

## II Church Fathers and the shaping of Orthodox theology

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It is a characteristic of Orthodox Christianity that its theological history is conceived of very broadly and valued very highly; in the eyes of many commentators, Orthodoxy quite simply *is* patristic Christianity. According to one anecdote, a recent visitor to Mt Athos was told by one of the monks there, 'Here it is still the fourth century.'<sup>1</sup> That claim is, of course, in many ways quite fatuous – but even so it reveals something very important about Orthodoxy. For to make such a claim is at once to present an important fact about how Orthodox Christians tend to think about the past: the past constantly flows towards the future and, in so doing, lives in the present. The past is not tidily compartmentalised and detached, as an object for disinterested study. This is not to deny the possibility of Orthodox Christians engaging professionally and seriously in historical study, even in the historical study of Orthodoxy. Rather, it is to make a claim about the process of continuously appropriating the past that animates Orthodox theology (and, perhaps, to shed light on why Fr Georges Florovsky regarded historical theology as having a special claim on the Orthodox).

This chapter will not attempt a history of Orthodox Christian doctrine; still less will it attempt a patrology. Both such projects are important and have their place, but what concerns us here is the exposition of patristic doctrine and that task is necessarily theological. Although it is important to be historically scrupulous in expositing that topic, our attention will be devoted less to historical detail and more to theological currents. For purposes of convenience, we will consider these currents as they were exemplified in the lives and writings of particular historical figures. The coverage will necessarily be selective, but it will register important developments in areas of doctrine such as Christology, trinitarian theology and iconography. In the following pages, key themes from the doctrinal heritage of Orthodox Christianity will be presented in a series of vignettes. The vignettes will be arranged in chronological order and, in most cases,

the presentations will be anchored by brief biographical notes on particular people whose names have become closely associated with the doctrines in question.

ATHANASIUS THE GREAT (c. 296–373): ON THE  
DYNAMICS OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

Athanasius the Great, sometime Archbishop of Alexandria and formidable controversialist, gave us one of the truly great lapidary phrases from the Greek patristic tradition when he wrote of God the Word that ‘he became human that we might be made divine’.<sup>2</sup> This pithy statement – which elegantly describes the dynamic underlying most Orthodox reflection on the doctrine of deification, or *theosis* – was penned probably before Athanasius was fully overwhelmed by the lengthy struggles he faced against the teachings about Christ advanced by the Alexandrian priest Arius.<sup>3</sup> It expresses in a positive way Athanasius’s persistent claim (so important during the Arian controversy) that, to act as Saviour, Christ must be fully divine and fully human. Only thus could Christ bridge the absolute difference in essence that separates the divine from the created. For ‘other things, according to the nature of things originate, are without likeness in essence with the Maker’.<sup>4</sup> Athanasius was similarly outspoken in insisting on the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, who is likewise deeply involved in the work of salvation. Indeed, the Spirit, no less than the Son, is implicated in deifying God’s creation.<sup>5</sup> The actions of the Son and the Spirit are co-ordinated and consistent; it is through the Spirit that the Son’s activity is accomplished: ‘As then the Father is light and the Son is his radiance – we must not shrink from saying the same things about them many times – we may see in the Son the Spirit also by whom we are enlightened . . . But when we are enlightened by the Spirit, it is Christ who in him enlightens us.’<sup>6</sup>

Athanasius tirelessly asserted the full and equal divinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit against a range of other theological views. Athanasius’s theological style was deeply philosophical. In furtherance of this cause, Athanasius employed the categories of middle Platonism and, through the ‘interlocking’ of history and salvation with ontology, he was able to present a coherent account of the Christian life.<sup>7</sup> Yet Athanasius had a critical attitude towards philosophy, which he subordinated to his theology. To paraphrase Gregory of Nazianzus’s ringing praise for Athanasius, he was preoccupied with the ‘true philosophy’ that confers deification.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Athanasius found pagan philosophy shamefully implicated in the problem of idolatry – a serious theological problem

insofar as the making of gods amounts to a turning from God to self.<sup>9</sup> But the coming of Christ, and most especially the Cross of Christ, provokes a re-orientation towards God such that humans are made to participate in God's attributes, i.e. they are made gods.

The most fundamental divine attribute in which humans participate is also the most basic: reality itself. As Athanasius states, 'Now reality is the good, unreality what is evil. I call reality the good because it has its exemplar in God who is real; and I call unreality what is evil because what has no real existence has been invented by the conceits of men.'<sup>10</sup> The evils invented by human conceits are chiefly the false gods who litter the false cosmology developed by perverse imaginations – as Athanasius makes clear with a lengthy quotation from Wisdom 14:12–21.<sup>11</sup> In quoting that passage, Athanasius demonstrates a practice that he warmly advocates in his famous *Letter to Marcellinus* by entering into scripture and making its worldview his own. This is possible, Athanasius contends, precisely because the words of scripture were inspired by the Holy Spirit who animates the Christian spiritual life.

#### THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS: ON THEOLOGICAL FORMULAE

Athanasius is chiefly remembered for his contributions to Christology. Although, as we have seen, he contributed to several other key areas as well, he dedicated most of his considerable talent to defending the divinity of Christ. It was left to three of Athanasius's younger contemporaries – Basil the Great (c. 330 – 1 Jan. 379), his brother Gregory of Nyssa (uncertain: c. 330 – c. 395) and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus (329/30–389/90) – to apply the same care and diligence to defending the Holy Spirit. The three hailed from Cappadocia in Asia Minor and, as Gregory of Nazianzus proudly claimed, 'of all men in the world, [Cappadocians'] special qualities are firmness in the faith, and loyal devotion to the Trinity'.<sup>12</sup> Motivated by this loyal devotion, these three Cappadocian Fathers contributed to the development of patristic theology 'a full-scale doctrine of the Trinity, in which both the unity and the diversity could be precisely formulated within a systematic theory and with a technical terminology adequate to obviate misunderstanding or equivocation'.<sup>13</sup> To appreciate this accomplishment, we need to consider the terminological problems that they faced.

The divinity of the Father was axiomatic and, in AD 325, the council of Nicaea asserted the divinity of the Son. But the place of the Spirit was still obscure. Theologians such as Athanasius were happy to appeal to the Holy

Spirit in their writings and even to offer analogies in support of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. He had also claimed that the Spirit must be God because the Spirit does what only God can do (namely, save humans).<sup>14</sup> But several basic questions about the Holy Spirit still awaited a satisfactory answer. In one of his orations, Gregory of Nazianzus runs through a long list of competing claims that could be made about the Spirit, even by Christians who were prepared to acknowledge the Spirit as God:

these agree with us that there are Three Conceptions [*tria ... noumena*]; but they have separated these from one another so completely as to make one of them [the Father] infinite both in essence and power, and the second [the Son] in power but not in essence, and the third [the Spirit] circumscribed in both; thus imitating in another way those who call them the Creator, the Co-operator, and the Minister, and consider that the same order and dignity which belongs to these names is also a sequence in the facts.<sup>15</sup>

The problem could not be resolved by appeal to scriptures; to turn again to an observation from Gregory of Nazianzus: 'The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely; the New manifested the Son, and suggested the deity of the Spirit.' The Bible does not spell out the truth about the Spirit; instead, as Gregory continues, 'Now the Spirit himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of himself.'<sup>16</sup>

Gregory thus explains the progressive disclosure of the Trinity as the revelation of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the midst of Christians. Basil offers this significant description of what happens as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:

Just as when a sunbeam falls on bright and transparent bodies, they themselves become brilliant too, and shed forth a fresh brightness from themselves, so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual, and send forth their grace to others. Hence comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, distribution of good gifts, the heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in God, the being made like to God, and, highest of all, the being made God.<sup>17</sup>

Here, Basil links deification ('being made God') to the economic activity of the Holy Spirit, which can be contrasted to Athanasius's connection of deification to the Incarnation. But the contrast is superficial, since Basil's claim is in line with Athanasius's teaching (e.g., in his letters to Serapion)

that the transforming effects of the Holy Spirit are evidence that the Spirit is fully divine.<sup>18</sup> These effects are demonstrated in greater understanding of God, to be sure, but it is precisely the same activity of the Holy Spirit that is manifest in care for the poor, service within the Christian community and other forms of pastoral involvement – and in all of these areas, Basil's contributions were renowned.<sup>19</sup>

But offering a systematic account of the divinity of the Spirit was difficult, because of the lack of conventional theological language. In surveying historical documents, we tend to expect key terms to be univocal and often supply such precision in instances where it is not warranted. Actually, Athanasius had treated essence (*ousia*) and subsistence (*hypostasis*) as synonyms,<sup>20</sup> and others carried forward this usage in a way that made it difficult to talk about the essential oneness of God.<sup>21</sup> So the Cappadocians roughed out terminological distinctions, which when subsequently refined would become landmarks of patristic doctrine. For instance, the hypostasis is that which is peculiar, rather than 'the indefinite conception of *ousia*'.<sup>22</sup> The distinctiveness of the Son and the Holy Spirit is further described using another technical expression – *tropos tês hyparxeôs* ('mode of existence') – that points to the different way in which each originates from the Father. The expression is found occasionally in Basil the Great's writings (e.g. *On the Holy Spirit* 18.46), but its refinement is to be credited to Gregory of Nyssa's *Against Eunomius*.<sup>23</sup> Gregory further contributed to the discussion by offering illustrations of their relation-in-distinctiveness in his letter to Ablabius entitled 'That there are not three gods'. There, he advances what is sometimes called, unsatisfactorily, the 'social model' of the Trinity by explaining how a single nature can be manifest in three (or, in the case of humans, a plurality of) persons. His main point is less social than grammatical: Gregory is delineating a proper grammar for theology. Hence, he concludes the letter by writing that, since 'the divine nature is apprehended by every conception as unchangeable and undivided, ... we properly declare the Godhead to be one, and God to be one, and employ in the singular all other names which express divine attributes'.

Perhaps the most famous theological formula associated with the Cappadocian Fathers is 'one nature, three *hypostases*' (or 'persons'): that is, the three divine persons are one in nature. That catch-phrase is exceedingly rare in their writings,<sup>24</sup> but it neatly expresses the direction of their combined influence on the development of trinitarian theology. And yet the Cappadocians had no fetishistic preoccupation with a form of words, however nice. Gregory of Nazianzus makes this clear in his somewhat embarrassed account of why Basil's *On the Holy Spirit* does not use the

word *homoousios*: he writes, 'For our salvation is not so much a matter of words as of actions.'<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, a similar note of reservation is sounded: 'Yet receive what I say as at best a token and reflection of the truth; not as the actual truth itself. For it is not possible that there should be complete correspondence between what is seen in the tokens and the objects in reference to which the use of tokens is adopted.'<sup>26</sup> The 'tokens' of theology refer us to God and are not to be mistaken for 'the actual truth itself'; and yet they are not for that reason useless or inaccurate, because they are inspired by the abiding presence of God.

EVAGRIUS PONTICUS (c. 346–399): ON THEOLOGY  
AS PRAYER

As we have seen, theology was for Gregory of Nazianzus more than a mere form of words, regardless of how important the right words are. Theology is actually an integral part of living a Christian life. How this is so can be seen clearly from the special case of living a Christian *monastic* life. The intimate connection between living and thinking is seen with exceptional clarity in the writings of a disciple of both Basil and Gregory: Evagrius Ponticus. Subsequent monastic theologians have taken up and developed this insight, and we shall consider some of them, too, in the next section.

Evagrius had known Basil and Gregory as a young man and, when Gregory became Archbishop of Constantinople, he travelled to the capital to aid his erstwhile teacher in promoting the Nicene cause. Shortly after Gregory left, Evagrius too departed – but Evagrius's journey took him ultimately to Egypt, where he was trained in ascetic practices that perfected the training that he had received in Cappadocia.<sup>27</sup> Evagrius was one of the many who came to Egypt to learn from the desert Fathers. We have writings from the same period that record travels in Egypt, sometimes lasting for several years, by John Cassian, Palladius of Hellenopolis, Rufinus of Aquileia and an anonymous group whose journey is related in the *History of the Monks of Egypt*. Evagrius stands apart from this group precisely because he came to stay. Although records suggest that he travelled from the desert to Alexandria upon occasion, and once (while fleeing the ordaining hands of a bishop) even left Egypt altogether, he embraced the life of Egyptian monasticism to such an extent that he did not so much as acknowledge the death of his father when it was reported to him.

It has been argued that Evagrius's theological writings, nearly all of which date from his time in Egypt, demonstrate a profound influence

from the elder desert Fathers – men such as Pambo, Macarius the Egyptian and Macarius the Alexandrian. The extent to which Evagrius conforms to the conventional teaching of the desert Fathers is admittedly a difficult question to judge. This is in part because we have so little independent evidence of what they taught (they did not leave writings, for example) that we cannot be too confident that there even was a ‘conventional teaching’. However, as Jeremy Driscoll has persuasively argued, Evagrius’s writings resonate with themes that can be otherwise identified in accounts of the teachings of Pambo and others.<sup>28</sup> But even without attempting to generalise from Evagrius’s works to a general theology of the desert, it is possible to acknowledge that those writings are a precious testimony to the experience of the desert Fathers as understood theologically by one of them.

At the risk of overstatement, we might identify Evagrius’s lasting contribution to Orthodox theology in two clarion statements of his. The first is a pithy definition: ‘Christianity is the teaching of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which consists of ascetic practice, natural contemplation and theology.’<sup>29</sup> Those words open the first book in a trilogy of his that was well known in the ancient world. The structure of the trilogy itself echoes that tripartite definition of Christianity: the first book is called *The Ascetic, or The Monk*; the second is *The Gnostic, or The One Who is Worthy of Knowledge*; the third is *Gnostic Chapters* (or *Gnostic Problems*). Form reinforces content.

In the first book, there is a marked emphasis on the foundational principles of ethical behaviour. In the second, more advanced themes such as the interpretation of scripture and advising other monks – both of which require profound understanding – come to the fore, though the importance of ethical practice is by no means ignored. In the third book, there is another shift in content so that the reader is presented with chapters about God, about the nature of creation and about the dynamics of salvation, all of which are put in a deliberately elliptical way. Quite apart from the positive content of these three works, Evagrius has in them identified three major modes of activity within Christianity – ascetical and ethical living; understanding of God’s creation; converse with God – that are progressive, mutually reinforcing and illuminating. This identification of the interrelated areas of activity, culminating in theology proper, has been vastly influential in the Orthodox tradition.

The second statement from Evagrius that has been enduringly fruitful is this: ‘If you are a theologian, you will pray truly, and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian.’<sup>30</sup> The first statement makes a proposition about how theology relates to life; this second statement makes a

proposition about the character of theology. It is *prayerful*. As Evagrius puts it elsewhere, prayer is 'the mind's conversation with God'<sup>31</sup> – and so, by implication, true converse with God is theology. Furthermore, undistracted prayer is the mind's highest function when it functions naturally<sup>32</sup> – and so, again, the implication is that theology is the highest function of the mind doing what it does naturally.

#### THE MONASTIC CONTRIBUTION: ON LIVING THEOLOGICALLY

Students of early Christianity increasingly recognise Evagrius for the importance of his writings because they reveal a major, early synthesis of monastic practice and theology. He is, however, a divisive figure, and in the subsequent literature he is frequently castigated for succumbing to a problematic infatuation with philosophy that is associated with the name of Origen of Alexandria. In the Greek tradition, Evagrius's name is most closely associated with a network of abstract and speculative theological claims about creation and salvation that has been repeatedly condemned. But his practical teachings (and even some of his quite advanced writings, such as *Chapters on Prayer*) have been very influential, as has his integration of prayer and theology. It is particularly through the monastic tradition that this heritage has been preserved and disseminated. But a word of warning is needed: though it is clear that the traditional understanding of monastic theology in the Orthodox world is profoundly indebted to Evagrian categories of thought, it is definitely *not* the case that every later monastic theologian has been indebted to Evagrius.

One great monastic teacher who is certainly not assimilated to Evagrius but whose writings reveal a similar integration of practice and theology is known to us as Macarius, sometimes called 'pseudo-Macarius' or 'Macarius-Symeon', author of *Fifty Spiritual Homilies* and the *Great Letter*. For several decades, it has been a commonplace to contrast the 'intellectualism' of Evagrius with the 'materialism' of Macarius, though this contrast is overdrawn.<sup>33</sup> It is perhaps too easy to think of Evagrius as an intellectual monk, precisely because within Orthodox tradition he is sometimes condemned for speculation, and also too easy to think of Macarius as a pious but crude monk, because his *Homilies* have a complicated relationship with the Messalian movement (an ascetic movement of the late fourth century, known to us chiefly through the writings of its opponents).<sup>34</sup> But in both cases the easy generalities are unsatisfactory. The major problem with that attitude towards Macarius is that people

are not accustomed to reading the works of such a 'spiritual' author for their theological content, but the effort to do so is (as Marcus Plested has recently shown) amply repaid by the results. The account of Christian life in Macarius's writings is both animated by a vivid awareness of the experiences of salvation and informed by a coherent theology in which teachings about the Trinity, the Incarnation, the gifts of the Spirit and other topics are integrated.<sup>35</sup> The homiletic structure of his writings may make the underlying theology less obvious to a casual glance, but it is no less real for that.

If Evagrius has a reputation for being too intellectual and Macarius for being too emotive, the monastic author who is usually credited with striking the right balance between those extremes is Diadochus, Bishop of Photike in New Epirus. His debt to the Evagrian tradition is clear in both the terms and the format that he uses (the genre is the 'century' of 'chapters', or group of 100 interconnected but discrete units); his affinity to Macarius is identifiable in the warmth and intensity that we find in his descriptions of the Christian life. His *One Hundred Practical Texts of Perception and Spiritual Discernment* analyses the experience of prayer as the major form of contact between God and humans, and its consequent effects for the one who prays.<sup>36</sup> The influence of Diadochus's theology has been perceived in Maximus the Confessor,<sup>37</sup> another monastic theologian about whom we will have more to say in due course. For now, what we need to notice is that Diadochus's century of chapters made available to monastic readers key insights into life precisely by applying theological teachings in order to understand the experiences of (for instance) temptation and isolation from God. In this respect, Diadochus stands in a distinguished line of monastic authors whose writings made the relevance of theology quite clear by bringing it to bear on the events of daily life. Even though Diadochus (like Evagrius, and indeed like John Climacus) was adept at using the 'chapters' genre to convey his teachings, monastic literature is not limited to any particular form. We have pastoral letters (e.g. from Barsanuphius and John of Gaza), anecdotes about the lives and deeds of great monks that are sometimes intense and sometimes amusing (e.g. from Cyril of Scythopolis and from Dorotheus of Gaza, respectively) and even a travelogue (e.g. from John Moschus). What all of this literature has in common is that it is *practical*, not in the quotidian sense that it explains how to make household repairs or the like, but in the etymological sense that it concerns the *practice of asceticism*, which is nothing other than the daily application of the theological doctrines of the Church.

THE AGE OF THE COUNCILS (325–842): ON DEFENDING  
THE FAITH

To return now to those doctrines, mention has already been made of decisions against Arius promulgated by the council of Nicaea (AD 325) – a council that within a generation was already being recognised as ‘ecumenical’ in scope and authority.<sup>38</sup> But the decisions at Nicaea did not calm the controversies, and for decades thereafter Christology was a contested and divisive issue in many ways;<sup>39</sup> even so, it was Nicene doctrine that the council of Constantinople (381) reaffirmed. That council itself was within seventy years being recognised as the second ecumenical council.<sup>40</sup> The 150 bishops at Constantinople revised the earlier Creed formulated at Nicaea, and it is this Creed that is popularly (if inaccurately) known as the ‘Nicene Creed’ – shortly thereafter to be described as a ‘wise and saving symbol of divine grace’ which ‘sufficed for the perfect knowledge and confirmation of piety, for on the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit its teaching is complete [or perfect: *teleion*]’.<sup>41</sup>

In debates during this epoch, there was a perceptible increase in the sense of deference to earlier figures, traditions and authorities.<sup>42</sup> Recourse to these sources was prominent in the debates between Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople, concerning Christology and the veneration appropriate to the blessed Virgin. For example, in the course of these debates, on 22 July 341, the bishops effectively made the Nicene Creed the touchstone of orthodoxy. Under Cyril’s direction, the council of Ephesus (431; third ecumenical) robustly asserted that Christ cannot be divided into two separate persons (i.e., a divine person filiated by the Father and a human person born of Mary), that Mary is thus the ‘Birth-giver of God’ (*Theotokos*) and therefore that to deny her the honour of that title is to blaspheme against Christ God. Cyril’s success resonated and, in subsequent controversies about Christ, all sides would attempt to claim fidelity to Cyril’s position. A strong consensus was forming.

But the stronger the consensus, the larger the rifts that followed. This generalisation is well illustrated in the events subsequent to the council of Chalcedon (AD 451; fourth ecumenical), which resulted in the estrangement of two large confederations of bishops that, for purposes of convenience, may be described as those in communion with the emperor and those who were not. (Because conforming and nonconforming bishops sometimes nominally held the same sees, communion is a better indicator than geography – although geographic patterns do emerge subsequently and survive to this day.) All of this is to say nothing of the survival of

the Apostolic Church of the East, whose members do not attribute authority to the decisions of the council of Ephesus.<sup>43</sup>

Following Chalcedon, there were several turbulent decades of mutual recrimination during which, broadly speaking, Alexandrian theologians accused Antiochene theologians of heretically separating Christ into two persons ('Nestorianism') and Antiochenes retaliated by accusing Alexandrians of heretically collapsing Christ's two natures into a composite nature ('Monophysitism'). During the reign of Justinian I, a council convened in Constantinople (AD 553; fifth ecumenical) to re-assert the authority of Chalcedon, and also to condemn some writings by prominent Antiochene theologians. Around this time, perhaps in conjunction with the council itself, a system of beliefs inspired by the Alexandrian theologians Origen, Didymus the Blind and Evagrius Ponticus was condemned as 'Origenism'.

Still christological controversy continued, as indicated by unsuccessful attempts at constructing a mutually agreeable position; such were 'Monergism', which posited a single energy (or activity) in Christ, and 'Monothelitism', which asserted unity at the level of the will. Key figures who resisted these attempts were Emperor Constans II, Maximus the Confessor – whose cosmological vision of Christology has been enormously significant in Orthodox theology<sup>44</sup> – and Pope Martin of Rome. Imperial leadership favoured reconciliation, but some prominent churchmen resisted the implied compromise of Chalcedonian orthodoxy and held to that resistance to the point of death. For instance, during his trial Maximus explained that 'no being exists without natural activity. I mean that the holy Fathers say plainly that it is impossible for any nature at all to exist or to be recognised apart from its essential activity [*tês ousiôdôs . . . energieias*]'.<sup>45</sup> For Chalcedonian theology to be meaningful, the two natures of Christ must be expressed through their proper activities. This position was broadly endorsed by the council that assembled in 680–1 (Constantinople III; sixth ecumenical) and that condemned previous attempts at compromise, thus asserting that Christ's two natures implied Christ's two wills and two energies.

Though further debates emerged in which key issues already discussed were taken up again (as when, for example, essential energies figure prominently in the debates about Hesychasm), the next major crisis that required a theological solution provides a good example of how Orthodox theology proceeded through insightful and creative recourse to traditional themes that were deployed in response to new challenges. In this instance, the challenge came in the form of a principled rejection of religious imagery ('Iconoclasm') about a generation after the sixth ecumenical council and

ran for over sixty years (AD 730–87). But in 787, Constantine VI and his mother Eirene convoked a council that established the theological basis for iconography (council of Nicaea II; seventh ecumenical). The major ‘intellectual architect’ of this theology was John of Damascus (approx. 650/5–750), whose *Three Treatises Against Those Who Attack the Icons* offer two collections of passages consolidated from earlier sources in support of Christian iconography, framed by a sustained theological analysis of imagery that is based on the Incarnation as an event that clarifies God’s relationship to matter and so justifies Christian symbolism.<sup>46</sup>

Collectively the ecumenical councils produced a huge collection of canonical legislation, but they are particularly important for our purposes because of their doctrinal creeds and formulations. These doctrines centre on the mystery of Christ – but that mystery itself has cosmic ramifications and, of these, some are pursued in conciliar definitions and statements. Examples include the veneration appropriate to those creatures and things who are imbued with God’s love – whether the ‘Theotokos’, the Gospel book, or graphic and plastic representations taken from salvation history; the divinity of the Son and the Spirit; good order within the communities that are being reconciled to God; the relationship between secular culture and sacred learning. Even during the centuries in which the great councils were occurring, the decisions of ecumenical councils were already becoming normative (if not sacrosanct) by long customary usage.

It is striking that all of these councils convened in the Christian East, though Western – or, more specifically, papal – involvement was always important; sometimes, it was decisive. (Maximus the Confessor’s high regard for the Church of Rome was largely based on its exemplary record of supporting orthodoxy and challenging heresy: ‘I love the Romans because we share the same faith, whereas I love the Greeks because we share the same language’, as he said in his trial.)<sup>47</sup> But by the time of the iconoclast controversies, Rome and Constantinople were beginning to pull apart for cultural and political reasons, some of which can be traced to the Christianisation of non-Roman peoples.

To the north, Charlemagne asserted himself as a Christian leader with no less stature than the emperor in Constantinople. His theologians, though opposed to the destruction of religious imagery, attacked the theological case for iconography advanced by the Fathers of the council of 787 in four books (the *Libri carolini*) written c. 790–2. The books’ aggressive tone is owed in part to faults in the Latin translation of the council to which they respond, but beyond that the Carolingians were overtly hostile towards icon-devotion, fearing that it admitted a return to pagan idolatry. Their strident and self-confident rejection of Greek theology

should also be understood against the background of strained diplomatic relations between Charlemagne and the Byzantine empress, Eirene. Comparable political problems overflowing into theological controversies intensified in the following decades, so that relations between the East and West ebbed low during the patriarchate of Photius the Great (*sed.* 858–67, 878–86).

PHOTIUS THE GREAT (c. 820–893): ON PATRISTIC  
CONTROVERSY

Photius was an erudite man who was made patriarch in the midst of controversy. His domestic problems were compounded when he came into conflict with Pope Nicholas I (*sed.* 858–67), a stalwart advocate of papal primacy, since both Rome and Constantinople were laying claim to jurisdictional oversight of recently converted Bulgaria.<sup>48</sup> Open conflict was inevitable because Germans and Greeks brought different practices and observances to the Balkans. The most provocative divergence was the Carolingians' inclusion in the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed of the clause 'and the Son' (in Latin, *filioque*) to describe the procession of the Holy Spirit, or more precisely the Spirit's *dual* procession, from the Father *and the Son*. The clause had initially been introduced as an anti-Arian device in fifth-century Spain, where Catholic Christian bishops were confronted by conquering Germanic tribes whose faith fell short of Greek standards. By the time it came to be advocated by the Carolingians, the expanded Creed was widely accepted as a matter of tradition in the Latin Christian world. Even Western theologians who rejected the modification of the Creed, such as Pope Leo III, supported the theological claims implied by the *filioque*.

The Greeks objected categorically to the modification of a conciliar Creed, as part of their increasing conviction that their ecumenical councils (even councils that, when they convened, went largely unnoticed) were normative. Meanwhile, the Carolingians set about tracing their own genealogy of trinitarian theology and generated lists of earlier patristic sources to support the dual procession of the Holy Spirit. In his *Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*, Photius challenged the Carolingians. According to Photius, his adversaries defended their position by invoking Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome, claiming, 'One ought not to charge the sacred Fathers with the crime of ungodliness [*dyssebeias*]. Either one agrees with their opinion because they taught piously and are acknowledged as Fathers, or they, together with their teaching, should be rejected as impious [*asebeis*] because they introduced godless doctrines [*dyssebôn*]

... *dogmatôn*].<sup>49</sup> Photius's counter-argument exposes the crudity of their claim on two counts: first, it reduces teaching to a factor that is absolutely pure or impure and thus compels assent or rejection, respectively; and second, it asserts that those acknowledged as holy Fathers are therefore to be followed in every particular.

By contrast, Photius criticises the Carolingians for contentiously opposing patristic excerpts against 'the teaching of the Church'. Photius can accept that error (even 'godless error': *dyssebêma*) can be found from time to time in the teaching of those who 'were admirable by reason of many other qualities which manifest virtue and piety' and he is prepared to acknowledge that they are Fathers despite the error. This is a disarming claim, particularly since Photius was vehemently opposed to the *filioque*.<sup>50</sup> Photius believes that historical development gives us the benefit of hindsight, but also that we are obliged to be charitable.

Photius accepts that a venerable father is not *ipso facto* inerrant, that a saint can be in error and that holiness is distinguishable from accuracy even amongst the Greek Fathers (which nearly offsets his tendentious claims about the superiority of the Greek language).<sup>51</sup> He also accepts that, in matters of doctrine, standards of precision increase over time. So he can accept that, in the course of history, changing circumstances may invalidate earlier views, without therefore rejecting those who held to the invalidated views. In this way, Photius's polemic against the *filioque* outlines a critical approach to the reception of earlier theology that accepts the importance of historical development.

#### PETER OF DAMASCUS (c. 1027–1107): ON THE CONSOLIDATION OF TEACHINGS

As we have already seen through discussing some early monastic theologians, not all Orthodox teachings concern trinitarian or christological doctrines. Indeed, many theologians understand those doctrines as the summit of teaching that reaches down to practical and ethical instruction. An excellent example is preserved in Peter Damascene's *Treasury of Divine Knowledge*, a work infrequently studied but deeply important.<sup>52</sup> The *Treasury* reveals clearly that doctrine is not simply a set of interconnected propositions about God; it also includes practical guidance for daily life, so that one's entire life becomes a *theological* enterprise. Consider, for example, how Peter makes humility a principle of hermeneutics: he insists on recognising one's own limited understanding when reading the holy scriptures and on resisting the urge to conform the meaning of the Bible to our expectations.<sup>53</sup> To be able to learn, we have to accept that we are

ignorant. Ethics and understanding are connected in that way. This basic insight is not limited to reading scriptures, however. Peter sees it at work in the Christian life as a whole. Initiation into understanding is a process that occurs when those who lack understanding put themselves in a position to learn from those who have more experience in theological living: 'It is on this account that with firm faith and by questioning those with experience we should accept the doctrines of the Church and the decisions of its teachers, both concerning the holy scriptures and concerning the sensible and spiritual worlds.'<sup>54</sup>

Peter's instructions outline the whole contents of theology – the 'doctrines of the Church and the decisions of its teachers' as they bear on the Bible and on creation. Even if it does not correspond to the standard divisions of modern academic theology, Peter's syllabus is basically familiar to students of Orthodox theology. What is interesting about it is that, in effect, it identifies his *Treasury* as an exemplary work of theology precisely because the *Treasury* is a compendium of those doctrines and decisions. Peter is of course not the first theologian to produce a massive collection of traditional theology. He has an eminent precursor in an earlier theologian from Damascus, St John Damascene, whose *Fountainhead of Knowledge* (or *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*) is a famous, and rather more tidy but otherwise comparable, example.

In much the same way that the *Treasury* can be compared to John Damascene's *Fountainhead*, it can also be compared to earlier collections of monastic wisdom. Collected aphorisms from the desert Fathers were already circulating within a generation of their lives (as we know because Evagrius, who lived in their company, apparently cites such a collection) and their sayings would eventually become a major theological resource. But there is also evidence in old manuscripts that a larger canon of standard monastic literature had developed even before Peter Damascene's time.<sup>55</sup> The *Treasury* is an important milestone in the development of monastic theology that stands midway between the earliest records of that theology and the hugely significant modern collections like the *Philokalia* and the *Dobrotolyubie*; in fact, the *Treasury* has been rightly called 'a circle within a circle, a concentrated *Philokalia* within the more extended *Philokalia*'.<sup>56</sup> As such, it has an important place in the broad tradition of ascetic literature that has nurtured Orthodox theology for centuries, inspiring modern monastic fathers of the Church from St Nil Sorsky to Fr Cleopa of Sihăstria,<sup>57</sup> but also playing a key role in the modern re-vitalisation of Orthodox theology as a whole. So both directly, through the pastoral ministry of spiritual Fathers who are themselves steeped in the traditions recorded in ascetic literature, and

indirectly, through the resurgence of a genuinely Orthodox theology that is inspired in large measure by the same literature, monastic theology has been felt even by secular Orthodox Christians.

Similarly, although Peter himself was a monk, he makes his teachings available to all Christians, as is clear from this remark in the preface to the *Treasury*:

there is no object, no activity or place in the whole of creation that can prevent us from becoming what God from the beginning wished us to be: that is to say, according to his image and likeness, gods by adoption through grace, dispassionate, just, good and wise, *whether we are rich or poor, married or unmarried, in authority and free or under obedience and in bondage* – in short, whatever our time, place or activity.<sup>58</sup>

Peter's teaching aims to meet the contingencies of life. By grounding theology in spiritual practice, and theological insight into human life, Peter exemplifies the traditional mode of Orthodox theology. In his *Treasury*, earlier Orthodox doctrines are recapitulated in such a way as to make the riches of theory and discipline generally available.

#### GREGORY PALAMAS (c. 1296–1359): ON REDEFINING DOCTRINE

Like Peter, Gregory Palamas<sup>59</sup> was also the inheritor of a rich theological tradition – but the controversies in which he became embroiled demonstrate that, for all its broad-based stability, this tradition was neither mechanical nor hidebound. For instance, Palamas drew heavily from the Fathers to offer his theological account of and defence for the claims of certain Athonite monks about their life of prayer (known as hesychasm). These monks were accused of heresy by Barlaam the Calabrian for claiming that they physically experienced an encounter with God. Palamas insisted to the contrary that when humans experience the activities (or 'energies') of God, they thus come into direct contact with God; or, to put it negatively, God's energies are not created effects that mediate between God and creatures. Divine energy is itself 'ineffable, uncreated, eternal, timeless, unapproachable, boundless, infinite, uncircumscribable, invisible to angels and men; it is the archetypal and immutable beauty, the glory of God, the glory of Christ, the glory of the Spirit, a ray of divinity, and so forth'<sup>60</sup> – and as such, to contact it is to contact God. Consequently, the Hesychasts affirmed that our material bodies can directly experience contact with God.

Now divine energies were already a theme in Greek theology, but Palamas articulated a position that met the needs of contemporary debates in a way that developed on earlier writings. But Palamas's defence provoked further controversy, this time from Gregory Akindynos. Akindynos criticised Palamas sharply – not without some justification – for his interpretation of the Fathers.<sup>61</sup> The fact that a competent theologian, well versed in the Fathers, challenged Palamas's patristic argument indicates that Palamite theology is not a simple recapitulation of classical doctrine.<sup>62</sup> In his *Discourse before Patriarch John XIV*, Akindynos presents an alternative solution to the debates on Hesychasm that is sympathetic to Hesychastic practices and at the same time more doctrinally conservative with respect to the Fathers than Palamas's argument had been. In defending the Hesychasts as he did, Palamas was transforming – or, from Akindynos's point of view, deforming – the patristic doctrinal heritage, by refining and developing it through theological reflection on Hesychastic prayer and its meaning. He re-deploys patristic doctrine and his point of departure is a particular set of religious experiences. Although the resulting emphasis on divine energies is characteristic, the theological method that leads to this characteristic emphasis is well attested and virtually constant throughout Orthodox theology.

## CONCLUSION

In surveying major developments in the history of Orthodox doctrine, we have noted several recurrent themes. We have seen that doctrine arises from, and remains in dialogue with, the experiences of the newness of life in Christ: theory guides practice, practice informs theory. The constant interaction of theory and practice in Peter Damascene's *Treasury* makes it possible for doctrine to be endlessly applicable by a general population. It also makes a central place in theology for ethics, since ethical living is basic for theological understanding. But ethics is not simply preliminary, something that is left behind after it has been put in order. As we learned from Photius, ethical considerations play an important part in articulating valid criticism within the tradition. Criticism fed by humility and charity enabled Photius to accept that mistakes are made, even by admirable and venerable teachers, and to avoid morbid preoccupation with a quest for abstract purity. His polemic against the Frankish theologians provides an example of how someone within the tradition can be constructively critical about the past, and thus of how the tradition itself can become self-critical.

This capacity for self-criticism (when it is exercised) has kept Orthodox doctrine from hardening into hidebound retrospection or atrophying into flaccid nostalgia. The accumulation of doctrinal insights is neither automatic, nor inevitable. Instead, it is deliberate and careful. Doctrine is validated by experience and corroborated by the witness of the saints. As circumstances change, it may become necessary to re-state the principles of Orthodox teaching. In proclaiming doctrine in a novel situation, or evaluating a proclamation that has arisen in that way, there is a criterion for criticism – and that criterion is Godliness. The goal of theology for the Orthodox is first and foremost communion with God. For this reason, life itself is a theological undertaking and doctrines are understood as expressions of the theological life. Even though it is possible (and in some cases necessary) to give a clear and precise statement of doctrine, Orthodox doctrine serves primarily to point the way towards God and so it takes on a distinctly experiential and practical flavour.

### Further reading

- Casiday, A. and Norris, F. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. II: *From Constantine to c. 600*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Louth, A. and Casiday, A. (eds.), *Byzantine Orthodoxies*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.
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- Pelikan, J., *The Christian Tradition*, vol. II: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Ramsey, B., *Beginning to Read the Fathers*, New York: Paulist Press, 1985.
- Runciman, Sir S., *The Great Church in Captivity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, especially Pt 1.

### Notes

1. C. Stewart, "'We'? Reflections on affinity and dissonance in reading early monastic literature', *Spiritus* 1 (2001), 93–102, esp. 94.
2. Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* 54.
3. See K. Anatolios, *Athanasius. The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998); on Arius, see R. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: SCM, rev. edn 2001).
4. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Arians* 1.6.20.
5. E.g. Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Decrees* 3.14.
6. Athanasius of Alexandria, *To Serapion* 1.19.
7. Anatolios, *Athanasius*, pp. 30–1.
8. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 21, *On the Great Athanasius* 2.
9. See Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Pagans* 19, and cf. *Against the Pagans* 10 (with reference to Plato); on his robust (and often

- misunderstood) argument against idolatry at *Against the Pagans* 2–29, see Anatolios, *Athanasius*, pp. 26–84.
10. Athanasius, *Against the Pagans* 4.
  11. Athanasius, *Against the Pagans* 11.
  12. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40, *On Holy Baptism* 33.
  13. J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 218.
  14. Athanasius, *To Serapion* 1.23.
  15. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 31, *The Fifth Theological Oration on the Holy Spirit* 5.
  16. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 31, 26.
  17. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 9.23.
  18. Athanasius, *To Serapion* 1.23.
  19. See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 43, *Panegyric on St Basil* 34–5.
  20. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Epistle to the Africans* 4; likewise, the Council of Sardica as well as Jerome and Epiphanius of Salamis: see J. T. Lienhard, 'Ousia and hypostasis' in S. T. David, D. Kendall, SJ, and G. O'Collins, SJ (eds.), *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 99–121, esp. 103–4.
  21. Thus (ps.-)Basil, *Letter* 38.1. Scholars now usually attribute this writing to Gregory of Nyssa; but since most Greek texts and English translations assign it to Basil, we follow that attribution, despite the possible inaccuracy.
  22. (Ps.-)Basil, *Letter* 38.3.
  23. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 1.21; see further, B. Daley, 'Nature and the "mode of union"', in S. T. David, D. Kendall, SJ, and G. O'Collins, SJ (eds.), *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 164–96.
  24. Thus Lienhard, 'Ousia and hypostasis'.
  25. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.68.
  26. (Ps.-)Basil, *Letter* 38.5.
  27. For details on Evagrius's life, see further A. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 5–22.
  28. J. Driscoll, *Steps to Spiritual Perfection: Studies on Spiritual Progress in Evagrius Ponticus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003).
  29. Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos* 1.
  30. Evagrius Ponticus, *Chapters On Prayer* 62.
  31. Evagrius Ponticus, *Chapters On Prayer* 3.
  32. Evagrius Ponticus, *Chapters On Prayer* 35.
  33. Thus, rightly, M. Plested, *The Macarian Legacy: The Place of Macarius-Symeon in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 59–71.
  34. A concise summary and evaluation of the evidence about the Messalians may be found in Plested, *The Macarian Legacy*, pp. 17–29.
  35. Plested, *The Macarian Legacy*, pp. 30–45.
  36. Diadochus of Photike, *One Hundred Practical Texts of Perception and Spiritual Discernment*.

37. Thus, e.g., A. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 25–6.
38. E.g., Athanasius of Alexandria, *Epistle to the Africans* 2.
39. See L. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
40. E.g. *Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, Second Session § 2; Sixteenth Session § 18.
41. *Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, Fifth Session § 34.
42. See P. T. R. Gray, “‘The select Fathers’”, *Studia Patristica* 23 (1989), 21–36; R. Lim, *Public Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Ch. 5.
43. W. Baum and D. Winkler, *The Church of the East* (London: Routledge, 2003).
44. See E. Theokritoff, ‘Creator and creation,’ above.
45. Maximus the Confessor, *Record of the Trial* 7.
46. For further discussion, see M. Fortounatto and M. B. Cunningham, ‘Theology of the icon’, above.
47. Maximus the Confessor, *Record of the Trial* 11; see also Maximus’s *Opusculum* 11.
48. See F. Dvornik, *The Photian Schism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), pp. 91–131; R. Haugh, *Photius and the Carolingians* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Co., 1975); H. Chadwick, *East and West: The Making of a Rift in the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 77–192.
49. Photius, *Mystagogy* 66. In fairness, it should be noted that the Carolingians also appealed to Athanasius, Didymus the Blind, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria and Hilary of Poitiers amongst others; see e.g. Theodulf of Orleans’s *On the Holy Spirit*.
50. See, e.g., Photius, *Letter* 13.33: ‘But also that blasphemy about the Spirit (or rather the Holy Trinity as a whole), which none surpasses, would suffice by itself – even if there were none of the aforementioned effronteries – to earn them a thousand anathemas.’
51. On Greek Fathers in error, see Photius, *Mystagogy* 75 and *Letter* 24.21; on the relative poverty of Latin, see *Mystagogy* 55 and *Letter* 24.5.
52. See G. Peters, ‘Peter of Damascus and early Christian spiritual theology’, *Patristica et medievalia* 26 (2005), 89–109; Peters, ‘Recovering a lost spiritual theologian: Peter of Damascus and the Philokalia’, *SVTQ* 49 (2005), 437–59.
53. Peter Damascene, *Treasury of Divine Knowledge (Philokalia)*, III, p. 144.
54. Peter Damascene, *Treasury (Philokalia)*, III, p. 138.
55. See further P. Géhin, ‘Le Filocalie che hanno preceduto la “Filocalia”’, in A. Rigo (ed.), *Nicodemo l’Aghiorita e la Filocalia* (Magnano: Qiqajon, 2001), pp. 83–102.
56. St Nikodimos the Hagiorite, as cited by Palmer, Sherrard and Ware (*Philokalia*, III, p. 72).
57. On Fr Cleopa, see N. Stebbing, *Bearers of the Spirit: Spiritual Fatherhood in Romanian Orthodoxy* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003), pp. 45–86.

58. Peter Damascene, *Treasury* (*Philokalia*, III, p. 76), emphasis added.
59. R. E. Sinkewicz, 'Gregory Palamas' in C. G. and V. Conticello (eds.), *La théologie byzantine et sa tradition*, vol. II (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), pp. 131–88; J. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1998).
60. Gregory Palamas, *Declaration of the Holy Mountain* 4.
61. See J. S. Nadal, 'La critique par Akindynos de l'herméneutique patristique de Palamas', *Istina* 19 (1974), 297–328.
62. N. Russell, 'Theosis and Gregory Palamas: continuity or doctrinal change?' *SVTQ* 50 (2006), 357–79.