Method of Correlation and Neo-patristic Synthesis: Paul Tillich and Georges Florovsky on Theological Method

Paul Tillich and Georges Florovsky, two of the greatest 20th century theologians of the Protestant and the Eastern Orthodox traditions, were colleagues at Harvard (1956-1962). The former was a systematic theologian and the latter a Church historian and patristic scholar. However, both were interested in history and the situation of the modern man inside and outside the Church. Moreover, both valued the ‘existential’ content and significance of Christian theology. Tillich put forward his method of correlation in an attempt to provide theological answers to human, existential questions. These answers presuppose the biblical message and the classical doctrines of Trinitarian theology and Christology, although Tillich believed that the formulations of these doctrines are not binding on all future theology. Florovsky suggested a neo-patristic synthesis, which aspires to be a comprehensive restatement of patristic theology in the face of new challenges from various quarters. Although he was strongly against a sterile ‘theology of repetition’, Florovsky was inspired by ‘the patristic mind’ and considered the formulations of the classical doctrines as binding. Tillich produced a Systematic Theology, whereas Florovsky usually expressed himself in ad hoc theological articles. Moreover, whereas in his Systematic Theology Tillich begins with the questions and then proceeds to the answers, Florovsky used to respond to modern challenges and questions while expounding the Christian doctrine. Given that both Tillich and Florovsky were ecumenically minded, it will be important to examine the ways in which their respective theological methods differ from or complement each other, in an attempt to address afresh their (and our) common concern, namely the need to recast the Christian message in a way that is both faithful to its content and able to bring to light its salvific relevance for our contemporaries.