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of the fourteenth-century Byzantine contemplative reawakening known as *Hesychasm* were translated into Slavic, and a number of such texts, from Diadochus of Photikē and John Climacus to Denys the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor, would reach Russian monastic libraries. Here the figure of Cyprian of Trnovo, metropolitan of Moscow from 1390 onwards, may be significant.<sup>11</sup>

Ivan III, who came to the throne in 1462, assumed the style of 'Sovereign of all the *Rus*', and, more tentatively, the title of Tsar, in recognition of his own victories against the Mongols and his neighbours. A continuing Greekward tendency, implicit in the ruler's marriage with the Byzantine princess, Sophia Palaeologos, was somewhat neutralised by the consideration that her tutor, Bessarion of Nicaea, had embraced the Union of Florence, and was now a cardinal of the church of Rome, from where a papal legate accompanied the bride to Moscow. When the Byzantine humanist Maksim the Greek reached Muscovy in 1507, two years after Ivan III's death, he found himself obliged to carry out his own translation work via the only common language of Greeks and Russians: Latin.<sup>12</sup> Though Maksim had studied in Italy, had been impressed by the Florentine Dominican reformer of morals, Savonarola, and would remain an admirer of the Carthusian Order, he was second to none in his dislike of Latin Scholasticism. The premier historian of Russian theology, George Florovskii, considered, therefore, that Maksim's linguistic and intellectual isolation in Moscow symbolised and witnessed the 'break in the Byzantine succession and ... the renunciation of creative continuity'.<sup>13</sup>

Under Ivan IV, rightly named the 'Terrible', who reigned from 1533 to 1584, access to the doctrinal works of the Greek Fathers was somewhat eased by the more propitious translating activity of Prince Andrei Kurbskii. While Kurbskii's chief pre-occupation was the Fathers of the fourth century, and here, in addition to the sermons of John Chrysostom, he managed to publish a considerable quantity of the anti-Arian exegesis of the period, his most successful project was the works of John Damascene, where several complete treatises were rendered into Slav-

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onic, including the theologically comprehensive *De fide orthodoxa*.<sup>14</sup>

In the 'Time of Troubles' – which stretched from 1605, the year of the death of Boris Godunov, brother-in-law of the last, feeble-minded Riurikid tsar Theodore I, until the accession of Mikhail Romanov in 1613 – the aspirations of Poland to political, religious and cultural domination over her Eastern Slav neighbours became all too painfully evident. Exposed cities of the borderlands, including the mother-city of Russia, Kiev, were important barometers of the theological climate. Zaharii Kopystenskii, abbot of the Kievan Lavra of the Caves in the opening decades of the seventeenth century, produced a genuinely Greco-Russian ecclesiology in his *Palinodiia*. Drawing the materials of Scripture and tradition into an ordered whole, Kopystenskii's work sought to elucidate, in response to a Polish apologia, the Eastern understanding of the unity of the Church. However, it remained unpublished until the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

Russian Scholasticism was to be born not in a Hellenic-Byzantine milieu but, for good or ill, a Latin-Roman one. The spur to its creation was the *Unia* movement whereby a sizable segment of the Orthodox Church in West Russia (Belorussia and the Western Ukraine), already subjects of the Polish-Lithuanian 'republic' since the 1569 Union of Lublin, passed over into communion with Rome. There was thus established what was long called the 'Ruthenian' church – until that adjective became in time restricted to the Byzantine Catholics of the sub-Carpathian provinces of the Habsburg lands. The polemics which this ecclesiastical revolution aroused were, as M. Gordillo wrote: 'at the basis of an intellectual renaissance of a lively and impressive kind in the southern Russia of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'. This renaissance left behind itself, in addition to controversial writing of an ephemeral nature, what the same historian termed: 'some remarkable works, where doctrine is expounded with order, serenity, a sense of logical entailment and even a certain *ampleur*'.<sup>16</sup> To some extent, the ecclesiological motifs found in this literature derive from Western debates, notably those of Conciliarism and the Calvinist Reformation. Thus Orthodox polemicists made use of Conciliarist anti-Roman

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argumentation put forward at the Councils of Constance and Basle, as well as individual works such as Marco Antonio de Dominis's *De republica ecclesiastica* of 1617 which argued that the Roman bishop was purely *primus inter pares* within the episcopal order. The 1597 *Apokrisis* of 'Christopher Philalethes' shows the influence of Calvin's *Institutes*.<sup>17</sup> But what will become the dominant theological influence, that of Thomas Aquinas, is also apparent in the treatise *Zerkalo bogoslavia* of 1618 and will remain a marked feature of theology in southern or Little Russia throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>18</sup>

The desire for greater ecclesiastical autonomy in Western and southern Russia, growing *pari passu* with the consolidation of Muscovy under Ivan the Terrible, and sharpened by the creation of a patriarchate of Moscow in 1589, was frequently accompanied by interest in and sympathy for the Roman church.<sup>19</sup> Even where this was not so, a degree of Westernisation was encouraged by way of a creative 'reconstruction' of Orthodoxy in a culture inevitably influenced by its Catholic and Protestant neighbours. Nor was contact with, and partial imitation of, the Latin church a total novelty in the Russian lands. Prior to the sixteenth century, Latin influence on the Russian church had been of various kinds. In the pre-Mongol period, one might instance the request of Olga of Kiev for Frankish missionaries, as recorded in the Annals of Hildesheim; the missionary work of Bishop Bruno among the Petchenegs under Olga's grandson Vladimir, as described in a letter to the Saxon emperor Henry II, and the translation of a number of hagiographical works, as well as extracts from liturgical offices, from Latin into Old Russian, probably through the agency of Western Slavs.<sup>20</sup> In the late eleventh century, the grand prince Izjaslav corresponded with, and sought the aid of, the Roman pope Gregory VII.<sup>21</sup> Evidence of continued communion between the Russian and Latin churches in the crusading period is provided by the travelogue of the Kievan abbot Daniel in the Holy Land.<sup>22</sup> Around 1143, the *Tome* of Leo was translated by a monk of the Peshcherskaia Lavra who added a conclusion implicitly affirming the Roman primacy.<sup>23</sup> However, at just this time the first anti-Latin treatises by

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native Russians were appearing through the work of Nifon of Novgorod.<sup>24</sup>

In the post-Mongol period, there was a notable lack of resistance to Isidore of Kiev's proclamation of the reunion of the Greek and Latin churches after the Council of Ferrara-Florence of 1438–9. Despite the lack of negative reaction (except at Vilna), the Muscovite grand prince Vasiliï II rejected the union three days after its liturgical proclamation in the Assumption Cathedral, Moscow, on 19 March 1441.<sup>25</sup> The last main form that Latin Christian influence took in the later middle ages belongs to the history of the Novgorod region of western Russia in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Faced with the heretical movement of the *zhidovstvuziushchikh*, 'Judaisers', who called into question the figural meaning of the Old Testament as a prophecy of Christ's coming, Archbishop Gennadiï of Novgorod commissioned the Slovene Dominican friar Veniamin to produce the first complete Russian Bible. In the same context, he also arranged for the translation of the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra's *De Messia eiusque adventu*. Of more strictly ecclesiological interest is the fact that, during the quarrel between Church and State over ecclesiastical land, – essentially over the Church's capacity to act as an independent agent of social welfare – both Gennadiï and the monastic reformer Josif Volotski turned for self-justification to Latin sources.<sup>26</sup>

This ambivalent background of mingled rivalry and co-operation helps to explain the ambiguities of Russian Orthodoxy's encounter with the West in the age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Beginning, in all probability, as parochial organisations, the chain of establishments known as *bratstva* soon transformed themselves into 'corporations for the defence of the faith', and, in a region where the loyalty of the episcopate to the Orthodox Church could not be assumed, received from the Patriarch of Constantinople powers of supervision over the teaching of the bishops themselves. Originally Greco-Slav in culture, the *bratstva* eventually adopted Latin and Western pedagogic methods. As the subsequent history of Russian theology indicates there is no necessary connexion between sympathy for Scholasti-



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cism and benevolent regard for the claims of the Roman pope. Yet while, in the majority of cases, a Scholastic culture was developed the better to defend Orthodoxy against the encroachments of Poland-Lithuania, that engulfing Catholic power of the period, the possibility may not be excluded that, in some others, the intention was to smooth the way for a future Uniate West Russian patriarchate, ushered in by an aristocratic, Polonophile upper clergy. The marriage of Orthodox with Latinity was helped on, it seems, by a certain suspicion of Greek influence, as channelled through the Grecophone communities of southern Russia and Moldavia, at a time when the Constantinople patriarchate, under the maverick Cyril Loukaris, had become briefly Protestant in sympathies.

In this process the crucial figure was Peter Mogila, a Moldavian, born in 1596 and sufficiently cosmopolitan to have enjoyed a period of study in the West, either at the Sorbonne or in Holland, or both.<sup>27</sup> In becoming head of the great Kievan monastery of the Caves, Mogila was able to benefit from its situation of *stauropegia*, its independence of local episcopal rule. He managed to transform what had been an insignificant monastic school into a centre of Christian learning where Latin sources and concepts would be utilised right down to the Revolution of 1917.<sup>28</sup> Mogila left, however, little in writing that was uniquely his own: his preferred literary manner was editorial and collaborative. Of the major products of this activity: the *Confession* of 1640, the *Little Catechism* of 1645 and the *Trebnik*, a 'euchologion', of 1646, the first contains the most material of directly ecclesiological interest. Although the *Confession* was modified by a conference of Kievan and Greek theologians at Jassy in 1642, its ecclesiology doubtless represents the broad outlines of Mogila's teaching. The Church's unity is singled out for emphasis: the single spouse of the single Christ must be *one*. Among local churches, the church of Jerusalem is given primacy, on the grounds that it was the first to enjoy the presence of the risen Christ. Later emperors transferred the primacy to Rome, Old and New, since the imperial seat was there. The Church is built on Christ not on men, a reference to Catholic use of Matthew 16:18, though bishops as Christ's vicars

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are rightly called 'heads' of their churches.<sup>29</sup> In the course of time, the Scholasticism of Mogila's school became ever more sophisticated, drawing on the Baroque Scholastic writers of the West, and notably on Gabriel Vazquez, Francisco de Suarez, John de Lugo, Gregory of Valencia and Robert Bellarmine as well as others.<sup>30</sup>

Western Scholasticism, mediated through Kiev, awakened a response in Moscow as well, via such carriers as Simeon Polotskii and Sylvester Medvedev. Tension between Latin-influenced theologians and the representatives of Byzantine thought, in the shape of visiting Greek-speaking churchmen from the Ottoman Empire was reflected in a protracted controversy over the form of the eucharistic consecration in the course of the 1680s. The condemnation of the Kievan theology by the Patriarch Joachim at a Muscovite Council in 1690 had no immediate effect but would later become a rallying-point for theological anti-Latinism.<sup>31</sup>

The advent of Peter the Great, who became tsar in 1689, was certainly not auspicious for pro-Byzantine minds. Peter's Westernising proclivities soon made themselves felt in Muscovite theology. In the years 1678 to 1681 the tsar Fëodor Alekseevich had laid the foundations for a modest theological school in the capital.<sup>32</sup> Under his successor, the tsarina Sophia, this 'Greco-Slav Academy' was entrusted to two emigré Greeks, the brothers Joannes and Sophronios Likhoudi. After their departure, Peter took the opportunity to instal as rector Palladius Rogovskii who had studied with the Jesuits in Vilna, and subsequently at Olmütz, Vienna, Venice and Rome. Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, the Moscow school would be Kievan and Latinising. Peter named another Jesuit-trained priest, Stefan Iavorskii, 'guardian of the patriarchal throne' in the interim before his reorganisation of the Russian church on Lutheran-Erastian lines. Iavorskii's *Kamen' very*, Bellarminian through and through, angered Peter, however, by its hostility to the Protestant tradition, which went against the grain of the tsar's policy of opening a window on to the (largely Protestant) West.<sup>33</sup> Peter found a more accommodating churchman in Feofan Prokopovich who, though trained not only at Kiev but also in the Greek College of St Athanasius at Rome, was Protestantising in theol-