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East and West in Dialogue with Post-Modernity

At the recent meeting of Anglican-Orthodox dialogue the discussion centred on the ordination of women to the priesthood. After putting my own position, which is definitely in favour, I acknowledged that while the ordination of women was appropriate, in my opinion, for the Anglican Church, it does not necessarily follow that it is culturally appropriate for every church to make this change, and certainly not necessarily at this time. It may be that the Anglican Church, which is called to a particular ministry in the context of modern western societies, has felt itself impelled to move in this direction, but a church that works primarily in Eastern Europe and the Middle East may be governed by a very different set of mandates – simply because of its cultural context. Afterwards, in conversation, a very prominent hierarch of the Church of Greece said to me: “but you must understand that we *all* live and minister in the context of modern western civilisation”.¹

Like the western churches, Eastern Orthodoxy attempts to live in the culture of modernity² – or is it perhaps post-modernity? Or indeed, could it be that even post-modernity is and was itself a transition from modernity to something else, and that we have now moved even beyond post-modernity?

¹ Conversation with Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, Addis Ababa, February 2003. See Andrew Sopko, *Prophet of Roman Orthodoxy: The Theology of John Romanides* (Dewdney 1998) 147.

² Paul Valliere, “Sophiology as the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with Modern Civilization”, in J.D. Komblatt and R.F. Gustafson (eds), *Russian Religious Thought* (Madison 1996) 176-194, argues that sophiology represents the late nineteenth-century attempt by Russian Orthodoxy to address the concerns of the modern world. It is, he suggests, “best seen as a conceptual representation of the dialogue between the Orthodox theological tradition and modern liberal civilization” (176), continuing: “The construction of sophiologies is a purely modern phenomenon in Orthodox theology” (178). Robert Gribben has more recently made a similar claim for Cyril Loukaris, that his controversial theology was attempting to “lay the foundation for a modernised and reformed eastern church”, in the context of the early modernity of the seventeenth century (“Cyril Loukaris: A Calvinist in Constantinople?”, address given at the Project 1453 Symposium, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, 31 May 2003).

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An alarming thought indeed for those of us who are not quite sure that we have really come to terms with post-modernity.

Hence my title: the churches of East and West in dialogue with the post-modern. We are talking here about the churches of East and West in dialogue, including the “exchange of gifts”, and how might this exchange look within the larger context of the post-modern. Let me start by declaring my own interests.

I am not some sort of “apologist for eastern Orthodoxy” – though I have been called that. I am a westerner who enjoys contact with representatives of the eastern traditions, who is fascinated by what have been called the “indigenous churches of the places where Christianity first took root”,³ a westerner who is conscious of the large number of adherents of the eastern churches in our own local communities and indeed, increasingly, among our own students, and who feels the need to learn from these traditions. But that does not mean I understand, or even like everything I see. As an Australian, I have been asked to bring in some Australian insights – and I shall try to do this. How might this dialogue between eastern and western Christianity be renewed in the context of post-modernity – and given that we are meeting in an Australian context, on Eora land – what can the dialogue between indigenous and immigrant Australians teach us both about dialogue and about love? I want to suggest it can teach us three things: not to ignore the other, not to assimilate or colonise the other, and to *try* not to misrepresent the other. I shall try to comment on these suggestions as I highlight some of the specific ways in which we as westerners might hear and see, give heed to and notice, the gifts the East is offering us. I leave it to representatives of the eastern churches to identify what, if anything, they can receive from us westerners. And what is post-modernity anyway? There are as many theories as there are theorists, along with lists of characteristics of what constitutes the post-modern. But I want to suggest just three commonly acknowledged elements: the retreat from the word, what we might call the rusting of the mechanistic worldview, and the disintegration of the autonomous self.⁴

³ I am grateful to J. Robert Wright for this designation of the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

⁴ Another (and more sophisticated) way of putting this would be in terms of the three axes suggested by Nancey Murphy and James McClendon, “Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies”, *Modern Theology* 5/3 (1989) 191-214: the word (language and art) in modernity locates itself on the representationalism-expressivism axis; mechanistic science on the scepticism-foundationalism axis; and the autonomous self on the individualism-collectivism axis.

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As an example of the post-modern, a few weeks ago at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Federation Square in Melbourne you could have seen a series of short films. These are vignettes from daily life in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s: an old man lighting his pipe, a woman bathing, people skating on a frozen lake, two children on a tricycle, a column of men with shovels. Commentary is kept to the bare minimum, and the chronology jumbled. The vignette is post-modern in that it breaks the pattern of “realistic narrative”.⁵ It illustrates the retreat from the word – it is almost totally non-verbal. It illustrates the rusting of the mechanistic universe – it is totally non-linear, jumping back and forward in the briefest moments of time, and in tiny moments of light and shadow. It represents the fragmentation of the autonomous self – it shows brief snippets from the daily lives of many different individuals, and while these come into focus the vast background of their lives fades to nothing. But note also that even in this self-consciously post-modern piece of work, we have not completely left the horizon of modernity: there is the familiar linear logic behind the technology, there is the familiar exercise of power in the choice of what has been included, and the presentation itself presupposes the familiar subject-object split of modernity. So let’s not make the mistake of thinking post-modernity is some sort of absolute *novum*.

Even so, with reference to each of these elements in the post-modern, I want to ask how the East might help us in the West to make sense of the post-modern world in which we find ourselves. I do not want to suggest a new type of “mediating theology” that adapts the Christian message to contemporary culture for the benefit of the cultured despisers of Christianity, for several reasons. One is that *that* was the modern project, and it is because our theologies have adapted themselves so well to modernity that we now have a problem. Another reason is that, even if we wanted to address this culture, our first task is simply to make sense of it, to learn its language, and to find some position for Christian faith in relation to it. The third reason is that most “post-moderns” I come across are (quite the opposite of cultured despisers) actually quite open to the message of Christianity and to religious belief and behaviour generally – their problem is just that our presentation of it is so out of touch. So what I want to suggest is that the East can help us rediscover elements in our own religious culture that have been overlaid by the insistent demands of modernity. This would indeed be light from the East in our post-modern confusion.

⁵ Robert Jenson, “How the world lost its story”, *First Things* 36 (1993).

Retreat from the word

George Steiner sees post-modernity as characterised by a “retreat from the word”.⁶ This retreat is partly a function of post-modernity’s incredulity towards so-called “grand narratives”, and is more specifically related to a critique of logocentrism, that is, undue privileging of the word, and words, as definitive conveyers of meaning. Ian Barns,⁷ an Australian commentator on whom I shall rely for an overview of post-modernity, argues that “a central feature of a post-modernist epistemology is the denial that language provides a way of ‘representing’ reality or that there are universally agreed principles of human reason through which we establish the objective truth of things”.⁸ Indeed, truth itself is not a foundational concept, but functions “within a certain discursive framework”. Lindbeck’s neo-liberal understanding of doctrine can be seen as an example of this.⁹ Barns suggests that one of the characteristic features of post-modernism is “a scepticism towards the major creeds of the European Enlightenment: liberalism, socialism, and a belief in human progress through the onward advance of science, technology and economic development”.¹⁰ We feel somehow misled and betrayed now by the words in which these creeds were encapsulated. These points suggest two elements in the crisis of western modernity, and correspondingly, two ways in which the East can help us in this predicament of retreat from the word: it questions and can take us beyond “literal” representation, and it questions and can take us beyond logocentrism.

Beyond Representation

In Steiner’s earlier writing, the retreat from the word is a negative thing. Words have been cheapened, and are unusable as a consequence. But we can ask what is (positively) replacing the word? Answer: pictures, icons. These are signs, but non-representational signs. Eastern theology is a liturgical theology, incorporating a theology of icons, and it is here that

⁶ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958 – 1966* (Harmondsworth 1969) 31-56.

⁷ Ian Barns, “Post-modernism and Public Theology”, *Interface* 2/1 (1999) 63-77.

⁸ Barns, “Post-modernism”, 65.

⁹ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age* (Philadelphia 1984).

¹⁰ Barns, “Post-modernism”, 64.

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“representation” means something different from the way it is generally understood in the West.

Let me quote at length from a recent commentator on this, Anastasios Kallis:

For those who defend the veneration of icons, who have to contend with the accusation of idolatry, the icons in themselves, without relation to their original, are iconologically worthless. An icon that is valuable as a historical work of art, if disconnected from its transcendental function, is no more than a piece of painted wood, because its ontological significance lies in its relation to its referent, i.e. finally, to God as the initiator of all things, visible and invisible.... It depends not on the form, but rather on the inner, spiritual content that the (icon) makes use of, in a particular form, to refer to the original. For this reason Orthodox iconography rejects naturalism and three-dimensional representation, because they lead away from reality.¹¹

This is a remarkable statement: that three-dimensional representation – which is called “realism” in art – leads away from reality.

Through its task of mediating rationally ungraspable, transcendental realities, the icon has its own aesthetic in so far as it presents neither an idealistic nor a materialistic naturalism, but a spiritual reality that expresses both its foreignness and its proper, inner beauty, the beauty of the truth that is God’s self, the God who stands beyond the pure optical-aesthetic plane...¹²

In the sense of the Latin understanding of images, the essence of the image is determined only by the similarity of the image to its original. The Greek church fathers, by contrast, see the main characteristic of the image in its mediating and revealing character. From this the image is named as a sign of remembrance, a mirror and a riddle... If the image is on this account used to reveal something concealed, it has no other significance than that of an intermediary. The image itself does not deserve peoples’ attention and focus, but only that which is ‘re-presented’ and revealed in the image... Of decisive importance...[is] grace as the factor that effects the resemblance between the original and the image.¹³

I would suggest that the difference can be stated thus: where for the East, the image reveals the reality behind the image, for the West the image substitutes for the absence of the reality. Modern western art moves along a

¹¹ Anastasios Kallis, “Presidency at the eucharist in the context of the theology of icons”, *Anglican Theological Review* 84/2 (2002) 713-730, here 713.

¹² Kallis, “Presidency”, 714-715.

¹³ Kallis, “Presidency”, 717.

spectrum between representation of an object and expression of a feeling.¹⁴ Eastern iconic art stands outside this modern continuum. By incorporating a theology of icons, eastern theology shows itself to be inherently suspicious of both representation and expression as they characterise western theological culture. The West has vacillated between highly representational forms of religious art and outright iconoclasm. The East, by contrast, by avoiding these extremes has made itself amenable to the post-modern in ways that western theologies are not – are not, precisely because western theologies have adapted themselves so admirably to the culture of modernity, the culture of the Enlightenment. Further, by being consciously a theology of icons, eastern theology is capable of speaking to a post-literate age and a culture characterised by the retreat from the word. But we have to note that eastern theology remains not yet post-modern, in that it seeks to reveal a presence. It is here that eastern theology might help us develop a much-needed theological appraisal of post-modernity. Let us not exempt post-modernity from theological critique just because it happens to be fashionable.

Beyond Logocentrism

Here we turn to Herwig Aldenhoven's¹⁵ critique of the *filioque* clause and, more importantly, of the theology that rests on it. This is not to say there are no advantages in the *filioque* clause, but there are serious disadvantages – and these are not limited to the traditional eastern rejoinders to it. One problem with the *filioque*, according to Aldenhoven, is that it undermines any theological critique of logocentrism. I have already defined "logocentrism" above, as undue privileging of the word, and words, as the definitive conveyers of meaning.

In addition to the traditional arguments, Aldenhoven is not alone in pointing out that the *filioque* privileges one pattern of inner-trinitarian sending over other patterns of sending. In the New Testament, the Son's sending of Spirit is only one of the patterns of trinitarian sending. And this one pattern of sending is then identified with the inner-trinitarian procession and imported into the inner life of the Trinity.

This in turn brings with it certain consequences, of which I want to mention only the one that concerns us here. This is that the operation of the

¹⁴ See n. 4 above.

¹⁵ Herwig Aldenhoven, "The Question of the Procession of the Holy Spirit and its connection with the life of the Church", in L. Vischer (ed.), *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ: Ecumenical reflections on the Filioque Controversy* (London/Geneva 1981) 121-132.

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Logos gains an ontological priority over the operation of Spirit in the process of knowing. This leads in turn to an objectivistic approach to knowledge, in which knowledge is primarily cognitive (logical), and world is seen as an object over against the thinking subject. Word is privileged over intuition; left-brain thinking is privileged over right-brain thinking, intelligence is defined in terms of cognition rather than emotion, and so on. There are countless manifestations of this tendency to logocentrism in our western culture. For example, in Australian primary school education we become very anxious if a child is not learning to read by, say, grade three or four, but take little notice of the child who has not learned to draw: drawing, a right-brain activity, holds very little social value for us. Aldenhoven's point is not to blame the *filioque* for this privileging of word over intuition, but to argue that the *filioque* – and the particular version of trinitarian theology that goes with it – makes it far more difficult to resist it or critique it theologically. For a theological critique of logocentrism, the Logos and the Spirit must be seen in a mutual relationship, without one being given some sort of ontological priority to the other.¹⁶

This criticism of logocentrism is strengthened by Andrew Louth,¹⁷ who sees within western culture a “dissociation of sensibility” (T.S. Eliot) “between thought and feeling, between mind and heart”. This, he argues, is “particularly damaging in theology in both its spiritual and intellectual aspects”,¹⁸ because

cut off from the movement of the heart towards God, theology finds itself in a void – for where is its object?... Faith is not a purely rational exercise; it involves, as an indispensable element, the response of the will or the heart to the One in whom we believe.¹⁹

Although Louth discerns this dissociation of sensibility emerging clearly in the late eighteenth century, he – correctly I think – traces it back to the twelfth-century West:

¹⁶ It may even be that our times require of us a starting point not in christology, but in pneumatology, a starting with the Spirit. See S. Pickard and G. Preece, *Starting with the Spirit* (Adelaide 2001).

¹⁷ Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford 1983) 1.

¹⁸ Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 2.

¹⁹ Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 2-3.

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we can see in the writings of the twelfth century – on both sides of the growing divide (sc. between cathedral schools and the monasteries) – a separation between mind and heart that had not been the case with the Fathers.²⁰

Where Augustine still holds together knowledge and love, in Bernard the priority of love leads to an anti-intellectualist strain. “Here, though there may be some sort of advance, it is at the expense of wholeness.”²¹ It is not by chance, according to Louth, that this leads to “the rise of theology as a purely intellectual discipline” and also to “the rise of an affective mysticism that is often frankly mistrustful of academic theology”.²²

Eastern theology never falls into this biurfication: the theologian is always the one who prays. By rejecting the *filioque*, this theology is capable of speaking to an age and a culture characterised by the retreat from the word. It has avoided the dissociation of sensibility characteristic of western culture, and which has tended to separate an overly intellectualised western theology from an anti-intellectualist western mystical tradition. In the West we are still cursed with the legacy of this separation: people who find themselves unmoved by academic theology seek “spirituality” in crystals and horoscopes. I do not want to do away here with Logos as such, for the work of the Spirit of God is not *alogos*, not separated from the work of the eternal Word. Nor do I want to discard the use of instrumental reason within its own limits of competency. I just want to point to another way of knowing, another sort of logic that is not limited to the exercise of instrumental reason. The point is not to set up some new biurfication between intuition and reason, one that privileges the former instead of the latter, but precisely to overcome this classic modern biurfication. The East points us to, and reminds us of something buried in our own western tradition, a theological mutuality of Word and Spirit.

The rusting of the mechanistic worldview

Just as there has been a retreat from the word, there is a corresponding retreat from the mechanistic worldview. It no longer works for us: it has become less credible, both ethically and metaphysically. The clockwork of the mechanistic universe has – you could say – rusted up.

²⁰ Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 5.

²¹ Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 6.

²² Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 6.

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Some decades ago T.F. Torrance,²³ and more recently David Bethea²⁴ and Daniel Rogich,²⁵ have suggested that eastern theology offers an alternative to the mechanistic universe of western modernity. I do not want to repeat their arguments, but focus on my own interest, the doctrine of energies. I suggest this offers an alternative to the mechanistic universe of modernity in two ways: it offers us, in the place of a cosmos apparently²⁶ vacated of God's presence, the vision of a world that is, in Gerald Manley Hopkins' words, "charged with the grandeur of God". Second, it offers us access to a mystical knowing that goes beyond cognitive, instrumental knowing. Both touch on our approach to God's creation. But note again, the very fact that I can quote Hopkins means that we are not dealing here with something essentially foreign to our western tradition – we just need to be reminded of it.

Barns tells us that post-modernity manifests "a greater openness to subjective experience, including a sense of holism and interconnectedness"²⁷ and less confidence in the "project of instrumental control of the world".²⁸ It perceives that

knowledge is [not just] (mis)-used in the service of power, but rather knowledge is itself an expression of power... Knowledge is thus not viewed as the outcome of disinterested rational enquiry, but is 'deconstructed' in terms of the forms of power it establishes.²⁹

This again suggests two elements in the eastern Christian worldview that can take us beyond our present impasse: the holistic vision of an interconnected cosmos, and a quest for knowledge understood in terms of human value rather than in purely instrumental terms.

²³ T.F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London 1969).

²⁴ David Bethea, "Florensky and Dante: Revelation, Orthodoxy, and Non-Euclidean Space", in Kornblatt and Gustafson, *Russian Religious Thought*, 112-134.

²⁵ Daniel M. Rogich argues this case specifically in relation to the doctrine of energies *Becoming Uncreated: The Journey to Human Authenticity: Updating the Spiritual Christology of Gregory Palamas* (Minneapolis 1997) esp. 179-224.

²⁶ The theological implications of the mechanistic worldview are by no means clear, and it can be argued that it was more rather than less supernaturalistic than the preceding Aristotelian worldview. See Keith Hutchison, "Supernaturalism and the Mechanical Philosophy", *History of Science* 21 (1983) 297-333.

²⁷ Barns, "Post-modernism", 66.

²⁸ Barns, "Post-modernism", 67.

²⁹ Barns, "Post-modernism", 65.

The energies in creation: holism and interconnection

The word “energy” has become popular in Christian theology at present.³⁰ I welcome this increasing usage, but at the same time I want to draw attention to the technical sense in which the word is used in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. There is always a danger in an outsider claiming to appropriate the terminology of another tradition, a danger of oversimplification or outright misunderstanding. This danger of misrepresentation is one of the things I warned against earlier. Even so, we do have to search for a common language in ecumenical theology, and this necessarily involves the use of loan words. But these words must be used with great sensitivity to the contexts in which they have been used in the past, and a willingness to stand corrected by the faith communities that have employed them. So let me try, as an outsider, to indicate what I understand to be meant by the term “energies of the Spirit”. I shall then try to develop some thoughts on how this patristic doctrine may make contact with the post-mechanistic worldview.

Does the doctrine of uncreated energies have something to say not only in relation to salvation, where it is usually invoked, but also in relation to the doctrine of creation? St Gregory Palamas, who developed the systematic exposition of the doctrine of God’s uncreated energies, certainly speaks of the energies not only in his writings on hesychast spirituality – the way to union with God and therefore salvation – but also in “the chapters on natural and theological science”.³¹ This would indicate a connection. The other hint that there might be a connection is in the close relationship between the doctrine of energies and pneumatology. If pneumatology is significant in relation to creation, as the Adelaide theologian Denis Edwards³² argues, then the doctrine of energies will also be significant.

In the doctrine of energies, the nearness of God is made available to us in and through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is, *par excellence*, the mediator of God’s availability, of God’s energies. This guards against any simple

³⁰ E.g. Krister Stendahl, *Energy for Life: Reflections on the Theme ‘Come Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation’* (Geneva 1990).

³¹ R. Sinkewicz (ed.), *Saint Gregory Palamas. The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1988). English translation in G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard and K. Ware (eds), *The Philokalia*, vol. 4 (London 1995) 346-417.

³² D. Edwards, “‘For Your Immortal Spirit is in All Things’: The Role of the Spirit in Creation”, in D. Edwards (ed.), *Earth Revealing-Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology* (Collegeville 2001) 45-67; and “Ecology and the Holy Spirit: the ‘Already’ and the ‘Not Yet’ of the Spirit in Creation”, in Pickard and Preece, *Starting with the Spirit*, 238-260.

subordination of the Spirit. The Spirit is not some lower level of divinity that can, *of the as a hypostasis*, be “given” to the creature. This is to say: the Holy Spirit is not itself an energy, which would be impersonal or anhypostatic, but the fullness of the Spirit (and thus the fullness of the trinitarian God) is encountered in the energies, in the Spirit’s activities, and these activities or energies constitute the real accessibility of God to us, not just to our cognition but to our existential participation “in the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). And yet the Spirit does not cease to be a transcendent member of the Trinity. Another way of putting this would be to think of the energies as gifts or charismata of the Spirit, given in such a way that God the Spirit is really and existentially and personally encountered. The energy of the Spirit is uncreated grace, but there remains a distinction between our speaking of grace and our speaking of the Holy Spirit as a member of the Trinity. The doctrine of grace is not simply identical to pneumatology. This is a fine distinction but an important one, for without it we risk either reducing the Spirit from being a trinitarian hypostasis to a mere *dynamis*, or else placing the Spirit totally beyond the realm of our human experience.

What we have here is the vision of a sort of penumbra of glory, or a field of energy that surrounds the trinitarian Godhead. Within this penumbra or energy-field, there is a resonating and a quickening of the natural, material universe, so that the material order is drawn into the experience – however we may understand “experience” – of God.³³ The human being is conscious of being drawn into the life of God, and can consciously choose for him- or herself to participate more or less fully in this life. Orthodox spirituality involves, I understand, a notion of ἐπέκτασις, or reaching out towards the source of God’s energy, and becoming a participant in it. But this participation of the material world in the life of God involves matter (inanimate and animate) as well as conscious mind. Thus Orthodox piety understands some things and some places to resonate more vibrantly or to focus the energies more sharply than the rest of the creation. If you will permit an anecdote here: I once heard Metropolitan John of Finland, of blessed memory, answer a question about his attitude to holy icons being displayed in Soviet museums of “scientific atheism”. He was not at all concerned because, he replied, the uncreated energies are active wherever

³³ Charles Birch, *On Purpose* (Kensington 1990) 84 and 120f. Experience is not simply a matter of consciousness, but – as Birch has pointed out – occurs at all levels of the material universe, in the strictly inanimate as well as the animate. Consciousness emerges from experience, and seems to be realised to the highest degree in our own human species. I bracket out here the possibility of angelic intelligences.

and however the icons are displayed, and will work towards the transformation of the those who enter their presence. The energies “shine through” the whole of the universe, and especially at certain significant points of resonance. It is this sense of an energy-field that I want to suggest makes contact with our post-mechanistic worldview.

The material universe is located in idea, i.e. as potential, within the energy of God, and also comes to its actualisation within – to use the language of the Heidelberg theologian Michael Welker – a “domain of resonance”,³⁴ while at the same time remaining distinct from and contingent upon God’s super-essentiality. This way of looking at the relationship between God and the universe opens up possibilities for postulating an interdependence between God and the universe, without, however, either compromising God’s transcendent necessity or suggesting that this dimension is in any way inconsistent with the nature of God.

This (admittedly western) reading of the doctrine of energies takes us beyond the (ultimately Godless) mechanistic universe. It is a pointer towards a God who can be identified with the God of Christian experience, but who also satisfies some of the elements of the post-mechanistic worldview.³⁵ This God is not pure activity alone, but activity and passivity, actuality and potentiality – so that God stands in a relationship of continuing responsive interaction (perhaps even interdependence) with that which is not God. This interaction takes place in the “domain of resonance” of the Spirit. The relationship between God and the world is expressed in terms neither of the Thomistic analogy of being, nor of Barth’s analogy of faith, but rather of participation. Insofar as the language of analogy has any validity here, we may perhaps speak of an analogy of energy between the uncreated energy of God and the created energy of the material universe. This God is the one who not only creates in the sense of initiating, but who more importantly acts creatively in responding to and interacting with all things.

Mystical theology: beyond instrumental control

We are dealing here with a distinction between the transcendence of God and the nearness of God. Technically, it is a distinction between the essence (οὐσία) or super-essentiality (ὑπερουσιότης) of God, and the energy

³⁴ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis 1994) 296.

³⁵ E.g. Paul Davies’ requirement of a distinction within God between God’s necessary nature and a dimension of contingency – this latter dimension could be located in the field of the uncreated energies: Davies, *The Mind of God: Science and the Search for Ultimate Meaning* (Harmondsworth 1992) 189.

(ἐνέργεια) or energies (ἐνέργειαι) of God. This distinction is not primarily academic, but based on Christian experience.³⁶ God is really encountered and accessible to us in God's activities, or energies, but at the same time God remains transcendent, i.e. "essentially" – in both senses of the word – beyond our "grasp", beyond both our comprehension and our attempts at manipulation. Our knowing God is not instrumental knowing. The modern, mechanistic worldview has allowed us (and continues to allow us) to manipulate the natural world – and it is this power to manipulate that is coming in question, as I said earlier, on ethical grounds as well as on more purely metaphysical grounds.

Vladimir Lossky made us aware that the theology of the eastern church is above all a mystical theology. By avoiding the western "dissociation of sensibility", it has avoided the pitfalls of scholasticism,³⁷ except perhaps where it fell under western influence. Mystical theology approaches the things of God by another way of knowing, an experiential "knowing otherwise". Kevin Hart goes further in seeing mystical theology as deconstruction: "Contrary to the Thomist tradition", he argues, "negative theology does not merely correct positive (or metaphysical) theology but supplements it as its ground and origin."³⁸ This seems to me to be exactly what the followers of St Gregory Palamas are saying in their critique of western versions of negative theology. Hart continues: "Deconstruction may not be a negative theology...but negative theology may deconstruct positive theology",³⁹ and "above all, it is in the writings of the mystics and mystical theologies that the vocabulary and concepts of philosophy present themselves as limited and askew, at variance with themselves".⁴⁰ The mystical theology of eastern Christianity, through the doctrine of energies, offers a holistic spirituality that calls in question the attempt to know purely instrumentally. It shows such knowledge to be limited, and potentially askew.

³⁶ A.M. Allchin, "The Appeal to Experience in the Triads of St Gregory Palamas", *Studia Patristica* 8 (= Texte und Untersuchungen 93) (1966) 323-328.

³⁷ Duncan Reid, "Hesychasm and Theological Method in Fourteenth Century Byzantium", *Ostkirchliche Studien* 46/1 (1997) 15-24.

³⁸ Kevin Hart, *Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge 1989) xi.

³⁹ Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, xi; cf. 45: "mystical theology might be a mode of deconstruction; such is the general argument of this study".

⁴⁰ Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, 42

This holistic, non-gnostic dimension is sometimes misunderstood as agnostic. Vladimir Lossky insists that essence – energies distinction is apophatic, but does not lead to an agnostic view of God. God is known, but known personally and immediately and experientially in the energies, as one knows another person. This knowledge is not something that can be verbalised definitively, for the essence of God – like that which is essential about another human person – is beyond our definitive knowing. It is not agnosticism about who God is, nor is it the presumption that we can know the Other through and through. It avoids the typical hybris of modernity that claims to know, claims to understand, that which by nature cannot be understood. If the modern West had been a little less given to such hybris, of thinking we know best what is best for others, we may have a lot less in our own histories to apologise for. We would not have claimed for so long to know what is best for indigenous people in this country, and we would probably not now be claiming so easily to know what is best for the people of Iraq. What we see in the East is more sapiential, less sciential; less claiming to understand, more of the reticence of true wisdom.⁴¹

Disintegration of the autonomous self

“Post-modern life”, according to Barns, “...has done much to undermine the experience of autonomous self-hood”.⁴² Rather, the focus of post-modern interest has been on the body, and “more broadly, post-modern critics have challenged the dualisms so characteristic of modern thought, between mind and body, self and other, public and private”.⁴³ I have already pointed to the embodied spirituality of the Palamite tradition. But how does recent theological thinking about persons and personhood sit with the wider post-modern sense of disintegration of selfhood? The Christian East has always been more collectivist than the West, but it would be a grave mistake to think this means the significance of human persons is undervalued.

George Florovsky, writing in 1931, has this to say about personhood:

In natural consciousness, the concept of person is the beginning of differentiation and alienation. This stark and immediate contrast is the difference between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’. However, in the divine life there is no such separation between the ‘I’ and the ‘not-I’. Through the trinitarian

⁴¹ Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville 1996) 257, about the dangers of certain types of understanding.

⁴² Barns, “Post-modernism”, 65.

⁴³ Barns, “Post-modernism”, 65.

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image the church has modified and done away with this imperviousness of the 'I' and the 'not-I', the mutual imperviousness of many 'selves'. There are two types of self-consciousness and self-discovery: the individualistic and the catholic. Catholicity here implies no denial of individuality. The catholic consciousness is not some collectivist consciousness, nor is it some abstract, universal consciousness, like the 'consciousness as such' of German (idealist) philosophy. The 'I' is not dissolved in the 'we'. It does not arise as the medium of a generalised consciousness. Rather, personhood finds its fulfilment in its catholic transformation, and receives power and capacity to feel and give expression to consciousness and the whole of life. Even in everyday speech we can say of a great thinker or artist that they grasp and bring to expression the spirit of their people and times. And this in no way robs them of their personhood! On the contrary, it demands the highest level of personal creativity, and is the clearest expression of the creative person. Somewhat similarly, but in the superlative, one can say the same of the church. Because each member, in his or her self-consciousness, can grasp and bring to expression the catholic consciousness of the new humanity, the rebirth of the spirit towards becoming a child of God... I say: each can bring to expression. I do not say: each brings to expression. Empirical things do not always express themselves, and not every Christian expresses who he or she actually is. This depends on the degree of spiritual maturity. And of those who do so express themselves, we say they are in reality the fathers and teachers of the church, because we experience of them not simply their own personhood, but the witness of the church – because they speak out of the fullness of the church's catholicity...⁴⁴

Florovsky's insight arose historically from the trinitarian appropriation of the terminology of hypostasis, which emphasised the status of persons. It anticipates Martin Buber, and a great deal of more recent theological writing on the nature of personhood. It is deeply and authentically Christian, but note that it does not assume any notion of autonomous self-hood. In fact it repudiates such notions and offers an alternative. We are not dealing here with the Cartesian subject that makes of everything (and everyone) other than itself an object, and that has become so integral a part of the modern western understanding of such matters as human rights. Neither are we dealing with simple collectivism. Florovsky was, after all, himself a refugee from Soviet collectivism. Instead we are pointed beyond the claims of both the individual and the collective, beyond the language both of rights and duties, and towards the language of mutuality, of interrelationality, and indeed, of love.

⁴⁴ George Florovsky, "Bogoslovskie otrivki", *Put'* 31 (1931) 21-23.

Conclusions

How might there be a true exchange of gifts? I have suggested three areas in which we westerners can learn from the East in our post-modern context of retreat from the word, the demise of the mechanistic worldview, and the disintegration of the autonomous self. None of these points is intended to be the last word on the matter, but merely a suggestion for further exploration. Equally important, if not more so, are the three attitudes to this learning that I mentioned at the start: do not ignore, do not assimilate or colonise, and try not to misrepresent. Misrepresentation is not easy to avoid: it is a matter of listening carefully and respectfully.

Let me cite some unfortunate examples of the first two tendencies. The American Roman Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson has very admirably reinterpreted the Thomist tradition by exploring the naming of God in terms of Sophia,⁴⁵ thus reclaiming a living tradition of the church East and West. But Johnson completely fails to acknowledge the Russian sophiology, school which – whether you agree with it or not – was so important in Russian religious thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This failure to acknowledge is the equivalent of the *terra nullius* approach to race relations and landholding in Australian legal history. It fails to admit that anyone has ever been here before.

An example of taking over, colonising, is the adoption of eastern liturgical and theological language. There is a tendency in the West to adopt the exotic trappings of eastern liturgy, because, quite frankly, we are aware of our own cultural and spiritual impoverishment – and so we live at the expense of those who have never lost touch with their cultural wealth. But we easily do this cheaply or exploitatively. We delete the *filioque* from the creed while maintaining an uncritically filioquist theology of God. We put icons in our churches, but without imagining ourselves into the non-representational theological aesthetic needed to read them aright. We adopt, dare I say, the doctrine of energies, because energy is in vogue, but without taking seriously the theological implications for mystical theology and practice. This is colonisation.

There are many small but very practical ways in which we can acknowledge we are not the first on the scene: do mention the Russian sophiology school when you teach about the Sophia metaphor, and when

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York 1992).

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you teach Meister Eckhart's mystical theology, do not fail to make your students aware of Vladimir Lossky's critique of Eckhart.⁴⁶ I am not asking you to agree with the critique – just do not leave it out of the lecture. Another area of great importance is just having good translations of Orthodox theologians. The passage from Florovsky I read out has never before, to my knowledge, appeared in English translation, even though it was written over seventy years ago and anticipates so much of the personalist strand in recent trinitarian theology.

The word is central to western culture, and arguably has been privileged ever since the *filioque* clause made its gradual way into the western creed. The mechanistic worldview is central to western cosmology, and arguably has been privileged ever since the universe was described on the analogy of a clock. The individual is supreme in modern western political and social ideology, and has been ever since Defoe placed Robinson Crusoe on his fictional desert island. A post-modern perspective, it seems to me, no longer wants to privilege either words or machines or individuals as ways of understanding and living in the world.

George Steiner refers, though without naming it as such, to the emergence of post-modernity, describing a cultural revolution of geological proportions, and the appearance of a cultural fault-line comparable to the epochal breaks between the Mediaeval and the Renaissance or between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. In Steiner's own words, "we are, I believe, at present within a transformative, metamorphic process which began, rather abruptly, in western Europe and Russia during the 1870s".⁴⁷ This is a remarkable statement, and it would take another address simply to unpack its significance. It is remarkable not only for its early dating of the emergence of the post-modern, but also because it locates this emergence not just in the post-Enlightenment culture of western Europe, but in the still largely pre-modern and very eastern Christian culture of Russia. It is one of the axioms of Russian history that Russia never experienced the Renaissance. This has often been seen as a great disadvantage. But if Steiner is right, it is as if, having avoided modernity, Orthodox Russia was among the first on the scene of post-modernity.⁴⁸ And though this seismic paradigm shift appears in

⁴⁶ Developed at length in *Théologie Négative et Connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris 1960); also elsewhere in Lossky's writings.

⁴⁷ George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London 1989) 87.

⁴⁸ G. Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky: An Essay in Contrast* (London 1959) 41. Russia's move from feudalism to post-modernity takes place, according to Steiner, between the emancipation of serfs in 1861 and the revolution of 1905. In a sense the twenty years

western Europe as well as in Russia, the legacy of the Enlightenment continued to make the West more resistant to it. Where the western European mind was already secular, the nineteenth-century Russian mind was, in Steiner's words, "God-haunted".⁴⁹ Thus it could be that Russia's Orthodoxy ensured both its resistance to modernity and its openness to the post-modern. We have barely begun to open our eyes to this theological light from the East.⁵⁰

between the emancipation edict and the assassination of Alexander II, and especially the decade of the 1870s, are the real watershed: in these few years Russia moves rapidly from the mediaeval custom-bound world of serfdom to the post-modern sentiment of Ivan Karamazov, that "all is permitted".

⁴⁹ Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky*, 43.

⁵⁰ I would like to express my gratitude to Stephen Ames (History and Philosophy of Science, University of Melbourne) for having read and commented on this paper in draft form.