

Datum 13.07.2015

Zdenko Širka

Horizons of Human Understanding and Transcendence
Gadamer in Dialogue with Modern Orthodox Hermeneutics

The work under consideration displays a well-written introduction. The author aims at comparing the Gadamerian hermeneutical project and Orthodox hermeneutics, taking the concept of *transcendence* as a starting point. Mr. Širka is aware that he is using this notion in two different nuances. Whereas for Hans-Georg Gadamer transcendence is horizontally experienced through history and language as a “limit of human knowledge” (p. 81), for Orthodox theology transcendence is rather vertical and presupposes faith in a transcendent being. The author proves his scholarly abilities by offering, on the whole, a well-structured dissertation. In each chapter, the reader is regularly informed about the upcoming steps and reminded of the major results thanks to concise summaries. Mr. Širka’s thesis includes a solid and well-documented presentation of Gadamer’s hermeneutics and its reception both in philosophy and theology. Worth mentioning in this regard is the fact that the author has acquired first-hand knowledge of Gadamer’s manuscript *Truth and Method* known as the *Urfassung* at the university library of Heidelberg (p. 68). Very helpful is moreover Mr. Širka’s attempt to offer a threefold framework within which the development of recent and contemporary Orthodox theological hermeneutics can be understood and critically assessed, namely patristic hermeneutics, biblical hermeneutics, and hermeneutical

theology (p. 178). His exposition of Orthodox hermeneutics is meticulous and draws on bibliographic material in different languages. Against this background, I recommend that Mr. Širka's work be accepted as a doctoral dissertation. The following critical remarks are not intended to downplay its value, but rather to induce a number of improvements and modifications:

1. The major shortcoming of the work under examination is the absence of a final chapter in which Gadamerian and Orthodox hermeneutics are comprehensively compared under the aspect of transcendence. Although such a comparative work has been partly done, especially in the second part devoted to Orthodox hermeneutics (see, for example, p. 299), the thesis would acquire more profile, sharpness, and impact if Mr. Širka would envisage writing such a comparative chapter. By doing this, the author's endeavor to contextualize Orthodox hermeneutics would certainly yield more fruits.
2. Throughout his doctoral dissertation, Mr. Širka considers that one of the main weaknesses of Gadamer's hermeneutics is his reluctance to "investigate what is transcendent sufficiently in relation to the divine" (p. 110, see also p. 115) and to do justice to eschatology (p. 111). However, this seems to do little justice to Gadamer's project of a philosophical hermeneutics; for questions pertaining to the divine and to eschatology fall rather within the competence field of theology. Within his overarching hermeneutical framework, Gadamer is fully justified to bracket purely theological queries.
3. Mr. Širka pays heed to the distinction introduced by Kant between *transcendent* and *transcendental* (pp. 44-47). This legitimate concern is intimately linked to the notion of transcendence in Gadamer's thought. What he seems to overlook, however – even though he appears to touch thereupon on page 105 – is that, without directly drawing on Kant, Gadamer's hermeneutics can be termed *transcendental* insofar as it seeks to disclose the *conditions de possibilité* of understanding, being thus reminiscent of Kant's *a-priori* question. We have every reason to assume that Gadamer's *Kantian* sensibility goes back to Heidegger.

4. Coming to Ricoeur's critique of Gadamer (pp. 96-100), Mr. Širka pauses briefly at the concept of *distance* as purportedly one of the major points of divergence between both thinkers. Nevertheless, the reader is at pains to fathom what this concept of distance is really about and how Gadamer "ignored" (p. 99) it although *temporal distance* is one of the guiding principles of his hermeneutics. Later on, the author ambiguously tends to agree with Gadamer against Ricoeur (p. 123, note 401). This uncertainty is doubled by Mr. Širka's stating that Gadamer engaged with Ricoeur's critique (p. 101), yet without elaborating on this – unlike the way he addresses Habermas' critique.

5. In his 4th chapter *Horizons of Human Understanding and Transcendence*, Mr. Širka does not draw a clear demarcation line between transcendence in Gadamer's sense, i.e. the limitedness of human knowledge, and how this concept has been developed further by thinkers such as N. Davey (pp. 156-159).

6. Contrarily to Mr. Širka's claim (p. 192, footnote 681), references to hermeneutics in Orthodox theology are older than Nikos Nissiotis' article written in 1965 and can be found as early as the international theological conference held in Athens in 1936 (cf. E. Antoniadis, B. Vellas).


7. There can be no doubt that Mr. Širka's threefold pattern *patristic hermeneutics – biblical hermeneutics – hermeneutical theology* (p. 178) is insightful and extremely seminal. It is yet important to stress that the second step seems to take for granted the first one, that is, the dominion of patristics, and seeks to combine it with biblical criticism, yet without saying how this should function in reality. Furthermore, it is highly questionable whether John Zizioulas and John Behr can be considered as voices of a *hermeneutical theology* (p. 195-197). Actually, Zizioulas understands his theological project as a kind of neo-patristic synthesis, whereas Behr is hardly interested in any genuine and fruitful debate with hermeneutics.

8. It is somewhat puzzling to read that "the period between the seventies of the 20th ct. and the late nineties is a period of silence in the hermeneutical discussion" (p. 192); for John Breck's book *The Power of the Word in the Worshipping Church* came out in 1986. Furthermore, it seems anachronistic to consider that Breck, in his understanding of

typology, was under the influence of Frances Young (p. 242), since her book *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* appeared only in 1997.

9. In Mr. Širka's opus both John Breck and Theodore Stylianopoulos are dealt with as examples of the move beyond neo-patristic synthesis (p. 226). Yet the question is whether they are not better understood from the perspective of a neo-patristic synthesis taking the Bible as a starting point. In fact, both scholars spill much ink to marry a number of patristic interpretative tools (Breck's typology for instance) with historical criticism. In addition, Stylianopoulos, following in Florovsky's footsteps, even coins the term *Biblical synthesis*. In essence, both are extremely indebted to Florovsky's pattern.

10. Unlike Mr. Širka's claim (p. 210), John Romanides has never sought to oppose Greek Orthodoxy and Latin Christianity. In Romanides' eyes, there existed a Latin Christianity whose "Roman" character has been distorted by the Franks (cf. p. 213).



Assaad Elias Kattan