CONTEMPLATION, SPECULATION, ACTION:
REFLECTIONS ON ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

DAVID TRACY

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Each contemporary Christian theologian, like any other intellectual, becomes more singular, not less, by learning other forms of Christianity. To take on the responsibility of a Christian theology today demands a willingness to be transformed by serious, i.e., historical-hermeneutical-dialogical study of at least the three major forms of Christianity: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant. Christianity, like every religion, is both a vision of life and a way of life. Vision and way should not be separated but mutually reinforce, challenge, and transform one another—which is why practical theology is the most complex and difficult of the three major forms of Catholic theology. Fundamental, systematic, practical theology—each has distinct tasks but tasks inseparable from the other two. Each seeks to find conceptualities, images, and above all, vision-transformed action appropriate to articulate a Christian way of life both informing and being transformed by some major version (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) of their shared Christian vision.

For my part, Orthodox theology in its diverse and sometimes conflictual forms is distinguished by its profoundly contemplative character. This contemplative form holds whatever the issue—cosmic, iconic, liturgical or, in my focus this evening, contemplation of God.
FROM CONTEMPLATION TO SPECULATION—AND BACK

Vladimir Lossky was surely correct to resist any understanding of *apophasis* or contemplation of God as merely epistemological corrective; i.e., apophatic thought in much classical Orthodox theology from the Cappadocians forward is not a convenient epistemological corrective to all cataphatic names for God as it sometimes is in Western and some Orthodox theology. On the contrary, apophasis is a fundamental spiritual and theological attitude in all apophatic contemplative theology, as Lossky and many, but of course not all, Orthodox theologians hold. An apophatic attitude is present in a major strand of the common tradition from Gregory of Nyssa through Dionysius the Areopagite to Maximus the Confessor. For Orthodox theology, that orientation received a systematic formulation in John Damascene’s clarifying systematic text *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, as well as in Gregory Palamas’s defense of the hesychast mystical tradition and the apophatic contemplative tradition by discovering conceptualities able to distinguish while uniting the Incomprehensible God and the Infinitely Loving Trinitarian God.

In the deepening experience of communion with God defined as the deified heart of salvation by the Orthodox, the theologian becomes far less involved in discursive thought but deepens her thinking into direct, immediate—i.e., contemplative thinking. Contemplative thinking may well be preceded by dialectical discursive argument or even by speculation: for example, Gregory of Nyssa’s articulated dialectical arguments in *Contra Eunomius* prior to his later, more constructive theological-spiritual works *Life of Moses* and *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Contemplative-intuitive theology can also quite naturally lead to new systematic theological speculation. Such systematic speculation will be based on contemplative thinking, therefore itself grounded in a realistic Christian experience of divine-human communion. Such theological speculation—again in fidelity to intuitive contemplative thinking as well as in experienced *communio* with God—if radically apophatic will find paradoxical conceptualities (e.g., God’s essence and uncreated energies) to express both discursively and
speculatively what the divinely saturated theological contemplation has intuitively sensed as true.

This theological move from experienced communio to intuitive contemplation to discursive speculative theology is analogous to Alfred North Whitehead’s statement at the beginning of *Process and Reality* that all speculative thought begins with some basic intuition of reality and then struggles to find conceptual categories and discursive arguments to expand, clarify, and defend the intuition.

Sometimes a more ambitious speculation takes hold, as in classical neo-Platonism in the ancient world or neo-Platonism’s most natural successor, German idealism, in the modern world. When such a strictly theological transformation does not occur (or is misapplied) then Christian contemplation yields, as Nicholas Berdyaev rightly insisted about his own work, not a theology but a religious philosophy. The Orthodox contemplative and highly speculative theologies (Soloviev, Florensky, Bulgakov), despite the suspicions of many non-Russian Orthodox theologians is, in my judgment, an entirely legitimate, indeed intellectually natural move for any contemplative thinker to undertake. The Cappadocians, unlike Origen, did not allow so-called pagan neo-Platonic contemplative speculation (viz., Plotinus) to take over their Christian, biblical, salvation as deifying communio. So too the daring speculative theology of Soloviev, Florensky and most of all, the amazingly speculative thought of Bulgakov, are outstanding modern theological examples of a contemplative speculative theology grounded in Christian communal and highly personal contemplation as well in critical conversation with Hegel and Schelling. Florensky also insisted that his sophiology also appealed to earlier Orthodox liturgical, iconic, and architectural resources. The Russian speculative theologians, rare among modern theologians, also used the theological implications of the apocalyptic tradition of the Book of Revelation as a resource for a speculative theology of history.

In other writings, I have argued philosophically that Heidegger’s meditative thinking is a good example of a modern philosophical move from discursive
thought—viz., the phenomenological and hermeneutical thinking of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*—to a more purely contemplative-meditative thinking in the “later” Heidegger (e.g., *Discourse on Thinking*). In his later meditative thinking, however, Heidegger’s religious contemplative resources are not Christian but neo-pagan and Taoist.

Whether speculation and all use of discursive reason precedes contemplation or follows from it, the same result occurs: every properly theological understanding of the basic Christian vision is intuitively grounded in some realized human experience of God—i.e., in faith as the experienced primordial trust in God, or, in Western language in cleaving to God and God’s promises through some sense of participation. In my judgment, which I defend at proper length elsewhere, all religion includes an intuitive contemplation of Ultimate Reality, whether that Ultimate Reality be named the Void-Open (Buddhism) or Being or the gods or the Good (Plato and Plotinus) or, in the radically monotheistic sense, God—the Jewish Yahweh, the Christian Trinitarian God of Infinite Love, the Muslim Allah.

In Christian theology God is the Infinitely Loving Trinity whose uncreated grace (Rahner) or uncreated divine energies (Palamas) draws the systematic theologian like a magnet into both contemplative and speculative forms of theology. All Christian theological understandings are finally contemplative intuitions, both informed by, as well as to be challenged by and to challenge, other basic religious intuitions and often philosophical, historical, and social-scientific arguments, which these intuitions themselves in turn challenge.

**FROM CONTEMPLATION AND SPECULATION TO ACTION**

Systematic theological contemplation and speculation alike move toward and from action—the graced action of God upon the whole person (mind, body, heart-soul) and the free action of a human response to God. The divine action from which contemplation and speculation alike emerge, and to which they inevitably return, is present in personal, prayerful interpersonal, ecclesial-sacra-
mental, and social justice forms. To emphasize that fact, I believe, one may name the Christian vision and the Christian way of life as not only “mystical theology” with Lossky but as a mystical-prophetic theology.

To call the central Christian vision and way mystical-prophetic (as explicitly in liberation theologies or implicitly in Sergei Bulgakov) is, of course, a now familiar contemporary Western term for the basic Christian vision and way of life. But the term is surely applicable to Orthodox theology as well.

Perhaps one of the major future conclusions of any Orthodox-Catholic-Protestant dialogue will be the deepening of a shared mystical-contemplative tradition and the prophetic-ethical-political tradition. This full-fledged mystical (or sapiential-prophetic) Christian vision and way would be analogous to the phenomenon of modern Chinese religion which, in both intellectual and institutional form, is called neo-Confucian. Neo-Confucianism is the union of the three classical religions of China: the civic, ethical-political religion of classical Confucianism and the two great mystical traditions of Taoism and Chan Buddhism.

The same kind of mystical-prophetic (ethical-political) paradigm is emerging in Judaism since Scholem’s magisterial retrieval of mystical kabbalah as well as in Islam with the continuous mystical-prophetic reading of the Qur’an since the early emergence of a mystical Sufi reading of the Qur’an until today. All three radical monotheisms are developing mystical-prophetic paradigms as well as engaging in the most serious and significant dialogue with one another since tenth- and eleventh-century Cordoba.

As the sense of Christianity as a whole—pan-Christianity—takes greater and greater hold in all Christian theology, an ever firmer mystical-prophetic paradigm is likely to be centered in agapic contemplation, in bold, speculative, and above all, in mystically informed prophetic action as love working through justice.
In this lecture, I am emphasizing only one such dialogical element of a shared Christianity: how all Catholic and Protestant theologians should learn from the uniquely consistent and systematic Orthodox development of contemplative and speculative mystical theology. In Western theological eyes, the enviable Orthodox age-old ability not to split spirituality from theology gives new hope for contemplative-speculative resources to help Catholic and Protestant theologians to heal a fatal split of theology and spirituality—an unintentional consequence of Western theology’s medieval move from the monastery to the university. The classical scholastic university theologians (e.g., Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Scotus) did not endorse any such split of spirituality and theology. However, the nominalist crisis of the fourteenth century, despite its honorable British empiricist attempt to try to promote experience, resulted in a triple disaster: language divided from all thought, including contemplation; epistemology separated from ontology; spirituality separated from theology.

This fourteenth century separation of theology and spirituality allowed the Commentator traditions and the later neo-Scholastic traditions to develop a mystical theology separate from theology proper. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Pascal, Bérulle; Fénelon, Newman, Mohler, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, the Tübingen School), the Neo-Scholastic separation of theology proper from what was newly named ascetical-mystical theology lasted hegemonically until Vatican II. Many (perhaps most) Catholic theologians have recently struggled to heal that dangerous split.

I agree with Hans Urs von Balthasar that the split of theology and spirituality was the greatest tragedy in the history of Western theology (both Catholic and post-Reformation Protestant scholastic theologies). On this view, Orthodox theology provides the great counterexample to guide Western theological reincorporation of spiritual traditions into all theology demonstrating that no such split is necessary.
After the profound but almost strictly intellectualist version of Christian contemplation in Origen and such later followers as Evagrius, Orthodox contemplative theology has received various expressions: some incorporating the agape elements that Origen certainly affirmed but seemed unable to incorporate into his intellectualist contemplative theology.

In the modern period, one finds several different Orthodox contemplative theologies. Some are more cataphatic like the liturgical communio contemplative theology of John Zizioulas. Some are more ethical-mystical like Christos Yannaras. Some are more prophetic—even apocalyptic—as in Sergei Bulgakov. Some are radically and comprehensively apophatic as in Vladimir Lossky. Lossky’s reading of early Christian theology, at times too schematic and overly selective, is still, in my judgment, basically sound. The contemplative theologies of Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus Confessor, John Damascene and Gregory Palamas were, one and all, profoundly apophatic. Moreover, most Greek theology (with the partial exception of a few Platonic, intellectualist moments in Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite) have been personalist: i.e., insistent that contemplation affects not just the mind (as in Platonism) but the whole person—mind, body, heart.

Nor is the embodied, affective, and intellectual understanding of contemplation reserved for the monastic theologian alone. The Jesus prayer, after all, is democratic, i.e., available for every Christian to recite. In the Jesus prayer the ensouled, embodied graced Christian person freely prays as she breathes the name of Jesus in constant practice; thus the power of the name moves from the mind to the heart; finally, in breathing out the name, the energizing Christic power of compassion now moves naturally toward all others (the neighbor—anyone). Just as in the central spiritual practice of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, a constant breathed recital of the name (nem-but-su) is, for the Pure Land Buddhist, the carrier of the Other-power needed to free the Pure Land Buddhist from our confused and degraded human situation where we cannot free ourselves against the claims of Zen Self-Power. Historians of religion have often claimed that
Western contemplation, unlike East Asian and South Asian contemplation, is strictly intellectualist and, in effect, relevant only to a disembodied mind (*nous*). This is indeed accurate about the classical Platonic forms of contemplation from Plotinus to Proclus but is inaccurate about mainline Christian contemplative traditions from the time of Macarius forward.

In fact, Orthodox contemplation is entirely a matter of mind and body, mind and soul-heart. As such, Greek Orthodox contemplation is in fact anti-Platonic. It refuses Platonism’s central attempt: to escape the body by means of mind-nous. Christian contemplation, despite Origen and Evagrius and some occasional backsliding of later contemplative Christian theologians, East and West, is an embodied and intellectual-spiritual form of contemplation theologically grounded in the incarnation where John’s Prologue does not say “God became mind” but “God became flesh.”

**APOPHATICISM AND ANALOGY**

If one traced the reception of Dionysius the Areopagite in Eastern and Western theologies one would note a paradox: after the ninth-century translation of the Dionysian corpus by John Scotus Eriugena, Dionysius surprisingly seems more influential in the West where, as Hans Urs von Balthasar rightly observed, he is second only to Augustine in citation and influence.

The many scholarly studies of the distinct Eastern and Western readings of the recently retrieved Dionysian tradition in Western theology and philosophy can justly be viewed as a major conversation in contemporary theology and in philosophy, as well as in the new phenomenology and radical hermeneutics (although not yet to my knowledge in analytical theologies or philosophies). The widespread contemporary Western theological discussion of Dionysius has, in my judgment, at least among many theologians and some philosophers (e.g., Jean-Luc Marion), embraced a more Orthodox (e.g., as in Lossky) and strong mystical reading of Dionysius. This embrace argues against both neo-Thomist
readings on being (esse) as the more adequate cataphatic, analogical name for God than the Good-beyond-being.

For my part, Vladimir Lossky’s powerful Orthodox reading of Dionysius’ apophasic orientation—not merely an epistemological technique of corrective—has proved one of the major reasons for my own writing elsewhere on Dionysius’ teaching on the radically incomprehensible God. In my judgment, however, Lossky exaggerates the Trinitarian character of Dionysius’ theology and also seriously misreads what Western analogical language (e.g., in Thomas Aquinas) actually means.

One may affirm, as I do, Lossky’s emphasis on apophaticism as central, not as a mere corrective for Christian God-talk without accepting his minimalist, purely epistemological reading of all properly analogical language employed in Catholic theology.

Hence, in all correct Catholic theological use of analogical language, the religious and ontological, not merely epistemological, character of analogy should hold: whether in the apophatically circumscribed diverse analogy of Being languages of e.g., Erich Pryzwara or Karl Rahner or Elizabeth Johnson. Except for Suarez-influenced neo-scholastics, Catholic theologians, when they know what analogy is and is not, do not use apophatic language merely as a corrective to a dominant cataphatic language. Rather, Catholic analogical theologians use apophatic language as an always/already necessary but not sufficient aspect of all theology. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) articulated the issue for the use of analogy in Catholic theology with precision: “there can be no likeness noted between Creator and creature without at the same time noting the greater unlikeness [major dissimilitudo] between them.” For every positive analogical statement in a theology of God, the negation of that statement must be equally radical.

All theologically employed analogical language is an articulation of an alternative language to equivocal and univocal language. Analogy is an alternative to equivocal language (which is the danger but only a danger—not a necessity) of Lossky’s apophatic language.
Analogy is also an alternative to purely univocal language for God-talk—as classically argued for by Scotus and in our own day by Schubert Ogden. Analogical language (from Aristotle forward) attempts to articulate a language both cataphatic (the proper language of similarity) and even more deeply (Lateran IV), apophatic. For any genuinely Christian (or, for that matter, any radically monotheistic) understanding of God, God is ultimately incomprehensible. Just as in Lossky’s basic apophatic attitude, the Christian analogical vision and way is principally a basic attitude before and after it becomes a logical, linguistic, and metaphysical technique. If I may cite it to help clarify the issue, my own major theological book is entitled *The Analogical Imagination* rather than *The Logic of Analogical Language*.

Moreover, a theological dispute over apophatic or analogical language in theology is not rightly characterized, as it can be, as the East-West division in theology. A dispute over the nature and necessary role of apophatic, paradoxical, antinomous, contemplative theological language can be found in both East and West (e.g., on this issue, contrast Zizioulas and Lossky).

**CONTEMPLATION EAST AND WEST**

At the same time, by any reasonable account of the history of theology, Orthodox theology has stayed most consistently contemplative (without rejecting the use of dialectical-argumentative reason and historical-hermeneutical work when needed) and most open to the need for contemplative apophatic language.

When Catholic and Protestant theologians read Orthodox theologians, or when one attends Orthodox liturgies, or when one is attentive to the theological power of icons, one cannot but sense the contemplative power of Orthodox theology. We must not exaggerate the East-West difference in the relationships of meditation and contemplation. Both traditions, I believe, could agree with Richard of St. Victor’s famous saying “Meditation investigates; contemplation wonders.” Moreover, Eastern theologians, with their insistence on contemplative deifica-
tion of the whole person (the heart), not merely the mind, would agree with the
notion of agapic wisdom or contemplation articulated by Pope Gregory I: “Ipse
notitia amor est” [love itself is knowing] later refined by William of St. Thierry to
“Ipse intellectus amor est” [love itself is understanding].

The contemplative character of theology can, of course, also be found in many
Catholic theologies, including, for example, in medieval monastic theologies
and in medieval lay mystical theologians, especially the extraordinary women
contemplative mystics. Moreover, Western Catholic theology developed and
perhaps sometimes over-systematized analyses of “stages” of prayer-medita-
tion-contemplation-action as well as conducted the theological debates over the
categories of acquired and infused contemplation.

These theological discussions of contemplation are richly present in the differ-
ent forms and theological understandings among the classic Catholic religious
orders: the monastic lectio divina and liturgical contemplation of the Benedic-
tines, Cistercians, and other Catholic monastic orders; the constant theological
rethinking of the distinct roles of understanding and love in contemplation as
well as the highly refined theological theories on the relationship of contempla-
tion and action in the mendicant orders—the intellectualist, contemplative
emphasis of the Dominican Thomas Aquinas (especially in Summa Theologie II
IIae), the love-focused Franciscan emphasis of Bonaventura; or the turn in early
modern Catholicism to more autobiographical-subjective analyses of the states
of meditation, contemplation, and action; in the brilliant experiential ground-
breaking theology of Teresa of Avila as well as the more theoretically oriented
tradition of John of the Cross with his articulation of a new apophatic nocturnal
form of contemplation in the dark nights of the soul. Other religious orders—
especially the Jesuits in early modernity and the many new women’s orders in
modernity—articulated new ways of both envisioning and living contemplation-
in-action for the world. Ignatius Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises are unequaled in
their ability to help any Christian focus properly on a theologically grounded
spiritual life active in the world and “finding God in all things.” Ignatius, whose
own mystical life was deeply contemplative (including his famous vision of the
Trinity), fashioned a set of meditative spiritual images using images and narratives of the life of Christ rather than contemplative exercises which remain emancipatory for any Christian engaged in the world. Hence the translation of Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* for inclusion in some later editions of the *Philokalia*.

Granted the sometimes important role that contemplation has historically played in Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant theologies (e.g., Boehme, Schleiermacher, and Otto), none of these Western theological traditions can claim, as the Orthodox justly can, that a contemplative-mystical emphasis has been systematically maintained in the entire history of Christian theology.

Unlike meditation in the spiritual life and unlike discursive reason in the intellectual life, contemplation is both intellectually and existentially immediate and intuitive. Contemplation is experienced as joy, delight, serenity, peace (*hesychia*). Contemplation sometimes, but not necessarily, includes the excess of *ec-stasis*—where the discursive mind and even, at times, the whole person including the body is sensed as outside itself. It is this ec-static, excessive side of mystical contemplation that has strongly appealed to such post-modern thinkers of excess as Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva.

**CONTEMPLATION AND ART**

The most familiar form of theological contemplation perhaps even for those purely secular persons whom Max Weber nicely named the “religiously unmusical” is a contemplative theology of beauty—for example in contemporary Orthodox theology in the *Theology of the Icon: a Theology of Beauty* by Paul Evdokimov. A theological appeal to beauty is appropriate not only on inner-theological grounds. The iconoclast-iconodule controversy after all was understood by both sides as a christological not aesthetic dispute.

Almost any aesthetically alive person, however secular, however uninformed and/or uninterested in the theological nature of the ancient dispute over icons can still be moved aesthetically and even, in a subliminal way, religiously, by
contemplating any great icon. Most human beings naturally respond contemplatively to beauty: the beauty of the icons, the cosmic beauty of the classical ceilings of the many Orthodox churches, and above all, to the rhythmic haunting beauty of the Orthodox liturgy. There is, indeed, a dividing line between a purely aesthetic contemplation of an icon and a fully religious, indeed, mystical-contemplative theological response to the beauty of the icons (as in Evdokimov).

Nevertheless, the affinity of any secular contemplation of beauty and a mystical-theological contemplation of beauty deserves further attention from theologians and aesthetic theorists alike. Iris Murdoch put the matter well:

[art is] a pure transcendent value, a steady visible enduring higher good, [that] perhaps provides for many people, in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest experience of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention. Good art which we love can seem holy, and attending to it can be like praying. Our relation to such art though ‘probably never’ entirely pure is markedly unselfish.

Many modern secular persons find in art the main place where contemplation—intuitive wisdom, joy, peace, serenity—frequently happen. All great art especially painting, poetry and music—evokes contemplation. Contemplation and speculative theologies of beauty, moreover, should always be open to any serious expressions of the beautiful and the sublime, however untraditional in form. For example, a Christian theology of beauty should be open to the Taoist-influenced flowing, open form of Chinese landscape painting as distinct from the finite, closed framed form of classical Western art (including the icon). In my judgment, a contemporary Christian theology of beauty should honor classical, modern and postmodern artistic forms. Theologians should not dismiss the fragmentariness, the unrelieved tension, the infinite openness and, at times, an aesthetic and even theological need for radically disorienting ugliness (as in Dostoevsky or indeed in any portrayal of Christ’s crucifixion). The icons, like the moon, will always quietly radiate their theological contemplative beauty to any attentive person. Yet even the icons can, without loss, lend their beauty
to less obvious, more fragmenting and unnerving works—as in Tarkovsky’s fragmenting, indeed often fractured film *Andrei Rublev*, manifesting the chaos, the failures, and at times the sheer ugliness of the fifteenth century world which, and partly by means of which, Andrei Rublev depicted in one of the greatest of all icons, his icon of the Trinity.

**CONTEMPLATION, COSMOS, AND SCIENCE**

Allied to a contemplative sense of beauty is a second kind of theological contemplation: contemplation of the cosmos in traditional Orthodox theology, still best expressed in the theology of cosmic liturgy of Maximus the Confessor. Our present day calls for new cosmic theologies for two reasons. First, the ecological crisis grows daily in increasingly apocalyptic proportions to warn us of the consequences of our death-dealing actions toward Earth. Not satisfied with polluting Earth, we have already begun to litter cosmic space itself. Even if the ecological crisis were not as severe as the majority of scientists believe, it would still deserve every intellectual and moral and theological resource we can amass to lend Christian help to a situation affecting everyone on Earth (presently seven billion persons). Orthodox theology, with its rich history of cosmic theologies, can surely aid all Christian theology in addressing the ecological issues theoretically just as, in Western theology, Franciscan theology is the least androcentric and most ecologically promising of Latin theologies (and less androcentric than many Western and even Eastern ecological theologies).

A second reason for renewed contemplative cosmic theologies: Can there be any doubt that contemporary physics—that most contemplative-inducing of the sciences—is possibly on the cusp of the new revolution in its understanding of the universe—or perhaps multiverse. Many physicists and cosmologists hope that string theory may one day provide the unified field theory which so many scientists including Einstein have sought in vain. Whether ‘string theory’ is that unified field theory no scientist technically knows. The extremely complex and elegant mathematics advanced by string theorists (especially in the M-theory
version of string theory) seems to suggest as much. But the brilliant mathematics, however suggestive, are not yet scientific knowledge. No one can claim scientific knowledge until there is also some experimental evidence to back the mathematics: in this case, until something shows up at the new and seven times larger Hadron Collider [LHC] in Cern at the French-Switzerland border. As a theologian, I have never witnessed a stronger call for some new contemplative theology of the cosmos than that evoked by the new developments in physics which may prove as revolutionary as relativity theory and quantum physics once were. I turn with hope, once again, to Orthodox theology, the most practiced of contemplative-cosmic theologies. Where is the new Maximus the Confessor now that we so desperately need him or her?

The early desert fathers and mothers beheld the strange beauty of the desert where contemplative silence paradoxically resounds. The Russian contemplative monks found in the forests their desert where contemplative solitude and silence had a better chance of occurring amidst the clearings of the vast steppes and northern Russian forests (so much more revelatory than the domesticated clearings in Heidegger’s Black Forest). In the great forests still surviving on our raped Earth—the great forests of the Amazon, of central Africa, and of Siberia—even citified theologians like myself can still sense as I did once in the Amazon religiously something like Maximus’ cosmic liturgy where the stars in their multitudinous constellations can still be seen by human eyes liberated from the sky-obfuscating city lights and where our fellow animals still roam freely—i.e., freed from our gaze, our murder, and our capture for our gaze. And once again, the secular analogues to Orthodox cosmic theology are clear. The great Romantic thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson or the Romantic nature poets like William Wordsworth lost a cosmic theology. For example, Emerson abandoned or perhaps never really understood the cosmic theology of one side of his great and ignored predecessor, Jonathan Edwards, still America’s greatest theologian. For myself, Emerson’s classic contemplative essays in *Nature* are often profound and always moving. He loved and understood Plotinus. He either did not read (despite his Harvard seminary education) or he did not understand how much
the explicitly theological understanding of the cosmos by Jonathan Edwards might have taught him. The same impressive post-colonial theology and doctrine but not post-Calvinist sensibility affected our greatest novelist, Herman Melville, for whom the thunderous power and sometimes deceptive calm of the ocean in *Moby Dick* became the classic American religious, but not theological, vision of the cosmos.

It is hardly surprising that Albert Einstein named his own spiritual stance a “cosmic religion.” Above all, Einstein with his spiritual belief in a cosmic religion and an impersonal Spinozist God was faithful to the contemplative insight informing all his groundbreaking speculations when he stated: “the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.” That sense—that religious contemplative sense—needs new theological articulation—i.e., a new cosmic theology that may lead to a new scientifically informed contemplation of both the cosmos and its Creator. All contemplative theology—whether apophatic, cataphatic, analogical, whether contemplation of iconic beauty, contemplation of the liturgy, contemplation of the cosmos—is ultimately, precisely as theology—theo-logia—the contemplation of God, i.e., the incomprehensible God who is, at the very same time, paradoxically the God experienced and known by Christians in divine-human communion as Infinite Trinitarian Love. A Christian theological contemplation of God is both a manifestation of the Christian vision of the Christian name for Ultimate Reality allied to an agapic way of life.

**CONTEMPLATION, THEORY, AND PRACTICE**

Pierre Hadot’s pioneering work has shown that ancient philosophy and theology was never only a theory (much less a system) but a theory always united to a way of life. Any Westerner who has been in serious conversation with Taoist or Buddhist thinkers (e.g., the Kyoto school) notices immediately (and, in my own experience, rather enviously) that contemporary Buddhist thinkers, most of whom are very theoretical-metaphysical, i.e., both contemplative and speculative thinkers, insist on relating their highly theoretical metaphysics to their way of
life and vice versa. Buddhist theories deeply influence and are deeply influenced by explicit daily spiritual practices (especially meditation, contemplation, and various ascetical methods of moral and intellectual purification). As we now know through the scholarly work of Hadot and others, all ancient Western philosophers, unlike most modern Western ones, were able to correlate their way of life, their spiritual exercises, their spirituality to their philosophical-theological theories.

In that sense, Orthodox theology with its tradition of uniting contemplative Christian theory and a Christian communal way of life is very like ancient Western philosophy and theology and contemporary Buddhist, Taoist, and Vedantic thought. Here there is a clearly valuable lesson on how to unite theory-vision of life to way of life for modern Catholic and Protestant theologians as well as modern Western philosophers, from three great sources now available to all: all ancient philosophies and theologies (East and West) in our culture; Buddhist, Taoist and Vedantic contemporary thinkers; and, for Christian theology, the enduring tradition of Orthodox theology always uniting theology and spirituality.

Kierkegaard was not so far from the mark when he ironically observed that most modern thinkers build their brilliant theoretical castles but then live, like everyone else, next door in a hut. And Marcel Proust spoke for many modern artists when, possibly stung by criticism of the disparity between the almost inhuman perfection of his art and the human—all-too-human—nature of his social life, he insisted: “The self with which I write my books (moi profonde) is not the self with which I live my life.”

Proust’s statement is striking in its truth and its Chekovian sensibility of the stoic sadness witnessed in many modern intellectual lives. All the more reason for all serious thinkers, artists and, above all, ordinary persons trying to live a decent life directed by some vision of Ultimate Reality to pay attention to the one major Christian theological tradition that not merely individually but systematically fought that split. In my judgment, Orthodox theologians, like the Buddhist think-
ers at Kyoto, like Taoist thinkers in China, and like many individual Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and secular thinkers (e.g., Wittgenstein or the later Foucault) demonstrate that the frequent modern Western split of spirituality and theology, theory and way of life cannot be countenanced any longer.

The modern Russian thinkers aided our common enterprise by renaming the philosophical limit-questions of modern thought since Kant with the more truthful title “the accursed questions.” These accursed questions—Does life have any ultimate meaning? Is there a God? Can God be known or experienced at all? Is there any possible answer to the horrifying evil and suffering of human life—especially if God is somehow construed as all-powerful and all-Loving? In the hands and, to use the right word here, the familiar souls of the great Russians, the philosophical limit-questions since Kant have been transfigured into the more accursed existential and more theological questions. Since the nineteenth century these questions constantly surface in Russian novels, drama, films, music, philosophy (e.g., Berdyaev) and theology—these accursed questions which affect anyone with even a vestigial soul and even a half-alert mind. Such questions are both our curse and our blessing as sentient beings attempting to be human. The prophetic-apocalyptic tone of so much Russian Orthodox theology, unlike the more serene contemplative reflections of most Greek Orthodox theology, suggest that the Russian Orthodox artists and theologians have embraced and transformed not so much Greek philosophy (as has Greek Orthodox theology for two millennia) as a Greek tragic vision now theologically transfigured by Russian Orthodox apocalyptic-speculative theologians. Here the Russians can guide us all to understand better the terror and wonder of history—not only Russian history, so filled with unnerving ruptures and unexpected continuities, but all history theologically—i.e., contemplatively and speculatively construed.

The Russian Orthodox theologians can help all Christian eschatological theologians articulate theologies of history in the same manner as Greek and Romanian (St niloae) cosmic theologies can help us all articulate some theological response to the new physics.
As Virginia Woolf observed in her splendid essay “The Russian Point of View,” reading the Russians makes one feel suddenly in another, a far stranger, a deeper world than the world we usually inhabit. At times, the ground under us seems to shift. Woolf is surely right to claim Russian art and thought is pervaded, above all by soul. The Russian soul in its arts and its theologies with its accused questions has unnerved all humanity. That singular gift is as great a gift to us all as the contemplative serenity of Greek Orthodox theologies. For both gifts to humanity, Catholic, Protestant, and secular thinkers should be deeply thankful.

1 I have become convinced that an even better choice than Dionysius for a theology of the incomprehensibility of God is the incomparable Gregory of Nyssa. No theologian demonstrated sharper dialectical argumentative skill when needed (in *Contra Eunomium*). No theologian better manifest the mutual penetration of spirituality and theology should be. No theologian is more willing to learn from the best philosophy (Plato and Plotinus) and prior theology (Origen) as well as more willing to challenge, correct, transform, theologically, i.e., in strictly Christian terms, both neo-Platonic philosophy and the greatest prior theologians: indeed, even the first great speculative Christian theologian and one of the most daring theologians who ever lived—the philosopher, apologist, speculative and, above all, hermeneutical-exegetical theologian, the amazing Origen of Alexandria.