

THE CHOIR OF HISTORY I

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Abstract: *What is the nature of historical theology? This article aims to serve as a first of two steps that examine the thought and life of historian-theologians and whose reflections on the same topic aim to provide a backdrop to the furthering of the discipline. The author examines several thinker's positions regarding the task and nature of history and specifically the nature of the church and seeks to extend and invitation to others willing to learn from the "fathers" of contemporary church history.*

Keywords: Glubokovski, Bolotov, Lebedev, ecclesial history, Florovsky, Pelikan, Harnack, church history, historical theology.

A few years ago, on the corner of 112th and Broadway I came across a tiny book, unbeknownst to me quite widely known, with its title printed in dim yellow letters and the author's name barely legible: "What is history?". Browsing through it I was not yet aware that just a few months later I would be applying to a doctoral program focused on the history of contemporary Orthodox theology and joining the recently re-organized *cathedra* of historical theology at the Sofia University „St. Clement of Ohrid“. Over the course of the following years, I had the chance to focus on questions, previously completely outside of my own area of research and eventually coming back, or forward, to the same question, but with an addition: „What is historical theology?“. I do not propose to exhaust the topic here but rather to provide a brief overview of the views of certain authors and provide a departure point for further reflection and research and this article will be just a beginning with a second part following.

E. H. Carr's book¹ was, as I mentioned, a very chance find while at the same time holding considerable influence on my initial point of departure. Despite its many merits only a few questions that the author tries to resolve will be mentioned as they point to the heart of the matter surrounding the demarcation of historical theology. A third of the way into his quite multifaceted argument Carr, after passing through two key themes – the relationship between historian and source and the personal and societal climate that shape the writing of history – outlines five main

¹ E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, Vintage Books, New York, 1961.

reasons as to why history cannot be called a science proper.² They are: 1) that history deals with the unique and thus is fundamentally opposed to the sciences that deal with the general;³ 2) that history, because it deals with the unique, can teach no lessons;⁴ 3) that history cannot predict the future because, connected to the previous points, it deals with the specific;⁵ 4) that within history the relationship between subject and object is fundamentally different from the one existing in the sciences;⁶ and 5) that history, because it deals with religion and does, or at least has, pronounced moral judgement of the past, cannot be considered a science.⁷ The first three objections all hang on the admittance of the first proposition. The latter two are also intimately connected and it is at the intersection of this connection, at its focal point that the focus will be. Man studying himself, or the deeds of his fathers and mothers and the place of faith in the historian's craft – the challenges in defining historical theology.

Without venturing into territory that would ascribe to this article pretensions of an epistemological work we can at least admit that it is indeed man, a human being, with all the complexity that this entails, that studies history though, a point of caution, does not do so in isolation nor is it possible to. Firstly, due to the very nature of the task and secondly because it is clear, now more than it was for the last two and a half centuries, that there is no such thing as an isolated individual, at least when it comes to the realm of ideas. Applying the same logic to the second part of our premise it is not another man that the historian studies but his or her society as well as all the things left out as those can and often are by far more important to the latter development of events. It can be said, then, that history is not man studying man but a human being's reflection on another member of a society the former almost always knows very little about. Here the therapeutic and optic character of history comes into focus, but this will be examined at a later point and in a different article. With this description what immediately becomes

² *Ibidem*, p. 78.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 79-84.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 84-86.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 86-89.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 89-94.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 94-99. Carr does treat the questions in depth and his conclusions, for the most part, provide an adequate *apologia*.

apparent is the fundamental role that faith and trust play in the historian's craft. Trust that what the authors of the source materials were putting down was, for their best knowledge, true. This is a major concession to human dignity that appears to be rarer now more than ever. Not only trust but also faith and faithfulness on the part of the historian that what the sources are saying is *what* the sources are saying. This should not be confused with mere repetition.

As our focus here is on history it seems appropriate that we employ a chronological choreography when dealing with the concrete authors. Perhaps it would make more sense to begin a bit earlier but due to the limitations inherent in such a work we begin with Bolotov and Glubokovsky and some of the first steps of Orthodox historical research.

Vasily Bolotov (1853 – 1900) headed the Chair of Church History at the St. Petersburg Spiritual Academy since 1879, after graduating during the same year. A polyglot beyond comparison in both contemporary and ancient languages he also served to shape foreign ecclesial policy. Well known to every seminarian, theological student, or curious believer in the Slavic Orthodox world Bolotov's magnum opus, *Lekcii po istorii drevnei cerkvi*, is certainly massive and in as much as it provides an in depth intro to church history for us here its most important aspect is contained in the first volume, focused on methodology.⁸ Within the very first pages Bolotov addresses some of the same questions raised by Carr more than half a century later. He begins with a broad acceptance that history is different, to a degree, from the other „deductive sciences“ while later going on to position history as an art, „like an arch, standing on firm foundations“⁹. He sees any effort to draw laws, in the sense of natural laws, from history as a pompous attempt to avert somebody's gaze but not as anything serious. The historian he interprets as the *histor*, the knowledgeable eyewitness „who submits to his nature – to know everything, to try and sooth his craving for knowledge.“¹⁰ After establishing the fundamentals of history in general he goes on to focus on a discussion of church history specifically.

⁸ В. Болотов, *Лекции по Историй Древней Церкви*, т. 1, *Введение въ церковную историю*, С. Петербург, 1907.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

One of the main characteristics of his thought in this aspect is the view that church history cannot be written about any independent person but is always the history of the entire people. In order to be able to tell that story the historian has to collect the sources and to decide which ones to use and while Bolotov does not give much advice on this, apart from the effort to find the *histor*, he does insist on the faithfulness to the sources. Every author, for Bolotov, should be considered knowledgeable and honest before a critique is raised against his ideas. The historian, especially the church historian, must be tactful, to be able to present and follow in a way that is akin to a conversation. On the question of the religious affiliation of the historian Bolotov argues that it is not only not a bad influence but should be considered as a mark of a faithful historian due to the highest degree of respect and obedience to the truth that is expected of believers.

This, although very broad, does give us a working definition of key points that should be followed further down the line of argument. Nikolai Nikanorovich Glubokovski, not immediately associated with church history, provides a further development of these ideas.

Glubokovski (1863 – 1937) was born into an ecclesial family and his education was carried out in ecclesial schools. In 1889 he graduated from the Moscow Spiritual Academy. One of the foremost biblical scholars of his time as well as an active member of the extra-orthodox commission, as well as the preparatory movement that led to the formation of the ecumenical movement. Glubokovski, primarily associated with New Testament studies did not start his academic path in this direction. His Masters dissertation, written under prof. A. Lebedev at the Saint-Petersburg Spiritual Academy, bears the title “The Blessed Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus” and is much more a work of history than what the name gives away. Despite its successful defense Glubokovski did not stay on as a professor of church history, because at both the Spiritual Academies in Russia at the time those seats were occupied by Bolotov and Lebedev.¹¹ He focuses, instead, on New Testament studies and specifically on the teachings of St. Apostle Paul. After fleeing the oppressive regime, he ends up in Sofia, Bulgaria via Prague, and Belgrade. He arrives as an honored and awaited guest. About 10 years

¹¹ П. Павлов, *Богословски аскетизъм и научни смислене: академичните завети на проф. Николай Н. Глубоковски* in *Forum Theologicum Sardicense*, 2/2014, pp. 266-281.

before his arrival there had been a decision to establish a theological faculty in Bulgaria but due to the wars at the beginning of the XXth century both the construction of its building and the hiring of its professors was delayed. Nevertheless in 1923 prof. Glubokovski would begin to teach in alongside prof. protopresbyter Stefan Tsankov and prof. archim. Evtimii Sapundjiev, the “founding fathers” of modern theological research in Bulgaria. During his time there he teaches regularly until his passing in 1937 on the occasion of which Exarch Stephen calls him a “pillar of Orthodoxy”. While the later part of his academic output is focused on New Testament studies, he does leave certain remarks that help us outline his historical vision here. He did leave a series of scattered notes from which we can see his “academic testaments”¹².

They have been categorized and synthesized elsewhere¹³ but can be presented in a four-fold pattern: academic loyalty, scientific humility, theological *podvizhnichestvo*, and thankfulness. Space does not permit us to go in depth to all of these, but two need to be mentioned in the context of history.

It is, admittedly, a bit forceful to try and extrapolate a concise and coherent vision of historical theology, based only on these testaments, especially as they are of a synthetic character. Despite this certain things can be mentioned. Firstly, on a somewhat more practical note, Glubokovski was more in favor of the establishment of a theological faculty, connected to a university, rather than the continuation of spiritual academies, having himself thought in both educational institutions during his life. The reasoning behind his insistence can be attributed to his desire to maintain certain criteria when it came to theological education. The compromises that could be theoretically allowed within the spiritual academies in order to provide for the needs of the church were beyond reach within the walls of the theological faculties. Holding to high criteria is a key mark of his view of the historian’s task and is also connected with his general approach to academic loyalty – during his time as a regular professor at the Saint Peterburg Spiritual Academy he was offered a position in the cathedra of

¹² As Pavlov terms them and due to whose care and research they are accessible at all. Cf. П. Павлов, *Богословски аскетизъм и научни смирение*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 271-276.

church history in the Saint Peterburg University, but he turned it down, not wanting to be spread too thin.¹⁴

The other aspect that serves our purpose here is Glubokovski's understanding of theological *podvizhnichestvo* or asceticism. This basic intuition that seems to be a rarity in our times was that the process of „doing“ theology and teaching is akin to a *mysterion*, a sacrament of the Church. He saw the academies (and the faculties) as sacred or at least sacerdotal, a place where “you take your shoes off.”¹⁵ He treats Bolotov as an archetypal image of the teacher-ascetic.¹⁶ But these outlooks were not forced upon scholars and teachers out of some pseudo-romanticism. They, like Glubokovski himself, had to endure hardships¹⁷ that would seem not only uncomfortable but beyond the strength or will of some contemporary thinkers. The work of theology has always provided an opportunity for *podvig* and during the later part of Glubokovski's life such opportunities were plentiful.

Putting these two prerequisites for academic life to the side for the moment a more concrete reflection on the task of history is necessary within the framework of Glubokovski's thought. As we have mentioned before despite his deep historical outlook, he did not produce a concrete work of history or a type of “philosophy of history”. He did, though, write an *In memoriam* for prof. Lebedev¹⁸ and in this hastily but brilliantly put together emotional work his views of history can be glimpsed.

The first thing that Glubokovski notes as a task of Lebedev's and, consequently, the church historian's is the alertness towards the “engine of historical development”¹⁹. He also warns of the “risk of missing the forest because of the branch”²⁰ or the excessive focus of scholarship. Connected with the previous remark within the telling of

¹⁴ П. ПАВЛОВ, *Богословски аскетизъм и научни смирение*, p. 273.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 276.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Н. ГЛУБОКОВСКИ, *В памет на покойния професор Алексей Петрович Лебедев (Под първите впечатления от тежката зазуба)* in *Forum Theologicum Sardicense*, 2/2014, pp. 167-201.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 170.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 173.

history the risk exists for the “weight of facts to crush with certainty”²¹. The challenge for church historians is, and was what Lebedev knew how to do perfectly, was to teach history as a captivating and interesting story, rather than one bludgeoned beyond recognition by factual records – to tell a story and to tell it well.²² An invitation should also be extended towards working with other, both historians and not.²³ Another task for later church historians and one that was accomplished by Lebedev himself was to produce a vivid recollection of all of Christian history and due to this he began to be called the Harnack of the East.²⁴ Glubokovski’s later reflections see Christianity as impossible to be exhausted by historical data and swayed, in the eyes of the serious historian. The other sciences, according to Glubokovski, also should not be subjected and dominated within theological schools but have their say in theology.²⁵ Another point he made was the interconnectedness of past, present, and future – following and flowing but not necessarily linearly. Being occupied with the past does not lead to a closedness but rather moves forward, pushing for a deeper understanding.²⁶ Within this search the historian is the wise man of old, “shining a light on the past [so that it] becomes a beacon for the present and a light for the future”.²⁷ And most importantly of all, at least for our purposes here and the “history of the church is the mother of all theological disciplines.”²⁸

Moving on and in a completely different direction from the previous authors we arrive at Adolf von Harnack who is probably one of the most established names in terms of historical and dogmatic theology. While chronologically intersecting both Glubokovski and Bolotov his views are quite contrary to theirs, or rather theirs are an answer to his provocations. Harnack’s liberal Protestantism is the backdrop for most

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 174. As is also reflected in the wonderful article J. Pelikan, *The Historian as Polyglot*, in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 137, no. 4, 1993, pp. 659-68.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 175.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 178.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 183. Further reflection, that will be examined in the second part of this series of articles can be seen in J. Pelikan, *The Predicament of the Christian Historian: A Case Study*, in *Reflections*. Vol 1, PCIT, Princeton, pp. 196-211, Lecture i, 4.

²⁶ Н. ГЛУБОКОВСКИЙ, *В память на покойника профессор Алексей Петрович Лебедев*, p. 187.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 189.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 186.

of his views on history which in turn serve his overarching theme of doctrinal development. This theme fits best at the end of the Enlightenment and applies naturalistic logic to both history and theology.

Unlike Bolotov and Glubokovski Harnack sees the history of the world as the superstructure while the history of the church occupies a smaller piece and is determined by what is exterior to it.²⁹ Without much speculation the Christological implication of this view are considerable. For one the centrality of Christ in the axis of history is a topic that cannot be neglected by current theological discourse as the counterpoint, to put it briefly, would be, and is, the slow decline into the ever-increasing hold of nihilism and the pointlessness of contemporary narratives of the metaphysical grounding of being within itself. Pavel Pavlov points to this in a recently published article and treats it, not only there, as one of the fundamental differences between a Christian worldview and one that treats itself as such.³⁰

Much unlike the previous point stressed Harnack is in full agreement with Bolotov, explicitly, and Glubokovski, implicitly, in rejecting an atomistic interpretation of history. Although framed in a different way this was strangely contrary to his usual views on the personal responsibility of historical actors. This can be traced back to one of his main theses – the difference between Petrine and Pauline, Jewish and Gentile, Christianity, where the personalistic mode of interpretation provides a convenient way to look at the whole picture. Most of what he wrote or said on this topic is closely connected to the way he interpreted the history of dogma which is his grand project.

What should be kept in mind when dealing with Harnack is that his influence was immense. His role in what preceded WW1³¹ is enough to be mentioned. The sheer scale of his work and fame made him a perfect example for some schools to emulate and some to see him as a

²⁹ G. Richards, The Place of Adolph von Harnack among Church Historians in *The Journal of Religion*, Jul. 1931, Vol. 11, No. 3, p. 335; As well in general cf. A. Harnack, *Christianity and History*, Adam & Charles Black, London, 1896, p. 27. and A. Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Leipzig, 1908.

³⁰ P. Pavlov, History and Christianity, Time and the Church (Musings of a Theologian-historian), in *Astra Salvensis*, 8, 2020, pp. 175-184.

³¹ Mentioned in more detail here: Т. Аврамов, Ярослав Пеликан и историята на богословието in *Forum Theologicum Sardicense*, XXIV, 2, 2019, pp. 155-164.

worthy, albeit obvious opponent to those who fell under what he saw as barbarian mindsets. Moving beyond just the simplification that church history is a chapter in the book of world history his work treats the history of the church, or at least her teaching by weaving a narrative that follows not the traditional manner – topic, discussion, problem, solution – but by way of the specific presuppositions of different dogmatic developments and positions.³² Elsewhere Richards points to the general attitude of Harnack towards church history as the “process of secularization ... of the original ideal.”³³ This, in turn, goes back to Harnack’s general dislike of the “Hellenization of Christianity”, a process he treats as one of the fundamental problems facing the faith at the turn of the XXth century and one that he tries to solve by circling back to Schleiermacher’s *spiritual* faith.

Florovsky was dead in the middle of the battle between pro and anti harnacians but engaged the problematic in the same elegant way that he later engaged with Bulgakov, his spiritual father – by never talking directly against the person or grand idea but allowing for those capable – to hear.

This, in his case was carried forward in an even more personal way. One of his students went on to produce what ought to have been the magnum opus of Harnack, at least when the attitude to the Christian tradition is concerned. That man, who had two portraits above his desk, one of Florovsky, the other – Harnack’s, went on to provide an interesting and profound presentation of the Christian tradition, and not only one based around theological loci, but centered on history and stretching for the entire duration of Christianity’s history. That man is Jaroslav Pelikan and the line that connects him with the thinkers we have briefly seen here³⁴ shall be discussed in the second article bearing the consecutive title of the one presented here.

Here we have seen the rough outline of the first few steps in the line of thinkers leading to Pelikan and his students, whose own research is a different topic altogether. We have outlined the basic positions

³² See the first volume in A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* in 7 Vols., Translated by N. Buchanan, J. Millar, W. Mac Gilchrist, London, Williams & Norgate, 1895-1899.

³³ G. Richards, *The Place of Adolph von Harnack among Church Historians*, p. 342.

³⁴ A line that was first highlighted for me by Pavel Pavlov. Cf. П. ПАВЛОВ, *Богословие като биография: Протоиерей Георги Флоровски (1893-1979)*. Био-библиография. С., 2013.

regarding historical theology and the way they challenge us to look at it moving forward. Learning from the fathers, as Florovsky always advised, as well as learning from the forefathers, as was one of Pelikan's favorite quotes from Goethe's *Faust* – that is what must be done in the next phase of research on the nature of historical theology.