



*Modern Orthodox Thinkers:  
From the Philokalia to the  
Present*

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*"This is a brilliant introduction to the living theology of the Orthodox Church since the publication of the Philokalia in 1782, revealing the amazing diversity and fecundity of the Orthodox theological tradition. This is sure to become the standard handbook on the ways of Orthodox theology in the nineteenth and twentieth century inspired by, and inspiring, the love of the good and beautiful."*

— John Behr, dean, St. Vladimir's Seminary, New York

## The *Philokalia* As a Watershed in Orthodox Theology

It is my contention that the publication of the *Philokalia* in 1782 can be seen as marking a turning point in Orthodox theology, a move away from the defensiveness of early modern Orthodox theology – the theology of the so-called 'Symbolic Books' – to a more confident style of theology, based on the authentic sources of Orthodox theology, namely the Fathers of the Church. This movement of renewal had deep roots and led the Orthodox Churches out of the problems that dogged them at the end of the eighteenth century. It is difficult not to see St Nikodimos as preparing the Greek Church under the Ottoman Empire for the independence it was to achieve in the course of the nineteenth century, providing it with what was needed for its spiritual, liturgical and canonical or structural well-being. The path before it was to be long and hard, and there is still much to be done, as we shall see.

The Philokalic revival took root most quickly in the Russian Church, where the problems were different. The Russian Orthodox Church was not under the yoke of a conqueror of a different religion; the Russians had, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, successfully turned back the oppression of the Golden Horde, and emerged with their temporal and spiritual centre in Moscow, where eventually a tsar and a patriarch of 'Moscow and all the Russias' were established. But as the Church entered the eighteenth century, it brought with it the self-inflicted wounds of the schism – the 'Old Believer' schism – that resulted from Patriarch Nikon's attempt to renew the Church, only to be encountered by Peter the Great and his attempts to make the Russian nation a nation on a par with the nations of Western Europe, which weakened the true traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy and subordinated the Church to the state in an uncompromising way. The nineteenth century saw the awakening of attempts to restore the true traditions of Orthodoxy, not least the traditions of monasticism which Peter the Great and Catherine the Great had tried to weaken, if not destroy, as irrelevant to their plans for a modern Western Russia. The Philokalic movement provided a powerful resource for such return to Orthodox principles, as it had at its heart a programme for a renewed personal spirituality, based on the Jesus Prayer, and an emphasis on the importance of *starchestvo*, spiritual eldership, that, at its best, made sure that the spiritual revival remained sound and healthy.

There is another marker of the influence of the *Philokalia* in nineteenth-century Russia – and indeed beyond – that I want to mention, though it could be said that it has little to do with theology. It is a small work known in English as *The Way of a Pilgrim*, in Russian *Candid Tales of a Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father*. The story is extremely well known (that is a measure of its influence) – about a 'pilgrim', perhaps better a wanderer, or *strannik*, familiar even to non-Russian readers from Tolstoy's novels and stories, who travelled from place to place, as many did in Imperial Russia. Our *strannik*, who did once try to make a pilgrimage to

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**Andrew Louth** is professor emeritus of patristic and Byzantine studies at Durham University, England, and visiting professor of Eastern Orthodox theology at the Amsterdam Centre of Eastern Orthodox Theology (ACEOT), in the Faculty of Theology, the Free University, Amsterdam. He is also a priest of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Sourozh (Moscow Patriarchate), serving the parish in Durham. His recent publications include *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology, Greek East and Latin West, AD 681-1071, Maximus the Confessor* and *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*.

Jerusalem, is presented as anxious to fulfil the apostle's command to 'pray without ceasing'. After receiving several explanations of this command, which he finds unsatisfactory, he learns about, and then learns to practise, the Jesus Prayer. He also acquires a copy of the *Dobrotolubiye* – a worn and battered one, for which he pays two roubles—which he pores over every day, and carries in his knapsack. The Jesus Prayer is for him a revelation, and a source of joy:

And when with all this in mind I prayed with my heart, everything around me seemed delightful and marvellous. The trees, the grass, the birds, the earth, the air, the light seemed to be telling me that they existed for man's sake, that they witnessed to the love of God for man, that everything proved the love of God for man, that all things prayed to God and sang his praise.

This apparently artless work has had a tremendous influence, both within and outside the Orthodox world. It famously appeared as a 'pea-green book' in J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*. Recent research has revealed something of its background. The familiar, and indeed classic, version is a later version, edited by St Theophan the Recluse – himself the Russian translator of the *Dobrotolubiye* – who made the figure of the spiritual father, the *starets*, central. It is based on earlier material that has its context in the missionary work of an Orthodox priest, a former Old Believer, Fr Mikhail Kozlov, among the Old Believers with whom the *stranniki* were popular. It illustrates the paradox of the issue of the accessibility of the Jesus Prayer, for St Theophan's version, edited to bring the spiritual father into prominence, has introduced the practice of the Jesus Prayer well beyond circles in which a spiritual father could be found – even beyond the boundaries of Orthodoxy, or indeed any traditional form of Christianity.

– Taken from Chapter 1, "The Philokalia and its influence"