
MYRRHA LOT-BORODINE

THE FIRST FEMALE ORTHODOX THEOLOGIAN

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(Received 4 August 2019, revised 12 March 2020)

Abstract

The article is dedicated to Myrrha Lot-Borodine who is considered to be the first female Orthodox theologian. Her pioneer studies in patristics, especially that concerning deification and Nicolas Cabasilas, initiated researches in this field in milieu of Catholic French thinkers. I also discuss the contribution of Lot-Borodine into the ecumenical movement of the 20th century. Eventually, I pay attention to her attitude towards Russian religious philosophy.

Keywords: patristics, Orthodox tradition, mystics, deification

1. Introduction

Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882-1957) is considered to be the first female Orthodox theologian. She was born in St. Petersburg and graduated from the Sorbonne in 1909 before spending the rest of her life in France as the wife of the eminent professor of history, Ferdinand Lot (1866-1952). In view of her excellent theological studies, such as *La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des pères grecs* (1932-1933, published posthumously in 1970 [1]) and *Nicolas Cabasilas: un maître de la spiritualité byzantine au XIV^e siècle* (published posthumously in 1958 [2]) along many others, she deserves to be treated as one of the most prominent representatives of Neo-patristic synthesis. In this article I will present the contribution of Lot-Borodine into the Neopatristics, as well as into ecumenical movement. I will argue that Lot-Borodine, in view of her profound studies in theosis and Nicolas Cabasilas, could be considered as the first female Orthodox theologian.

2. The renovation of patristic thought

Lot-Borodine was Russian Orthodox, but she felt herself comfortable in a Western cultural environment, naturally combining studies of the Greek and Byzantine Church Fathers and the figures of medieval French literature. Due to her highly versatile education and the breadth of her views, Lot-Borodine

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contributed to the awakening and deepening of interest in Eastern Christianity in Europe. Her efforts in the renewal of patristic thought were appreciated by reputable experts in this field such as Vladimir Lossky, Fr. Paul Evdokimov and the ‘father’ of the Neo-patristic synthesis, George Florovsky. The authority of Lot-Borodine was also widely recognised by prominent Catholic theologians, such as Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Valentin Breton, who considered the legacy of Lot-Borodine as related to the Franciscan tradition, and Jean Daniélou, who was her friend from the 1930s and who referred to her works in his famous book *Platonisme et théologie mystique* [3].

It is said that Lot-Borodine returned to Orthodox theology as a result of the influence of George Florovsky, after he delivered a paper at a Berdyaev colloquium entitled ‘The Mystical Tradition of Eastern Christianity’, in which he accentuated the liturgical character of the Orthodox Church [4]. Yet a more detailed analysis of her life and activity shows us that Lot-Borodine’s interest in Christianity, especially in patristic thought, began much earlier. For example, Lot-Borodine, together with Vladimir Lossky attended E. Gilson’s courses at the *Institut Catholique* in 1928. She also studied at the beginning of the 20th century under the guidance of the Catholic theologians and the Church historians Jules Marie Lebreton and Paul Alphandéry. Lot-Borodine also consulted Fr. Vasily Krivoshein on questions connected with patristics, with who she corresponded in the 1930s expressing her joy about “this living connection with the Orthodox East” [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to G. Florovsky from 19.03.[1937]*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Library, Fr. Georges Florovsky Papers, Box 1, Container B, F. 4]. She shared with Krivoshein the following plans: “My dream is to write a whole book for French Catholics about *spiritualité orientale*, including the liturgical mysticism (I am already able to print a number of articles on the Orthodox liturgy in the journal ‘Revue des Sciences théologiques’) and mysticism from Evagrius to the Palamites, *inclusivement*” [5]. Lot-Borodine asked Fr. Florovsky, during his trip to the First Congress of Orthodox Theology held in Athens in 1936, to give Krivoshein her articles on the gift of tears and baptism: “The reason is that one of the former students of Berdyaev, Vsevolod Krivoshein, now a monk on Athos, wrote (in Archivum Kondakovium) an essay about Palamas, in which he mentioned - quite surprisingly - my work on *theosis*. Hence, I would be pleased if also my last writings fall into his hands. I think that it will be easy for you to arrange it on the spot.” [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to G. Florovsky from 20.11.[1936]*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Library, Fr. Georges Florovsky Papers, Box 1, Container B, F. 4]

Indeed, in 1932-1933 Lot-Borodine published in ‘Revue de l’histoire des religions’ a remarkable series of profound articles entitled ‘La doctrine de la déification dans l’Église grecque jusqu’au XI^e siècle’, which were subsequently published as a separate book [6]. These works won her the reputation of a formidable theologian [7]. Although, strictly speaking, Lot-Borodine did not initiate the research concerning deification, because the first studies are dated back to the 19th centuries [8], it was her work that became one of the most significant, if not one of the classics, in this regard. While it is generally

accepted that her research is not of a systematic character, it would nevertheless be more correct to say that Lot-Borodine's works in the field of patristics form complete, or, more precisely, spiral-shaped cycles dedicated to the problem of deification, the thought of Nicholas Cabasilas, as well as other issues of Eastern and Western Christian spirituality [9]. Lot-Borodine described the method of her investigation as concentric: in her three articles on theosis she periodically returned to the same aspects, but each time at a new level, in connection with which, although inevitable repetitions appear, the thought becomes more refined [1, p. 67].

During her work on her first article on deification, Lot-Borodine wrote to Florovsky: "I know, this is a blind undertaking, because I can, alas, work only on the base of the second-hand sources, but the French, both Catholics (except for the Jesuits from 'Orientalia Christiana'!) and the non-Christian teachings, are so ignorant of Orthodox thought and mystics, that even I can offer them something positive, especially since I have been reading and reflecting on this topic all year round and am surrounded by the research of the "specialists" in different languages. Yet, I do not have everything at hand and something remains generally under a question mark, despite a conscientious study of the sources. For this reason, I dare once again to address to your obliging erudition in order to clarify some points which are still doubtful for me." [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to G. Florovsky from 24.08.1931*, Princeton University Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Georges Florovsky Papers, Box 27, F. 30]

It soon turned out that the scope of the article was beyond the scope of a single publication. After a year and a half, Lot-Borodine reported: "I am correcting (...) the second article on *θέωσις*, and there will be a third one, it seems 50 pages. I even dream to publish them as a book!" [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to N. Berdyaev from 23.12.1932*, Russian State Archiv of Literature and Art, F. 1496, Op. 1, Ed. khr. 588]. The same idea can be found in a later letter addressed to Berdyaev: "I did not lose hope of publishing this thing someday, connecting it with other essays on Byzantine mysticism, but I still cannot get down to business" [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to N. Berdyaev from 7.11.1934*, Russian State Archiv of Literature and Art, F. 1496, Op. 1, Ed. khr. 588].

At the beginning of her work, Lot-Borodine noticed that the mysticism of the Christian West was different to that of the Christian East. According to her confession: "The main interest I have is a rapprochement with the Western medieval doctrine of contemplation as well as a high point of *divergence*" [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to G. Florovsky from 24.08.1931*]. Lot-Borodine wrote that Western anthropology emphasizes the "ontological nothingness" of creation, while "the Eastern Fathers, with their teaching about the virtual divinity of an intelligent icon of the Divine on the earth, raised a primordial man to an extreme limit and established theosis as a decisive chord of being, not just a temporal being" [10]. In her letter to Jacques Maritain, Lot-Borodine pointed out that the Greek patristics had emphasized the divine, or, more precisely, the divine-human nature of Christ (different from the Western medieval concept of the 'imitation of Christ'), and that this very fact had established a theoretical dogmatic basis

for ascetic practice [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to J. Maritain from 30.11.1932*, La Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg, Fonds Jacques et Raïssa Maritain, correspondances]. In her opinion, Byzantine anthropology is of theocentric, theandric and synergetic character [2, p. 7, 111, 148]. Theosis is a renovation of the entire empirical world, *terra nova*, but it cannot be treated as an ‘apocatastasis’ or universal salvation in the meaning of Origen [11]. Deification supposes a complete harmony of freedom and grace which consisted, according to Saint Maximus the Confessor, frequently cited by Lot-Borodine, ‘two wings’ that carry us toward perfect union with God [12] “It was here - Lot-Borodine wrote - that lay the main point of divergence of the East and West, especially the Protestant one. The Reformation, from Luther to Barth, inclusive, preaches about a fundamental damage of human nature and a complete separation of the original *imago Dei* from God. It is a source of dogma, of *Sola fide*.” [13]

The doctrine of deification was not developed in the Western tradition, since it was based on the East Christian distinction between divine essence and uncreated energy which was rejected by Latin thinkers. In this connection Lot-Borodine, as well as Vladimir Lossky, noticed that among the medieval Western philosophers only Meister Eckhart was “a distant disciple of the Areopagite” [14]. However, for this very reason he was unjustly and erroneously accused of pantheism. “From the twentieth-century, only the work of Jules Gross and Myrrha Lot-Borodine stands out as attempting serious summary of the development of this tradition, and neither offers an extensive consideration of the terminologies in which this doctrine was expressed or a consideration of the ways in which the doctrine was integrated within broader theologies and polemical contexts.” [15] Lot-Borodine treated the concept of deification as a *via regis*, the royal way of Eastern Christianity. She tried to reveal the true nature of theosis and the entirety of mystical experience, but she did not neglect the significance of its bodily aspect or deny the so-called *visions imaginatives*, typical for the Western tradition. In her letter to Fr. Basil Krivoshein Lot-Borodine she shared the following reflections: “The ‘auxiliary techniques’ of the Palamites are the weakest point of the whole doctrine, because they bring together their contemplation with the non-Christian practice, first and foremost, Indian yoga. Unfortunately, the holding of the breath during contemplative prayer became the central point of the reciprocal knowledge of God in Russian spirituality, distorting its nature and cutting off all the threads connecting it with the *theologia mystica* of the first centuries.” [5, p. 495]

In her articles Lot-Borodine distinguished and analysed in detail three stages or ways of deification: (1) “the transfiguration of the human nature by the uncreated divine energies through the deifying action of the Holy Spirit”, (2) the continuation of this process in the sacramental life, and (3) “the ultimate expression of the process of divinization” [16] - a mystical union with Christ. Hence, deification for Lot-Borodine is the end of a purification of love [17]. She attached particular significance to the sacrament of the Eucharist, to which she dedicated two brilliant essays corresponding with the works of Fr. Nikolas

Afanasyev. As Lot-Borodine said, “our sacramental system is thoroughly charismatic, like a battery of divine energies, and it leads a person through the sacraments to *theosis*” [18]. Lot-Borodine “praises contemplative asceticism as the ‘royal way’ of deification, but admits that for many believers this may be too difficult. Therefore, the Church dispenses via the sacraments a deifying grace to all. She regards the strictly personal and the ritualistic way of theosis as two forms of mysticism, which are, however, united in their roots and harmoniously complementary.” [19]

In her last article on deification, Lot-Borodine emphasized the role of prayer which is “the pillar of asceticism, the *alpha* and *omega* of the militant and triumphal life” [1, p. 126] and noticed that there exist a lot of varieties and aspects of prayer practices. She drew special attention to the *Jesus Prayer* and briefly traced the history of invoking and praising the name of God in both the Byzantine East and the Latin traditions. The apophatic contemplation of God is the pinnacle of theology, *θεολογία*, but this is only possible due to God himself, from whom love proceeds and leads to Him [1, p. 142]. This distinguishes Christian mysticism from all other types of mystical experience, especially the so-called philosophical *amor Dei intellectualis*.

In 1970, Lot-Borodone’s articles on theosis (with minor amendments) together with two other later works (‘Teaching on Grace and Freedom in the Eastern-Greek Orthodoxy’, 1939 and ‘Beatitudes in Eastern Christianity’, published posthumously in 1959) were printed by the prestigious French publishing house ‘Cerf’ as part of the ‘Ecumenical Library’ series as a separate book entitled *La déification de l’homme selon la doctrine des pères grecs* [1]; the second edition appeared in 2011. The introduction was written by Fr. Jean Daniélou who admitted that in the works of Lot-Borodine the line between her personal experience and of the experience of the authors she referred to is erased, and this permits her to provide the reader with something more than just an erudite account [20]. As he noticed: “What was exceptional in the work of Myrrha Lot-Borodine was not simply her learned research, but the way she gave vivid expression to the mystical heart of the Byzantine tradition. Her work was nourished by the writings of the great Greek and Byzantine spiritual writers and theologians. One found here the echo of the Gregories and of Evagrius, of Maximus the Confessor and Pseudo-Dionysius, of Simeon the New Theologian and Nicholas Cabasilas. She mentioned these authors frequently, but not by means of citation. Her articles have a minimum of the apparatus of erudition. That makes them difficult to use. The boundaries between the experience of the author and that of her sources are difficult to trace.” [17, p. 95-96]

The main hero of the 1935 study by Lot-Borodine was the Byzantine mystic and theological writer Nicholas Cabasilas, to whom she dedicated several articles and the posthumous book *Nicholas Cabasilas: a Spiritual Byzantine Mentor of the 14th Century* [2]. She also wrote about the sacraments (especially the Eucharist), the Mother of God, the saints, beatitudes, martyrdom and other important aspects of the Christian dogmas in an extensive manner - expressing the Orthodox point of view and, at the same time, conducting a comparative

analysis of the various theological issues with the Western Christian tradition. She “preferred to return to the theology of Nicholas Cabasilas, as opposed to the ‘Old Testament spirituality, the only spirituality authorized by synodal Russia’” [21]. It is worth emphasizing that Lot-Borodine was the first researcher who translated and commented upon fragments of the *Mistagogy* of Saint Maximus the Confessor in a modern European language (namely, French), dedicated to the connection between the mystical and liturgical aspects, unity of knowledge and contemplation and theurgy. Saint Maximus - as recalled Lot-Borodine - wrote: “Man should become by grace what God is by nature” [18, p. 6].

Lot-Borodine was often invited to deliver papers on religious topics. In 1931, she wrote that she was working on the report devoted to contemplation in the Orthodox Church (‘La doctrine de la contemplation dans l’Église Orthodoxe’) for the Renan Society, and in 1948 she spoke to French Catholic youth about the patristic doctrine of deification [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to S. and T. Frank from 12.05.1948*, Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, S.L. Frank Papers, Box 2]. Lot-Borodine also participated in two meetings of the French Philosophical Society. In particular, she defended the right to a rational justification of the truths of faith, agreeing with the approach of Catholic philosophy, like Gabriel Marcel [22]. The Greek Fathers - as Lot-Borodine stressed - not only taught that the divine essence is totally incomprehensible, but also about the creation of man in the image and likeness of God which constitutes the foundation of human dignity and, moreover, his deification. Lot-Borodine took an active part in the ecumenical meetings held at the Orthodox Religious-Philosophical Academy in Paris on Montparnasse Boulevard, at Jacques Maritain’s, and those held in Berdyaev’s home [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to N. Berdyaev from 15.01.[1942]*, *Vestnik Russkogo studencheskogo khristianskogo dvizheniya*, F. 1496, Op. 1, Ed. khr. 588].

3. Ecumenical activity

For a long time, Lot-Borodine was far from the ideas of ecumenism, despite the fact that she had many Catholic friends. After participating in a conference organized by the Russian Society for the Rapprochement of the Anglican and Orthodox Churches held between the 28th of June and the 1st July 1937 in High Leigh in Hoddesdon (Hertfordshire), Lot-Borodine changed her position, which was publicly stated in her article printed in *Irénikon*: “The author of these lines considers it her duty to confess that, being alien to the problem of the rapprochement of the Churches, she unwillingly found herself this year at a meeting of the Anglicans and Orthodox in the vicinity of London. Previously, she had distrusted the ecumenical movement as it made her concerned about any possible encroachment on the gracious integrity of Orthodoxy. But these warnings and anxieties did not withstand the insuperable force of the reality she experienced.” [23]

Lot-Borodine also reported to Fr. Vasily Krivoshein, a monk from Athos: "I admit that I had hitherto treated the ecumenical movement quite negatively, for the reason that it calls upon the Orthodox consciousness to find compromises. However, confronted by the world's religious situation, my suspicious attitude towards 'English Protestantism' (in fact, I am talking *only* about Anglo-Catholics) has changed radically. First of all, I was struck by the depth of the individual prayer experience, that is, what is most weak in our Russian spirituality (of course, I mean the secular one). The best proof of this is the complete confusion that almost all Russians showed at this meeting (about 35 persons + several Romanians and one Greek per approximately 150 members of the Congress) when Fr. Talbot, the famous Benedictine preacher, suggested a 'retreat' - a daily prayer in silence. The young people had no idea what to do and only a few tried to practice the Jesus prayer which was not so easy for them. Indeed, the venerable tradition of 'spiritual work' has long been lost in even in the most advanced circles, and nobody teaches us about meditation and *oraison acuire*; alas, we cannot even read the Gospel." [5, p. 498-499]

Starting from this momentous congress, Lot-Borodine not only began to be interested in the issues of ecumenism, but also to study them from a theological point of view. In 1940 she informed Semen Frank: "Now I am trying to find out the main doctrinal (non-dogmatic) differences between the Catholic and the Orthodox thought, which I was asked by *Irenikon*, and, it seems to me, I have discovered the core of these *divergences théologiques fondamentales*" [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to S. Frank from 16-17.03.1940*, Archive of of the Library of The Alexander Solzhenitsyn Memorial House of the Russian Abroad, F. 4, Op. 4, Ed. khr. 5, p. 7]. Somewhat earlier, Lot-Borodine wrote to Frank: "The Orthodox East has a different idea, and, perhaps, a different mission. By its very being, it somehow denies psychology - the heritage of Augustine, who broke with the patristic tradition - and it lives in an ontologically timeless [universe], simultaneously in the distant *paradise* past and in the unknown future, in anticipation of future *glory*. It is the Church of apocalyptic aspirations, whose eschatology spiritually coincides with the *status ante peccatum*, in which man was already an icon of the Divine Logos and the entire created cosmos reflected the Proto-Image. In Orthodoxy, on the contrary, even the laity feels the inner mysterious necessity of the transformation of a rational creature and the whole empirical nature in general very keenly. The tragedy in the East is the opposite of the tragedy of the West which worries too much about this empirical matter - *Menschliches, allzu menschliches* - it relies on *underestimating* it as a vital earth element which leads to the forthcoming Harmony." [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to S. Frank from 16-17.03.1940*, p. 4-7]

Not accidentally Lot-Borodine repeatedly described the Latin and Greek Churches as sisters [2, p. 1]. She not only gave a sober, impartial assessment of various Christian denominations, but also carried out a comparative analysis of different aspects of the spiritual and cultural traditions of the East and the West and looked for points of contact between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. It is worth

noticing that Lot-Borodine preferred to use the notion ‘Greek-Eastern’ instead of ‘Orthodox’ in her works [19].

Lot-Borodine combined a European education and the rigor of reasoning with the Eastern Christian attitude of contemplation. In her own words, in her search for truth she was guided by intuition, which, however, was based on a solid foundation of positive data. Lot-Borodine defended the freedom of thought and the breadth of the Christian horizon, which is not limited to any visible borders. At the same time, she was faithful to the Orthodox Church. From this very perspective, Lot-Borodine analysed Russian religious philosophy, in which she found “so many eclectic and even completely non-Orthodox elements”, in particular, in the thought of Vladimir Soloviev. In this context she posed a rhetorical question: “Name at least three truly Orthodox thinkers of the 19th or 20th centuries” [24].

4. Conclusions

Lot-Borodine was a profound thinker: a gifted theologian and a penetrating, thoughtful philosopher - in the broadest sense of the word and, at the same time, in its strictest (the original ancient and patristic meaning of someone who loved Wisdom). That is why Fr. Jean Daniélou wrote of Lot-Borodine that her “fiery theological studies” were directed by the love of truth [25]. According to Fr. Vasilii Zenkovsky, Lot-Borodine discovered “both theological insight and a serious scientific approach to historical issues” so he even asked the Council of the Theological Institute of Saint Sergius (which, in the opinion of Lot-Borodine, “served a great service in emigration” [M. Lot-Borodine, *Letter to T. Frank from 26.03.1946*, Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, S.L. Frank Papers, Box 2]) “to give her the title of doctor of theology *honoris causa*, but encountered decisive resistance” [26] from his colleagues. As Zenkovsky commented, their prejudice toward Lot-Borodine had been mistaken because they simply did not know her studies. Meanwhile, Lot-Borodine “not only revealed the rich potential of the patristic concept but also presented her own theological view of deification as a mystical ideal and a contemplative practice” [19, p. 221].

The life and work of Lot-Borodine can be described by the very word by which she defined the hero of her writings, Nicholas Cabasilas: Christian humanism. She deeply loved man, created in the image and likeness of God, and emphasized that his main goal consists of deification.

Acknowledgement

This publication was made possible through the support of a grant ‘Philosophy in Neoplatonics: New Figures and New Interpretations’ from The National Science Centre of Poland (2018/31/B/HS1/01861).

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