

## Introduction

The study of the relationship between science and theology is often referred to as the science-theology dialogue. My intention in this study is, from the perspective of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, to provide a critique of perspectives that have been dominant within this dialogue since 1966, the year in which Ian Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion* set both the scene and the agenda for much of the mainstream discussion that has occurred since that time.<sup>1</sup>

While Barbour scrupulously outlined the perspectives of many modern theological traditions, a notable characteristic of the discussion he initiated has been a tendency to follow his own predilection for a rather abstract kind of theism. While most of the pre-eminent scholars in this field have been Christians, many of them have put little emphasis on the traditional doctrines that distinguish Christianity from other theistic traditions or on those aspects of the philosophical theology of the Christian world that have their roots in the pre-modern era.<sup>2</sup> This has meant that, except through their rejection of biblical fundamentalism, the majority of these scholars have not taken fully into account the ways in which specific Christian traditions might modify the positions they have developed.

In what follows, I shall illustrate the problematical nature of this approach by arguing that a number of topics that are important for the dialogue might be affected significantly if understandings to be found in the Eastern Orthodox community are taken seriously. A similar effect may perhaps be brought about if certain Western frameworks of a traditionalist kind are used in a comparable way, and certainly my hope is that my own critique will encourage others to use such frameworks to develop or expand comparable evaluations. However, while I shall mention such frameworks from time to time in what follows, I shall do so only in passing since my focus will be firmly on Orthodox perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*.

<sup>2</sup> Arguably, the dialogue in the late twentieth century was dominated by liberal protestant perspectives, sometimes – as in John Polkinghorne's work – shading into a more conservative protestant mould in which classical Christian doctrines are clearly affirmed but with little sense of their philosophical foundations and expansion. (For a comparison of Polkinghorne's work with that of Ian Barbour and Arthur Peacocke – who, together with him, dominated thinking in this field in that period – see Polkinghorne, *Scientists As Theologians*.) This situation is one in which thinking within the Roman Catholic world – such as that presented in John Haught's *God after Darwin* – has frequently been applauded but in practice undervalued. This situation may have arisen from the fact that some of the influential voices within the dialogue have been those of scientists with little theological training, while those who have had such training have often received it within traditions that put little emphasis on patristic and medieval developments of Christian thinking and focus primarily on supposedly 'biblical' perspectives and on the kind of modern philosophical discussion that largely ignores earlier philosophical perspectives.

<sup>3</sup> As my occasional mentions of it will indicate, an understanding that I regard as particularly promising in this respect is that of the 'return to the sources' or *nouvelle théologie* movement of the twentieth century, which – partly through encounters in Paris between French and Russian

It should perhaps be noted that, because an Orthodox consensus on science does not yet exist, the critique that I shall offer is based on *an* Eastern Orthodox approach, not *the* Eastern Orthodox approach. This is partly because Orthodox Christians, while unanimous in seeing the patristic witness as central to their theology, still often manifest a culpable disregard of Georges Florovsky's warning that to follow the Fathers means not simply 'to quote their sentences' but 'to acquire their *mind*'.<sup>4</sup> This insight has not been entirely ignored but – even when taken seriously – it has tended to lead to a rather narrow scholarly focus on understanding the patristic writers in the context of the era in which they lived. There has been little engagement with the associated question of how the patristic 'mind' might have implications for questions that have arisen only since that era. This has meant, among other things, that serious exploration of the theological implications of modern science has – at least until very recently – been undertaken by only a handful of Orthodox scholars, and no consensus position has yet emerged.

Indeed, in the work of these scholars we can find examples of all the attitudes to modern science that Barbour has categorized in terms of *conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration*.<sup>5</sup> In their details, however, none of these attitudes bear much resemblance to what in Barbour's terms would be their Western equivalents. This is partly because of the general distinctiveness of Orthodox theology, which means that the questions seen as relevant are often different ones.<sup>6</sup> It is also partly because Christian responses to science, in both medieval and more recent times, have not been the same in the Orthodox world as in the West.<sup>7</sup>

These factors need to be taken into account if we are to understand the way in which the Orthodox *conflict* viewpoint has not usually arisen, as it has among Western Christians, from biblical fundamentalism. Orthodox suspicion of science, where it does exist, has a distinctive historical and sociological

---

émigré theologians in the decades immediately after the Russian Revolution of 1917 – developed a reaction against neo-scholasticism and had a significant effect on the Second Vatican Council. For a varied set of studies of this movement, see Flynn and Murray, *Resourcement*.

<sup>4</sup> Florovsky, 'The Ethos of the Orthodox Church', 188.

<sup>5</sup> Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, 1–30. There have been criticisms of this fourfold scheme but in the context in which I use it here it is sufficiently well known still to be useful as a 'broad brushstroke' framework.

<sup>6</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, has rightly observed (p. 9) that 'Christians in the West, both Roman and Reformed, generally start by asking the same questions, although they may disagree about the answers. In Orthodoxy, however, it is not merely the answers that are different – the questions themselves are not the same as in the West.'

<sup>7</sup> The only general study of this history in the Orthodox world is that in Nicolaidis, *Science and Eastern Orthodoxy*. The main developments examined in that book are summarized in Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith*, 37–44.

*Eastern Orthodoxy and the Science-Theology Dialogue* 3

background.<sup>8</sup> Its attempts at theoretical justification do not arise from a belief in the literal inerrancy of the Bible but from a selective approach to patristic biblical interpretation.<sup>9</sup> However, most Orthodox scholars recognize that patristic writers often took the science of their own time very seriously, and in some cases anticipated aspects of modern scientific understanding.<sup>10</sup> As a result, this ‘conflict’ attitude is not common in the Orthodox scholarly world (though it remains so in the wider Orthodox community).

A more usual stance is the ‘independence’ position, in which it is assumed that science and theology do not interact. Just as with the conflict attitude, however, this view is not the result of the same influences as have given rise to a comparable attitude among theologians in the West. Sometimes, among Orthodox, it reflects little more than wishful thinking that science need not affect theological reflection because one can validly adopt something akin to the ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ concept developed – without much understanding of the nature of theology – by Stephen Jay Gould.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes it has been linked to the kind of postmodernist perspective that has been presented by writers such as Christos Yannaras.<sup>12</sup> Most frequently, however, it has been due to the influence of an older kind of phenomenology. Here, Alexei Nesteruk – from the perspective of one who (as a cosmologist) knows the sciences from the inside – has made a version of this position an influential one. He does not proclaim independence, as such, but stresses that science and theology do not interact in some abstract, impersonal way but can properly be understood only in relation to human subjectivity. Any mediation between the two pursuits lies only in the unity of the human experience.<sup>13</sup>

When examining work that corresponds to Barbour’s other categories too, it is important to recognize the distinctiveness of the Orthodox versions of these attitudes towards how scientific and theological perspectives should interact. Though usually in a less complex way than that explored by Nesteruk, Orthodox scholars often implicitly assume the kind of ‘unity of knowledge’ that pushes the enquirer beyond the usual bounds of interdisciplinarity. This approach is sometimes described in terms of the concept of *transdisciplinarity*.<sup>14</sup> Often,

<sup>8</sup> Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith*, 37–45.

<sup>9</sup> An example of this selectivity is Rose, *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man*.

<sup>10</sup> For example, some patristic writers suggested a scenario that is distinctly reminiscent of evolutionary theory. See Till, ‘Basil, Augustine, and the Doctrine of Creation’s Functional Integrity’.

<sup>11</sup> Gould, ‘Nonoverlapping Magisteria’. <sup>12</sup> Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Nesteruk, *The Universe As Communion*.

<sup>14</sup> The meaning of this term has been explored in Nicolescu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*. Its general meaning is, however, not tied to Nicolescu’s particular approach. The term seems to have been first used by Jean Piaget in 1970 to advocate an approach to psychology that is not limited to recognizing the interactions or reciprocities between specialized fields of research. Rather, it

however, it is understood in terms of something on which I shall put great emphasis in what follows: the ‘mystical’ strand of Orthodox thinking in which Christian theology is – as Vladimir Lossky has put it – ‘in the last resort always a means: a unity of knowledge subserving an end which transcends all knowledge’.<sup>15</sup>

The earliest Orthodox attitude in which the necessity of interaction between theology and modern science was recognized arose in the Russian religious philosophy of the nineteenth century. A significant figure here was Vladimir Soloviev, whose thinking was taken up in the early twentieth century by two of his more theologically mainstream successors, Pavel Florensky and Sergius Bulgakov. Relatively few Orthodox scholars of the present day have, however, been significantly influenced by these two. This is due partly to the fact that Florensky’s death at the hands of the Soviets cut short his work, much of which has only recently become widely available, and partly to the way in which Bulgakov – who was exiled rather than killed – has often been considered idiosyncratic because of his way of focusing (as did Soloviev and Florensky) on the concept of divine Wisdom.<sup>16</sup>

Exceptions to this lack of influence can be found. Stoyan Tanev, for example, has been aware of their work in developing his analysis of ways in which the uses of the concept of energy in physics and in Orthodox theology might be mutually illuminating, while Gayle Woloschak has sometimes used insights from Bulgakov in her defence of neo-Darwinism.<sup>17</sup> Most Orthodox scholars who are active in exploring the impact of modern science on theology have, however, approached the dialogue from rather different directions.<sup>18</sup>

One such scholar is Basarab Nicolescu, who in the 1990s led the first major effort to develop a structured and widespread science-theology dialogue in a traditionally Orthodox country: his homeland of Romania. He has focused on the essentially philosophical issue of *transdisciplinarity*, attempting a significant (if arguably over-complex) explication of the ‘unity of knowledge’ outlook.<sup>19</sup> Another is Lazar Puhalo, a Canadian archbishop who, while not attempting any systematic analysis of the interaction between science and

---

locates these links inside a total system without stable boundaries between those fields. This understanding has now been expanded to incorporate the interaction of any two disciplines. Implicit in this approach is a more flexible attitude towards the accepted boundaries and methodology of each discipline than is usual in interdisciplinary work.

<sup>15</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Bulgakov’s sophiology has been used in an adapted form within the Western science-theology dialogue in Deane-Drummond, *Creation through Wisdom*.

<sup>17</sup> See Tanev, *Energy in Orthodox Theology and Physics*; Woloschak, *Faith, Science, Mystery*.

<sup>18</sup> A sense of the variety of approaches can be obtained by examining recently published anthologies of essays by different authors – see the ‘Further Reading’ section of the Bibliographies.

<sup>19</sup> Nicolescu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*.

theology, has written a number of short theological works that take up scientific perspectives in a way that is often full of insight.<sup>20</sup> A third is myself, whose work – on which the present study will focus – has its origins in direct participation in the science-theology dialogue that has taken place among Western scholars.<sup>21</sup> (This makes it particularly useful for presenting Orthodox insights to Western readers, as this study attempts to do.)

In my recent book, *Science and the Christian Faith*, I have already discussed some of the issues that I shall address in what follows.<sup>22</sup> However, that book was oriented towards the needs of ordinary Orthodox believers. This study, by contrast, is aimed at researchers and students who are interested in the science-theology dialogue as it has developed within the academic world. It focuses on the needs of those who already have at least a preliminary knowledge of that dialogue, whose dismissal of fundamentalism can be taken for granted, but whose knowledge of Orthodoxy may be slight.

In the light of the discussion I shall present, two things will, I hope, become clear. The first is that the Orthodox tradition has much to offer in developing an alternative pan-Christian vision to that which has become dominant within the science-theology dialogue. The second is that, even if this alternative vision is not judged to be preferable, Orthodoxy still provides, at a conceptual level, ways of looking at particular issues that may offer new and important insights.

## 1 Natural Theology

Natural theology has been defined by William Alston as ‘the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs’.<sup>23</sup> Within the science-theology dialogue, this kind of natural theology has often been approached with caution, partly because of the failure, in the light of evolutionary theory, of its most well-known manifestation: the version of the argument from design developed by William Paley through the ‘watchmaker’ analogy set out in his 1802 book *Natural Theology*. This analogy is still often associated with theistic belief to such an extent that the insight that evolution may now be seen as the ‘blind watchmaker’ has become a significant component of atheist rhetoric.<sup>24</sup>

Natural theology is not, however, necessarily based on observation of the character of the empirical world, and it did not begin with such arguments but with others of a more purely philosophical kind. (The ontological argument of

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Puhalo, *On the Neurobiology of Sin*.

<sup>21</sup> This is evident from my first two books: Knight, *Wrestling with the Divine* and Knight, *The God of Nature*.

<sup>22</sup> Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith*. <sup>23</sup> Alston, *Perceiving God*, 289.

<sup>24</sup> See especially Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*.

Anselm is a well-known example.) Over the centuries, these philosophical arguments were all challenged in one way or another, and by the middle of the twentieth century the resulting doubts about the possibility of natural theology were reinforced not only by the failure of Paley's watchmaker argument but also by the way in which logical positivism had made the entire project of philosophy of religion disreputable.<sup>25</sup>

This situation was changed in the second half of that century by the downfall of logical positivism within the philosophical community. This encouraged the development of a renewed belief in the application of straightforwardly 'logical' forms of philosophy to religious statements. In particular, the recently developed analytic form of philosophy seemed to some to be extremely promising in this respect.<sup>26</sup> As a result, interest in the philosophy of religion now seems to be focused at least partly on the kind of natural theology in which 'proof' or evidence-based 'probability' arguments for the existence of God have been attempted by philosophers such as William Alston and Richard Swinburne.<sup>27</sup> This interest has recently become influential within the Orthodox world, partly because of the influence of Swinburne, after his conversion to Orthodoxy in the 1990s, and partly because of a growing recognition that classical natural theology arguments were used in the Eastern patristic literature.<sup>28</sup> However, it is at least arguable that those who manifest this interest are not always sufficiently attentive to those aspects of the Orthodox tradition that have, over the last century, caused major Orthodox scholars – including Sergius Bulgakov, Vladimir Lossky, Christos Yannaras, and John Zizioulas – to 'view natural theology as at best religiously useless, in that it does not lead to a true knowledge of or encounter with God; and at worst as positively harmful'.<sup>29</sup>

A further point to note here is that those who try to develop 'proof' or 'probability' arguments for the reality of God tend to ignore the way in which the term *natural theology* is, in theological circles, now becoming understood in a broader way than it once was. When Alston himself spoke of it, he saw it much as the medieval scholastic tradition usually had: as providing support for religious beliefs independently of faith. However, not only was scholastic natural theology (as we shall see) sometimes more nuanced than is often recognized but recent historical overviews have made it clear that natural theology, as actually practised over the centuries, has often been more complex than definitions based on 'proof'

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*.

<sup>26</sup> See the comments in Knight, "Analytic' Natural Theology: Orthodox or Otherwise?."

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Alston, *Perceiving God*; Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.

<sup>28</sup> See the essays in Bradshaw and Swinburne, *Natural Theology in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*.

<sup>29</sup> Bradshaw, 'Introduction', 3.

*Eastern Orthodoxy and the Science-Theology Dialogue* 7

or ‘probability’ allow for, sometimes being closer in methodology to the kinds of approach advocated by modern Western theologians like Thomas Torrance and Alister McGrath, who explicitly argue that there should be no separation from faith or revelation of the kind presupposed in Alston’s definition.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, since modern approaches of the ‘proof’ or ‘probability’ kind are the result of strategies that are primarily those of scholars with a philosophical rather than a theological training, it is unsurprising that these scholars have sometimes been seen as insufficiently attentive to theological perspectives that urge caution towards such approaches. One of the most influential of these theological perspectives is associated with the understanding of Karl Barth, in which the possibility of natural theology was rejected. Early debates about this Barthian rejection were usually based on the contrary position taken up by Emil Brunner.<sup>31</sup> It was, however, probably the variation of the Barthian position developed by Thomas Torrance – articulated with at least some reference to scientific insights – that was most influential among participants in the science-theology dialogue of the late twentieth century.<sup>32</sup>

Torrance was an interesting scholar not only because of his use of scientific insights but also because he had a strong respect for patristic perspectives. Precisely how much his position on natural theology was due to this respect for these perspectives is perhaps not clear, but even if there was no straightforward causal link, his position does, if only partially, reflect patristic attitudes.

This consonance with patristic perspectives is exhibited by the way in which Torrance’s later work embodied a distinct variation on earlier Barthian perspectives. The conclusion he eventually came to was that the problem identified by Barth lay not in natural theology per se but in the dominant Western version of it, which had been developed in medieval scholasticism and had claimed – though with subtleties that we shall note presently – to provide ‘preambles of faith’ (*praeambula fidei*).<sup>33</sup> He therefore came to argue not that natural theology cannot be valid but rather that it ‘cannot be pursued in its traditional abstractive

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*; McGrath, *The Open Secret*. Russell Re Manning, in the ‘Introduction’ to his edited volume, *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, writes (p. 1) that one of the primary aims of that volume is to ‘highlight the rich diversity of approaches to, and definitions of, natural theology. The lack of a fixed consensus on the definition of natural theology is due, in part, to its inherently interdisciplinary character and the inevitable limitations on definitions that belong firmly within particular disciplines.’

<sup>31</sup> For a brief summary of this debate, see Moore, ‘Theological Critiques of Natural Theology’.

<sup>32</sup> See Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, in which it is argued that in its classic forms natural theology can be seen as inadequate in much the same way as Euclidean geometry can be seen as inadequate to describe physical reality in the context of Einstein’s relativistic understanding.

<sup>33</sup> For a good modern discussion (more sympathetic to this concept than Torrance’s), see McNerny, *Praeambulae fidei*.



form, as a prior conceptual system on its own, but must be brought within the body of positive theology and be pursued in indissoluble unity with it'.<sup>34</sup> In relation to arguments from the nature of the created order, for example, he insisted – as Alister McGrath has put it – that

creation can only be held to 'reveal' God from the standpoint of faith. Nevertheless, to one who has responded to revelation (and thus who recognizes nature as God's creation, rather than an autonomous and self-created entity), the creation now has potential to point to the creator . . . While the neutral observer of the natural cannot, according to Torrance, gain meaningful knowledge of God, another observer, aided by divine revelation, will come to very different conclusions.<sup>35</sup>

Torrance's stress on what can be known only through divine revelation in historical acts corresponds to one aspect of patristic understanding, as can be seen from the Cappadocian Fathers' way of stressing eschatological factors in their natural theology.<sup>36</sup> However, what is crucial for our comprehension of the Eastern patristic understanding is to recognize the importance it attributes to noetic perception, and here Torrance seems to have a blind spot that is arguably the result of his failure to challenge perspectives on the effects of 'fallen' human nature that have their origin in Augustinianism.<sup>37</sup> (In Torrance's own Calvinist tradition, these perspectives are often asserted in an extreme version.)<sup>38</sup>

The point here is that Augustinianism's influence was negligible in the Eastern part of the Christian world, so that the notion of 'ancestral sin' held by Orthodox is not the same as the Augustinian notion of 'original sin'. The image of God in humanity is not seen in Eastern Christian theology as having been so badly damaged as to have been effectively destroyed through human rebellion against God. For Orthodoxy, the created, 'natural' capacity to know God in an intuitive, contemplative way – though partially eclipsed in 'fallen'

<sup>34</sup> Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 40.    <sup>35</sup> McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance*, 192.

<sup>36</sup> See the comments in Knight, 'Natural Theology and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition'.

<sup>37</sup> It is arguable that the 'Augustinianism' of those who attempted to systematize the thinking of Augustine of Hippo after his lifetime failed to incorporate the full subtlety of his understanding into their own understanding. It was, however, their understanding, as much as Augustine's own, that affected Western theology's understanding of 'fallen' human nature so profoundly, and which was, in an even more extreme form, taken up in Calvinism.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin did affirm an intrinsic human 'sense of divinity' (*sensus divinitatis*) – which has become well known among philosophers of religion because of its importance for Alvin Plantinga's development of 'reformed epistemology' – but this is different from the Eastern patristic understanding of the inherent human capacity for knowing God. For Calvin, this capacity is viewed through the filter of his expansion of the Augustinian understanding of original sin in his notion of *utter depravity*. This depravity means, for Calvin, that although the *sensus divinitatis* exists as an aspect of our created being, there is no one in whom it 'ripens' (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.4.1) and it is, in fact, so corrupted in fallen humanity that 'by itself it produces only the worst fruit' (1.4.4).



*Eastern Orthodoxy and the Science-Theology Dialogue* 9

human nature – has not been effectively obliterated in the way often assumed in the West.<sup>39</sup> (As Peter Harrison has shown, it was the supposed obliteration of the ‘paradisaal’ contemplative capacity – particularly as expressed in Calvinism – that formed one of the main motivations for the justification that was often given in the early modern period for the scientific method.)<sup>40</sup>

In many Western traditions that have inherited an Augustinian understanding of the fallenness of human nature, the effects of this fallenness have been seen as applying less to discursive reasoning than to other human capacities. This means that philosophical thinking is used in these traditions as if its validity is independent of the spiritual state of the philosopher who uses it. The notion of the Fall prevalent in Eastern Christianity has, however, meant that its theology has tended, if anything, to move in the opposite direction, seeing the unaided human reason as potentially misleading because it inevitably bases arguments on presuppositions that require, for an assessment of their validity, a level of spiritual discrimination that may or may not be present. Its focus is, therefore, less on philosophical argument, as such, than on the spiritual discernment that is a necessary precondition for recognizing the validity or otherwise of these presuppositions.

One of the reasons for this Orthodox emphasis on something in human nature other than the discursive reasoning capacity is that its theology is characteristically an experiential one. Its approach is ‘mystical’ – not in the sense of being anti-rational but in the more complex sense in which it is stressed that Christian dogma, often appearing at first as ‘an unfathomable mystery’, is something that must be approached ‘in such a fashion that instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding, we should, on the contrary, look for a profound change, an inner transformation of the spirit, enabling us to experience it mystically’.<sup>41</sup>

As we shall see in a different context in Section 2, an important aspect of this mystical theology is a radically *apophatic* attitude towards theological language, in which it is stressed that the words that we use of God can never circumscribe the reality to which they point. (This attitude – influential in Orthodoxy through the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers and of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite – has roots in Neoplatonic thinking. Because strands

<sup>39</sup> A variety of views is to be found within Orthodoxy, but even at its most pessimistic Orthodoxy is ‘optimistic’ by Augustinian or Calvinist standards, and at its most optimistic it reflects Justin Martyr’s argument (1 Apology, 46) that even those who lived before the historical incarnation of the divine *Logos* could, through the love of wisdom, be sufficiently connected to that *Logos* to be, essentially, already Christian.

<sup>40</sup> Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*.

<sup>41</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 8.

of Islamic thinking have similar Neoplatonic roots, this apophaticism is to be found in the Islamic tradition too.)<sup>42</sup>

Related to this apophaticism is the concept of *antinomy*, which recognizes the importance of sometimes holding together concepts that can seem logically incompatible. (The Trinitarian notion of God's simultaneous three-ness and oneness is an obvious example of this.) In an important strand of Orthodox thinking, therefore, theology is not regarded as

abstract, working through concepts, but contemplative: raising the mind to those realities which pass all understanding. This is why the dogmas of the Church often present themselves as antinomies . . . It is not a question of suppressing the antinomy by adapting dogma to our understanding, but of change of heart and mind enabling us to attain to the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God, and unites us, according to our several capacities, to Him.<sup>43</sup>

Behind this apophatic approach lies the way in which – in the Greek patristic understanding, and especially in its later use within the Byzantine hesychast tradition<sup>44</sup> – knowledge of God is far more than an understanding based on the discursive reasoning faculty. Such knowledge is, in this understanding, based first and foremost on contemplation (*theōria* in Greek) which is seen as the perception or vision of the highest human faculty, the 'intellect' (*nous*). This intellect is not the same as the discursive reasoning faculty (*dianoia*), which latter is understood as functioning properly in theological analysis only if rooted in the spiritual knowledge (*gnōsis*)<sup>45</sup> obtainable through the intellect.

According to this understanding, the intellect – when the darkening of its functions in 'fallen' humanity is overcome through divine grace – provides not knowledge *about* the creation but rather a *direct* apprehension or spiritual perception of the inner essences or principles (*logoi*) of the components of the cosmos created by the divine *Logos* (Word) and ultimately of that divine *Logos* itself. (As we shall see in Section 4, the intimate connection between the divine

<sup>42</sup> The Islamic aspect of the apophatic tradition is especially prominent in Shi'ite thinking. See the 'Shi'ite Doctrine' article in the online *Encyclopaedia Iranica*: [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shiite-doctrine](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shiite-doctrine).

<sup>43</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 43.

<sup>44</sup> This word *hesychast*, deriving from the Greek term for silence or stillness, refers to the understanding of contemplative practice which has – especially since its defence by Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century – been dominant within Orthodoxy and in particular in its monastic practice.

<sup>45</sup> In the Orthodox understanding, this *gnōsis* is not the same as that which was at the heart of the heretical Gnosticism of the early Christian centuries, which was based on secret teachings. *Gnōsis*, in the Orthodox sense, represents a deeper understanding than is usual of the public teachings and practices of the church. For an explanation of this and the other terms used in this paragraph, see the glossary given in Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, *The Philokalia*, 357–67.