

John Behr's patristic views – initial observation

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ἡ κατανόηση καὶ ἡ ἀντίληψη τοῦ John Behr περὶ τῆς Ἁγίας Γραφῆς μέσα ἀπὸ τὸ πρῖσμα τοῦ Πάθους κινεῖται μέσα στὸ πλαίσιο στὸ ὁποῖο βιώνεται ἡ χριστιανικὴ θεολογία, ἡ ὁποία βιωματικὰ ἀντικατοπτρίζεται στὴ συμμετοχὴ στὸ Σῶμα καὶ τὸ Αἷμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ. Ἡ ἀντίληψή του δέ, περὶ τῆς ἐν συνεχείᾳ Ἱερῶς Παραδόσεως βασιζέται στὴ σκέψη τῶν Ἁγίων Πατέρων τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, τῶν χρονολογικὰ τοποθετημένων πρὶν καὶ μετὰ ἀπὸ τὸν 4^ο αἰῶνα. Εἶναι ἀπαραίτητο νὰ ἀναθεωρήσουμε ὅλες τὶς προγενέστερες ἀντιλήψεις γιὰ τοὺς μεταγενέστερους Πατέρες καὶ τὸν θεολογικὸ τους προσανατολισμό, ὥστε νὰ ἐρευνήσουμε τοὺς Πατέρες τῶν πρώτων αἰώνων στὴν πιὸ γνήσια ἔκφρασή τους, καὶ ὄχι μόνον νὰ ἀναζητοῦμε στοιχεῖα μὲ τὰ ὁποῖα θὰ μπορούσαμε νὰ στηρίξουμε κάποιες κατὰ πολὺ ὕστερες θεολογικὲς Ἀλήθειες, διότι τὰ συμπεράσματα ποὺ ἐξάγουμε χωρὶς ἐπιχειρήματα εἶναι κατ' αὐτὸν τὸν τρόπο ἰδιαιτέρως προβληματικά. Ἐφ' ὅσον μελετοῦμε τὰ ἔργα τῶν Πατέρων ἔτσι ὅπως ἀκριβῶς εἶναι γραμμένα καὶ τὰ ἀντιληφθοῦμε στὸ φῶς τοῦ δεδομένου χρονικοῦ πλαισίου μέσα στὸ ὁποῖο δημιουργήθηκαν, τότε μπροστὰ μας θὰ ἀναδυθεῖ ἕνας αὐτόπτης καὶ παραστατικὸς μάρτυρας ἐκείνης τῆς ἐποχῆς, ὁ ὁποῖος θὰ μαρτυρεῖ περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὡς τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠμέγα πάντων τῶν πραγμάτων. Ὁ Behr τονίζει ὅτι, ἔτσι καὶ μόνον ἔτσι, ἐὰν δηλαδὴ φρονοῦμε ὅπως καὶ οἱ Ἅγιοι Πατέρες, μπορούμε καὶ ἐμεῖς νὰ προσφέρουμε στὴ σύγχρονη ἐκκοσμικευμένη κοινωνία μία γνήσια ἀπολογία τῆς πίστεώς μας. Αὐτὸ ὁ Behr προτείνει στοὺς θεολόγους τῆς μοντέρνας καὶ μεταμοντέρνας ἐποχῆς.

Introduction – 1.1. Patristics is the study of the early Christian writers, Church Fathers that continued the Tradition. According to Alister McGrath,

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several major areas of theology can be seen to have developed during the period of the Church Fathers: the New Testament Canon, the Tradition, the Creeds, in which are developed the doctrine of the Trinity, Christology, the doctrine of the Church, and the doctrine of Divine grace.¹ After the period of the “neo-Patristic” movement, which is based on a “return to the Fathers,”² Patristics became a more important discipline of theology and, also, became an integral part of Dogmatic. John Behr³ is the Dean of St. Vladimir’s Seminary and Professor of Patristics, teaching courses in Patristics, Dogmatics and Scriptural exegesis at the Seminary, and also at Fordham University, where he is the Distinguished Lecturer in Patristics.⁴ As can be seen, in his works, John Behr has sublimated Patristics, Dogmatics and Bible study.

1.2. John Behr completed first degree in Philosophy in London in 1987, after which he spent a year studying in Greece. He completed his M. Phil. in *Eastern Christian Studies* at Oxford University, under Bishop Kallistos (Ware), who subsequently supervised his doctoral work, which was examined by Fr. Andrew Louth and Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury.⁵ Behr studied the social, anthropological and sociological approach to early Christian asceticism, associated with Michel Foucault and Peter Brown.⁶ While working on his doctorate, John Behr was invited to be a Visiting Lecturer at St. Vladimir’s Seminary in 1993, where he has been a permanent faculty member since

1. McGrath, A. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1998, 28-36.

2. Numerous theologians have pointed out that the “Neo-Patristic Synthesis” propagated by Fr. Georges Florovsky (1893-1979) and his contemporaries constituted the overriding intellectual paradigm of Orthodox theology in the 20th century. Cf. Kalaitzidis P., “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology”, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54, 1, 2010, 7.

3. Father John hails from England, though his family background is Russian and German – and clerical on both sides. From the Russian side, his great-grandfather was sent to London by Metropolitan Evlogy to serve there as a priest in 1926; his father was also a priest, ordained by Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom), as are his brother (at St. Paul’s Monastery on Mt. Athos) and his brother-in-law (Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Terryville, CT). His maternal grandparents met at Karl Barth’s graduate seminar in Basel, and served in the Lutheran Church in Germany, where his grandfather was a Lutheran pastor. <http://www.svots.edu/profile/very-rev-dr-john-behr/16.11.2015>.

4. <http://www.svots.edu/profile/very-rev-dr-john-behr/16.11.2015>.

5. <http://www.svots.edu/profile/very-rev-dr-john-behr/16.11.2015>.

6. Behr, J. *The Way to Nicaea*, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, x.

1995. He sublimated in his mind and activity several influences:⁷ the Oxford school, Andrew Louth, Russian traditional theology, philosophical discourse, a new approach to the asceticism, along with criticism of one-sided historical explorations of the Church Fathers. His academic background was initially in philosophy, but he went on to study the formative period of Christian theology with Bishop Kallistos in Oxford.

His early work was on issues of asceticism and anthropology, focusing on two major Fathers from the second and beginning of the third century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons and Clement of Alexandria. John Behr began the publication of a series of books on the *Formation of Christian Theology*, as a patristic series. After the second century, he studied the third and the fourth century, subsequently synthesizing his studies in his book, *The Way to Nicaea*. He then continued his exploration of the fourth century in his book *The Nicene Faith*, in two volumes. He has also published a synthetic presentation of the theology of the early centuries. Behr explored the implications of scriptural grounding for traditional authority in his book *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (2006). His work constitutes a powerful voice in contemporary Orthodox theology in the world.⁸ While preparing another book, he completed a translation and wrote an introduction to the remaining texts of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. John Behr has just finished a new critical edition and translation of Origen's *On First Principles* for Oxford University Press,⁹ and has begun work

7. Educational Background: B.A., Thames Polytechnic; M.Phil., Oxford University; D.Phil., Oxford University; M.Th., St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary. <http://www.svots.edu/profile/very-rev-dr-john-behr/16.11.2015>.

8. Behr seeks to outline Christian theology as an encounter with Christ as presented in the scriptural narrative, for this is the mode in which the apostles reflected on the crucified and risen Christ. The task of Christian theology is to witness the Christian truth in the way that the first Christians did, through encounter with Christ. That is the main idea of Behr's scriptural exegesis. Cf. Behr J., *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006, 33.

9. After beginning a series of books on "The Formation of Christian Theology" (vol. 1: *The Way to Nicaea*; vol. 2: *The Nicene Faith*), he worked on the remaining texts of Diodore and Theodore of Mopsuestia (Oxford University Press) in preparation for the third volume of the Formation series, but found that he really needed to go back to Origen again before tackling the sixth-century Origenist controversy (hence the new edition/translation of Origen's *On First Principles*). However, he then, received an offer from Oxford to write a monograph on St. Irenaeus. Having done that, he went back to the beginnings of theology with the Gospel of John

on a new edition and translation of the complete works of St. Irenaeus of Lyons (*Against the Heresies, the Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching, and Fragments*) with Paul Saieg, for Oxford University Press.¹⁰ All of these works show John Behr as a very careful and original student of the theology and history of the Church,¹¹ introducing new ways of theological thinking.

Patristic views – 2.1. The Way to Nicea: Too often today, theology is treated as if it were a number of distinct disciplines, each having little to do with the other. In his foreword of Behr's *The Way to Nicaea*, Andrew Louth said that Orthodoxy has a problem with theology, and the reasons for this problem are mainly historical.¹² John Behr is a younger Orthodox theologian, who has transcended the relationship between Orthodoxy and critical theology. In what way? John Behr insists that Scripture and exegesis should be treated as something separate from Dogmatics and Systematic theology. And the categories of the latter (God, Trinity, Creation, Christology, Ecclesiology, etc.) too often govern our reading of the Fathers; think, for instance, how the debates of the fourth century are characterized as "Trinitarian," to be followed by the "Christological" debates of subsequent centuries. And, above all, Behr's conclusion is that patristic exegesis is treated as a separate topic from its dogmatic reflection, as if what we say about God can be separated from our reading of Scripture! Behr wants to change this, his guiding idea being that theology derives its meaning from the encounter with Christ through the Scriptures, and not

the Theologian. Another work of note is his *Becoming Human: Meditation on Christian Anthropology in Word and Image*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013.

10. <http://www.svots.edu/profile/very-rev-dr-john-behr/16.11.2015>.

11. Cf. Behr J., "Response to Ayres: The Legacies of Nicaea, East and West", *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2, The God of Nicaea: Disputed Questions in Patristic Trinitarianism, 2007, 150. When John Behr explored the usage of the term "God", and how Scripture speaks about Christ, tied in as they are with the relation between theology and economy, he criticized Ayres's work: that it operates at a level removed from a close analysis of the history of the controversy and the texts that we have remaining from that period. Ayres does not overly concern himself with the details of the controversy. For example, as John Behr points out, the outbreak of the conflict between Arius and Alexander is simply said to have occurred "in AD 318 (but maybe as late as 322)," with a footnote referencing Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret, but no mention is made of the scholarly debate regarding the date, nor the implications that either date might have for identifying the historical context of crucial documents and, thus, for understanding the development of the key players in the debate and the debate itself.

12. Behr, J. *The Way to Nicaea*, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001, ix.

through the Scriptures themselves.¹³ That idea was stressed in Behr's system of theology.

John Behr's patristic books emphasize that Orthodox theology is based upon the apostolic proclamation that Christ "died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, and that He was raised in accordance with the Scriptures" (1. *Cor* 15, 3-4). Thus, He begins His patristic exploration with the Scriptures and the Gospel. It is this approach to understanding the person of Christ, and the work of God that he accomplishes and completes in and through the Holy Spirit, that the Apostle "delivers" or "hands-down" (or better "traditions"), which we are called upon to continue ourselves: "Search the Scriptures for they speak of me" (Jn 5, 39). Behr's exploration of the Scriptures, in the light of the Passion, is the context in which Christian theology lives, nourished by the participation in the Body and Blood of Christ, which the Apostle also "traditions" (1. *Cor* 11, 23-26). The first book in John Behr's patristic series – *The Way to Nicaea* – published in 2001, begins with an account of the "Canon and Tradition of the Gospel according to the Scriptures", to establish the parameters and the dynamic of Christian theology, and then follows early Christian reflection, beginning with the Scriptural Christ and continuing through to the Council of Antioch. The subsequent chapters are devoted to the great figures of the early centuries – the Fathers and, occasionally, those deemed as heretical. Behr begins with the question Christ himself asks, "Who do you say I am?"¹⁴ According to Behr, it is crucial to understand the boundaries that identify Jesus Christ, the unique Jesus Christ – crucified on the Cross, buried, risen three days later, and contemplated through the texture of Scripture – the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets – who is revealed as the Son of God, the Logos. It is through the Word of God previously hidden in the Scripture, as preached by the Apostles, revealed by the Holy Spirit, that the invisible, incomprehensible Father is made visible and comprehensible by the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. This first of two volumes of patristic series is

13. Behr, J. *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006, 51.

14. Andrew Louth stresses that this starting point is very important because of the answer to this question involves the fact that the One who is Christ is the crucified and risen Christ; and that Christ is the Word of God. All that has radical consequences for the approach to theology. Cf. Behr, J. *The Way to Nicaea*, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001, xi.

primarily devoted to the examination of the chosen theologians and heretics: Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus of Rome, Origen and Paul of Samosata. Behr provides a short biographical sketch of each and then focuses on their works and the controversies they were engaged in. This is neither a comprehensive history of theology nor a compendium of Christian doctrine. Instead, Behr draws attention to the theological debates and reflections that led up to the First Council of Nicaea. Behr's conclusion in the first book of the patristic series is that it is important to study the heretics as well, lest we consciously avoid their erroneous statements but unconsciously follow their patterns of thought.

According to Behr, it is necessary to understand these earlier figures, before turning to the great Church Fathers of the fourth century and beyond. For, not only did they develop the theological reflection that formed the bedrock upon which the later Fathers worked, but, in a very real sense, we cannot even understand the later Fathers if we have not worked our way through the earlier figures. And in doing so, Behr warns that we must be very careful to "suspend," as it were, what we think we know from the later period. If we read the Fathers of the first centuries only to find anticipations of what we think the later Fathers wrote about, we will only find what we think that we already know (and so will not grow in our understanding), and will probably wind up misunderstanding both! For, we will not have read the earlier figures on their own terms, to understand how their thinking coheres, how it works and witnesses Christ; and, thus, we will not have read the later figures in terms of the questions which arose from the earlier centuries but will have more likely read them in terms that derive from the modern systematization of dogmatic theology. Conclusions without the arguments that lead to them are at best ambiguous.¹⁵ When we do

15. As we have said, John Behr criticized Ayers because he did much to deconstruct the oppositional model of Trinitarian theology, usually traced back to Theodore de Regnon, which dominated so much of twentieth century theological scholarship, both historical and systematic. Following Michel Barnes, as well as in the work they did together, Ayres said that in Trinitarian theology the "Cappadocian East" stands in opposition to the "Augustinian West"; "posits that distinct analogies illustrate these differences (the "social" and the "psychological" respectively); and then focuses on the writings which deploy these analogies as the supposedly "classic texts" of their respective traditions, thereby establishing the thesis as a proven fact." Cf. Behr J., "Response to Ayres: The Legacies of Nicaea, East and West", *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2, *The God of Nicaea: Disputed Questions in Patristic Trinitarianism*, 2007, 145-146.

read them on their own terms we will, however, be struck by the tremendously vivid and immediate witness that they give regarding the crucified and risen Lord, the *Alpha and Omega* of all things.

By reading through the Fathers in this way, it is John Behr's hope that we too will be prepared, not merely to repeat their thoughts, but to think as they did, so that we too, in this increasingly troubled world, can give a good *apologia* for our faith. These were the ideas of John Behr for theologians in modern and postmodern times.

Way of the Fathers – 2.2. The Nicene faith: The second book of John Behr's patristic series, released in 2004, dealt with the Formation of the Nicene Faith. Again, the first volume explored the theological reflection of great figures, such as St. Irenaeus of Lyons¹⁶ and Origen, Fathers from the first three centuries, the period of the first great struggles of the Church, especially against Marcion and the Gnostics, which resulted in a clear articulation of the basis and framework of the Christian tradition, following the crucified and risen Lord, the Son of God, understood and encountered through the opening of the Scriptures (what we now call the "Old Testament") and the breaking of the bread as his Body, enabling us to become his body, as Christians, sons adopted by the Son of God and by the power of the Spirit, calling upon his Father as our Father, as Abba. *The Nicene Faith* examines the theological reflections of the fourth century, beginning with the theological debates that led to the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea and ending with their resolution at the Council of Constantinople. The book is structured not only chronologically, but according to themes, examining of only certain theologians – Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. Making a similar approach as in *The Way to Nicaea*, this book is neither a complete collection of theological discourses nor does it have a sole focus, such as Trinitarian theology. The book traces the development of theological thought in the fourth century, of St. Athanasius and the Cappadocians expounding their vision, preparing the path for the Ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, providing the proper context in

16. In the book *The Mystery of Christ*, Behr frequently cites Irenaeus on his understanding of salvation history and the work of Christ, which Irenaeus calls "the work of God in refashioning the human being." This perfecting of the human being is a deeply embodied process that involves the "enclosure" of the "incorporeal" within bodily reality. Cf. Behr J., *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006, 167-168.

which their creeds could be correctly understood. The Nicene faith is, then, a special confession, revealing the power of God, responding to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, concerning the God whom they reveal as the Father. It is the transformation fashioned *in* and *by* Christ. When Christ dies as a human being, He demonstrates His divinity as God: He raises His own body. God's power is found in human weakness: the form of a servant transforms into the form of the Lord, revealing true divinity and equality in the Trinity. It is in the crucified one that glory is both received and revealed, the same glory which He shared with the Father from all eternity, by which there is no other. John Behr states in the book that this kind of God's revelation, which is the cornerstone of all Christian theology, through which God is made known, is located solely on the Cross. The One who is the Creator is the One who now renews. It is the Passion, the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God, illumined *by* and *through* the Cross.

Although this basis had been clarified, the controversies of the fourth century were at least as important: the promulgation of the Creed at the Council of Nicaea (325) and its reception by the Council of Constantinople (381), together with the work of the great Fathers of the fourth century, St Athanasius of Alexandria, and the three Cappadocians, Sts Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and Gregory of Nyssa – all this was and is decisive: for the Orthodox Church has been “Nicene” ever since.

Precisely because of the importance of the fourth century, John Behr insists that it is vital that we do all we can to hear the voices speaking to us from that era on their own terms. It is too easy to say that the fourth century was the period of the “Arian controversy,” in which “Trinitarian theology” was hammered out for the first time, and that this was then followed by the “Nestorian controversy” in which “Christology” was developed. As Behr points out, modern theologians have certainly become accustomed to dividing up history and dogmatic theology in this very manner.¹⁷ But this does not correspond to what

17. Writing about Lewis Ayres' work, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, John Behr emphasized that Ayres raised a number of issues important to the discipline of theology. The first is simply the difficulty of studying the past, especially the fourth century, one of the key periods in the formation of Christian theology. Behr said that reading the texts from fifteen hundred years ago was sufficiently challenging, but these texts were set in a very complex history of theological, social and imperial controversies and transitions. “Then there is the task of relating the study of

the Fathers of that period thought they were doing. It is sometimes said that conclusions without the arguments that led to them are at best ambiguous, that is, one needs to know the question or the problem that is being addressed, and the previous discussion about this, as well as to think through all of this, so that one can understand what the conclusion is, and is not, saying.

The controversies of the fourth century continued the debates from the third century, and they also continued into the fifth century and beyond. John Behr's concern here is not "Trinitarian theology" in the sense of how do we say that God is both one and three, a kind of divine arithmetic, but rather the proclamation that what we see in Christ – the crucified and risen Lord as proclaimed by the Apostles (the subject of the faith settled in the prior centuries) – is indeed truly what it is to be God, that He, the Son of God, is "consubstantial with the Father", "true God of true God", and that this is known in and through the Spirit, who, as the One who makes God known, is also fully divine.

John Behr says that this was simultaneously a debate about Scriptural exegesis: if the Scriptures speak of Christ, the question about how this is so needs to be addressed. He stresses that the most disputed text in the fourth century was Proverbs 8, 22: "The Lord created me, the beginning of his ways". How can Christ, as the Wisdom of God, say that He is "created"? Arius' answer was to say that this text means what it says: *Christ is created, but not as one of the creatures; he is god, but not as God himself – he is somewhere in between.* Athanasius, on the other hand, would argue that Christ says this "as a human", for to be created belongs to human beings; on the other hand, other things are said of Him in Scripture as God – yet the same Christ in each case. This exegetical debate continued through the fourth century and beyond, when Diodore

historical theology to modern systematic theology, knowing that simply retelling the history more thoroughly will not solve or resolve modern issues, for they have their own complicated genealogy. There is also the need to be aware of the involvement of different exegetical practices and presuppositions - then and now - in all of this. Finally, and most broadly or ecumenically, there are the implications that such work now has for dialogue between "Western" and "Eastern" Trinitarian theology, and the questionable usefulness of such categories. That Ayres has remained sensitive to these, and other, dimensions of difficulty, while also engaging with a substantial body of literature, numerous primary texts, and diverse secondary texts (if that is still a useful distinction) makes his work both challenging and significant." Cf. Behr, J. "Response to Ayres: The Legacies of Nicaea, East and West", *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2, The God of Nicaea: Disputed Questions in Patristic Trinitarianism, 2007, 145.

of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, teachers of Nestorius, developed the Nicene response – that some things in Scripture are said of Christ as human, and others of him as divine – implying two different entities in Christ; to which Chalcedon replied: no, there is only *one hypostasis* (one concrete being), *one prosopon* (one “face”): *we look to one and the same Christ to see both divinity and humanity, together, without confusion, change, division, or separation.*

This debate, which was stressed by John Behr, was at the same time both theological and exegetical. Also, on another level, this debate was about anthropology and incarnation. This is seen in the writings of St Athanasius that became classic texts for the later tradition, especially *On the Incarnation and The Life of St. Antony*, but equally as profoundly by the other great Fathers of the century. As Behr points out, St Athanasius’ exposition of the Incarnation is not, as we might expect today, a reflection on Christmas, on the birth of Jesus from Mary.¹⁸ It is, rather, an exposition of the rationality of the Cross, demonstrating that the One on the Cross is indeed the Word (*Logos*) of God, so that the Christian faith is not “irrational” (*alogos*). The One on the Cross is the one who has taken our body upon Himself, to conquer death by His death and through His body to make Himself known, so that, to the extent that we take up the faith of the Cross, we become His body, the instrument by which He works in this world, with ourselves becoming witnesses of His resurrection. The most important was the depicted image of St Antony in John Behr’s exploration of St. Athanasius’ writing: he did not flee from the world to the desert to take refuge and find peace, but rather to engage the enemy on his own territory, just as the Word became incarnate to fight the devil here; then, after his initial battles, secluding himself for twenty years in a deserted fortress, during which he so yielded to the Word of God that when he finally emerged he appeared as the instrument, the body, of the Word who, through St. Antony, brought peace to all those around him and colonized the desert.¹⁹

John Behr’s work was very hard in its basis, but his conclusions are very inspiring, because his studies contain many different dimensions of the theo-

18. John Behr notes how the Nativity is seen by both Orthodox iconography and Orthodox hymnography in the terms of the Passion. Cf. Behr, J. *The Way to Nicaea*, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, xi.

19. Behr, J. *The Nicene Faith*, Part One, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004, 253-259.

logical works of each of the great figures. Readers, especially theologians, should try to hear each of their voices as clearly as possible, to hear what they have to say in all its dimensions and interconnections, rather than reducing what they say to a few points that correspond to what we think we already know. If we do the latter, we will never hear these Fathers, let alone learn from them. John Behr recommends that we must approach their writings as an icon, allowing our vision to be shaped by the vision it contains. He urges each reader of these books to read through the primary texts that are discussed in the books, so that the reader can hear directly from the Fathers themselves.

We have to say that John Behr preserves the Neo-Patristic model of thinking, but makes it primarily scriptural. Thus, he defines Christianity itself in terms that are Christ-centric, that attempt to move beyond the distinction between Scripture and Tradition from the very outset. In Christian truth, the faith delivered to the saints once and for all is preserved in approaching the mystery of Christ, which St. Irenaeus encapsulates in terms of the mutuality of Scripture, Canon and Tradition, all bearing witness to Christ and the Gospel.²⁰ It is this orientation toward the crucified Lord that is primary for Behr, making his focus so “scriptural” that it in fact goes beyond Scripture itself and refers to the Truth contained within it, which is Christ. The narrative of Scripture and the salvation history that it elucidates is not history strictly speaking, since it is occasioned by the activity of the truth itself, the eternal Word that is the metaphysical first principle.²¹ In the final analysis, Behr’s approach signals a radical refounding of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis along explicitly scriptural lines, while at the same time fundamentally reorienting its methodology, making John Behr one of the most important theologians of the 21st century. In addition, as Andrew Louth emphasizes, Behr’s method is radical, but not conservative.²²

However, John Behr’s imperative does not end at that point: for, having thought through the faith with the Fathers, our vision shaped and our minds informed, we must then articulate the same faith for ourselves today, in our particular contexts with all the questions, many of them new, that we must now address. It is certain that the patristic volumes help to lay a solid foundation in

20. Behr J., *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006, 52.

21. *Ibid.*, 89.

22. Behr, J. *The Way to Nicaea*, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, xi.

theological knowledge, so that further work can also be accomplished. With his patristic views, as we have seen and demonstrated, John Behr inspires future theologians to follow him on his way!

Conclusion – 3.1. John Behr describes his theological approach as a *postmodern reappropriation of a premodern perspective*. In every book and article, he seeks to address the mythologized and historicized tendencies in modern theology. Behr explicitly rejects the notion that Scripture alone is authoritative or that Scripture is contained within the Tradition. For Behr, Scripture is instead the source of the encounter with Christ, which is itself the content of Christian truth. As Behr explains, “Scripture is...a compendium of the words and images with which we, as it were, articulate the mystery of Christ, the Christ proclaimed in accordance with the Scriptures.”²³ In that context, John Behr explains the person of Jesus Christ, because of which theology became Christ-centric. Finally, he stresses that history is not only an exposition of events, but also the activity of the Truth itself, the eternal Word.

Abstract: The article is about the patristic work of John Behr, one of the most important Orthodox theologians in the West, where the main ideas of his patristic books were introduced. His explorations have given birth to new ideas and new books, and his influence on the modern Orthodox theologians has been recognized by Oxford University Press, while his works on Irenaeus of Lyon, Origen, St. Athanasius, Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, etc. helped shape the modern theological mind. He has made a new approach to theology, not only Patristics or Dogmatics, but to theology in general. His idea is not merely to repeat the thoughts of the Fathers, but to think as they did, so that we too, in this increasingly troubled world, can give a good *apologia* for the Orthodox Faith. John Behr insists that it is vital that we do all we can to hear the voices of the Fathers speaking to us from their era, on their own terms. In that context, John Behr preserves the Neo-Patristic model of thinking, but makes it primarily scriptural. So, he defines Christianity itself in terms that are Christ-centric, which attempt to move beyond the distinction between Scripture and Tradition from the very outset.

Keywords: John Behr, Jesus Christ, Cross, Scripture, Gospel, Patristic

23. Behr J., *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006, 54-55.