

## A PRACTICE OF LOVE MYRRHA LOT-BORODINE (1882-1954) AND THE MODERN REVIVAL OF THE DOCTRINE OF DEIFICATION

HELEEN E. ZORGDRAGER\*

In recent years there has been an increasing interest, also by non-Orthodox scholars, in the matter of deification. The ecumenical potential of the Eastern doctrine has been rediscovered as a rich resource for research, dialogue and debate over the last twenty-five years.<sup>1</sup> The theme of *theosis* has become one of the most significant and fruitful subjects of Christian dialogue between Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants. Although male theologians generally dominate the scene, with only a few women taking part,<sup>2</sup> this picture seems

\* Dr. Heleen E. Zorgdrager (1959) is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Gender Studies at the Protestant Theological University, location Amsterdam, and lecturer in Ecumenical Theology at the Institute of Ecumenical Studies, Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv, Ukraine.

<sup>1</sup> Some significant publications are Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ. Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987); A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1999); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004); Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2004); Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature. The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> We could mention the Orthodox ecumenical theologian, the late Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907-2005), and the patristic scholars A.N. (Anna) Williams (see note 1), and E.F. (Nonna) Verna Harrison: 'Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 41 (1990), pp. 441-471; 'Gender, Generation, and Virginité in Cappadocian Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 47 (1996), pp. 38-68, and her latest publication *God's Many-Splendored Image. Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). Some works of Behr-Sigel in which she discusses theosis: 'Réflexions sur la doctrine de Grégoire Palamas. A propos d' *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas* par J. Meyendorff', *Contacts*, 12 (1960), pp. 118-124; *Alexandre Boukharev. Un théologien de l'Église orthodoxe russe en dialogue avec le monde*

to be changing. Recently, more and more women theologians from different confessional backgrounds, with their own, sometimes explicitly feminist or postmodernist ecumenical agendas, are engaging in the debates, at least on the level of academic research. They find in the tradition of *theosis* resources for a more integral spirituality, for a renewed appreciation of creation, and for an open-ended, apophatic anthropology.<sup>3</sup>

It is a fascinating fact that the first scholar who drew the attention of modern twentieth-century Western readers to deification as a central doctrine in the Eastern Orthodox tradition was a woman. Her name was Myrrha Lot-Borodine. In 1932-33 she published a series of articles in the *Revue de l'histoire des religions* on the doctrine of deification in the Greek Church until the 9<sup>th</sup> century. After her death, these essays were reprinted in *La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs* (1970).<sup>4</sup>

Lot-Borodine's articles on deification appeared prior to the more voluminous publication of the patristic scholar Jules Gross, *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les pères grecs: Contribution historique à la doctrine de la grâce* (1938).<sup>5</sup> Both authors deliberately set out to rehabilitate the patristic doctrine in (Western) European theology, for the theological climate was

modern (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1977); *The Place of the Heart. An Introduction to Orthodox Spirituality* (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1992), translated as *Le lieu du coeur. Initiation à la spiritualité de l'Église orthodoxe* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1989); with Kallistos Ware, Bishop of Diokleia, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Linda Woodhead, 'Apophatic Anthropology', in *God and Human Dignity*, eds. R. Kendall Soulen & Linda Woodhead (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 233-246; Chris Boesel & Catherine Keller (eds.), *Apophatic Bodies. Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Nonna Verna Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image. Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010); Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder. A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010); Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away. A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) (on *theosis*: pp. 169-186).

<sup>4</sup> Myrrha Lot-Borodine, 'La doctrine de la "déification" dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 1932-1933. Reprinted in: Myrrha Lot-Borodine, *La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*. Preface by Cardinal Jean Daniélou (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970; repr. 2011). I have chosen to write her name as Borodine (with e), as this is how she wrote it herself.

<sup>5</sup> Jules Gross, *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les Pères grecs: Contribution historique à la doctrine de la grâce*, (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1938). In the field of scientific research in Western Europe, before Lot-Borodine and Gross, only a brief general account of the doctrine of

rather hostile to the idea of deification. Of crucial influence for this negative view was the German liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack, who had characterized deification as a pagan and Hellenistic idea, incompatible with Christian theology.<sup>6</sup> This assumption was reinforced by the Protestant crisis theology of Karl Barth with its radical emphasis on the 'Otherness' of God. In such a theology the idea of human beings 'taking part in God' or even 'becoming God' seemed fairly blasphemous. As for Catholic theology in the French interwar situation, scholasticism dominated with its rational and abstract schemes. The works of the Greek Fathers, which would have given direct access to the traditions of deification, were not available in a French text edition until 1942.<sup>7</sup>

Under these difficult circumstances, Myrrha Lot-Borodine started to explore and articulate the meaning of deification for modern times. Who was this scholar who crossed the boundaries between medieval literature studies and patristic theology? What attracted her to the theme of deification, and how did she, from her particular cultural and social context, interpret Athanasius' famous formula: 'He became human that we might become divine'?<sup>8</sup>

In the current literature, Lot-Borodine is acknowledged as a trailblazer, but her theology has been virtually overlooked as a subject of research.<sup>9</sup> This

deification was presented in an article by V. Ermoni, published in 1897: 'La déification de l'homme chez les pères de l'église', *Revue du clergé français*, 11 (1897), pp. 509-519.

<sup>6</sup> A. von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1894-1898); ET *History of Dogma* III (London: Williams & Norgate, 1896-1899), pp. 121-130. Actually, the book of Jules Gross was meant as a response to Harnack's critique of deification as a 'Hellenization' of Christianity. See Kerry S. Robichaux and Paul A. Onica, 'Introduction to the English edition' of Jules Gross (1938), *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers* (A & C Press, 2002), pp. viii-xvii.

<sup>7</sup> In 1942, the first volume appeared of the famous bilingual collection of patristic texts, *Sources chrétiennes*, by Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, and Claude Mondésert.

<sup>8</sup> *De Incarnatione* 54.

<sup>9</sup> Her major works are only available in French; some articles appeared in Russian-language journals in France. A brief discussion of the way she opposes Eastern and Western theology is presented by Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 187-190, and in the margins of a broader discussion also by Jeffrey D. Finch, 'Neo-Palamism, Divinizing Grace, and the Breach between East and West', in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, in *Partakers*, eds. Christensen & Wittung, pp. 233-249. Brief surveys in: René Laurentin, *L'Esprit Saint, cet inconnu: découvrir son expérience et sa Personne* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997); Robichaux and Onica, 'Introduction', p. xiii. An embarrassing reference to her name has

article aims to disclose and expose her view of the doctrine of *theosis*, and to evaluate its particular contribution to the history of theology and spirituality. The structure of the article is as follows: I will first sketch her biography, and from there proceed with illuminating the major theme of her medieval studies, namely love. Subsequently, her essays on deification will be discussed in a twofold approach: I will describe the theological framework and foundation, and then present her view of deification as a practice of asceticism and contemplation. Finally, I will assess her theological position: first, within the wider field of twentieth-century Orthodox theology; second, in relation to different strands of the tradition of deifications; and third, from the perspective of theological gender studies.

#### LIFE AND WORK

Myrrha Borodine was born in St Petersburg in 1882. Her father Ivan Borodine was a renowned botanist and member of the Academy of Sciences. Her mother Anna Perets was a professional journalist and interpreter. Her mother's family was of Sephardic Jewish origins, but converted to Russian Orthodoxy. The Borodine family belonged to the cultural and intellectual elite of St Petersburg. Myrrha Borodine attended the University for Women 'Prince Obolensky', and went to Paris for further academic education. Inspired by a course of Joseph Bédier<sup>10</sup> on the subject 'La femme dans l'oeuvre de Chrétien de Troyes', she decided to dedicate her research to the courteous literature of the Middle Ages. In 1909 she married the historian Ferdinand Lot. For the next twenty years she would be working on studies about the King Arthur Cycle and the quest for the Holy Grail, and would become a leading scholar in French and Anglo-Saxon courteous literature. Her interest was as much spiritual as intellectual. In a memorial article, published in 2004,<sup>11</sup> her

been made by Pope John Paul II, in his Pastoral Letter 'Eastern Theology has enriched the whole Church' (August 11, 1996). Among the 'many studies worthy of mentioning' he recalls 'the study of the doctrine of "divinization" by the Orthodox scholar, Loth Borodine.' The Pope apparently was not aware of this scholar being female.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Bédier (1864–1938) was a French writer and historian of medieval France.

<sup>11</sup> Marianne Mahn-Lot, 'Ma mère, Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882-1954). Esquisse d'itinéraire spirituel', *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* (2004), pp. 745-754. This essay is the main resource for the biographical details in my article. It will be referred to with only the name of the author. See also Olivier Rousseau, 'In memoriam: Myrrha

daughter Marianne Mahn-Lot posits that the study of courteous love drove Myrrha Lot-Borodine in a straight line towards the contemplation of Christian mystery. This is best testified by her posthumous publication *De l'amour profane à l'amour sacré. Études de psychologie sentimentale au Moyen Ages*,<sup>12</sup> to which I will turn below.

From about 1920 onwards Myrrha Lot-Borodine turned more and more towards religion. She was searching for the essence of Christian faith beyond denominational borders. At the Sorbonne, the Thomistic philosopher Étienne Gilson<sup>13</sup> introduced her into the mysticism of St Bernard de Clairveaux. She also attended theological courses of Jules Lebreton<sup>14</sup> at the *Institut Catholique de Paris*. She participated in an interconfessional group with Jacques Maritain and his wife, and received Russian emigrants at her home in Fontenay-aux-Roses. Among them was the religious philosopher Nicolas Berdiaev, and through him she met with Georges Florovsky whom she heard first speaking about the theme of deification in the Eastern Church. The theme immediately grasped her and with the enthusiasm of a neophyte she began to read Eastern mystical theology. This scholarship resulted in her articles on *theosis* published in 1932/33. The essays earned her the reputation of a '*theologienne*', a word which she ironically put between quotation marks.<sup>15</sup>

In regard to her theological development, she confessed that modern theology with its historical criticism of Scripture annoyed her, while the classes of Étienne Gilson and P. Alphanféry,<sup>16</sup> which explored heterodox positions

Lot-Borodine (1882-1957)', *Irenikon* 30 (1957), pp. 340-345 (the year of death in the title is apparently a mistake). I shall be glad to receive any further information on the life and work of Myrrha Lot-Borodine.

<sup>12</sup> Myrrha Lot-Borodine, *De l'amour profane à l'amour sacré. Études de psychologie sentimentale au Moyen Age* [1948](Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1979).

<sup>13</sup> Etienne Gilson (1884-1978) revitalized Thomistic philosophy in its own dynamics, regarding it as a reaction against scholasticism, and was at the same time a great admirer of St Bernard of Clairveaux. Gilson was also the inspiring teacher of Vladimir Lossky.

<sup>14</sup> Jules Lebreton (1873-1956) was a French Jesuit who specialized in studies on the early Church.

<sup>15</sup> In an autobiographical text, quoted by Mahn-Lot, p. 748.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Alphanféry (1875-1932), professor of the History of Dogma at the Sorbonne, specialized in medieval church history and published on the crusades and on heterodox Latin theologians in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. P. Alphanféry, *Les idées morales*

within medieval theology, had inspired her. She commented: 'There I verified my instinctive mistrust which inspired me to all heresy'.<sup>17</sup> She reveals that at an early age she already felt attracted to the Gnosticism of Vladimir Soloviev, and later to the theological speculations of Fr Sergei Bulgakov, calling him 'le véritable génie de notre diaspora'.<sup>18</sup> She was critical on the institutional (Russian) Orthodox Church for having deformed the great Tradition and stained itself with an abhorrent nationalism.

Looking back on her 'spiritual wandering' and the question of unity in her works, she distinguishes three phases: the Romanesque literature as the passion of her youth, the mystic quest for the Grail as the search for the highest religious values, and, finally, the study of Greek-oriental spirituality (she never applies the word 'Orthodox' to spirituality).

In a far too modest way, she comments:

'Neither erudite, nor historical, neither merely philosophical nor merely theological, the work that bears my name is essentially the experience of a burning soul on a quest for Truth. What I consider as its essential quality is the intuition, however, an intuition supported by positive data and resting on solid foundations.'<sup>19</sup>

She never held an official position within the academy. But she received recognition from other patristic scholars, such as Jean Daniélou and Vladimir Lossky.

Besides deification, her theological writings were devoted to Nicolas Cabasilas,<sup>20</sup> to the theme of beatitude,<sup>21</sup> to St Bernard, to Simone Weil,<sup>22</sup> to

*chez les hétérodoxes latins au début du XIIIe siècle*, Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des hautes études, 16, fasc. 1 (Paris, 1903).

<sup>17</sup> Mahn-Lot, p. 748. All quotations from Myrrha Lot-Borodine are translated from French into English by the author of this article.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 748.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 747.

<sup>20</sup> *Un maître de la spiritualité au XIVe siècle: Nicolas Cabasilas* (Paris, 1958).

<sup>21</sup> 'La béatitude dans l'Orient chrétien', 1950, reprinted in the posthumous publication *La déification de l'homme*.

<sup>22</sup> In *Dieu Vivant* (1950). She responds critically to an article by Marcel Moré about the religious thought of Simone Weil. Lot-Borodine keeps aloof from the dualist position of Simone Weil, but she expresses her admiration for Weil's spiritual path going from human misery to God, and for Weil's view of compassion in which the power of Christ was at work.

Russian Christianity, and to questions of the Eucharist and ecumenism. From her rich correspondence we also know that she admired Thérèse de Lisieux and was interested in Buddhism.

Their letters to friends before the Second World War testify that Ferdinand and Myrrha Lot were clearly aware of the dangers of rising Nazism. The war struck the family with great personal losses. Their son-in-law, Boris Vildé, one of the founders of the French resistance, was executed by the Germans in 1942. The other son-in-law, Jean-Berthold Mahn, was killed on the battlefields in Italy in 1944.

Myrrha Lot-Borodine died in 1954 at her home in Fontenay-aux-Roses. Two religious sisters from the Orthodox monastery in Bussy-en-Othe, where she used to spend her summers, came to say the funeral prayers.

#### EROTIC LOVE HIDES THE SECRET OF SPIRITUAL LOVE

In the Romanesque literature Lot-Borodine explored the idea of love. She analyzed the troubled complexity in which worldly and sacred love are joined, as fraternal and rival powers. In the twelfth century aristocratic women were shaping the morals of courteous love. From the '*chambre des dames*', courteous life was being refined by the secret work of introspection. 'Beyond the Christian opposition Eve-Mary', and 'outside the eternal function of wife and mother, always venerated, never compensated',<sup>23</sup> the lady (*dame*) presented herself to the knight as the one who inspired his dreams, as an initiator. She became the one 'who cultivates the flowers of the good'.

The lyric cult of the lady not only revealed her eternal dignity, but her apparent immorality as well. Lot-Borodine points out that the reality of a noble woman was such that she had no right to choose before marriage; therefore she *took* it after being married. She gave herself the freedom to devote her heart to the man she chose. Within the oppressing framework of feudal love women tried to realize their higher conception of happiness, while adapting it to the conditions of the life in which they were held captured. By doing so they changed the nature of love; they recreated it.

| <sup>23</sup> *De l'amour profane*, p. 15.

Lot-Borodine illustrates this with the example of Lancelot of the Lake. He is the perfect lover, because he is the best knight in the world, and his highest virtue is that of the cult of the lady Geneviève ‘in whom all beauty and goodness resides’. However, this love for the unattainable lady – because she is King Arthur’s wife – cannot be upheld in such an extreme psychic intensity. The end of Lancelot is very symbolic: he dies as a hermit. All the carnal residues of his love for the lady must burn, in ascetic purification; they have to melt away in the mystic sunlight. His soul was ready, just waiting for the divine calling. The worldly love transforms itself into the vision of the intelligible world, to dissolve finally in the mystic beatitude of the divine love.<sup>24</sup>

Erotic love hides the secret of spiritual love. Human nature, fuelled by erotic love, shows its innate tendency towards the supernatural, the ‘divine touch’. In the communion with God, worldly love and sacred love become peacefully united as ‘fraternal powers’. In her understanding of this courteous poetry, Lot-Borodine’s intuition of deification was already at work.<sup>25</sup>

#### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DEIFICATION

We now turn to the essays on deification of 1932/33. The first essay<sup>26</sup> reflects on the theological foundations of deification, the second<sup>27</sup> on the ways of contemplation to achieve union with God, or on deification as a *practice*. Lot-Borodine approaches deification as a living phenomenon. Since deification is found both in the practice of asceticism and in the mystical experience, we have to adapt our method of analysis to it. The living subject requires an organic approach.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, concerning her method, typical for her approach is that she seeks to define the own shape and identity of Eastern theology by contrasting

<sup>24</sup> *De l'amour profane*, p. 29. Lot-Borodine adds that this marks the beginning of the cult of Our Lady (Notre Dame) as well. The unattainable lady made the knight suffer by her unjust or sometimes cruel behaviour. The only way out was to detach his view from the earthly queen and turn to the heavenly queen.

<sup>25</sup> This is the conclusion of Mahn-Lot, p. 747.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Fondements théologiques’, pp. 21-66.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Les voies de la contemplation-union et la théosis’, pp. 67-183.

<sup>28</sup> *La déification*, p. 67, note 1.

it to Western theology. Critics have expressed the opinion that Lot-Borodine tends to harden the opposition between the theology of the East and the West.<sup>29</sup>

Reflecting on the theological foundations of deification, she unfolds her thoughts on the knowledge of God, on theological anthropology, and on Christology.

In line with many Greek Fathers, Lot-Borodine insists on the apophatic nature of our knowledge of God. From Clement of Alexandria she borrows the expression of *théognosie apophatique*: At the heights of *gnosis* we only touch the periphery of God's essence.

What is quite remarkable in her doctrine of God is that she takes the thirteenth century position of Gregory of Palamas as the basis for the whole Eastern theological epistemology. She argues that the mainstream of Greek theology has always made the distinction between God's Essence and Energies.<sup>30</sup> Using different vocabularies, the Cappadocians Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, as well as Denys the Areopagite would have made a similar distinction between the unknowable nature of God, and the powers, rays, energies, or divine names, by which creatures are drawn to God and empowered to participate in the divine life. Greek theology, according to Lot-Borodine, is marked by a union between the uncreated and the created.

From this vision of the divine-human relationship Lot-Borodine reconstructs Eastern anthropology with *theosis* as its core piece. From Denys the Areopagite she learns that God grants to all beings the vision of God (*theoria*), participation in God (*koinonia*) and likeness to God (*homooiosis*). So God pulls the creatures to himself by desire and love, by the power of Eros, which is the mystery in human nature. The aim and fulfilment of creation is deification by grace.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Jean Daniélou makes this critical remark in his generally amicable 'Preface' to the book *La déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des pères grecs*. Andrew Louth discusses this aspect of her theology in *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* and Jeffrey D. Finch in 'Neo-Palamism, Divinizing Grace, and the Breach between East and West' (2007).

<sup>30</sup> 'Les Pères grecs, partant de l'idée de l'être, ont de tout temps distingué en Dieu l'essence et les forces ("énergies"), tantôt potentielles, tantôt actualisées ...' (*La déification*, p. 29).

<sup>31</sup> *La déification*, pp. 35-36.

The Greek Fathers were able to develop the doctrine of deification because they distinguished between the Essence and Energies of God. Deification presupposes a mutual permeation of the divine and human nature.<sup>32</sup> St Augustine merely acknowledged at the summit of spiritual life a beatific vision of the soul, but not a deification of the human being. In his doctrine of God he holds on to an ontological barrier between Creator and creature. Lot-Borodine comments that at this point the bridges between East and West were already broken down, long before the official schism.<sup>33</sup>

The basic assumption of Eastern anthropology is the creation of the human being in the image and likeness of God. The soul of Adam in paradise was naturally theomorphic. There was an intimate communication between the human and the divine.<sup>34</sup> Adam was 'a perfection in becoming', 'a created god' (Maximus Confessor). Lot-Borodine also quotes Gregory of Nyssa, who located the image of God in the *nous* as the manifestation of the Logos in the human being.

She emphasizes that the *nous* is not purely intellectual; it is the faculty for conceiving charismatic knowledge, and is more properly understood as 'intuition'. The *nous* as the mirror of God in the human being is the regulating device of all the forces of being, the sensible and intelligible. Knowledge and love are intimately joined, as both are generated by the Godlike *nous*. It was the sin of Adam that he gave way to *agnoia* (ignorance), which brought evil

<sup>32</sup> Lot-Borodine applies here, disconnected from Christology, the risky and disputable term 'consubstantiality': 'consubstantialité, donc compénétration, de la nature divine et de la nature humaine', (p. 40).

<sup>33</sup> *La déification*, p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> 'La doctrine de la grace et de la liberté', in *La déification de l'homme*, pp. 186-235. Lot-Borodine deplores: such a poverty in Augustinian anthropology, where there is no co-naturalness between the image and the model, but a collision of privileges. The Greeks discover an innate character of the divine image, embodied, like a living seed, in our humanity; the Latins see merely a superadded grace. (pp. 192-193.) About the Protestants she complains: if the human being is truly a pneumatophore creature in the beginning, like the Church Fathers assumed, and carrying in the clay the sign of adoption, how could this human being entirely change, diminishing to the point where the divine image disappears without leaving any trace? From Luther to Barth, not one of the Reformers has answered to this anguishing interrogation. Karl Barth has declared God heterogeneous to the fallen man; the bridges between the divine and human have been broken down. This raises the question: through which channel does the holy Word arrive at a soul which is hermetically closed, how does the soul hear the appeal, and through which organ does it receive the Revelation? (p. 197)

into the world. The likeness of God has to be restored. Christ communicates to us the deifying grace through the Spirit.

Lot-Borodine stresses the fact that deification is not a uniform model. Deification works out for every person in an individual manner, conditioned by his/her grade of perfection and particular nature.<sup>35</sup> She also discusses the question of gender-identities and deification.<sup>36</sup> Will there be a duality of male/female in the transfigured, deified state? She follows Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and other Church Fathers in the vision of the first Adam as an ideal androgynous being, a prefiguration of the last, eschatological Adam. The destiny of human life is integral humanity, which transcends any temporary difference (male/female is considered to be such a temporary difference). Full humanity will be completed in the spiritualization of the whole creation. The matter of the body is not left behind; the material body will be permeated by the Spirit. She quotes with approval Maximus: 'becoming wholly God by grace, in soul and body.'

Now we move on to Christology. Jesus Christ as the *theos anthropos*, the new Adam, succeeded where the first Adam failed. He restored human nature and leads humanity to eternal life. It is our destiny to take part in the glory of Christ, because in his person there was a true union of the divine Logos with human nature. Our flesh will be sanctified in the communion with his flesh.

Lot-Borodine holds the view that the *incarnation* was already a salvation. She assigns a significant role to the Godmother. In the womb of mother Mary human nature was restored in its integrity. She speaks, referring to Irenaeus, of the 'parallelism of the two Eves'. (56) The second Eve, the Godmother, helped to restore human nature. Not by being sexless, but by carrying the Son in his integral human nature in her womb. They reciprocally (!) elevate the other. Through this intimate communion with the incarnated God, the human nature of Mary embodied the seed of immortality.

Traditionally, in Alexandrian tradition, *kenosis* and *theosis* mirror each other. Lot-Borodine speaks of *kenosis* in the following sense:<sup>37</sup> Christ descended into the abysses of desolation, but even in the darkness of the

<sup>35</sup> *La déification*, p. 36.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46, n. 29.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

deepest abyss, on Golgotha, the lights of divine presence can be seen. Kenosis is never absolute. Greek theology emphasizes the triumphant Christ, not the suffering Christ. The humanity of Christ is so completely saturated with the divine nature that the idea of the Kingdom of God never leaves Christ, and never should leave the Christian who wants to follow him. Serenity, holy indifference, should be the inner attitude.

Following Maximus Confessor, Lot-Borodine takes the expression of 'spiritual flesh' literally. Experiences of levitation of the body and illumination of the body belong to the so-called 'physical charismas'. The spiritualized body of the saint has an imperishable quality. She connects this with a particular view of Jesus' death. The body of Christ has not been submitted to concrete death (*athanasie*). Christ's life has only been postponed, not discarded. The mystical ascetics imitate his divine model, believing that, just as sin has destroyed the body, *catharsis* will preserve the body against corruption. The purified spirit will transfigure the flesh, making the deceased body of the saint into a gift of miracles.<sup>38</sup>

#### THE PRACTICE OF ASCETICISM

In a more psychological analysis, part of her 'organic' approach, Lot-Borodine examines deification as a practice and an experience. Here we will examine her thoughts on the passions, on sin and synergism in salvation, on *eros* and *agape*, and on the reality of deification.

According to the Church Fathers, the path of asceticism consists of: mortification, purification, illumination, transformative unity, and participation in God or *theosis*. Ultimately, we participate through loving contemplation in the Energies, not in the Essence of God.

On the path towards deification the Christian has to cope with the passions.<sup>39</sup> Passions are overly strong reactions to the influences of things around us. They are movements of the soul against nature.<sup>40</sup> Human beings are

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-66, n. 52.

<sup>39</sup> Lot-Borodine follows Clement of Alexandria, who presents in *Stromateis* the first theory of the method of deification.

<sup>40</sup> *La déification*, p. 73.

supposed to mirror the imperturbable nature of God. They have to train their higher capacities, and to cultivate virtue and reason. The ideal is *apatheia* (serenity). Although Clement of Alexandria sometimes dreamed about the eradication of the passions, Lot-Borodine prefers to speak of the proper moderation of the passions.<sup>41</sup> She calls this a kind of ‘sublimation’, directing the passions towards higher goals. Again, nothing of the living person should be sacrificed in the unification with the living God. The goal is not to get rid of the body, but to set the body free to become a ‘cither of God’.

What is striking in Lot-Borodine’s theology is her emphatic view of synergism in salvation.<sup>42</sup> In Eastern soteriology, she argues, human beings maintain a certain autonomy. The integrity of the free will (*librium arbitrium*) is the divine mark (image) in human beings. In the process of deification, the first initiative, Lot-Borodine poses, is to the human will, which is guided and nourished, but not activated by the divine power.<sup>43</sup>

Greek tradition holds that the origins of sin are more intellectual than physical. Gregory of Nyssa located it in the ‘erring of judgment’. When the *nous* has stopped controlling the faculties, the ideas get confused and disordered, and as a result the thoughts become passionate.<sup>44</sup> The healing process should therefore be directed towards the ‘intellectual’ faculties. Christian ascetics should purify the soul (*psyche*).

The first step is to discipline the will, by ascetic training. Against the Western tradition Lot-Borodine poses that here we can do without imputation of justifying grace. The grace of divine adoption is innate, embodied in human creatures, like a germ. This seed has been tragically covered by the sin of Adam, but wondrously rediscovered by the Incarnation. The healing, the eternal life, is within the reach of human beings, by the desire that is already operative.<sup>45</sup> The reservoir of sanctifying grace, though, is beyond human resources.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 71, n. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 96.

<sup>43</sup> She draws on the disciplinary practices of Eastern monks, and on Clement and Origen who defended the inviolable freedom of the human being, p. 91. She quotes Bulgakov too, who sees the Godmother as the perfect incarnation of the free will, p. 90, n. 23.

<sup>44</sup> Lot-Borodine uses the Freudian term ‘libido’ for this state of mind.

<sup>45</sup> *La déification*, p. 92.

Liberty is the walking stick of the pilgrim on the path towards deification.<sup>46</sup> She quotes Maximus Confessor: ‘the human being has two wings to reach heaven, liberty and, as its companion, grace’.<sup>47</sup>

From her studies of courteous poetry we have seen how the imagination of erotic love in its highest tension conceals the power of spiritual love. It makes one curious about how Lot-Borodine views the relation between *eros* and *agape* in the process of deification.

She discusses the topic in two places. The first is a critical review of the monastic model of love,<sup>48</sup> the second is a likewise critical review of the book *Eros und Caritas* of Heinrich Scholz, which appeared in 1929.<sup>49</sup> Scholz disconnected and opposed *eros* and *agape*.<sup>50</sup>

In the monastic model, love tends to become spiritual, disincarnated, emaciated, without a sense of tenderness because the monk does everything to protect himself from the temptations of the world of the senses. In traditional monastic life, the monks did not practice love towards God by social charity, except for some pious works, like caring for the sick and providing hospitality. Feelings of compassion had to be restrained. Lot-Borodine comments: ‘The first love, the Amor Dei, seemed to absorb, in its unique splendour, all the vital forces, all the inner powers and will-powers of the human being.’<sup>51</sup> The fraternal love of the monks looked like a very pale indoor plant in comparison to the wild flowers of Galilee and of the valley of Umbria where St Francis dwelled. Monastic virtues, in short, were ‘more angelic than apostolic.’

In Maximus Confessor she finds an alternative model. In the highest state of contemplation ‘holy tears’ can flow. They show the rehabilitation of the passions in a transfigured, yet embodied form. She speaks of ‘a sublimated sensibility’ in Maximus.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-124.

<sup>49</sup> Heinrich Scholz, *Eros und Caritas. Die platonische Liebe und die Liebe im Sinne des Christentums* (Halle, 1929).

<sup>50</sup> *La déification*, pp. 143-158.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

Lot-Borodine objects fiercely to the opposition of *eros* and *agape* proposed by Scholz, who holds that *eros* would be 'attracting', while *agape* would be 'self-giving'.<sup>52</sup> She argues that Eastern Christian spirituality presents a beautiful integration: All the passion of erotic energy is concentrated in the creative love that makes the human spirit God-like. How should we call this love? *Agape* or *eros*? Lot-Borodine couples them in the term *eros extatikos*<sup>53</sup> as the 'queen of the virtues', or *agapè-Eros* as the essence of the soul in its likeness to God.<sup>54</sup>

In the *eros extatikos* we experience a rapture of the *nous*; the *nous* turns into the pure heart.<sup>55</sup> All activities are suspended. To know and to love is: becoming God.

Lot-Borodine insists though that the nature of God remains different. The human being *participates* in God, in the erotic energy of the divine life. She loves the patristic image of the iron thrown into the fire; it glows like the fire itself, while its substance remains iron. This is the way our flesh will experience the mystery of the regenerating Spring.

For Lot-Borodine, the transfiguration of the flesh is a real thing. She affirms the position of Macarius and of Gregory of Palamas (*photismos*): we can truly see with our physical eyes the glory of God.<sup>56</sup> The human nature will be transfigured by the uncreated divine Energies. The mystical life is the highest expression of the process of divinization. We can achieve this by contemplative asceticism, as the '*via regia*' of deification; however, for many believers this may be too difficult. There is another, broader way: the Church dispenses in the sacraments the deifying grace to all. In the sacramental life

<sup>52</sup> For the discussion with Scholz, see pp. 143-144, n. 70. She argues that Eastern mystical theology compellingly shows how Greek philosophy and the Gospel have achieved an organic synthesis. Furthermore, Scholz misrepresents the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus; we see in *Timaeus* that God is not indifferent towards the world He has created, but rather good, and in *Symposion*, that Eros rises from a common source with the self-giving form of love.

<sup>53</sup> Self-transcending *eros*, cf. Denys the Areopagite.

<sup>54</sup> *La déification*, p. 146.

<sup>55</sup> 'those who are possessed by this love belong not to themselves, but to the objects of their longing', Andrew Louth quoting Denys the Areopagite (*Divine Names* 712A) in *The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition*, p. 175.

<sup>56</sup> She also finds support with Hildegard von Bingen, who received in her visions the splendid revelation of the divine Light. She calls Hildegard the 'great prophetess of the twelfth century'. p. 171, note 92.

of Baptism and Eucharist the spiritual energies of Christ's glorified humanity are communicated. Lot-Borodine views the strictly personal and the ritualistic as two forms of mysticism, which are united in their roots and harmoniously complementary. They are the two faces of the one pneumatophore (Spirit-enlightened) religion.<sup>57</sup>

Ultimately, not only the human being, but the entire cosmos will be glorified and God will be all in all.

'In this ideal of *theosis* (...) the desire of the creature, thinking and feeling in an earthly way, reveals itself: to live eternally in the Spirit, without losing its human appearance, without ever seeing the disappearance of the world which it has loved ....'<sup>58</sup>

## EVALUATION

In the run-up to the evaluation, we summarize the key elements of Lot-Borodine's vision of deification:

- It is the call of every creature to participate in the Energies of God.
- Grace cannot be separated from creation but inheres it and potentially leads it to union with God.<sup>59</sup>
- Deification is a process of synergism between the free will of the human being (the divine mark in creation) and the sanctifying grace of God.
- Deification aims at an integral humanity which transcends gender-identities.
- *Eros* and *agape*, the corporeal and spiritual aspects of human life, become perfectly integrated in the experience of participating in God.
- The strictly *personal* path towards deification through contemplation and ascetic practice is paramount; the ecclesial life is secondary in her thinking; her ecclesiology is rather underdeveloped.

<sup>57</sup> *La déification*, pp. 180-183.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Gösta Hallenston, 'Theosis in Recent Research. A Renewal of Interest and a Need for Clarity', in *Partakers*, eds. Christensen and Wittung, pp. 281-293. Eastern theology views creation from its very beginning as participation in God; there is a continual presence and action of grace and the Energies of God from the beginning to the end. Hallenston refers among others to Lot-Borodine as an important source (note 27).

I will conduct my evaluation in two parts: first, I will examine Lot-Borodine's theology within the wider field of twentieth-century Orthodox theology; second, I will look at the way she relates to particular traditions of *theosis*. Finally, I will formulate some insights into the gender-relevance of her work.

Within Orthodox theology in the twentieth century, scholars usually distinguish two schools or different strains; each conveys a different approach towards modernity and the Tradition.<sup>60</sup>

The first strain is called the 'Russian' school. Its representatives are the religious philosophers Khomiakov, Soloviev, and Bulgakov. They shared the conviction that, with respect for its patristic foundation, Orthodoxy must go 'beyond' the Fathers in order to respond to the challenges of modern times. Modern Orthodox theologians must break away from the Hellenistic philosophy in which the Fathers framed their thoughts, and find a new creative synthesis with Western philosophy.

The second approach, the *neopatristic* school, emphasizes the 'return to the Fathers', including the Hellenistic conceptual framework. This school holds that creative recovery of the patristic inheritance in view of the modern times ought to be the task of theology. Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky are prominent representatives of this school.

Both schools acknowledged that there was a difference between the living Tradition and human traditions, yet for the neo-patristic theologians the patristic Tradition remained the body and substance of all truth for the Church. For the Russian school, there was a limit even to Tradition. New things needed to be said, and new thoughts could come to the Church, also from secular culture.

<sup>60</sup> See Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology, Part Two* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987); Alexander Schmemmann, 'Roll of Honour', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* (Old Series), 2/1 (1952); 'Russian Theology: 1920-1972, An Introductory Survey', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 16/4 (1972); Paul Vallière, *Modern Russian Theology. Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000). See for an overview of the two schools and their varied names, Sarah Hinlicky Wilson's, 'Elisabeth Behr-Sigel. Feminist, Protestant, Orthodox? Part II: Which School of Orthodox Theology?', *Sobornost*, 32/2 (2010), pp. 37-56. Recently, the partition of modern Orthodox theology into two schools is fundamentally questioned by Paul Gavriluk in his lecture 'Vladimir Lossky's Reception of George Florovsky's Neopatristic Theology' at the conference 'A Celebration of Living Theology: Engaging with the Work of Andrew Louth' on 9-12 July 2012 at Durham University.

As for Lot-Borodine, she fits quite well into the picture of the Russian school. She frankly expressed that she felt attracted to the ‘Gnosticism’ of Soloviev and Bulgakov. She refers positively to the speculative thoughts of Bulgakov on the Godmother. Interestingly, she does not consider heresy to be a bad word. She believed that from heterodox sub-streams new truths about the Church and theology could be discovered. Her preference for subjugated mystical traditions, either in the early Church or in medieval times, is telling and rather rebellious. As her personal ‘touch’ of the Russian school-approach I consider the way she smoothly integrates psychological, Freudian terminology into her analysis of contemplative religious experience. On the other hand, in distinction from the Russian school, the social challenges of the modern era are quite absent in her works.<sup>61</sup> She certainly has an eye for the social dimension of *theosis* – as shown in her criticism of the monastic ideal of love, as well as in her reflections on sex/gender – yet she does not really elaborate it. Her approach is more person-oriented than aimed at a transformation of society. In line with this, she shows a minor interest in ecclesiological issues, for instance the role of the church in society. I explain her lack of interest in ecclesiology and her explicit preference of the individual, mystic path towards deification also from the fact that she, as a woman, was categorically excluded from bearing official responsibilities in the institution and hierarchy of the Church. This limitation of women’s ecclesial agency may have made the sacramental-ecclesial path of deification less relevant to her.

With regard to the traditions of *theosis*, Norman Russell in his seminal study of 2004 differentiates between nominal, analogical, ethical-philosophical, and realistic approaches of deification language.<sup>62</sup> The Early Fathers could use deification language in a *nominal* sense (‘god’ is merely a title of honour), or in an *analogical* sense (e.g. man is a god by grace as Christ is God by nature), but they could also apply it in stronger ways, either in an *ethical* sense (deification means attainment of likeness to God through ascetic and mystical endeavour; the model is that of *homoiosis* –

<sup>61</sup> This is what makes her different from other French-speaking twentieth-century theologians of the Russian school, like Paul Evdokimov, Lev Gillet, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, or Olivier Clément.

<sup>62</sup> Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 1-15.

likeness to God) or in a *realistic* sense (human beings are ontologically transformed by deification; they come to participate in God; the model is that of *methexis* – participation).

Within this matrix, I see that Lot-Borodine employs the ethical-philosophical and realistic approaches. The ethical-philosophical approach understands deification as ‘attainment of likeness to God through ascetical and mystical endeavour’.<sup>63</sup> Clement of Alexandria, Evagrius, Gregory of Nyssa, Denys the Areopagite, and Maximus Confessor are her guides for this ethical conception.<sup>64</sup>

For Denys and Maximus, in the sixth and seventh century, the ethical is already conjoined with the realistic approach.<sup>65</sup> Lot-Borodine joins these Fathers, as along with Gregory Palamas, in their utterly realistic understanding of *theosis*. Participation in God is literally having access to the uncreated Light: *Voir la lumière, c’est voir Dieu*.<sup>66</sup>

She seldom refers to Church Fathers like Athanasius or Cyril of Alexandria who favour a ‘high Christology’. She prefers the company of teachers of the Early Church with apparently more Gnostic or Platonic minds (Clement, Evagrius, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Macarius, Denys), and places them sometimes surprisingly side by side with medieval mystics like St Bernard, Tauler, and Hildegard of Bingen.

Above all, Maximus is her favourite and most frequently quoted resource. However, her reading is selective: it illuminates the spiritual, speculative, and ‘holistic’ aspects of Maximus, but leaves aside the role of the ecclesial-institutional context in his thought, as well as his clear emphasis on the divine initiative and agency in deification.

In the end, how shall we review the gender relevance of Lot-Borodine’s studies? Her theology rarely explicitly addresses the issue of gender; however, she apparently is aware of it. This is most obvious in her discussion of the dual

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 2 and 12ff.

<sup>64</sup> *La déification*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>65</sup> See the first formal definition of *theosis* by Denys the Areopagite: ‘theosis is the attainment of likeness to God and union with Him so far as possible’. Maximus Confessor offers the greatest elaboration and most profound articulation of the doctrine of *theosis*. He makes the transition to a more conceptual and dogmatic expression of deification. Russell, pp. 248-295.

<sup>66</sup> *La déification*, p. 169.

sexes and the deified state.<sup>67</sup> But there is more to say. From the background of her studies in courteous literature we saw how she addressed the theme of love from a women's perspective; the 'lady', she argued, as the social initiator of courteous love, played a pivotal role in fuelling the 'impossible love', leading to its transformation at an imaginary level from erotic love for a finite person into a spiritual and mystical love. We could discuss the exact role of women in this process, but for our interest now it is significant that Lot-Borodine discovers a connection between women's agency in courteous love relations and the erotic, embodied dimension of love in medieval mystical experience.

A similar intention to keep erotic love and love for God together impregnates her theology. The *eros extatikos* highlights the experience of fully participating in the Energies of God. Without overdoing it, I see her theological anthropology as driven by an intention to (re)value bodily, psychic, and subconscious affections, and to find a healthy integration of the sensuous and the spiritual, the corporeal and intellectual aspects of human life, and, in the end, of the human and the divine. This attempt to overcome dichotomous thinking is a common feature with later feminist theology. Moreover, her work at the intersections of different academic disciplines and confessional traditions (Orthodox and Catholic) contributes to the picture and strategy of women theologians who are re-appropriating Christian tradition on their own conditions by crossing established boundaries in order to find new meaning.

Myrrha Lot-Borodine was the pioneer of disclosing the rich tradition of deification to a Western culture suffering from processes of fragmentation, depersonalization, and compartmentalization. In a ravishing organic integration of psychology, theology, philosophy, and love of literature and poetry, she developed her own theological style in addressing the spiritual needs of her time. Even if we may question some 'troublesome' aspects of her theology, like the radical synergistic view on salvation or the denial of a real death of Jesus, we should keep in mind that these thoughts emerge from her deep and unfaltering belief in a Spirit-enlightened creation that can never break away from its benevolent Creator. Due to the persistent and original manner

| <sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 46, n. 29.

in which Myrrha Lot-Borodine spelled out this basic Christian vision, her voice and vision deserves it to be heard and received in the theological discourses of today.

### Abstract

The first scholar who introduced the Eastern doctrine of deification to a modern Western audience was Myrrha Lot-Borodine, in 1932/33. Born in Russia, she moved to France and became a specialist in medieval literature. The courteous poetry was a source of inspiration for her to discover the Christian mystical tradition and, subsequently, the treasures of patristic theology. This article presents the life and scholarly development of Lot-Borodine, reconstructs extensively her view of *theosis*, as becoming one with God in a contemplative movement of *eros/agape*, and discusses the deficient reception of her work. In the evaluation, Lot-Borodine's theology is rehabilitated within the context of modern Orthodox theology and situated in relation to the different traditions of *theosis*. Finally, some insights into the gender-relevance of her work are formulated.