The Reception of the Theology of the Russian Diaspora by the Greek Theology of the '60s: a Case Study

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This paper is the result of an interview with Christos Yannaras and aims to explore the impact of the theology of the Russian diaspora on the creative explosion in Greek Orthodox theology usually described as the 'generation of the '60s' through the eyes of one of its protagonists. My particular approach here is to look into how that protagonist thinks back to that encounter today, both in his personal development and in his assessment of the theological landscape.

The aim of this paper is to explore the impact of the theology of the Russian diaspora on the creative explosion in Greek Orthodox theology usually described as the 'generation of the '60s'; however, my particular approach here is to look into how the protagonists of that generation think back to that encounter *today*, both in their personal development and in their assessment of the theological landscape. To that end, my initial intention was to interview both Christos Yannaras and the Metropolitan of Pergamon, John Zizioulas, as the living protagonists of the Greek theological renewal. However, Christos Yannaras's 31 December 2017 interview provided me with an abundance of material to which I would not do justice were I to try to squeeze it into the first part of a two-part paper; this being the case, I opted here to present Christos Yannaras's take on his, and Greek theology's, encounter with the Russian diaspora. I remain with the hope that an interview with the Metropolitan of Pergamon shall follow in the near future. Given that this is the context of this paper, I should stress that it does not claim to be a *research* paper but, rather than that, precisely what it is—a snapshot of how these protagonists of the *Greek* theological revival remember *today* their encounter with the ideas and figures of the Russian diaspora. Thus, any descriptions of persons or events reflect the protagonist's take on these persons and events rather than my own research on the matter.

Christos Yannaras

Some background on the state of theology and public Christian discourse in Greece during Yannaras's youth, with which most of you are already familiar:

> As far as Christian life in Greece is concerned, the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by the activity of the Christian movement characterized by Yannaras as 'pietistic', the chief actor being the Zoē Brotherhood and its affiliated organizations.[1] These organizations did not derive from the ecclesial life of the Greeks or the institutional church and its structure, but were (and still are) parallel structures independent from the church's hierarchy and control. They proclaimed a 'New Greece' reborn through Christian morality and were recognizably pietistic in nature and theology, in their priorities and activities. Christos Yannaras, born 1935 in Athens, became an active part of the 'Christian movement' in his youth, eventually reaching its core and becoming a member of the Zoē Brotherhood of celibate theologians. Gradually discovering ecclesial Orthodoxy and its patristic and ascetic tradition in all its tangible materiality as something wholly juxtaposed to the pietistic worldview of the 'Movement', a journey documented in his autobiographical *A Refuge of Ideas*, he clashed with the Movement, leaving the Zoē Brotherhood in 1964 and emigrating to Germany to study philosophy and theology at the postgraduate level in Bonn. Up to that decade, the '60s, virtually the only extrovert and active version of Christianity in Greece was the pietistic one represented by the 'Christian Movement'.

As far as Greek *academic* theology was concerned, it oscillated between Roman Catholic scholasticism and Protestant morality, with Orthodoxy's difference from those traditions and denominations not forming an object of theological enquiry. Far from them being at the centre of attention, neither its patristic legacy nor the distinctive features of the Orthodox Church were studied, developed or taught. As far as the first part of the twentieth century is concerned, two important figures can be discerned: Christos Androutsos and Panayiotis Trembelas, authors *inter alia* of two different *Dogmatics of the Orthodox Church*, which dominated academic classes on Dogmatics for many decades.[2]

Returning to the interview: Yannaras remembers that even up until the late '50s and the early '60s, there was virtually no mention—neither in the University of Athens's theological faculty nor within the Christian movement—of the new theological landscape that was being formed in Europe and, later, in the United States due to the activity of the major figures of the Russian diaspora. The first time that those names were heard by the young theologians of Zoē was via Dimitris Koutroubis, the theologian brought to the circles of Zoē by the then head of the Brotherhood Fr Ilias Mastroyannopoulos (b. 1919) after his re-conversion from Roman Catholicism. Through regular discussions with the younger generation of theologians and

[1] On the Brotherhood's history, see Christoph Maczewski, *Die Zoi-Bewegung Griechenlands. Ein Beitrag zum Traditionsproblem der Ostkirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1970).

[2] I am borrowing the previous two paragraphs from forthcoming publications of mine on the subject.

Koutroubis's translations of works by the theologians of the *nouvelle théologie*—the first time that such works would appear in Greece—this younger generation would come to know about both the theology of the Russian diaspora and the Roman Catholic *nouvelle théologie*, both of which being, in a sense, movements for the rediscovery of the Church's tradition, as well as *neo-patristic* undertakings wholly different from any theology they had been taught before. In 1960–1965, the names of Alexander Schmemann, John Meyendorff, Vladimir Lossky, Paul Evdokimov, and Olivier Clément—who, Yannaras recalls, in spite of being a Frenchman himself, functioned as a sort of 'public representative' of the Russian diaspora in French society and beyond—were heard for the first time by the Zoē theologians and alongside the names of Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Hans Urs von Balthasar, or Jean Daniélou. It seems that Fr Georges Florovsky was not mentioned at that point in that quite Francophone company, due to him having left the St Serge Institute of Orthodox Theology in Paris for the United States somewhat earlier. The internal conflicts and divisions within the Zoē Brotherhood itself had a lot to do with the stirring up that this encounter engendered, as figures within the movement that oriented themselves towards a rediscovery of the Fathers of the Church (particularly the Cappadocians, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas) and of monasticism, the influx of new ideas from the Russian diaspora, and a multitude of other causes effected a profound change, first ignited by Dimitrios Koutroumbis and his fellowship of Zoē theologians gradually discerning the dead end. Yannaras would later write:

> By 1960, academic theology and extra-ecclesiastical pietism were losing their authority. Theology was becoming reintegrated with ecclesiastical life. New themes were being discussed: the Eucharistic rather than the institutional constitution of the Church, an experiential or apophatic approach to dogma, an existential rather than a legalistic understanding of sin.[3]

On the academic level, Yannaras assumes that the first time the names of the Russian diaspora played a role in the University of Athens's theological faculty was during the fierce correspondence between the then doctoral candidate Fr John Romanides and Prof. Panagiotis Trembelas in 1957 on the former's doctoral dissertation on *The Ancestral Sin* (the exchange was published much later in Greece[4]). Russian diaspora theologians, particularly Fr Georges Florovsky due to Fr Romanides's discipleship to him, were among the points of contention in that

[3] Christos Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West: Hellenic Self-Identity in the Modern Age*, trans. Peter Chamberas and Norman Russell (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 273.

[4] John S. Romanides and Panayiotis N. Trembelas, *Ἐγχειρίδιον : Ἀλληλογραφία π. Ι. Σ. Ρωμανίδου Καὶ Καθ. Π. Ν. Τρεμπέλα* [Handbook: Correspondence between Fr. J. S. Romanides and Prof. P. N. Trembelas], ed. Georgios D. Metallinos (Athens: Armos, 2009).

correspondence, in which Trembelas sought to show that Fr Romanides should not be awarded his doctorate in Orthodox theology. In other words, the *ancien régime* professor was implicitly portraying the theology of the Russian diaspora in a *negative* light and *against* John Romanides as a student thereof, while John Romanides would stress that his positions are also to be found in the works of established professors of Orthodox theology such as Florovsky, noting that Trembelas had simply not read them. However, this development and battle did not make the Russian diaspora widely known at the time, as it was largely an internal affair, with the publication of the letters taking place much later.

Yannaras notes that the Athens theology professor Hamilcar S. Alivizatos (1887–1969) should have previously known and should have been influenced to some extent by Fr Georges Florovsky and possibly Nicholas Zernov due to his involvement in the World Council of Churches; however, these encounters and their influence had not reached down to his students of theology. Similarly, and among a younger generation of Orthodox theologians teaching at Athens's Faculty of Theology, Nikos Nissiotis (1925–1986) would also have been deeply familiar with those representatives of the Russian diaspora that participated in the WCC; however, this did not directly result in a major way in the later influx of themes and ideas related to the Russian diaspora in Greece.

Influenced by the discovery of a very different Orthodox tradition than the one taught at both the university and the Christian movement, and by extension, Greek Church life at the time (i.e., by a patristic and neo-patristic, sacramental and Eucharistic Orthodox tradition as articulated and sparked by the Russian diaspora), Yannaras clashed with the Zoē Brotherhood in 1964 and left Greece with the help of an Alexander-von-Humboldt scholarship in order to study theology at the graduate level, as well as philosophy, at the University of Bonn, where Jürgen Moltmann was at the time. During the three years he stayed in Bonn (1964–1967: *Heidegger and the Areopagite*, under Louise Abramowsky), he discovered Martin Heidegger's philosophy and critique of Western metaphysics, but he also formed the wish and intention to move to Paris precisely in order to get to know the protagonists of the Russian diaspora there and their distinct approach to theology. His first contact with the **émigré** community was completely coincidental. In a train journey from Bonn to Paris, he met out of sheer coincidence the second wife of Leonid Ouspensky, Lydia Alexandrevna Miagkov, who invited him to the family's home. Having heard an immense amount of praise for Leonid Ouspensky by Fotis Kondoglou and painter Dinos Ksynopoulos back in Greece, Yannaras was delighted to oblige. In subsequent trips to Paris, he would meet Paul Evdokimov and his son Michel Evdokimov, Nikolai Lossky (the son of Vladimir Lossky), Boris Bobrinskoy, Olivier Clément, and many others.

In March 1968, a mere two months before May '68, a scholarship from the World Council of Churches enabled Yannaras to leave military dictatorship-ridden

Greece, where he had returned for a brief interval, and to move to Paris in order to work on a doctoral dissertation in philosophy at the Sorbonne (he received that doctorate in 1971, having previously received his 1970 theology doctorate from the University of Thessaloniki). He soon started to teach at the St Serge Institute of Orthodox Theology, in the heart of the theological diaspora community, his main courses being Byzantine Philosophy and Orthodox Ethics; this lasted for two years. However, the Institute had already descended from its peak, from its glory days. Yannaras's return from Paris to Athens coincided with the beginning, or continuation, of a period of intense conference activity, making regular theological interpenetrations possible. In conferences organized by the Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius in the United Kingdom and fuelled almost exclusively by the Russian diaspora from the Orthodox side,[5] he first met Nicholas Zernov, Militza Zernov, and Dimitri Obolensky, among others, while trips to the United States created the opportunity to meet Alexander Schmemann and Georges Florovsky.

Influence

In hearing Yannaras speak about the theology of the Russian diaspora and its role in the Greek theological renaissance from the '60s onwards, a seeming antinomy is to be underscored as particularly important.

(a) On the one hand, Yannaras treats those currents as clearly distinct ones, particularly on the level of the *content* of those theological developments: he does not consider the Greek theological renaissance as a 'translation' of the spirit of the Russian diaspora or as a Greek appropriation thereof. For example, Yannaras holds that, among other aspects, the level of *philosophical* sophistication—the need to respond to particular questions of a markedly *philosophical* texture—witnessed in the new era of Greek theology was not to be found in the theological writings of the Russian diaspora, but was a distinct Greek contribution.

(b) On the other hand, according to him, it is certainly and emphatically true that it is the presence of the theology of the Russian diaspora, together with further turns to the Fathers such as the nouvelle théologie, that sparked the Greek renaissance and made it possible. Without this new theological breeze and the themes, approach, and issues that it put on the table (allow me to repeat Yannaras's summation thereof: 'the Eucharistic rather than the institutional constitution of the Church, an experiential or apophatic approach to dogma, an existential rather than a legalistic understanding of sin'[6]), that new chapter in Greek theology—the first truly and deeply significant chapter

[5] Yannaras made a point of stressing the importance of the role of Arthur Macdonald 'Donald' Allchin from the Anglican side.

[6] Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, 273.

> since the 14th century and Gregory Palamas[7]—would have been unthinkable. Developments that were not directly related to the new theology articulated by the Russian diaspora and played a significant role in the rebirth of Greek theology included, for example, the seemingly sudden repopulation of Mount Athos and the renewal of Orthodox monasticism. However, the fact remains that without the impact of the theology of the Russian diaspora, which took so painfully long to actually reach the theological faculties, there would have been no obvious way out from the pre-'60s style and content of Greek theology and no route or path to a lively rediscovery of the Fathers, a re-evaluation of living tradition, and a substantial dialogue with modern philosophical thought.

Yannaras himself states that the first time he encountered both the importance of apophaticism (labelled as such) and the centrality of the person as a relational entity was in studying Vladimir Lossky's *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, a book that has been exceedingly formative for his own thought (in stark contrast to other Russian sources: for example, Yannaras confesses to no direct influence whatsoever by Nikolai Berdyaev, while he claims never to have read Vladimir Solovyov). Seeing that such indebtedness to Lossky is not declared by the Metropolitan of Pergamon, one could attempt the schematization that, as far as the Russian diaspora is concerned, Christos Yannaras can be seen as an indirect disciple of Vladimir Lossky (as he never got to meet Vladimir Lossky himself), and John Zizioulas as a disciple of Georges Florovsky. Lossky's insistence on personhood has not been directly received by Zizioulas, but only via Yannaras.[8]

Lossky seems to have been the first step for the influx of that radically alien Russian diaspora theology into Greek public theological discourse at large. His *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* was presumably the first major Russian diaspora theological treatise to be translated to Greek: 1964 saw it being published in Thessaloniki, translated by Presvytera Stella Plevraki in the formal *katharevousa* Greek of the time. It is safe to assume that the 1970 Greek translation of Schmemann's *For the Life of the World* (Athens: Dodoni, 1970, *Synoro* series, later republished by Domos) also played an important part in the Russian diaspora's impact on Greek theology. This translation was prepared by Zissimos Lorentzatos, practically together with Christos Yannaras, with the former reciting translated passages and the latter scribbling them down in preparation for publication. According to Yannaras, this was the first theological book in Greece to be (shockingly!) published in the Greek vernacular, *demotiki*, rather than the polished, official and classical-sounding *kath-*

[7] The astounding length of this theological silence is also noted by Aristotle Papanikolaou, 'Orthodox Theology in the Twentieth Century', in *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern*, ed. Ståle Johannes Kristiansen and Svein Rise (Farnham, Surrey – Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 53.

[8] Papanikolaou also notes that John Zizioulas's reception of the theology of personhood was from Lossky, but mediated via Yannaras: Papanikolaou, 'Orthodox Theology in the Twentieth Century', 59.

arevousa. Lorentzatos's insistence on the vernacular was such that even the book's title, alluding to the New Testamental and liturgical phrase the Greeks were familiar with as *'ὑπὲρ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου ζωῆς'*, was rendered as *Γιὰ νὰ ζήσει ὁ κόσμος*. This being the case, Schmemann's sacramental theology entered the Greek public theological and Christian discourse as a *new language,* not merely figuratively speaking, but also literally so, further adding to its impact and perceived strangeness.

Yannaras insists that the theology of the Russian diaspora was not received in Greece as a new *ideology* or as a new theological *current*, as a *programme* or *movement*; rather than all that, its absolute strangeness to the established theological parlance of the time made it sound promisingly and explosively otherworldly (i.e., a truly new and different way to conceive and speak of theology, Christianity, tradition, the patristic legacy, and the Church). This *explosive* nature of the influx of Russian diaspora theology in Greece, coupled with the dead-ends of the Greek theological and ecclesiastical landscape at the time, the new challenges posed by the wider post-war condition, and the dynamic protagonists of the younger generation of theologians helped spark the emergence of the multitude of creative Greek theologians with distinct contributions, comprising what has been called 'the generation of the '60s'.

It should be noted that a *linear* understanding of these developments (i.e., a monodimensional sketch of the Russian diaspora as leading to the Greek '60s generation) would be an oversimplification. As, for example, the Theological Faculty of Thessaloniki, under the leadership of Panayotis Chrestou, actualized a return to the Fathers—and as such a way of 'doing theology' that constituted a radical departure from previous norms—that return was not necessarily mediated by the Russian diaspora in particular. The situation in Athens in particular, however, would indeed merit such a linear understanding, according to Christos Yannaras: Athens's Theological School back then is described as immune to such neo-patristic innovations, as if divided from the hyperactivity of the younger theologians with a wall. Even today, and in spite of the fact that the great theologians of the Russian diaspora are considered as well-established authorities, it is difficult to find doctoral dissertations devoted to studying their work, even after a number of decades.

In summarising Christos Yannaras's current take on the reception of the theology of the Russian diaspora by the Greek theology of the '60s, one could say that both these different events, with distinct theological fruits, constituted the most important Orthodox theological developments in many centuries: that these are causally related is enthusiastically asserted—as if caused by one and the same breath of the Spirit.