

The Once and Future College: Rose Hill in Theory and Practice

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Orthodox Theological Society of America Consultation and Annual Meeting
Cenacle Retreat Center, Chicago, Illinois

12 June 2008

I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23).



I have been asked to speak to you about Rose Hill, a tiny and regrettably short-lived Orthodox great books college. In order to keep myself organized, I can do no better than to borrow from Plato, the author of the *Republic*, surely one of the greatest of all the great books, and a man from whom I borrowed much in laying the groundwork for the college.

The conversation Plato records in this book begins to take shape, as you may recall, when his master Socrates is asked to describe a perfectly just human being. Saying that it would be easier on the mental eyes to look first at something larger than a man, Socrates proposes to describe instead a just *polis* or state, where the functions and faculties of the individual person reveal themselves more clearly in different classes of

people, each having a distinct set of civic responsibilities.¹ My assignment is to tell you about a Christian college. But a college, like a state, may be regarded as a large human being, and a human being—according to Saint Paul (1 Thess. 5:23)—consists of three basic parts: a spirit, a soul, and a body. I propose that we consider the collegiate version of each of these in turn. I shall begin with the last, with the body of Rose Hill College, turning next to its soul, and saving its spirit for the final part of my talk.

The Body

The body of a college, like the body of a human being, is of course its most outward dimension—the part that takes up a certain amount of space in the world and lasts for a certain period of time.

Located about 160 miles east of Atlanta in the small but surprisingly cosmopolitan city of Aiken, South Carolina—nationally known for its fox hunting, polo, and other equestrian activities—the body of Rose Hill College was a five-acre, turn-of-the-twentieth century estate occupying an entire block in a beautifully wooded residential area near the city's downtown. The grounds included a newly renovated 32-room manor house, two additional cottages, an art studio, and a chapel, all set in the midst of immaculately groomed Victorian gardens. The manor house fulfilled a number of purposes. The upstairs functioned as the women's dormitory, while the downstairs included the college kitchen and dining room as well as a seminar room and small library. One arm of this body reached out to embrace three additional buildings, all within a five-minute walk from the central campus: a small house that served as the men's dormitory and another larger, two-building complex where administration and faculty offices, classrooms, and a recreation area were located.

To give you some sense of where this body fits on the time-line, I first visited Rose Hill in the early spring of 1992. At this point the estate was under the auspices of a conservative Anglican organization, the Episcopal Synod of America, and it was on the verge of opening as a retreat and conference center. I accepted an invitation to serve as the center's scholar-in-residence, and my family and I moved to Aiken later that summer, though I continued teaching during the academic year at the University of South Carolina

¹ *Republic*, 368d-369a.

in Columbia, where I have been a professor of theology and religious thought since 1980. My principal focus at Rose Hill was on planning and directing summer seminars for college and university students from around the country. These seminars were billed under such titles as “None Other Name: A Christian Perspective on the World’s Religions”, “The Christian Art of Self-Defense: Apologetics for the Beleaguered Believer”, “Discovering the Interior Life: The Practice and Experience of Prayer”, and “Retrieving the Sacred in Art and Literature”.

I also helped with arrangements for a number of guest speakers, including Father Thomas Hopko, then dean of St Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, who led a very successful weeklong conference for about 20 college and university professors in July of 1994. Father Hopko’s visit signaled an important turning point. The conference center was still technically Anglican, but my family and I, like several others associated with Rose Hill, had recently become Orthodox; a newly formed Antiochian mission had begun worshiping in the chapel; and the mission’s priest was becoming increasingly involved in the center’s activities. It was clear that any future developments would be in the direction of a more distinctly Orthodox identity.

Since my own undergraduate days, I have been keenly interested in what John Henry Newman called “the idea of a university”, and no doubt like anyone who has given serious thought to this subject, I had more than once contemplated what I would do if I were given the opportunity to design a college curriculum and implement a pedagogy. From the start I could see that my work at Rose Hill had afforded just such a chance, and soon after arriving in Aiken I began voicing support for the idea of trying to start a new college. Here, I proposed, we might endeavor to do full-time what we had been doing part-time in the summer seminars: provide young men and women with an education rich in both spiritual and intellectual nourishment—one in stark contrast to the “fast food” variety offered by most of our country’s institutions of higher learning, public and private alike. During Father Hopko’s visit, I participated in a brainstorming session with several of the visiting scholars. They were generally supportive of the idea and agreed it was an auspicious moment to attempt a transition from Anglican retreat center to Orthodox Christian college. Within a few weeks a mission statement had been drafted and an

advisory board assembled, headed by Metropolitan Philip Saliba of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese.

The next two years, leading up to the formal opening of the college, were a blur of activities, which included designing a curriculum, composing a catalogue, developing promotional materials, placing advertisements in selected journals and magazines, combing through College Board and other lists for the names and addresses of promising students, and of course hiring a faculty. We also consulted extensively with educators at other small liberal arts colleges we hoped to emulate and visited Orthodox and other churches around the country in order to make our plans known to as broad an audience as possible. In the midst of these and other preparations we managed to stage a major ecumenical conference in May of 1995.² Plenary speakers included J. I. Packer, Father Richard John Neuhaus, and Bishop (now Metropolitan) Kallistos Ware. Quite apart from its immense intrinsic value, we saw this event as an important key to drawing the attention of students, parents, and potential donors to our educational aspirations. At last things were in place, and with a faculty of five, Rose Hill College opened its doors on August 28, 1996 to an entering class of 17 adventurous freshmen, ten men and seven women, ranging in age from 16 to 26.

I shall speak below about the educational program and the Orthodox ethos of the College, but before concluding my comments on its physical dimension, I should draw the rest of the timeline, which I am afraid was quite short. Needless to say, funding is to the body of an educational enterprise what food and drink are to our own bodies. Without money a college dies, and this is what was to happen all too soon to Rose Hill. The financial resources our principal benefactors thought would materialize failed to do so, and by the spring of 1997, in only our second semester, it was evident that the college was in trouble, though it did manage to limp into a second year—with nine new students to balance nine who had left—before finally closing in the early spring of 1998.

I had been granted a year's leave of absence from the University of South Carolina to serve as Rose Hill's dean and to assist with the teaching of the inaugural class, but I was obliged to resume my duties at the University in the fall of 1997. I am

² The conference was organized in collaboration with *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*. For the conference proceedings, see *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics, and Orthodox in Dialogue*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

happy to say that all of the Rose Hill faculty were able to find gainful employment elsewhere: two of them, both former students of mine, are now college professors; one works with an environmental non-profit organization; and the other is a writer and commentator for National Public Radio. Among the students with whom I have kept in contact or been able to track, two are now Orthodox nuns; two are studying, or will soon begin studies, at St Vladimir's; two are attorneys; and yet another two, having first followed me to the University of South Carolina for the remainder of their undergraduate work, are in Ph.D. programs, one at Harvard and one at Notre Dame. I might add, on another happy note, that six Rose Hill students now compose three married couples! The estate itself soon reverted to private ownership and now operates as a bed and breakfast as well as serving as a venue for weddings, receptions, and meetings.³

The Soul

If the buildings of a college and its location in space and time are its body, then its soul is its educational program.

As mentioned already, I have been interested throughout much of my adult life in the nature and art of higher education. I have for many years been especially enamored of the great books model, where the curriculum consists entirely of classic texts, and of the Socratic or dialectical method of teaching, where the instructor's aim is not to dispense facts or express opinions but to ask questions, questions designed to lead his students to clearer thinking and a deeper understanding of principles. My undergraduate alma mater, Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, was not a great books college, but I had the rare blessing of studying there with a classics professor who was himself a living, breathing Socrates—a master of the western intellectual tradition, who used only primary texts in his classes and who seemed to know at least 50 moves in advance where we his often bewildered but always fascinated interlocutors would find ourselves when we had finally encountered the truth!⁴

³ Recent photographs of Rose Hill can be found at <http://www.rosehillestate.com>. Orthodox visitors to this website should be warned that the interior of the chapel has been dramatically altered—for the worse!—since the closing of the College.

⁴ The professor was the late John M. Crossett, and I am very happy to have this opportunity to discharge my debt of thanks to him. Another of his former students writes that Crossett “taught by a method as close

I therefore had a very clear picture as to the kind of education I hoped we could promote at Rose Hill. To give it substance, however, I spent considerable time examining the philosophies, politics, histories, and curricula of two other great books institutions: St John's College, a secular school with campuses in both Annapolis and Santa Fe, whose program of instruction, inaugurated in the early 1930s, has served as the model for a number of other similar ventures; and Thomas Aquinas College, a Roman Catholic institution in Santa Paula, California, which was established in 1971 and which itself borrowed rather freely from the St John's curriculum. A Rose Hill colleague and I visited both of these schools, sat in on classes, and talked with students, teachers, and administrators about their accomplishments and experiences. Out of this research came the Rose Hill College Catalogue, which I assembled during the summer and early fall of 1995. I shall try to summarize a few key features of our program as I described it there, but for a more complete picture of the soul of Rose Hill, I recommend consulting the Catalogue itself.⁵

First a few words about what is meant by "great books". A great book or a classic, as we understood these terms at Rose Hill, is any text that has had a defining impact on man's view of himself and his world: religiously, scientifically, politically, or artistically. This impact, let us add, may have been for better or worse. In other words, *great* books are not necessarily *good* books—books a traditional Christian might regard as spiritually nourishing or even "safe". Nonetheless they have so deeply and lastingly affected the world within and around us that we are obliged to understand them if we wish to make deep and lasting sense of that world. It was therefore determined from the start that the Rose Hill curriculum would not be limited to authors whose views could be easily accommodated within an Orthodox, or even generally Christian, frame of reference. As I point out in the Catalogue, many of the ideas that have brought us to our present moment

to Socratic dialectic as the English language allowed.... Although students may at first have been wary of [his] methods, those who eventually realized the effect of his teaching would not have traded Crossett's class for any other.... No method could compare with dialectic for forcing a student's mind to grasp and keep a true idea" (James A. Arieti, "John M. Crossett: A Memoir", *Hamartia: The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition: Essays in Honor of John M. Crossett* [New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983], 285).

⁵ The Rose Hill College Catalogue can be found on my website: <http://cutsinger.net/teaching/index.shtml>. See in particular the sections entitled "Rose Hill College" and "The Curriculum". In what follows, page numbers have been placed in parentheses after quotations from the Catalogue.

of history have been anything but pious and godly, and yet this does not mean they should be ignored. On the contrary,

the Christian who wishes to lead an effective life in this age must come to grips with those ideas, not simply in their effects, but at their roots, and this means that alongside of the Bible and the patristic tradition, and ancient writers like Plato, who have traditionally been called upon to help support the Christian worldview, he must also study the works of such figures as Descartes, Hume, and Kant, and Darwin, Marx, and Freud (8).

One of the marks of a great book is that it cannot be easily classified: in fact the greater the work the less susceptible it will be to placement in a single category. Great books theorists are nonetheless obliged in practice to bring some organizational pattern to their reading lists. At Rose Hill my plan was to follow the example of both St John's and Thomas Aquinas College by requiring that certain books be read for tutorials and others for seminars. Tutorials were intended for a focused and guided study of more demanding materials, where mastery of a particular system of symbols or specialized vocabulary was deemed essential. Texts to be studied in these settings were arranged under six headings: Language, Mathematics, Natural Science, Theology, Philosophy, and Religion. Seminars on the other hand were reserved for discussion of works that are less technically difficult and require a somewhat less exacting investigation, including various literary, political, and historical classics. I should note that the Rose Hill curriculum differed from that of the other great books schools in two ways: first, in the emphasis it placed, not surprisingly, on Orthodox authors, including the Cappadocians, Maximos the Confessor, Symeon the New Theologian, and Gregory Palamas; and second, in its incorporation of sacred texts from other religious traditions, including the *Upanishads*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and the *Koran*, as well as non-Christian spiritual classics, such as Dogen's *Shobo-Genzo*, Ibn al-Arabi's *Bezels of Wisdom*, and the *Zohar*.

One other distinctive feature of the program was the chronological arrangement of the curriculum. The list of books was laid out over the course of four years in such a way that students would be reading historically both forward and backward in any given semester—generally forward in the tutorials and backward in the seminars. In their freshman year, for example, while they were learning Greek in their Language tutorial and studying such ancient authors as Plato and Aristotle in Philosophy, Euclid and Nicomachus in Mathematics, Archimedes and Galen in Science, and Irenaeus and

Athanasius in Theology, our students were at the same time reading modern literature by Solzhenitsyn, Camus, Twain, Tolstoy, Melville, Dostoyevski, Thoreau, Goethe, and Austen. On the other hand, by the time they were seniors, the plan was to have them examining such modern authors as Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein in Philosophy, Lobachevski and Cantor in Mathematics, Maxwell and Einstein in Science, and Newman and Theophan the Recluse in Theology, whereas their seminar readings would include ancient literary classics by the likes of Aristophanes, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Homer.

My aim in formulating this admittedly idiosyncratic, and no doubt controversial, schedule was to help underscore the numerous differences between traditional and modern thought and culture by bringing representative texts from widely divided periods into a kind of collision with each other. Reading in one direction alone, from the past to the present, can create the illusion that worldviews are the result of blind historical fatalism, and it is easy for young people, even the best and brightest among them, to fall prey to what C. S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery”—that is, “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited”.⁶ This I was determined to avoid.

The second aspect of our collegiate soul was its pedagogy. If the great books curriculum was the matter of a Rose Hill education, the form of this education was Socratic *elenchos*—the dialectical method of teaching by questioning. To quote again from the Catalogue:

At Rose Hill, the role of the faculty is primarily to guide discussion. They do not teach the great books. They make it possible for the books themselves to do the teaching. Rather than serving as experts or specialists in particular subjects, with the responsibility of promulgating the fruits of their scholarly research, the Rose Hill faculty are tutors and Socratic interlocutors, whose task is to stimulate reflection and inquiry and to foster intellectual community and the fruitful exchange of ideas (9).

Unless one has experienced a class run on these principles, it is difficult if not impossible to understand its dynamics. I tell other professors who are interested in trying their hand at dialectic that what they must do is prepare a lecture on the assigned reading for the day

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1955), 207.

but then “swallow” it, converting its sentences from indicative to interrogative mood, so as then to enter their classroom with nothing but a series of questions in mind, the answers to which, supposing they are able to ask them all, may or may not prove to be the main ideas of their undelivered lecture.

The words “may or may not” are crucial here. Like Socrates himself, the practitioner of Socratic *elenchos* commits himself to following the argument wherever it leads.⁷ This means being sensitive to the shifting currents of a given dialogue and the needs and insights of individual students as well as to the actual content of the text at hand. Critics often suppose that the Socratic method is less rigorous than a more didactic and typically professorial style, but in fact its rigor is simply of another kind. In the serious cross-examination of a great book, the course of the argument is often unpredictable, and it is certainly less “linear” than that of the lecture hall. But the intellectual commitment required of both teacher and students, together with the continual vigilance, demand a preparation and in my experience yield a mental fitness not promoted by other forms of learning.

I distinguished above between two elements, the matter and the form of our educational program. Insofar as this program was the *soul* of the College, it might be more appropriate, however—and certainly more in keeping with the Eastern Christian tradition—to say instead that there were *three* distinct factors or forces at work. I have in mind the psychology we would find if we followed the example of the Fathers and looked for inspiration once again to Plato’s *Republic*.⁸ Using Platonic and patristic terminology, one could say that the rational element—the *logistikon*—in the soul of Rose Hill was the curriculum, the great books themselves, which provided a pattern or structure for study and reflection. The incensive or “spirited” aspect—Plato’s *thymos*—could be seen in the thrusts and counterthrusts of Socratic *elenchos*, as we endeavored to wield our questions in such a way as to overcome premature interpretations and unexamined assumptions. And the appetitive or passionate aspect of the soul—*epithymia* for Plato and the Fathers—came into play in our efforts to disperse a lustful desire for

⁷ “I certainly do not yet know myself, but we must go wherever the wind of the argument carries us” (*Republic*, 394d).

⁸ Book IV, 434d-441c.

mere information by arousing in its place a deeper longing for genuine wisdom, a longing too often suppressed, or only superficially satisfied, by the ingestion of lectures.

In remarks he prepared for the matriculation-day ceremonies, my colleague Vincent Rossi warned our new charges, “Knowledge is not a quantity that can be weighed or measured but a potentiality of being that must become a noetic act through ethical habit”.⁹ Much of the spirit as well as the soul of Rose Hill is captured in this powerfully succinct admonition. But here I would focus on the single word *act*, for intellectual *activity*—and of course the *activation* it presupposes—are without doubt the distinguishing marks of a genuinely Socratic education. To quote the poet and philosopher Coleridge, a good teacher’s aim should be

not to assist in storing the passive mind with the various sorts of knowledge most in request, as if the soul were a mere repository or banqueting-room, but to place it in such relations of circumstance as should gradually excite the germinal power that craves no knowledge but what it can take up into itself, what it can appropriate, and re-produce in fruits of its own.¹⁰

The dialectician’s job is clear. He must continually challenge his interlocutors, provoking them in every way possible to move from a state of passive acquiescence to one of active engagement. But this he can do, fallen human nature being what it is, only if he works by attraction and not compulsion alone—only if he succeeds in conveying something of the delight his students may expect to experience when, by virtue of their own burgeoning powers, they have broken through the dark underbrush of a difficult argument and re-emerged into sunlight, *seeing* not just being *told* what is so.

This was the ultimate goal of our educational program. But I need to be careful lest I end up painting too rosy a picture of the Rose Hill classroom. No teacher, and certainly no Socratic teacher, can expect every class to go well: so much depends on so many imponderables—including how well his interlocutors might have slept the night before!—and I would be guilty of grossly misleading you if I failed to admit that our

⁹ Vincent Rossi, “The Three Principles of Rose Hill Pedagogy in the Light of St Isaac the Syrian’s Three Degrees of Knowledge” (unpublished lecture delivered at Rose Hill on 14 September 1996). I had said in the Catalogue that “the Rose Hill program is liberal, it is classical, and it is Orthodox” (3). Rossi connects these three dimensions with what St Isaac called knowledge of works, knowledge of faith, and knowledge beyond knowledge (see especially Homilies 52 and 53).

¹⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (Princeton: Princeton University Press), Vol. I, 473.

short history was marked by its share of frustrations and disappointments. I do not believe, however, that the great books curriculum or the dialectical pedagogy were themselves the cause of these disappointments. Of course, you need to take my assessment with a few grains of salt: no parent wishes to admit his own child may be the problem! But based on the evident success of St John's and Thomas Aquinas College—colleges whose experiences now span several decades—I am confident that a Socratic approach to classic texts can work, and indeed work very well.

In fact I remain convinced that this is the ideal form of education for an Orthodox college, much more so than for its secular or Catholic counterparts—or rather that it *would* be ideal if everyone, students and faculty alike, were prepared to honor, if not accentuate, the apophatic or Dionysian current of our Eastern Christian tradition. I shall return to this important qualification below.

Spirit

The microcosmic *collegium* called a man embraces three distinct parts, we have said with Saint Paul: a body, a soul, and a spirit. It stands to reason—or so at least I have claimed—that the macrocosmic *anthropos* we call a college should exhibit the same basic structure and be describable in the same basic terms. It too will have somatic, psychic, and pneumatic dimensions. I use the word “dimensions” advisedly, for it is important to stress that the third of these elements, the spirit of Rose Hill, was to be much more than just another piece of some puzzle. Intersecting the length of its body in Aiken and the width of its soul in the Socratic classroom, the Eastern Orthodox spirit of the College was intended to provide us with a vertical axis, giving depth and height—and thus solidity—to what would otherwise have been a merely secular surface.

We had agreed from the start that Rose Hill would be an Orthodox college. But we were also agreed that students from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds would be welcome. As noted earlier in my brief historical sketch, our efforts to advertise the College had included making visits to both Orthodox and non-Orthodox churches, and promotional materials were distributed to prospective applicants based as much on their standardized test scores and the likelihood of their attending the College as on their religious affiliation. We also took advantage of the mailing lists we had compiled

when Rose Hill was still a retreat and conference center. For example, we had orchestrated several symposia for university students in cooperation with the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, an organization dedicated to politically conservative issues and values. Announcements about the College were sent to the students who had come to these conferences, even though none were Orthodox and some had no significant religious background at all.

As it turned out, our inaugural class of 17 included 11 Orthodox, four Protestants, one Roman Catholic, and one student whose parents were Muslim but who called himself an agnostic. The Orthodox were all converts or the children of converts. Three of the Protestants, the Roman Catholic, and the agnostic eventually became Orthodox, while one of the formerly Orthodox students left the Church soon after the close of Rose Hill and entered Islam. I am not sure what conclusions—if any—can be drawn from these facts, but I mention them for your interest. Since I was no longer involved with the College after the end of the spring semester of 1997, I have not been able to track the students who arrived that coming fall, but I know that eight of them were Orthodox when they came to Rose Hill, and one was Protestant. As for the Rose Hill faculty, four of us were Orthodox, and one was an evangelical Protestant. The College president, chancellor, provost, director of public relations, and office manager were also Orthodox, and our Board of Visitors included a bishop and an abbot as well as five Orthodox laity. The College comptroller and the two men responsible for our buildings and grounds were Protestants. One of the latter was a Baptist minister.

Daily life at the College was deliberately and very carefully structured around worship and prayer. Weekday services in the chapel included First Hour at 7:15 a.m., Third and Sixth Hours at 11:15 a.m., Ninth Hour and Vespers at 5:00 p.m., and Compline at 9:00 p.m. Wednesdays began with Orthros and the Divine Liturgy at 7:00 a.m. No services were scheduled on Saturdays, and on Sundays students would either attend the Antiochian liturgy in the chapel or visit other nearby Orthodox Churches. In keeping with our policy of accepting applicants from a variety of backgrounds, attendance at these various services was not required, but it was strongly encouraged. Every class began with prayer, and meals were occasionally eaten in silence so as to allow for a reading from the lives of the saints or another edifying text. The Antiochian priest whose local mission

shared the chapel had primary responsibility for the spiritual needs of the College community, but he was assisted by two additional chaplains: a Greek Orthodox priest and a priest of the Orthodox Church of America, both of whom served churches in Columbia.

The Orthodox ethos of the College was also reflected in subtler ways, not least in our insistence that the education we offered was intended for the whole human being, body, soul, and spirit. One of the ways we made this point was by requiring that everyone participate in a weekly horticulture class and assist in caring for the grounds as well as by providing occasional opportunities for instruction in iconography and Byzantine chant. Emphasis was also placed on thinking of ourselves as a Christian family. To quote from the Student Handbook,

The College expects that everyone in the Rose Hill family—students, staff, and faculty alike—will strive to live in a way that is becoming to traditional Christians. This means that campus life is characterized by a subtle combination of rules and exceptions. Courtesy and informality, respect and love, seriousness and good humor come together in ways that no single code of conduct will fully account for. Since the family is a deliberately small one, the complicated policies and formal procedures of large institutions are not necessary. On the other hand, precisely because of its small size, the relationships between members of the community are often close-knit, and it is therefore very important that each member be respectful of the others and conduct himself in a manner appropriate to the aims of the community as a whole.¹¹

The rules of this family included a daily curfew of 11:00 p.m., designated quiet hours in the dormitories, and a dress code, which was to be observed in the chapel, classrooms, and offices, as well as during the noon meal in the manor house dining room: this meant pants (no blue jeans) and collared shirts for men, and skirts or dresses of modest length for women. The dormitories were always off limits to the opposite sex.

The Rose Hill chapel was blessed to have a relic of Saint Severinus, better known among scholars by his family name, Boethius. Like Catherine of Alexandria, the patron saint of the College and herself a dialectician of great renown, Boethius stood for precisely the unity or harmony we hoped to achieve between worship and intellectual inquiry—between the *spirit* of the Orthodox tradition and the *soul* of a classical education. Martyred for his faith in the early sixth century by the Arian king Theodoric the Ostrogoth, Boethius was one of the most brilliant and learned men of his time, and

¹¹ *Student Handbook 1996-1997* (Rose Hill College, Aiken, South Carolina), 4.

perhaps of all time.¹² A master of both the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*, he was a translator and enthusiastic transmitter of Plato and Aristotle, and the author of a Socratic-style dialogue called *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which was written while the saint was awaiting execution and which appears on nearly everyone's list of great books.

Needless to say, a truly Boethian unity of faith and scholarship, let alone of sanctity and sagacity, is not something that just comes about of its own accord. It must be deliberately and repeatedly struggled toward, with the help of God. As I have hinted already, there were certainly days at Rose Hill when our own struggles seemed particularly painful and unproductive, and this was notably the case when it came to integrating the liturgical and community life of the College with our work in the classroom. Of course, we were but a fledgling institution, and it was inevitable that a variety of anxieties, financial and otherwise, would have been on nearly everyone's mind, adding to the tensions one naturally encounters in the daily life of any small community. This no doubt contributed to our pedagogical challenges. But setting these historical and psychological facts to one side, it is clear in retrospect that there was something about the educational program itself that served to impede us in our efforts to unite spirit with soul. As I approach my conclusion, I would like to focus on this obstacle in hopes that Orthodox Christians with their own college-building aspirations may be able to draw some useful lessons.

I said earlier that I do not think either the great books curriculum or the Socratic method of teaching were themselves the problem. But to be more precise what I should have said was that neither of these elements—neither the matter nor the form of the program—would necessarily have been problematic on its own. Looking back, however, I can see that I had been rather naïve in supposing that the combination of these potentially volatile elements within the crucible of a self-consciously Orthodox institution would not result in at least the occasional explosion!

By the end of the first week it was obvious that some of our students would benefit from these detonations more than others. For some they came as sudden flashes of

¹² Even the atheist Bertrand Russell was obliged to concede that Boethius “would have been remarkable in any age; in the age in which he lived he is utterly amazing” (*History of Western Philosophy* [London, 1961], 366). Given our emphasis on the Christian East, it is worth mentioning that Boethius's martyrdom was owing at least in part to the sympathetic contacts he had established with the court of the Byzantine Emperor, Justin I, a staunch defender of Orthodoxy.

insight as they began to see more deeply into the origins and implications of differing views of the world. But for others it was the painful force of the explosions themselves, not the light they released, that proved more decisive in shaping their classroom experience. As far as I can tell, religious demographics had little to do with these differences: there were Orthodox and non-Orthodox in both groups. Nor do I think inequalities in intelligence or academic preparation were at issue. It seems to me that these widely divergent responses were rooted instead in the students' varying expectations as to how academic work and religious life would—or would not—intersect at Rose Hill. I am eager for correction if you think me mistaken, but I submit to you that these different expectations flowed in turn from competing currents within the Orthodox tradition itself.

The students who were best suited for what we were trying to do pedagogically—whether they were Orthodox or not, and whether they knew it or not—were those who were most deeply attuned to what I called earlier the apophatic current of the Christian East. This first group was by no means indifferent or uncommitted to the traditional teachings of the Church or uninformed as to their history and meaning. But they seemed better able than their peers to follow the risen Lord's injunction to Mary Magdalene, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). In other words, they regarded dogmatic formulations not so much as *saying* what is so as *unsaying* what is not—as a means for pointing the mind, emptied of what it may have supposed to be true, toward a final participation in What Truly Is. As a result these apophaticists—if you will permit me this shorthand—seemed from the start more at home in the fluid medium of dialectical discussion, and they were correspondingly less wary than their fellows of giving careful attention to the arguments of non-Christian authors. They seemed instinctively to be of one mind with Saint Justin the Philosopher, who informed them in the freshman Theology tutorial that "those who lived in accordance with the *Logos* are Christians, even though they were called godless, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and others like them".¹³ Although the writings of Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich, a scholar and canonized saint of recent times, were not on our reading list,

¹³"First Apology", *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 272.

I believe these same students would have readily embraced his claim that Krishna, Lao Tzu, Zoroaster, and the Buddha are to be numbered among “all the prophets”.¹⁴

On the other hand, the students who had the greatest difficulties with the program were those who had arrived in expectation of receiving an education more catechetical and cataphatic in form. They were clearly troubled at the prospect of having to enter seriously into the minds of the pre-Christian pagans—to say nothing of such anti-Christian authors as Feuerbach and Freud, to mention just two of their freshman seminar readings. But I do not think the curriculum itself would have seemed nearly so perilous to them had it not been for the dialectical method with which it was paired. It was when they realized we teachers would not be offering them the safety net of an officially Orthodox interpretation of the books that they seemed to become especially unnerved. I realize in hindsight that we had probably done a less than adequate job of explaining the nature of a pedagogy that would prove so relentlessly interrogative and so demanding of the active mental engagement I was describing above. Part of the problem, in other words, was a certain amount of natural, and perfectly understandable, resistance to the peculiar demands of the Socratic method—resistance to which we faculty were by no means immune, but which in our case took the form of not always practicing what we preached, or rather of giving in to the temptation to *preach* and opine in the usual way of professors instead of *practicing* the more difficult art of dialectic!

But there was another factor at work here as well. The wariness these cataphaticists brought to their studies was not just a function of the Rose Hill pedagogy. It reflected in many ways a second current in Orthodox tradition, one more characteristically focused on dogmas as propositional truths—more concerned, in other words, with the said than the Unsaid—and therefore *a priori* mistrustful of competing verbal formulations, even those that might actually complement or corroborate the formulations of the Church. If saints Justin and Nikolai were precedents for the eagerness with which the first group of students approached their education, the anxieties of the

¹⁴*Prayers by the Lake* [Grayslake, Illinois: Free Serbian Orthodox Diocese, n.d.], 86-87). A survivor of Dachau, Saint Nikolai (1880-1956) held earned doctorates from both the University of Berne and Oxford. Our students never reached the already mentioned *Consolation of Philosophy*, which had been scheduled for late in the sophomore year, but the apophaticists would not have been surprised to discover that our holy father among the saints Severinus—Boethius himself—could write, “I agree fully with Plato” (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Green (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 70 (Book 3, Prose 12).

second group were also clearly prefigured among the holy Fathers. One thinks, for example, of Gregory Palamas, who likened the paltry benefits of non-Christian writings to the “therapeutic value” one obtains from the “flesh of serpents”. Is there anything to be gained from such “secular wisdom”? Yes, he replied, but “you must first kill the serpent”.¹⁵ These students could also have easily looked for support to those who compiled the *Synodikon*, which is read in many of our churches on the first Sunday of Great Lent, the “Sunday of Orthodoxy”, and which contains this dire warning:

To those who study Hellenic sciences and do not take them as tools of instruction only but follow their futile theories, being so thoroughly convinced of their truth that they shamelessly introduce them and teach them to others, sometimes secretly and sometimes openly, *anathema!*
*anathema! anathema!*¹⁶

As you know, such statements are not uncommon. On the contrary, there exists within our tradition a very powerful and persistent current of mistrust regarding philosophical speculation and an often-unreflective dismissal of what are perceived to be “worldly”, or even “demonic”, forms of wisdom. A born apophaticist myself—in case you couldn’t tell—I am nonetheless obliged to admit that the more anxious and frustrated of our young people were perfectly within their Orthodox rights in feeling that the soul of Rose Hill College was, on occasion, in conflict with its spirit, or at least one current of that spirit.

Concluding Questions

During a pilgrimage last summer to the Holy Mountain of Athos, I was told by one of the fathers that the contemplative and ascetical life consists in placing the Prayer of the Heart in the spirit, the spirit in the soul, and finally the soul in the body. This he said is the key

¹⁵ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 28, 29.

¹⁶ *Synodikon*, ed. J. Gouillard in “Centre de Recherche d’histoire et de civilisation byzantines, Travaux et mémoires”, Volume 2 (Paris, 1967), 56). Let us note that this was one of nine anathemas added to the *Synodikon* in the eleventh century and directed against the scholar John Italos, who was tried and condemned for his Platonic sympathies and use of dialectic. Saint Basil the Great is more temperate, but he too would have sided with those who might have preferred we avoid certain authors altogether: “If we are wise, having appropriated from [pagan literature] what is suitable to us and akin to the truth, we will pass over the remainder” (*Advice to Young Men on the Proper Use of Pagan Literature*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, Martin R. P. McGuire [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University (Loeb Classical Library), 1934], 391 (Book 4, Chapter 8)).

to unifying and transfiguring the pneumato-psycho-somatic reality we call a man. Had we been granted more time, could Rose Hill have attained a correspondingly transfigured unity? God alone knows. What is clear, however, is that the difficulties we faced in trying to bring about this union give rise to a host of questions bearing upon the relationship between Orthodoxy and higher education. With just a few of these I shall conclude my remarks.

- ❖ First, can an Orthodox spiritual life, a penetrating study of classic texts, and a pedagogy of Socratic questioning be linked in a way that bears spiritual and intellectual fruit for all concerned, or was my supposing they could be a serious mistake from the start?
- ❖ Second, how does the Orthodox educator go about teaching books that are undeniably great but not necessarily good? Where exactly is the line to be drawn between using these texts as “tools of instruction only” and “shamelessly introducing and teaching them to others”?
- ❖ Third, are the dogmas of the Orthodox faith like icons, which we look *along* and not *at*? Or are they verbal enclosures beyond whose limits our minds trespass at peril? Do they *point* to the Truth or *contain* it? Or do they do both simultaneously? And if so, what would it mean to teach accordingly?
- ❖ Fourth, is it enough for an Orthodox college to rely on its liturgical and community life in providing its students with a “vertical axis”, or should the classroom itself be safeguarded in ways we had not deemed necessary at Rose Hill?
- ❖ Fifth and finally, what should I say to the various individuals, both priests and laity, who continue to approach me for advice about creating an Orthodox institution along the lines of Rose Hill? Is our once-upon-a-time College deserving of some future resurrection, or should we leave it to rest in peace?

I do not have ready answers to these questions. So in good Socratic fashion, I shall simply leave them with you, inviting you to join me in thinking our way toward the Light.

The image at the beginning of this paper is an Orthodox icon of Plato. Instead of a halo he is wearing a golden crown signifying his regal wisdom, and atop this crown is a coffin containing a corpse, a reminder that dialectic is “the science that proceeds by demolishing its own hypotheses” (*Republic*, 533d) and that true philosophy is thus a “rehearsal for death” (*Phaedo*, 64a). The icon is from the Sihastria Monastery in Romania.