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**The importance of hermeneutics in theological education – Georges Florovsky and Joseph Ratzinger on soteriological questions<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

Hermeneutic in theological education has been for long time a neglected area. In this article, the importance of the hermeneutical discourse in theological education is exemplarily examined with two represents of the western and eastern tradition: George Florovsky and Joseph Ratzinger. Two hermeneutical approaches are discussed: the philosophic system based on extrinsic principles versus the neo-patristic synthesis based on intrinsic theological principles, as it was elaborated by Florovsky. The comparative study on Ratzinger and Florovsky revealed that both agreed in their hermeneutical approach based on common intrinsic theological principles. At the end the topic is made more concrete by new and old developments in the field of the doctrine of atonement.

**1. Which hermeneutics?**

According to Georges Florovsky and Joseph Ratzinger regarding the importance of hermeneutics in theological education, I would like to start with the meaning of the Russian word “воспитание” (vospitanie). Воспитание (vospitanie) – education in Russian – contains the lexeme “питание” (pitanie), what means “nutrition”.<sup>2</sup> The Russian language saw in this word composition a deep link between education and nutrition. With this in mind, it can be seen that also in theological education we should ask the question of how we nourish, how we feed students of theology to become theologians. Usually theological programs are structured in sections – biblical, historical, systematical, practical, all covering various domains (morals, dogmas, symbolic theology, etc.). All of this offers a wealth of material or facts according to the topic. A heavy emphasis is put on the subject matter. In some of these subjects, the

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Ruslan Kucenko for this observation.

hermeneutical question is explicitly raised, e.g., in exegesis with the question of an historical-critical approach to the Sacred Scripture or canonical exegesis. It appears that each theological subject has its own discussion in relation to methodology and hermeneutical approach.

In the 1930s, Georges Florovsky was one of the first to begin criticizing the hermeneutical approach to theology itself as it was taught in Russia leading up to his own time. He analysed the situation of orthodox theological education with the diagnosis of a western captivity and pseudo-morphosis. His first public mention of this topic was in front of an international audience here in Athens during the first panorthodox congress of theology held Nov. 30<sup>th</sup>, 1936. His first of two talks addressed western influences in Russian theology and presented a sort of situation analysis that he then responded to an expounded on especially in his second talk where he put forth a programmatic wake up call for a spiritual return to the patristic sources and their foundations.<sup>3</sup> His main aim was to overcome the captivity of orthodox theology to an alien philosophical and scholastic system, a setup that made her unfree. Instead of imposing external hermeneutical systems over theology, his plea went to an intrinsic theological hermeneutic whose principles can be found in the theology of the fathers themselves. This led him to the development of his program of the neo-patristic synthesis, a hermeneutical approach to theology in contrast to the hermeneutics of the prevailing Kantian shaped idealism or the German romanticism which characterised the theological climate of his time. In my own studies, specifically the study of “Vergegenwärtigung der Vätertheologie” (Re-presentation of the theology of the fathers),<sup>4</sup> I was able to identify in detail eight hermeneutical principles on which Florovsky’s theological hermeneutic is based. In short they are: 1. An updating of the patristic mind. 2. Historicity and ecclesial experience. 3. Christological centre. 4. Apostolic and patristics – the mind of the Fathers. 5. Scriptural mind – scripture and tradition. 6. Creative synthesis versus closed system. 7. Christian Hellenism. 8. Ekklesiastikon phronema (mind of the church) and catholicity – existential theology and theological existence. Florovksy created with his Neo-Patristic-Synthesis theological hermeneutics a connection to the fathers and the patristic roots, while at the same time remained open for the challenges and needs of the present day.

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<sup>3</sup> See Georgi W. Florowski, *Westliche Einflüsse in der russischen Theologie*, in: *Kyrios* 2 (1937), 1-22, here 21. – All German quotes in English are the author’s own translation.

<sup>4</sup> See Michaela C. Hastetter, *Vergegenwärtigung der Vätertheologie*. Joseph Ratzingers/Papst Benedikts XVI. Beitrag in der patristisch-ökumenischen Theologie im Nachgang zu Georgi Florowskis Neo-Patristischer Synthese (TO&OS), St. Ottilien 2019.

In my comparison of Florovsky's approach to the fathers and Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of ressourcement, I was able to prove in detail that Ratzinger's theological hermeneutic had the exact same theological principles as Florovsky's Neo-Patristic Synthesis. Surprising in this context was the fact that both authors had nearly equivalent theological hermeneutics without ever having read or met one another. The nearness to the theology of the fathers brought both independently to theological hermeneutics with the same principles, even the same terminology. Less surprising is the fact that also the critics of Florovsky and Ratzinger spoke the same language. Berdyaev's sharp review on Florovsky's early writings "The Ways of Russian Theology" from 1937 affirms: "Theology completely independent of philosophy never was and never will be. Theology is not religious revelation, theology is the reaction of human thought upon revelation, and this revelation is dependent upon the categories of philosophic thought."<sup>5</sup> But exactly this philosophic dependency, the enclosure of theology in a philosophic system, was the point Florovsky criticised in his new hermeneutical approach of Neo-Patristic Synthesis, an approach that can be understood as a reform program of theological hermeneutics. Thirty years later in 1969, Walter Kasper accused Joseph Ratzinger in his review of Ratzinger's book, "Introduction to Christianity" (Einführung in das Christentum), of a "decidedly Platonic approach"<sup>6</sup> that carried idealistic traits. The dispute between Kasper and Ratzinger, as also the one between Florovsky and Berdyaev, took place on a hermeneutical level. For Kasper, Ratzinger's theological orientation was too Greek, too Hellenistic, too little "critically action-oriented" and therefore "not concrete" enough. In contrast to Ratzinger, Kasper's own hermeneutics are no longer patristic but rather present-oriented, as he himself emphasized. He writes: "Nevertheless, it is possible to open up and articulate the question of salvation, especially from the historical reality of today, since many original Christian approaches are effective in the secularized philosophies, ideologies, and utopias of the modern age." Thus, for Kasper, "modern thinking provides categories that must be at least as good as those of Greek philosophy, which has grown on the soil of mythology"<sup>7</sup>. The argumentation of Kasper strongly reminds us of Berdyaev's criticism on Florovsky's "Puti": too backwards turned, too Hellenistic, too little modern philosophical categories of thinking, which he had found especially in Kant. Kasper may have had similar philosophical premises in mind as Berdyaev.

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<sup>5</sup> Nikolai A. Berdyaev, *Ortodoksia i Chelovechnost. Prot. Georgii Florovskii. Puti russkogo bogosloviya*, in: *Puti* 53 (1937), 53-65; English translation: *Ortodoksia and Humanness. Archpriest Georgii Florovsky. „The Way of Russian Theology“*, 1937, YMCA-Press, in: [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1937\\_424.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1937_424.html) (325.11.2019).

<sup>6</sup> Walter Kasper, *Rezension [Einführung in das Christentum]*, in: *ThRv* 65 (1969), 182-188, here 184.

<sup>7</sup> Kasper, *Rezension [Einführung in das Christentum]*, 186.

In his reply, Ratzinger agrees with Kasper that philosophical principles cannot be ignored in theology, but adds that in his book he did not want to propound recipes of how to change the Church but rather a direction, a signposting, of how to believe.<sup>8</sup>

The core of the controversy between Berdyaev and Florovsky, Kasper and Ratzinger, is in the end a hermeneutical dispute, which leads us back to the point of departure of our reflection: How do we want to nourish students of theology? The question seems to be less with what material and contents we want to build up their knowledge, but rather through which hermeneutics do we want to transmit theological subject matters. My study resulted in the option of two hermeneutics: (1) either a theology founded on intrinsic theological principles as it was the case in Neo-Patristic Synthesis or (2) a foundation in external philosophical or natural science principles which can differ. For example, natural reason (Kant), other highest principles like freedom (Pröpper-School) or just the post- or late modernity used as external frame of reference (Bultmann's exegetical approach and followers).

I will now show in a second step the importance of hermeneutics in the theological education using examples of new soteriological challenges.

## **2. Consequences of hermeneutics for theology new soteriological challenges**

One of the most understandable theologoumena of late modernity is the tension between the sinfulness and freedom of men. Different interpretations of the soteriological question have taken place in recent years. Feministic theology went so far to interpret the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ as a “form of ‘divine child abuse’ – one that would downplay and justify the further abuse of other human beings”<sup>9</sup>, as Matthew Baker pointed out in his introduction to Florovsky and the patristic doctrine of atonement. Consequently, what was needed was no longer “atonement, but liberation: a political liberation that we ourselves should effect through our own revolutionary social efforts”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Glaube, Geschichte und Philosophie. Zum Echo auf „Einführung in das Christentum“*, in: *Hochl 61* (1969), 533-543, here 537.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Baker, *Preface*, in: *ibid.*, Seraphim Dackaert / Nicholas Marinides (ed.), *On the Tree of the Cross*, Jordanville, New York 2016, 9-13, here 10 without reference. It might be an allusion to the feministic theology of atonement of Joanne C. Brown, *Divine Child Abuse, Daughters of Sarah*, Summer 1992; continued by Rita Nakashim Brock / Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes. Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, Boston 2001 and others.

<sup>10</sup> Baker, *Preface*, 10.

Magnus Striet introduced a further paradigm shift in the soteriological question with which he tries to integrate the concept of freedom and autonomy into soteriology.<sup>11</sup> His starting point is the concept of a free God who wanted free men. This freedom shows only in the dimension of the absence of God his greatness, who wants really the complete freedom of men. Consequently, there are only two options for Striet: either the plunge into faith or into suicide.<sup>12</sup> A greater freedom cannot be thought. His approach to theology from a strong freedom concept is based on the philosophy of freedom of his teacher Thomas Pröpper. For him therefore the old paradigm that God became men to redeem the sinfulness of men, according to Anselm of Canterbury's satisfaction theory, is no longer understandable. God becoming a victim for sin and the consequences men face in the order of creation can be understandable in the feudalism of Anselm's time, but for the new generations this sort of thinking is no longer acceptable. "It burdens humanity with the guilt of the cruel death of the man Jesus, it gives the speech of the original sin a firm place in the doctrine of the greatest hope of Christianity, of salvation – and: It led to a dimming of God, which continues to this day. The fact that the theory of atonement was able to write so deeply into the cultural-religious memory of the Christian tradition speaks volumes about self-understanding, but above all about the needs and fears of generations. When freedom rediscovered its dignity, without revealing its profound inclination towards evil, it no longer understood this God, who demanded such a cruel sacrifice as an expression of his mercy, God died"<sup>13</sup>, and here can be seen clearly the consequence of Striet's freedom hermeneutics. To come out of the burden of sin and atonement, he proposes a new paradigm: "In his incarnation, God does not atone for the sin of man, by which a Paradise would have been reversed in a history full of resentment and ruthlessness, infinite violence. He does not represent in the place of man a satisfaction for the lack of respect. Instead, he becomes a human being in order to remain faithful to his creative decision, risked for the sake of the free man. Therefore, if the concept of atonement is still to be used in the face of its beleaguered history, then it is – as my suggestion following a reflection by Ottmar Fuchs – radically different. In the incarnation, God accomplishes the satisfaction for his own creation by pretending to himself as a son what he expects of all men: a life that can not only be full of beauty and lust, but also tremendous abysses ready. If you like, God is atoning for his risky work of creation, and at the

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<sup>11</sup> See Magnus Striet, *Offenbarungsglaube und Gotteszweifel*, in: George Augustin (Ed.), *Die Gottesfrage heute*, Freiburg 2009, 91-105.

<sup>12</sup> See Striet, *Offenbarungsglaube und Gotteszweifel*, 104.

<sup>13</sup> Magnus Striet, *Erlösung auf Golgota? Der Opfertod Jesu im Streit der Interpretationen*, in: *ibid./Jan-Heiner Tück* (Ed.), *Erlösung auf Golgota? (Theologie Kontroversen)*, Freiburg i. Br. 2012, 9-27, here 12.

same time he gives hope for the future.”<sup>14</sup> Shortly said: On the cross, God redeemed in his Son Jesus Christ his one sin on creation. Striet’s approach to redemption shows the extreme consequence of a theology enclosed in a philosophical system. The reference point is no longer God revealing himself, but the principle of freedom. No longer man but God is now standing in need of salvation.

Yet in 1936, Florovsky lamented in reference to soteriology that the “patristic mind is too often completely lost or forgotten. [...] The doctrine of Atonement is presented in our popular textbooks either according to Anselm of Canterbury or some later Post-Tridentine authority”<sup>15</sup>. Florovsky later added in 1963: “The mystery of the Cross is beyond our rational comprehension”, but he affirms: “His death was in no sense an accident. It was preordained in God’s design of salvation. He had to die. He suffered and died, not because He could not escape it, but because He chose to do so. [...] In no way was the crucifixion a kind of passive suicide, or a simple murder. It was a sacrifice and an oblation. It was not so much a necessity of this world. Rather, it was a constraint of the divine love. The mystery of the Cross begins in eternity.”<sup>16</sup> We see that Florovsky does not argue here with satisfaction, but puts the emphasis on oblation, self-giving, divine love.

Also Ratzinger, decades before different late-modern reinterpretation of salvation, warned of a theology detached from the fathers.<sup>17</sup> In a theology where the Christian image of God is pushed into the background there are direct consequences for Christology. It is inevitable that a theology emancipated from the fathers moves in this direction, a movement in which the world and reality are no more seen from the perspective of God. It must be kept in mind that such an understanding of reality is not arrived at in an empty space, but is shaped by “previous understandings and preliminary decisions of philosophical character”<sup>18</sup>. In considering this new approach to freedom, Ratzinger considers a „new abstract negative-religion“ with a „tyrannical benchmark“ to which everyone has to follow „if only to liberate from something what was preceding”<sup>19</sup>. For Ratzinger, the enclosed system of a freedom-philosophy – which today is opposed to the patristic understanding of atonement and salvation – is not what Christian

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<sup>14</sup> Striet, Erlösung auf Golgota, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Florovsky, Patristics and Modern Theology, in: Hamilcar S. Alivisatos (Ed.), Procès-Verbaux du Premier Congrès de Théologie Orthodoxe à Athènes 29. Novembre - 6. Décembre 1936, Athens 1939, 238-242, here 239.

<sup>16</sup> Georges Florovsky, The Stumbling-Block, reprint in: Matthew Baker / Seraphim Dackaert / Nicholas Marinides (Ed.), On the Tree of the Cross, Jordanville, New York 2016, 157-163, here 160.

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph Ratzinger, Zur Lage des Glaubens, in: JRGS 13/1, 27-204, here 95-96.

<sup>18</sup> Ratzinger, Lage des Glaubens, 95.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Licht der Welt, in: JRGS 13/2, 841-985, here 885.

philosophy and theology of history mean by freedom. Freedom, to be truly freedom, has to include the non-derivable and exclude therefore the perfect context of thought. Only in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the event of the newness and the unexpected and at the same time the central expression of this truth and the proper model for the understanding of Christianity, only in him true freedom of men is granted.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, “philosophy of freedom and love is at the same time philosophy of conversion, stepping out of oneself, and transformation. Therefore, it is also a philosophy of community and history, of a truly free history”<sup>21</sup>. Still Pope emeritus, he said in 2016 in an interview with P. Servais with regard to Striet’s position: “For the man of today, compared to those of the time of Luther and to those holding the classical perspective of the Christian faith, things are in a certain sense inverted, or rather, is no longer man who believes he needs justification before God, but rather he is of the opinion that God is obliged to justify himself because of all the horrible things in the world and in the face of the misery of being human, all of which ultimately depend on Him. In this regard, I find it significant that a Catholic theologian may profess even in a direct and formal this inverted position: that Christ did not suffer for the sins of men, but rather, as it were, had cancelled the guilt of God.’ Even if most Christians today would not share such a drastic reversal of our faith, we could say that all of this reveals an underlying trend of our times. [...] Even rescinding from such a radical contestation of the Church’s vision of the relationship between God and man, the man of today has in a very general way the sense that God cannot let most of humanity be damned. In this sense, the concern for the personal salvation of souls typical of past times has for the most part disappeared.”<sup>22</sup> Ratzinger in the following asks why then cross and atonement. In reference to Israel’s approach about the “mass of evil” through a rebalancing on the Day of Atonement (Yom-Kippur) he comes back to the quoted “theologian for whom God had to suffer for his sins in regard to the world. Now, due to this reversal of perspective, the following truths emerge: God simply cannot leave “as is” the mass of evil that comes from the freedom that he himself has granted. Only He, coming to share in the world’s suffering, can redeem the world.”<sup>23</sup> And he continues in a sort of Neo-Patristic Synthesis going back to Origen: “On this basis, the relationship between the Father and the Son becomes more comprehensible. I will reproduce here on this subject a passage from the book by Henri de Lubac on Origen which I

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<sup>20</sup> See Hastetter, *Vergegenwärtigung*, 239 with references.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Heil und Geschichte*, in: *JRGS* 9/1, 522-546, here 546.

<sup>22</sup> Benedict XVI., Interview with Fr. Jacques Servais. Full text of Benedict XVI’s recent, rare, and lengthy interview, in: <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2016/03/17/full-text-of-benedict-xvis-recent-rare-and-lengthy-interview/> (12.11.2019).

<sup>23</sup> Benedict XVI., Interview with Fr. Servais.

feel is very clear: “The Redeemer came into the world out of compassion for mankind. He took upon himself our passions even before being crucified, indeed even before descending to assume our flesh: if he had not experienced them beforehand, he would not have come to partake of our human life. But what was this suffering that he endured in advance for us? It was the passion of love.”<sup>24</sup>

Florovsky came to a similar conclusion in the face of the modern reinterpretation of redemption, in whose “reduced” Christology he sees a “deformation of the Christian doctrine of men”<sup>25</sup>. “The crucifixion itself is so often interpreted as less of a crucial event in time and seen as more of a symbol that had to express the ultimate condemnation of sin by divine righteousness. One thinks much more of the redemption than of the redeemer. [...] A positive reconstruction of the original patristic doctrine is attempted instead. Possibly that is the best way of criticism.” As Florovsky underlines in following the importance of liturgical sources and hymns “to describe the patristic doctrine of atonement as a liturgical or sacramental theory, in contrast with any others – juridical, moralistic, or, political” – an expression of the spirit of the church fathers. I’d like to conclude in this positive way with an soteriological hymnic element to open a poetic way for a prospective theological education in Florovsky’s and Ratzinger’s Christo-centred hermeneutics: In the first canon for the departed Theophanes, the confessor gives a very short but impressive verse of the basic message of soteriology: “Healing the wound of death you took the death upon yourself and (you) made blunt the thorn of the death.”<sup>26</sup> Redemption in the language of the fathers focuses on the disempowerment of the eternal closed system of death, the unsurpassable “catastrophe for humankind”<sup>27</sup>, through Jesus Christ’s own death on the cross. In the image of dulling the thorn through Christ’s atoning death, the closed paradise is reopened to achieve infinitive freedom in God. The blunted thorn through our redemption is more than a “historic event”, it is in the words of Florovsky “also an eternal design”<sup>28</sup>. That means, with the question of hermeneutics in theology much is at stake. We should carefully

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<sup>24</sup> Benedict XVI., Interview with Fr. Servais.

<sup>25</sup> Georges Florovsky, „Ad Lectorem“ [to: In Ligno Crucis: The Patristic Doctrine of Atonement, 1948], reprinted in: Matthew Baker / Seraphim Danckaert / Nicholas Marinides (Ed.), On the Tree of the Cross. Georges Florovsky and the Patristic Doctrine of Atonement, Jordanville, New York 2016, 137-141, here 140.

<sup>26</sup> Theophanes, Erster Kanon für die Hingeschiedenen, in: Hymnen der Ostkirche, in: Kilian Kirchoff / Chrysologus Schollmeyer (Ed.), Regensburg, Münster 1979, 215-221, here 216.

<sup>27</sup> Georges Florovsky, In ligno crucis. The church father’s doctrine of redemption interpreted from the perspective of Eastern Orthodox theology, in: Matthew Baker / Seraphim Danckaert / Nicholas Marinides (Ed.), On the Tree of the Cross. Georges Florovsky and the Patristic Doctrine of Atonement, Jordanville, New York, 143-152, here 146.

<sup>28</sup> Florovsky, Redemption (Précis of a Planned Book), in: Matthew Baker / Seraphim Danckaert / Nicholas Marinides (Ed.), On the Tree of the Cross. Georges Florovsky and the Patristic Doctrine of Atonement, Jordanville, New York 2016, 153-156, here 154.



consider if we are providing the proper nutrition in theological education. On this depends if the thorn at the end of life remains sharp to mortally wound or if it has been made blunt in the Christian hope of an eternal design.