

Christ as the Watermark of Divine Love: Expanding the Boundaries of Eastern Orthodox Ecumenism and Interreligious Encounter*

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj**Brandon Gallaher**

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Abstract

The article is a personal theological reflection on ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue by one of the commission of drafters of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's 2020 social teaching text *For the Life of the World: Toward an Orthodox Social Ethos* (=FLOW). The text argues that FLOW, despite being innovative for Orthodoxy, needs its boundaries expanded theologically. The section on Christian ecumenism is still quite conservative in character. It acknowledges that the Orthodox Church is committed to ecumenism but it does not explicitly acknowledge the ecclesiality of non-Orthodox churches. The author puts forward a form of qualified ecclesiological exclusivism that affirms that non-Orthodox churches are tacitly Orthodox containing “a grain of Orthodoxy” (Sergii Bulgakov). Strangely, FLOW's section on inter-religious dialogue is much more radical than its section on ecumenism. The author builds theologically on FLOW's positive affirmation of other religions as containing “seeds of the Word”, in particular, Islam containing ‘beauty and spiritual truths’ and Judaism as being Orthodoxy's “elder brother.” The essay ends by sketching a Trinitarian theology of other religions drawing on ideas from Maximus the Confessor, Bulgakov, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Raimundo Panikkar amongst others.

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A reflection on worldly being in the light of the knowledge of faith [...] is a reflection on the 'image'-and-likeness'-character of created being in relation to the divine archetype, which consequently brings to light the watermark of divine love in every single created being in the totality of nature as a whole. This sign imprinted on nature, however, comes to light only when the sign of absolute love appears: the light of the Cross makes worldly being intelligible, it allows the inchoate forms and ways of love, which otherwise threaten to stray into trackless thickets, to receive a foundation in their true transcendent ground.

(Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 142)¹

A Bold and Innovative Text

For the Life of the World: Toward an Orthodox Social Ethos (hereafter *FLOW*) is in many ways a bold and innovative text in the history of Orthodox social teaching. It engages with a multitude of social issues that the Orthodox normally are silent on, from sexuality to human rights. It celebrates the modern world's cultural and social pluralism as a vehicle for the peaceful coexistence of the world's many cultures and the context in which a just society in which the person's infinite and inherent dignity can flourish.² This is a remarkable turn in intellectual history given that so much of Orthodoxy has tended to emphasize—perhaps because of its eucharistic cast—social, political, and religious unity and has tended to be suspicious of pluralism as a Western

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004 [1963]), 142.
2. David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis, eds., *For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 2020) and also at <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos> (accessed October 13, 2021). For commentary see “Vers un éthos social de l'Église orthodoxe”, *Istina*, LXV, No. 4 (2020) (special issue: see especially, Vasilios N. Makrides, “Le nouveau document social de l'Église orthodoxe Son orientation, son élaboration, son contexte et son importance”, 387-413), *Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West* (RGOW), 48. Jahrgang, 11/2020 (special issue), *Ecumenical Trends*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (September/October 2020) (special issue), “For the Life of the World. Reflections of Post-Conciliar Orthodoxy”, *Review of Ecumenical Studies* (Sibiu, Romania), 1/2021 (special issue) (<http://www.res.ecum.ro/2021-2/>) (last accessed: October 15, 2021), Dietmar Schon, *Berufen zur Verwandlung der Welt. Die Orthodoxe Kirche in sozialer und ethischer Verantwortung*, Schriften des Ostkircheninstituts der Diözese Regensburg Bd. 6 (Regensburg: Pustet, 2021) (with English summary: “A Catholic Perspective on ‘For the Life of the World’”, *Public Orthodoxy*, June 24, 2021 (<https://publicorthodoxy.org/2021/06/24/a-catholic-perspective-on-for-the-life-of-the-world/>) (last accessed: October 15, 2021) and Metropolitan Emmanuel Geron of Chalcedon, “Dialogue on Dialogue”, G20 Interfaith Forum 2021, September 12, 2021 (<https://fosfanariou.gr/index.php/2021/09/13/his-eminence-metropolitan-emmanuel-elder-of-chalcedon-g20-interfaith-forum-2021/>) (last accessed: October 15, 2021).

innovation, not seeing it as a providential opportunity for free encounter with Christian orthodoxy. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has opened up Orthodoxy to consider a new proactive approach to the modern pluralistic world we now face. The creative dynamism of *FLOW* is particularly noteworthy in Section VI on “Ecumenical Relations and Relations with Other Faiths” (§§50-59) which we shall examine more closely in this study.

A Personal Note

It should be acknowledged, before proceeding further, that I was part of the Commission that drafted the document. Indeed, I specifically played a role in the drafting of Section VI of *FLOW* on “Ecumenical Relations and Relations with Other Faiths” (§§50–60). However, as in any corporate text, my contribution was but one of many voices so I see in the text ideas or phrases that I certainly contributed to, but also the words and concepts of many other scholars and hierarchs. It is an ecclesial text or text of the Orthodox Church and not the private theological expression of one person. *FLOW* was not meant to be a creative response to the social teaching of Orthodoxy. Instead, it was understood as a constructive reflection of where the Orthodox Church currently is situated on various social issues, for the most part, today, especially in the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In some cases, as happens in church documents, it was felt there was room to move forward on certain issues given the existing consensus. In other cases, *FLOW* held back theologically in terms of a more open and creative approach given recent controversies and fears in world Orthodoxy. The following theological reflection is both a personal explanation of the text by someone who was one of its many drafters but also a creative response, expressing personal theological opinions of sections of the text where I feel it might have gone yet further theologically.

Section VI: Both Conservative and Radical

On ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, *FLOW* is strangely, simultaneously both conservative and radical in orientation. The document puts forward a qualified ecclesiological exclusivism in relation to other churches and other religious traditions and it is muted with the former but much more generous with the latter. It affirms simultaneously that the Orthodox Church understands itself to be the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” affirmed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed recited at each Orthodox Divine Liturgy and that the Church is dedicated to sustained dialogue with other Christians and other religious traditions—reflecting the dialogue between God and humanity in Jesus Christ *through* the divine Logos (*dia-logos*) incarnate—because, as I will argue, the Orthodox Church is connected existentially and even ontologically with other Christian “churches” and other religious traditions.

FLOW is, as was said, strangely, much bolder in its affirmations about the links of Orthodoxy to other religions than it is in its comments on the bonds of Orthodoxy with other Christian churches and confessions. It certainly affirms very clearly, building

on “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World” of the Holy and Great Council of Crete of 2016,³ that the Orthodox Church is fully committed to ecumenism but it stops short of *explicitly* affirming the ecclesiality of non-Orthodox traditions. The document affirms that the Orthodox Church as *the* church can stand in a common ecumenical witness to Christ with “other Christians” not just from “shared history and moral vision” but “because such Christian groups, through their Trinitarian baptism and confession of the faith of the Councils, profess and share many aspects of Orthodox teaching and tradition” (§54). What is missing here *explicitly* is an affirmation of these bonds as ecclesial ones pointing to the tacit Orthodoxy/ecclesiality of non-Orthodox churches given that their baptism, faith, and tradition are, in some sense, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the church body, of the church or of Orthodoxy. Indeed, there are very few references to other non-Orthodox bodies as “churches” (§52) but these are merely descriptive and there is no attempt to explore how these bodies exist as church in relation to Orthodoxy as the church.

The Legacy of Crete?

One can’t but think that lurking in the background, as an explanation for this reticence, is the legacy of Crete’s intentionally ambiguous statement⁴ that “In accordance with the ontological nature of the Church, her unity can never be perturbed. In spite of this, the Orthodox Church accepts *the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions* that are not in communion with her” (“Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World,” §6).⁵ Both pro-ecumenist and anti-ecumenist Orthodox groups acknowledge that the Orthodox Church is the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of the Creed and that neither history nor schism has divided it (“her unity can never be perturbed”) and that it will remain unified and one until the *parousia*. The next clause, “the Orthodox Church accepts the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her” is Orthodoxy’s “subsist in” moment (the famous ambiguous phrase in the

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3. See Brandon Gallaher, “The Orthodox Moment: The Holy and Great Council in Crete and Orthodoxy’s Encounter with the West: On Learning to Love the Church,” *Sobornost* 39:2 (2017): 26–71 and see my essay responses to the essays of Daniela C. Augustine, John P. Burgess, Dale M. Coulter, and Peter Phan in the special issue of *The Journal of World Christianity* on the Council of Crete’s “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World,” “The Holy and Great Council of Crete and Eastern Orthodoxy’s Struggle for Identity in the Modern West”, *Journal of World Christianity* Vol. 11.1 (2021): 60-99.
 4. See Brandon Gallaher, “Ecumenism as Civilizational Dialogue: Eastern Orthodox Anti-Ecumenism and Eastern Orthodox Ecumenism: A Creative or Sterile Antinomy?,” *International Journal of the Christian Church* 19:4 (2019): 265–285 at 278–280.
 5. “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World,” §6, https://www.holycouncil.org/-/rest-of-christian-world?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2F&_101_INSTANCE_M8gWCQe69nZW_languageId=en_US (accessed October 21, 2020).

eighth paragraph of Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* where there was an attempt to define the universal church's relationship to the Catholic Church).⁶

The passage in the Crete text is not perspicuous. It is a purposefully ambiguous statement meant to join two very different Orthodox ecclesiological positions that are retained today in the Orthodox Church in an unresolved tension. The clause can mean different things for pro- and anti-Orthodox ecumenists. It can mean that (1) the Orthodox Church has always accepted that other Christian bodies like the Roman Catholic Church are called and are in some sense "churches" and so are spiritually linked with Orthodoxy even if they are not in visible communion with Orthodoxy; but (2) it can also mean that the Orthodox Church accepts that other Christian bodies have and continue to call themselves "churches" and that the Orthodox respect that they do so, although this in no way means that it accepts them as such given their ecclesial defectiveness not being in either spiritual or visible communion with the (Orthodox) Church. The section on ecumenism in *FLOW* seems, arguably, caught somewhere in between these two positions in terms of acknowledging the ecclesiality of non-Orthodox churches: neither fully explicitly affirming the ecclesiality of other Christian churches—though certainly tacitly acknowledging them—nor simply stating that they are merely churches in some loose descriptive and historical sense.

Non-Orthodox Churches: "A Grain of Orthodoxy"

I think *FLOW* could have gone further in terms of explicitly acknowledging the ecclesiality of other Christian churches, especially its "sister church," the Roman Catholic Church,⁷ and elaborating on its links with other Oriental, Assyrian, and Greek Catholic churches. The sort of position I am advocating is one that has been classically defended in the twentieth century from Sergii Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky to John Meyendorff and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware. It is that other non-Orthodox churches are Orthodox in some sense given not only Scripture, common history, shared moral vision, and confession of the Faith of the Councils but also because such Christian groups, through their trinitarian baptism, contain, as the great Russian theologian Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) put it, "a grain of Orthodoxy." The invisible universal Church, *Una Sancta*, Orthodoxy as such, is, Bulgakov argued, like the ancient Jewish temple composed of two circles and all baptized Christians belong to her and are in a sense Orthodox insofar as they are Christian. In the inner circle, the holy of holies, is the visible empirical Church which coincides with the canonical family of Churches known as Eastern Orthodoxy, but in the larger circle, the court of the temple, are the other Christian confessions and churches. These groups have to a lesser or greater degree "a grain of Orthodoxy" insofar as they are related to the "Orthodox" center of

6. *Lumen Gentium*, §I.8, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed October 21, 2020) and see Gallaher, "The Holy and Great Council of Crete and Eastern Orthodoxy's Struggle for Identity in the Modern West", n. 56, 95–96.

7. See Will T. Cohen, *The Concept of "Sister Churches" in Catholic–Orthodox Relations since Vatican II*, *Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia* 67 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016) but see the difficulties of this ecclesiology at Gallaher, "The Holy and Great Council of Crete", 85–88.

the temple with its fullness of divine-human life, but all churches are alike ecclesial, tacitly Orthodox.⁸ Insofar as they are in reference to the Orthodox Church, as the incarnation of the truth, all non-Orthodox Christians are tacitly Orthodox, for all of creation has the invisible imprint of the cross upon it, as the “watermark of divine love,”⁹ and, all non-Orthodox Christians are marked visibly in their trinitarian baptism with that cross and joined existentially and ontologically to the divine-human organism of the church, and are called in their baptisms to yet greater unity with the Body of Christ, whose earthly locus is the Orthodox Church. All baptized Christians are called to reunion with the Orthodox Church—the text speaks of how Orthodoxy calls all Christians to the “fullness of the faith” (§51) though eschewing a Byzantinization of them—from which they have become separated either through willful schism or, more often than not, through history and no fault of their own. In Georges Florovsky’s audacious words, “Christian reunion is just universal conversion to Orthodoxy. I have no confessional loyalty; my loyalty belongs solely to the *Una Sancta*.”¹⁰ Such a form of qualified ecclesiological exclusivism, calling non-Orthodox Christians to become Orthodox and thereby enter into the fulness of the Church and fulfill their baptism, requires great theological nuance and sensitivity if it is not to collapse into a chest-beating ecclesial triumphalism.

Seeds of the Word

FLOW is much more daring theologically in its thoughts on interreligious dialogue, which is a topic that reflects the deep pluralism of our world. Pluralism is seen as a providential opportunity for Orthodoxy. It is crucial that the Orthodox Church, without relativizing its claim to be the locus of the fullness of truth, has a knowledge of other religious traditions from which basis it can be at peace with its neighbors as well as cooperate with them in a common response to the challenges of secularism.¹¹ Simply dismissing other religions as “heresies” (Islam) or “demonic delusion” and “idolatry” (Hinduism and Buddhism) is counterproductive.¹² It is also contrary to the spirit of the church, which holds, as Justin Martyr (Justin the Philosopher, for the Orthodox) expressed it, that whatever was said rightly among all people belongs to us Christians. Indeed, the section argues, building on the “seeds of the Word” (*logoi spermatikoi*) tradition in the Church Fathers (Justin

8. Sergii Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, trans. Lydia Kesich (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1988), 188.

9. Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, 142.

10. Georges Florovsky, “Confessional Loyalty in the Ecumenical Movement,” in *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, ed. Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (London: Bloomsbury—T&T Clark, 2019), 279–85 at 285 and commentary at 23–27.

11. See Brandon Gallaher, “A Secularism of the Royal Doors: Toward an Eastern Orthodox Christian Theology of Secularism” in *Fundamentalism or Tradition: Christianity after Secularism*, eds. Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 108–130.

12. But in contrast for an excellent critique of the section arguing that it silences the Patristic critiques of other non-Christian religions, notably Islam, in favor of religious diplomacy see Serafim Seppälä, “Truth or Diplomacy: *For the Life of the World*, Islam and the Patristic Approach”, *Review of Ecumenical Studies*, 13.1 (2021): 31–41.

Martyr [100–165] and Maximus the Confessor [580–662] are drawn on explicitly), that knowledge of the Logos has been imparted not only to Israel but to all peoples. The seed of the Word who dwelt among us and saved us and whose Body the church is was implanted in every race of people and through a share in this Word all non-Christian writers can see the truth—if ever so darkly—and elaborate it by invention and contemplation (2 *Apol.* 8, 10, 13). Maximus the Confessor argues that there is a *logos* or divine principle for all the beings and powers of God (e.g. angels, humans) that preceded their creation and guided it (*Amb.* 7). All these *logoi* find their coherence in Christ as the one *Logos* is many *logoi*. The text then extends this idea to the different world religions.¹³

Islam: Beauty and Spiritual Truths

FLOW audaciously argues that the church “can and does engage the beauty and spiritual truths of Islam” (§56) despite its significant disagreements with that tradition (e.g. Trinity, Incarnation). This positive statement on Islam is a first historically in an Orthodox official church document, as Phil Dorroll has observed.¹⁴ This section was among the most contentious in the drafting process. Orthodoxy has had a long experience of cohabitation with Muslims and of living in Islamic majority societies. However, this experience has not always been peaceful and has even been traumatic and violent for Orthodoxy as religious minority. Ultimately the passage was included and I must say that I am very pleased that it “made the cut.” *FLOW* argues that Orthodoxy has many points of contact with Islam from the Virgin Birth and recognition of Jesus as Messiah to reverence for the holiness and truth of God’s Word spoken through his Prophets, the necessity of discerning the divine will at each moment and the centrality of prayer and the ascetic struggle for perfection. The very real differences that separate Orthodoxy from Islam can be constructively used as points of dialogical encounter and learning on both sides aiming to “enter into an intimate conversation for the advancement of peace and understanding” among our different peoples (§56).

If I was to go further in this section, I would argue, drawing on Maximus’ thought, that the Holy Spirit is eternally coaxing the tradition of Islam towards the truth of Christ through its *logos*. This in no way affirms everything Islam teaches. There are aspects of Islam—its rejection of the Incarnation, the cross, and Resurrection (Qur’an, 3:55; 3:59; 5:157; 19:34–35)—where we must say it has deviated from its guiding principle (*logos*). But there is truth here such as in its affirmation of the Virgin Birth (3:47, 19:16–21, 21:91) or in its acknowledgement of Jesus as the Messiah, Messenger, Word, and Spirit of God (4:171). The guiding principle of Islam (*logos*) has more or less truthful expressions (*tropos*) in the religion and its story is not yet finished. Islam only finds its coherence and clarity within Orthodoxy as the Body of the living *Logos*, but, as a family of religious traditions, it embodies truth nevertheless.

13. See also John Garvey, *Seeds of the Word: Orthodox Thinking on Other Religions* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 2005) and Paul Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology: Behold, I Make All Things New* (*Rev* 21:5) (London: T&T Clark-Bloomsbury, 2019), 301–317.

14. Phil Dorroll, “Islam from an Orthodox Perspective: A Review of Paragraph 56 of the Social Ethos Document,” July 3, 2020, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/07/03/islam-from-an-orthodox-perspective/> (accessed October 15, 2021).

I was blessed to participate for six years (2012–2017) in Islamic–Christian dialogue through Georgetown University’s Building Bridges Seminar.¹⁵ It was a transformative experience. It led me to the opinion that in some ways Islamic spirituality and theological traditions now have more in common with Orthodoxy and the various forms of Eastern Christianity than many of the Western churches which have undergone massive changes in the face of modernity (and are changing by the day!) with whom the Orthodox have long-standing official international dialogues.

Judaism: The Spiritual Elder Brother to Orthodoxy

FLOW discusses Judaism and affirms the Jewishness of Jesus Christ and the continued election of Israel (Rom 11). Orthodoxy looks to Jewish communities, the document daringly argues, “not merely as to practitioners of another creed, but as to, in some sense, their spiritual elders in the history of God’s saving revelations” (§57). This is despite Orthodoxy’s obvious disagreements with Judaism (e.g. the saving nature of the oral and written Law, the Incarnation). The text rejects in no uncertain terms anti-Semitism and says Orthodox must repent and seek God’s forgiveness for violence and oppression against the Jews. This is utterly remarkable given the long history of Orthodox anti-Semitism from anti-Jewish rhetoric in its hymnography¹⁶ to church involvement both formal and informal in official acts of anti-Semitic hatred and even violence (e.g. the Kishinev pogrom of 1903).

But one would hope that future official Orthodox texts on Jewish–Orthodox Christian relations would go yet further theologically in developing, as Fr. Lev Gillet (1893–1980) (the “Monk of the Eastern Church”) attempted to do, a “theology of Christ for Israel”¹⁷ which saw Christian universalism as including the “free election and special graces,” indeed, the “primacy of Israel.”¹⁸ In order to accomplish this object theologically, Gillet argued that one would need to go beyond the asymmetrical notion of a Christian “mission to the Jews” to a Christian “dialogue with Israel” understood as the “communion” of Jews and Christians either in the same personal Messiah (this total communion is a distant goal rather than an immediate possibility) or in messianic values common to

15. “The Building Bridges Seminar,” <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/projects/the-building-bridges-seminar> (accessed October 15, 2021). See Brandon Gallaher, “The Christian Church Facing Itself and Facing the World: An Ecumenical Overview of Modern Christian Ecclesiology” in *The Community of Believers: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 97–146 and “Creativity, Covenant and Christ” in *God’s Creativity and Human Action: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 79–99.

16. See Bogdan G. Bucur, “Anti-Jewish Rhetoric in Byzantine Hymnography: Exegetical and Theological Contextualisation,” *St Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No.1 (2017): 39–60.

17. Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah: Studies in the Relationship between Judaism and Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999 [1942]), 184; I am indebted to the discussion in Bohdan Hladio, “Judaism and Orthodox Christianity: Encounters and Dialogues,” *Eastern Orthodoxy and World Religions: The Theology and Practice of Inter-Religious Encounter in the Contemporary Christian East*, eds. Thomas Cattoi Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2023).

18. Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah*, 183.

both of them (this partial communion can be reached today and progressively enlarged).¹⁹ This would be, Gillet continues, an attempt to reach “some aspects of the communion of Jews and Christians in one Messianism, therefore in the one Messiah.”²⁰ Each side could learn from the other in terms of developing its own messianic consciousness.²¹ Gillet is a writer normally only referred to for spirituality but his importance is far broader as he points the way towards a more dialogical encounter between Judaism and Orthodox Christianity where interfaith relations are a mutual-learning process.

The other key resource for future Orthodox–Jewish dialogue is Vladimir Solov’ev (1853–1900), who argued that the Jewish people symbolized both the principle of prophecy—insofar as prophecy anticipates the future and by this anticipation “gives a moral power to people to bring closer this ideal future and realize it”²²—and a vision of what he called “religious materialism,” which was the “impatient striving to embody the Divine on earth” or the incarnational principle.²³ Solov’ev vigorously attacked official Russian anti-Semitism and defended the Talmud as a “law of life” which can serve as a model for Christians as a practical life system.²⁴ These sorts of historic open and creative Orthodox approaches to Judaism can arguably be seen in the interreligious and educational initiatives of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.²⁵

Further Up and Further In: Trinity, Logoi, and World Religions

Things become more obscure once one attempts to see the face of Christ, albeit dimly visible, within non-Abrahamic traditions, like Buddhism. The challenge, however, needs to be taken up, for if all things hold together in the incarnate Word then He is the watermark of divine love. As Sergii Bulgakov put it, “Imprinted in the world is the face of the Logos, who in the fulness of time descends from heaven to earth in order to be ‘in-humanized’.”²⁶ When the truth of Orthodoxy shines on creation then Jesus is made visible even in something as abstruse as the Ryokai or Two Worlds Mandala of Japanese Shingon Buddhism. The cruciform rationale and meaning of what is apparently godless then becomes intelligible, finding its true direction and shape in its transcendent ground in light of the Gospel, Jesus Christ crucified and risen according to the Scriptures.²⁷ How then might we build on *FLOW* creatively going further up and further in to an Orthodox theology of religions? In what follows I want to creatively suggest a trinitarian theological approach to the theology of religions inspired by the

19. Ibid., x.

20. Ibid., 196–97.

21. Ibid., 106.

22. Vladimir Solov’ev, *Freedom, Faith, and Dogma: Essays by V.S. Soloviev on Christianity and Judaism*, ed. Vladimir Wozniuk (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008), 188.

23. Ibid., 54–55.

24. Ibid., 142ff.

25. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America “Responding to Anti-Semitism,” <https://www.goarch.org/society/antisemitism> (accessed October 19, 2021).

26. Sergii Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, abridged trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 193.

27. See Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 142 (epigraph at beginning of essay).

document and drawing on not only the theology of the *logoi* of Maximus but Orthodox and Catholic trinitarian thinkers like Bulgakov and Hans Urs von Balthasar,²⁸ and other contemporary theologians of religious plurality.²⁹

The *logoi*, I would argue, building on Maximus, exist within the hypostatic relations perpetually recirculated in the dance of perichoresis but finding their ultimate coherence in the hypostasis of the Son. However, the particularity of the divine providential words, though they find their ultimate divine center in Christ in whom all things are created and hold together, also might reflect the hypostatic differences themselves, the divine circulation, being marked as it were by the divine processions. Thus, God the Father eternally begets His only-begotten Son and in this begetting He pours out His life as an eternal sacrifice into the Son giving all that He is to Him even to the point of complete self-immolation. Within the divine will, hypostatized by the Father, are contained all of His eternal intentions for creation, the divine *logoi*. We might speculate that this eternal paternal self-emptying marks certain of the *logoi* of the divine being which when seeded in the divine creation can be contemplated by us through prayer and meditation.

When these *logoi* are seen in their fullness they are known in the experience of quietude by the hesychast through repetition of the prayer of the heart or Jesus Prayer (or if you prefer through the recitation of the Rosary or even through *lectio divina*) where he encounters the kenotic Christ whose sacrifice echoes His Father's primordial self-emptying of Himself. Yet we do not encounter these *logoi* only within the Christian churches and traditions. They also mark Buddhist meditation—but here lacking their true Christform basis—and grasped in the experience of Śūnyatā, the void at the heart of all things.

In the Father's total self-gift He generates His Son. As was just said, within the divine will as hypostatized in the Father is contained all of His eternal intentions for creation, the divine *logoi*. The Son in response to His own necessary begetting freely and with gratitude returns His being to the Father with loving completeness, sacrificing any sense of His own self as origin by affirming His own begottenness in thanking His Father for all He is from Him. In this self-gift back to the Father, the Son contemplates the divine will in the Father and discovers all the seminal words for creation. These include, as the Anaphora of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom reminds us, "the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the Sitting down at the right hand, and the second and glorious Coming."³⁰

This *logos* is enacted within the world through the history of Israel whose apogee is the Word's taking flesh as Jesus Christ and the birth of His Body the Church. Yet this divine truth of the *logos* of the embodiment in creation of Christ is also grasped ever so darkly

28. See Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2016).

29. See Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man: Icon–Person–Mystery* (New York: Orbis, 1973); S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); and Donald W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1991).

30. *The Divine Liturgy According to St. John Chrysostom with appendices*, 2nd Ed (South Canaan, Pa: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1977), 65.

within other cultures such as within the Hindu notion of Īśvara. Whereas Brahman as the Absolute is “immovable, in-concrete, beyond all possibility of acting, the *avatāras* of the godhead are in fact manifestations of Īśvara. It is Īśvara that manifests, appears, descends in the form of an *avātar* of the most different kinds” such as in the Trimurti of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva or indeed with Krishna.³¹ These avatars are imperfect, though still true, attempts to grasp the fullness of the truth that the *Logos* of God is a specific human being.

Finally, in the Father giving all of who He is in the Son and in the Son affirming His givenness there is their conjoint common love which binds them, that is, their own mutuality as self-gift and here we speak of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, then, as their conjoint love, their mutual gift and giving in perfect union, proceeds from the Father and rests on the Son, only existing so that He might confirm and establish their union as an eternal love. In this way, He puts the seal on the Son’s begetting as a necessary act of God to be God and yet upholds the Son when he freely appropriates His own being. The Spirit is the Absolute Freedom of God in both its divine necessity and liberality and in His spiration He takes up the *logoi* and the *Logos* in whom they are contained and enacts them in creation.

This includes, for example, both the actual utterly unique Incarnation and its obscure expression in various Hindu avatars. The Spirit enacts both and leads the Hindu to the fullness of what Raimundo Panikkar called its “Unknown Christ” through gentle persuasion. Yet, and this bears further thought, the Spirit may actually be leading Christians both to discover deeper aspects of their own tradition through contemplating the religions of others *and* as yet unknown truths revealed in other religions that are not yet expressed in Christianity, short of the eschaton.

Orthodox theology is quite new to the discipline of the theology of religions, let alone comparative theology³². While this means that it has an enormous amount to learn from the last half century of work by its Protestant and Catholic counterparts and could be said to have “fallen behind,” it also is not hampered by the “soteriological fixation” that George Lindbeck observed of the standard models of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.³³ What I have presented, inspired by *FLOW*, is only a beginning and I see it as eventually actively accompanying the practice of comparative theology. Here again there would be a difference from some Western practitioners of comparative theology where attempts to give a comprehensive statement about how another religion is

31. Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964, repr. 1968), 124.

32. See Hieromonk Damascene, *Christ the Eternal Tao* (Platina, CA: Valaam Books, 2004); Ernest M. Valea, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue as Theological Exchange: An Orthodox Contribution to Comparative Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015); Christine Mangala Frost, *The Human Icon: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Orthodox Christian Beliefs* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2017); and Brandon Gallaher, “Spiritualities separated at birth or accidentally related?: The ‘spiritual senses’ traditions in Eastern Orthodox Hesychasm and Chan and Zen Buddhism” in *The Routledge Handbook of Buddhist-Christian Studies*, eds. Carol Anderson and Thomas Cattoi (Abingdon: Forthcoming 2023).

33. George Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability,” *Modern Theology* 13:4 (1997): 423–50 at 425, but the exact phrase is that of Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue. From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness,” *Modern Theology* 28:1 (2012): 25–52 at 26.

viewed from a Christian perspective are ruled out *tout court* if one, in Frank Clooney's phrase, begins to "theologize ... from both sides of the table."³⁴ Yet these are the risks one runs if the cruciform rationale and meaning of what is apparently godless is to become intelligible for the Christian finding its true direction and shape in its transcendent trinitarian ground.

Conclusion

The importance of *FLOW* is manifold. It certainly has profound utility in contemporary catechesis on the Orthodox parish level and it has already started to be used by pastors in America as a teaching tool. Yet what I have tried to show is how it can inspire Orthodox theologians to encounter and respond to comparatively new areas of theology such as the theology of religions, or it can cause us to highlight, as I have done, past ecclesiological responses in the twentieth century to Orthodoxy's union and ever-increasing communion with other Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church. The Orthodox ethos, as Georges Florovsky is approvingly quoted in the document (§50), is certainly its historic, spiritual, and ontological identity with the "Church of all ages," the *Una Sancta* of the Creed found in the "Early Church," but this church was and is never a static body but a living and responsive divine-human organism that from within the depths of its holy tradition can respond to a changing world, since it is ever ancient and ever new.

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34. Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 13.