Stephen H. Blackwell
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Lexical Housekeeping: Nabokov's "Greek Catholicism"[1]

Several years ago, I was struck by the mischief, or simply confusion, Nabokov generated by using the phrase "Greek Catholic" to describe his own and then Timofei Pnin's religious heritage, first in the memoir (1951) and then in the novel that came some six years later. The (correct) assumption of someone with knowledge of Nabokov's family origins is that he is using "Greek Catholic" where, more recently, American speakers have used "Russian-," "Eastern-," or "Greek Orthodox." However, this hypothetical "someone" would be wrong to think that Nabokov's usage was clear in its day, or even that the relevant terms and categories had achieved any sort of stability. Considering that today there is a growing attention to Nabokov's religious alignments, it seems a good moment to do a little terminological housekeeping so that, at least, we can try to keep straight what he meant with these words. In an undated lecture fragment entitled "Religion of Russia," on which more below, Nabokov made clear that to him, "Greek Catholic" was the natural counterpart of "Roman Catholic" across the East/West divide.[2] *Why* he felt this way is another, much more speculative matter, but not one without interest, as I hope to show.

There is a slight difference between the two cases under examination that needs to be made clear: the instance of "Greek Catholic" that appears in *Conclusive Evidence* and *Speak, Memory* allows an unequivocal solution: we can say for certain that in this passage, Nabokov had in mind the standard Eastern/Russian Orthodox church, because in their Russian companion, *Other Shores (Drugie berega)*, Nabokov had used the word "pravoslavnyi," from "Pravoslavie," which equates to Orthodox Christianity of the formerly Byzantine sort. We'll return to the word's etymology below, in a different connection. But, as a start, it is helpful to know that Nabokov knew what he wanted to say, despite the ambiguity of the phrase "Greek Catholic." The second instance of this phrase, in *Pnin*, allows for some small doubt. It is easy to brush this doubt away, on the authority of the lecture fragment, and of Nabokov's very recent use of the term in *Conclusive Evidence* and its translation soon after. Still, one might wonder if in Pnin's case another allegiance could be implied—specifically, to Eastern Rite Catholicism (formerly sometimes called the Uniate church, a

[1] I am grateful to Vadim Liapunov and Stanislav Shvabrin for their assistance with aspects of this essay.
[2] Berg Collection, "Religion of Russia," holograph draft, unsigned and undated. 1 p.

term now rejected by adherents; and also called, then and now, the Greek Catholic church, at least among some communities).[3] Within the Russian empire and its successors, Eastern Rite Catholicism has existed mainly within the Ukrainian lands, a result of the ebb and flow of national boundaries throughout the centuries, with the conquerors' varying theological allegiances to Rome or Moscow. For now, however, based on available evidence, the idea that Pnin's family were Eastern Rite Catholics can be summarily rejected.

What makes this little textological and terminological moment more than a simple case of word choice is the fact that, clearly, Nabokov selected his term deliberately and stuck to it even in the 1966 revision of *Speak, Memory*. It is a curious move, because at the time he employed it, the phrase "Greek Catholic" did not register at all in the world of printed matter, as far as Google Books can inform us: the very first usages of the term are recorded beginning in late 1956. (It had some strong bursts around 1860 and 1880, and then was dormant for over seventy years). "Eastern Orthodox" had a spike around 1857, and was roughly 100 times as "popular" at its peak; "Russian Orthodox" has a similar usage contour, and about the same popularity as "Greek Catholic" (both quite low). Presumably, the spike in these terms in printed matter in the 1880s had something to do with how works of Russian literature were translated and discussed as they became known in the West. In short, all these terms were available to Nabokov from various sources, though none was ever as popular in print as "Eastern Orthodox"; "Russian Orthodox" burst upwards from nil circa 1952, staying aloft until 1960 or so, and thus it was not much "in the air" at the time that Nabokov wrote his memoir's first chapter (but was while *Pnin* was drafted and published). The *New Yorker* seems to have rejected Nabokov's phrase, and substituted "Greek Orthodox" in its April 15, 1950 publication of "Perfect Past,"[4] but by *Conclusive Evidence*'s appearance in 1951, "Greek Catholic" was firmly in place. As for *Pnin*, in the one chapter published by the *New Yorker* that included a relevant passage, "Victor Meets Pnin" (the novel's Chapter 4, which appeared in 1955), the editors left Nabokov's preferred phrase in place.

So much for facts. Turning to the speculative side of this note, we may ask, *why* did Nabokov choose the term "Greek Catholic," even after it was rejected by the *New Yorker*'s editors? Contextually, it may be significant that the now-pejorative term "Uniate" was one hundredfold

[3] The term "Greek Catholic" with this meaning can be found (through Google Books searches) in 19th-century writings; it can also be found in the same era with the meaning "Eastern (etc.) Orthodox."

[4] "The Perfect Past," *The New Yorker*, 15 April, 1950: 33.

more common than "Greek Catholic" in 1950, and had an unambiguous association with Eastern Rite Catholics. Although Nabokov's lecture fragment does not offer any details on his thinking, my own guess is that the reason comes down to the vexed etymology of the word "Orthodox," and Nabokov's desire to push aside the term's ambiguity or even inaccuracy. The problem is that in English, there is "Orthodoxy," and there is "Orthodoxy," and there is even "orthodoxy," and not only are they not the same, but the differences between them are poorly recognized in the lexicographical and etymological literature (not to mention in common parlance).

The current OED dates English use of "orthodox" to ca. 1454, where the selected source text gives the direct meaning "right faith."[5] But it also notes the dual etymology of the Greek root-word "δόξᾰ" which, in addition to "opinion, judgment, belief," has the meanings "glory, honor, magnificence, praise." It is this latter set of meanings that informed the early Christian meanings of ὀρθόδοξος, which were later translated into Biblical Slavonic as Правослaвіе, "right praise" (or "right glory"), the term that came to name the Slavic branches of Eastern Orthodoxy.

My theory is that at a time of terminological fluidity, Nabokov would have become curious about the origins of the word "Orthodox," especially as it also described a branch of Judaism. Nabokov would have been aware that Russian "Православие" does not appear to be an obvious calque for "Orthodoxy" in its meaning of "right opinion" or "right belief," since "slava/-slavie" is wholly unrelated to questions of opinion, etc. *Webster's Second International Dictionary*, Nabokov's primary dictionary, would have been of little help: it offers only the "opinion/belief" definition of "δόξᾰ" in its etymology. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first edition[6] (and second) likewise gives only "ὀρθό-ς + δόξα opinion." If Nabokov turned to these sources, he may have been puzzled at why "δόξα" should mean only opinion/belief in English, yet appear as "glory/praise" (слава) in Slavic guise. Dictionaries of classical Greek could have helped him find the missing meaning, as could Gerhard Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, volume 2, published in 1932 (translated into English only in the 1960s); more on this source below.[7] Of course, he could also have

[5] "Orthodox, Adj. & N." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, June 2026, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7915242963. See also: en.wiktionary.org/wiki/ὀρθόδοξος#Ancient_Greek

[6] *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933), vol. 7, p. 212; cf. 2nd ed. 1989, via above online link for OED (previous note).

[7] Kittel, Gerhard, et al. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* Eerdmans, 1964, vol. 2, 233-253.

approached classicists at Cornell, and later at Harvard. (Wikipedia cites articles from 1991 and 1998 as arguing that the medieval Greek term refers to *both* right belief *and* correct glorification of God, a conclusion I will question below).

Kittel, in the course of about twenty pages of commentary on this word, observes that in the Septuagint (the Hebrew Bible translated into Koine Greek in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE), which the Slavonic version followed closely, nearly all instances of δόξα had the meaning or connotation "light" or "radiance," sometimes "glory" or "magnificence," but never "opinion" (in these cases, to translate various particular Hebrew words in the Old Testament). This usage, Kittel suggests, influenced the New Testament authors to use the word δόξα exclusively in the same manner, and according to Wiktionary, the Greek word ὀρθόδοξος was coined much later, in the 4th or 5th century CE, and specifically within the Christian context (that is, probably not intending "right opinion").[8] If this is so, one would expect that the local and contemporary meaning of the word derived from the current Christian meaning of δόξα, which helps explain why the Slavic calque from this word family was православие etc., -слав- having, likewise, no relation to "opinion" or "belief." (One could, in fact, interpret the Slavic word as adding supportive evidence to the notion that the Greek word ὀρθόδοξος, in the 4th or 5th century CE, up to the ninth century, did not mean "right opinion" in the Christian context). All of this is probably more information than Nabokov gathered (though it was available to him); nevertheless, one suspects that it was his discomfort with the "Orthodox"/"Православный" contrast that pushed him to abandon the more common term Eastern Orthodox. In all likelihood, he concluded that the early Slavic translators of Biblical texts decided that *liturgical* use of the term equated to православие, or right-glory/radiance/praise, perhaps influenced also by "doxology" (δοξολογία)—an expression or hymn praising God. In any event, the liturgical meaning, and especially its Slavic guise, is in some conflict with all standard definitions of the English word "orthodox" in all familiar modern contexts, including all etymologies given in the best available English dictionaries of Nabokov's time (W2 and OED). Faced with this challenge, I suggest that Nabokov wished to avoid the apparent conflict by choosing an alternative pedigreed term for the Eastern Christian Church. The minimal official name of that church has consistently

[8] See Wiktionary: en.wiktionary.org/wiki/ὀρθόδοξος#Ancient_Greek; in contrast, one Greek etymological resource offers a contradictory view, but does not go nearly as deeply into the matter as Kittel does: https://oodegr.com/oode/orthod/genika/leksh_or8odoksia_1.htm. I have been unable to consult the most thorough etymological dictionaries of Koine Greek (published in Greek).

been held as "Orthodox Catholic Church," and the maximal name sometimes used is "Holy Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church" (note the absence of both "Eastern" and "Greek" in these names). But "Catholic" was part of the formal nomenclature dating back to origins as early as 110 CE.

So, Nabokov's choice of "Catholic" is clear enough, but why "Greek" vs. "Eastern" or "Russian"? In his draft lecture fragment, "Religion of Russia," Nabokov claimed that the Western church "appropriated" the term "Catholic" as its title after the schism of 1054, and he glibly asserts that Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic are "of course" the more correct designations of the two churches, rather than Eastern or Greek Orthodox (he does not give any hint about his objection to "Orthodox," and he seems untroubled that there should be two "Universal," but mutually exclusive, churches).[9] I propose, however, that he felt his obvious solution was justified historically, and produced a better, less ambiguous (or simply less inaccurate) nomenclature. Early Christianity evolved in a Greek-dominated world, with Constantinople becoming the capital of the newly Christian Roman empire by 330; and Koine Greek was the language of the New Testament's composition, following a few centuries after the creation of the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. Thus "Greek," in that Byzantine Empire-related sense, implies not modern (or even ancient) Greece, but the broader heritage of that aspect of the early Christian world. Unaware, most likely, that "Greek Catholic" also had an established use as a preferred synonym for "Uniate" or Catholic Church of the Eastern Right, Nabokov perhaps felt that "Greek" acknowledged the historical reality (in contrast to Rome), and "Catholic" invoked the key term, "universal," embraced by Orthodox tradition (parallel to western Catholicism). Moreover, there were and are other (non-"Orthodox") "Eastern" Christian churches, which would render that term unacceptably ambiguous, as well. I find it probable that Nabokov felt he was solving a problem of linguistic ambiguity, but in the end, his solution did not win out.

[9] The fragment will be published in the forthcoming *Lectures on Poetry, Prose, and Drama*, Stanislav Shvabrin and Brian Boyd, eds. (Princeton University Press, expected in 2027).