

LIGHT FROM THE CHRISTIAN EAST: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ORTHODOX TRADITION

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I have always been keenly interested in comparative theology. However, as a recent adherent to Eastern Orthodoxy, I approach analysis, as opposed to knowledge, of Orthodox theology as presumptively above my pay grade. This book combines both. Written by James Payton, a Protestant academic, *Light from the Christian East* is a fairly accessible text meant primarily to introduce Western Christians to Orthodoxy, and to challenge them to understand and appreciate the Christian faith better through a grasp of Orthodoxy.

Payton wrote this book to encourage what might be called dialogue. As he concludes, “I pray that this volume will enable some Western Christians to open themselves anew to the Christian faith through the insights of their Orthodox brothers and sisters.” Nothing wrong with this, of course, but let’s not use the term dialogue, because for very good reasons, “dialogue” has lately acquired an odious reputation. What it almost always means in a Christian context is that some group of Modernist heretics uses a pleasant- and reasonable-sounding request for “dialogue” as a wedge to begin formal rejection of some long-settled part of Christian faith, in order they may more fully abase themselves before modern sensibilities and thereby ensure their social respectability in the eyes of the acolytes of Baal.

In this oft-repeated scheme, a faithful Christian’s refusal to engage in “dialogue,” that is, his refusal to agree that any given doctrine can be changed, is used as conclusive evidence that doctrine should, in fact, be changed. And if he does agree to “dialogue,” but then after hearing what his interlocutors have to say, refuses to agree the faith should be changed, this means “discussion,” meaning threats and insults, must continue until he does agree to change the faith. The beatings will continue until morale improves. Heads I win; tails you lose. This transparent malice seems like it should never work, but it works all the time. It has destroyed all the mainline Protestant churches, and is well on its way to destroying Roman Catholicism. I expect it succeeds because many of those of whom “dialogue” is demanded, the leaders of churches, are

in fact in agreement with the heretics, and looking for a climb-down. They are weak men and women who, whenever some meaningless modern epithet such as “sexist” or “homophobic” is thrown at them, run for the hills, rather than doing what they should do, which is punch those who demand “dialogue” in the face.

And, of course, when the target doctrine is, sooner or later, changed, “dialogue” on that topic, if it might reverse the change rather than extend it, is suddenly deemed unthinkable—retrograde and evil. The new, cretinous morality is imposed as absolute and unchangeable. You can be sure, for example, that those who rule the Episcopal church now aren’t interested in dialogue about whether female “priests” should be defrocked, or, to take a much more important set of doctrines, changed earlier, whether divorce and artificial birth control should be again forbidden. No, the arrow of “dialogue” only points one way.

Fortunately, this is not Payton’s type of dialogue. Nor does it appear likely that the Eastern Orthodox churches have any interest in such dialogue (although all believers have to be on guard against the roaring lion who pushes it). Payton is himself a Protestant in the Reformed tradition, a professor (now retired) at Redeemer University in Canada. His career revolved around the Christian East, its history and theology, both ancient (Byzantine) and modern (Eastern Europe), with a common denominator being Orthodoxy. Payton also studied the Church Fathers, writing, among other books, a condensation of *Against Heresies*, the classic work by the second-century theologian Irenaeus. Thus, he’s well-qualified to write a book of broad comparative theology. Nonetheless, this is a tricky business, for on many matters there is wide divergence among Western Christians, and it is impressive that Payton can avoid the extremes of lumping disparate ideas excessively together and getting lost in the details. Still, there is necessarily some simplification—he does not cover the Oriental Orthodox, for example, such as the Copts. This book is a gateway, not the final word.

Light from the Christian East is written for the educated Western Christian layman who has little familiarity with Orthodoxy. Anyone not well-versed in Christian basics would be largely at sea reading this book. Payton does provide a base of necessary knowledge, beginning with a good historical overview of Christianity’s beginnings, as embedded in the cultures in which it arose. Crucially, in the eastern part of the

Roman Empire, this meant that Christian thought often revolved around interaction with Greek philosophy, especially Platonism (though Payton is at pains throughout the book to reject the claim that Orthodoxy is tainted by Greek thought). In the western part of the Empire, theologians such as Tertullian, who famously said “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?,” ignored Greek thought in favor of the Roman emphasis on law. There was still only one Church, of course—this was a matter of emphasis, not of doctrinal belief.

Payton sketches how this division became wider after the fall of the western Roman Empire. The eastern Empire continued to flourish, but communication with the West faltered, as did the internal sophistication of the West, and it was therefore under the eastern Emperors that much of the first millennium of Christian theological development occurred. Broadly speaking, eastern Christian theology de-emphasized reason—not entirely, but never demonstrating the Western need for precisely delineating the rationales of every single belief, rather simply relying on the wonder and awe of revealed truth in many instances. Theologians in the East were not those who trained for years or decades to build an internally-coherent written structure in the Augustinian mold; they were rather those who were best able to, in this life, commune with God, and write down the fruits of that communion. In this vein, Payton contrasts Saint Thomas Aquinas, Western systematizer, and Saint John of Damascus, who wrote the “great textbook of Orthodox theology,” *The Orthodox Faith*, which Payton says is disorganized and elliptical, yet just as great when examined and understood. Humility and silence were the watchwords, not intellectual fireworks. (It is at least in part from this tendency that the Orthodox requirement that bishops be monks arose.) And Payton sketches the conflicts arising from the Crusades, the evangelization of Eastern Europe, as well as the fall of Constantinople, and brings the history of Orthodoxy to the present day.

Next Payton corrects common Western errors about Orthodoxy. It is not, as some Protestants believe, basically the same as Roman Catholicism. Yes, certain formalities and many key doctrinal points overlap, but the perspectives from within the thought of each are often very different. In fact, Orthodox thinkers often lump Protestantism and Roman Catholicism together, in an inversion most Western Christians find strange, as legalistic and sharing core premises rejected or deprecated

by Orthodoxy. Nor is Orthodoxy ossified; quite the contrary—often it is more vibrant than many versions of Western Christianity. That doctrinal change is (or seems) functionally impossible under Orthodoxy, and therefore Orthodoxy is doctrinally unified, unlike fragmented Western Christianity, is not to the contrary.

Nor is Orthodoxy tainted by pagan Greek thought; it wrestled, and always has, with Greek thought. But as shown in the writings of the Cappadocian fathers, the intellectual cousins of Saint Augustine (Saint Basil, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, and Saint Gregory Nazianzen), Orthodoxy has always rejected the pagan aspects of that thought. The analogy used by Saint Gregory of Nyssa was that, as the Israelites plundered the Egyptians to beautify God's tabernacle, so did they use Greek thought to spread the Good News. Those who went too far, such as Origen, were condemned; these men were aware of the danger. (This is a general principle—men of ancient times usually saw problems we flatter ourselves only we can see, and often with more insight. One present-day example of this is modern atheists who think they are coming up with new arguments, rather than simplistic arguments that were soundly beaten more than two thousand years before.) Not to mention that Western Christianity itself relies on Platonism, and even more Aristotelianism, so claims of Greek influence by Western Christians are really the pot calling the kettle black.

Before turning to specific matters, Payton goes to some length to explain that small-o orthodoxy in the East is much less about doctrinal precision than in the West. True teaching is certainly necessary, but the style of life and worship, giving proper glory to God, is equally important to Christian truth, and to salvation. That is the starting point of Orthodox theology, not reason. Knowing God, not rationalizing about Him, is the core matter; one who is drawn to theology must first become "saturated with wonder." Thus, Orthodox theologians rarely center on, or are even drawn from, academics, unlike in the West. Orthodoxy has always opposed excessive scholasticism. Rather, Orthodoxy is focused on meditation and contemplation. And to the extent some element of doctrine is not fully worked out, doing so is simply not a major goal, or a goal at all; the Orthodox accept that some matters are mysteries, and there is no reason to obsess about it—another approach that helps

prevent schism. “Orthodoxy expects not clarification but adoration, not teaching but praising.”

I was raised orthodox Roman Catholic, but I attended a Reformed (Calvinist) elementary school. In my nature, a legalistic approach to religion always appealed to me. I like having certainty and all the answers (in fact, as you can see, my political writings do provide all the answers—you’re welcome). Roman Catholicism offers an answer to every possible question; it provides certainty. But at what cost? Examining Orthodoxy comparatively gives the answer—at the cost of awe and wonder as a core basis of the faith. True, Western Christians sometimes focus on the awe and wonder. Mystics do, and, famously, this is what started C. S. Lewis down the path to conversion, the occasional glimpses of unsought wonder and awe, close to ruptures in reality, what he called joy, that he got reading Scandinavian epics. Maybe this is what some Evangelicals, or even more Pentecostals, experience. Sadly, whatever awe and wonder Catholicism offered in the past has been lost since the Catholic Church embraced the serpent of Modernism. John Paul II failed to take the necessary actions to expel poisons from the Church, and Benedict XVI buried his talent in the ground and still hides his face in shame at his own weakness, as he should. And so the odious Jorge Bergoglio was elevated, to not only erase any vestiges of awe and wonder, but also to demand “dialogue,” which will result inevitably in the practical destruction of the Roman Church if he is not taken out. Bergoglio, like some type of Bizarro Samson, is pulling down his own Church, not the temple of his enemies. That may not seem like my problem anymore, but it is, because the Roman Church is critically important to the West, given Orthodoxy’s limited reach here. However, we are drifting into politics, and away from theology, so let us return to the book.

Payton then turns to one of the foundational questions of Christianity—how do we talk about God? This is not a question of credal belief; it is rather tied to what we can say about God. As David Bentley Hart has said at book length, we can show clearly that God is the ground of being, but that does not tell us what we can actually know about His being. Western Christianity tends to approach this question through positive (cataphatic) theology—what can we say directly about God? Orthodox theology tends to approach it through negative (apophatic) theology—what can we say about God by saying

what He is not? Orthodoxy believes we can say some things about God, but this approach is inherently limited, since God is ineffable and incomprehensible, and metaphor is necessarily limited.

Eastern Orthodoxy thus rejects univocity, the belief that God in his essence shares any characteristic in common with created beings. Univocity is the rock on which, some argue, Western Christianity founded, by laying the groundwork for viewing God as demiurge, and therefore making possible the Enlightenment and its consequent evils. Apophatic theology, on the other hand, while not inherently incompatible with cataphatic theology, usually leads practitioners to contemplation, sometimes to complete mysticism, but certainly away from bean counting and hair splitting. The favoring of apophatic theology also lies at the root of the basic Orthodox distinction between God's essence, which man can never approach or grasp in this life or the next, and His energies, God's actions that are still God but which man can approach, on rare occasion, in this life, and to which he will be fully exposed in the next. (Payton in this context also discusses the complex thinking of East and West on the topic of grace, which the Orthodox view as a manifestation of the uncreated energies of God, and thus God Himself.)

Given that God's essence will remain forever outside our grasp, Payton narrates how Orthodoxy believes that God has nonetheless assigned each created thing, from rocks to men, a *logos*, "what each created nature ultimately is and is more fully to become in God's creative intention." The purpose or goal of each *logos* is its *skopos*; and ultimately, "the *skopos* of each created nature is communion in the divine energies; that is, each created nature is increasingly to dwell in and be transformed through communion with God." In Eastern Orthodoxy, nature and grace are not distinct; there is no such category as "supernatural." Humanity is the highest expression of God's creation, but all nature participates in the divine energies. (From this, although Payton does not conclude it, it seems to me we can logically conclude that our pets likely participate in the next life.)

Narrowing his focus, Payton turns to humanity. Mankind is uniquely privileged, in his *logos* partaking, unlike any other created thing, of both the spiritual and material. Moreover, he is assigned the privilege of mediator of creation, and made in the image of God (though in the usual pattern, the precise parameters of what this means are not a

major Orthodox focus). Of course, man fell, in the disobedience of Adam, but the Orthodox do not impute this sin to Adam's descendants, which means they reject the Western conception of original sin. We children of Adam suffer consequences from Adam's sin, to be sure, but our only guilt is our own, individual, sin. We suffer corruption as the result of death and other suffering, but human nature is not depraved, as many Western Christians would have it—our *logos* and *skopos* remain unchanged, and our natural will still impels us to God.

Salvation, the crucial matter for all Christians, is an area with significant differences between East and West. In the West, the focus tends to be on Christ's suffering, and on arguments about why his death was necessary for our salvation. But in Orthodoxy, Christ's death (and his subsequent descent into Hades) is depicted as a victorious battle, where "The King of Glory," as the icons name him (usually omitting the common inscription in the West, "INRI"), smashed the Devil and his works. (This is very well covered in Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev's *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*.) Christ, as the last Adam, thereby led man back to his proper *logos* and *skopos*, conquering sin and making all things new, reversing the corruption of death to which sin had led. Substitutionary atonement and similar other dreary, counter-intuitive ideas have no place in Orthodoxy. If Christ did ransom us, he did it as part of defeating Satan, and again the specifics are not that important. For the Orthodox, therefore, Christ's resurrection is much more the focus than Christ's death; the Orthodox celebration of Easter is overflowing with joy, the joy of triumph in which we all participate.

That salvation we have been granted, for which we are now eligible, is literal union with Christ—the end God intended for humanity from the beginning, *theosis*, a type of deification, union with the energies of the Trinity, the divine, uncreated light. This is not a swallowing up of the individual, as in some strains of Buddhism—very much the opposite. The Transfiguration, an event extremely important for the Orthodox (in church, my family sits below a large half-dome icon of the Transfiguration), more so than for Western Christians, prefigures this state, which, of course, we cannot understand in this life, although some saints have been given a taste. God's essence will remain forever remote from all creation, but not his energies. In the West, this idea of "divinization" is regarded as bordering on pagan, and is usually rejected

in favor of, on the one hand, harps and clouds, or on the other hand, a claim of simple ignorance, that we see “through a glass darkly” and can have no real concept of our future state.

A range of other topics round out the book. The author talks about the importance of the Church and of individual church communities, where collective worship is taking place with the actual, literal presence of both the angels and those who have already reposed in Christ (whose icons depict their presence, such that the church is “opening onto eternity”). The Orthodox see the boundaries of life and death as more porous than modern Western Christians, heavily tainted by materialism, do. Those in eternity are here (monks, in fact, apparently often see and interact with them), and we can ask them to pray for us just as we might ask any other Christian. Payton also covers icons, central to Eastern worship and far more than simply “books for the illiterate,” the medieval Roman Catholic rationale created in response to claims that religious art encouraged idolatry. Because of the Iconoclastic Controversy, the East early developed sophisticated analyses about art missing in the West, scriptural, Christological, and logical.

It has always interested me that Orthodoxy forbids depictions of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, since both are pure spirit, but encourages depictions of the Son, for he had a body that can be depicted, and in fact that incarnate body is a living icon of the invisible God. Thus, the Orthodox icon of the Trinity, commonly found, depicts the three angels who visited Abraham and Sarah, viewed as a manifestation of the Trinity. They sit around a table, being served by Abraham and Sarah, looking at the viewer—and what is not obvious until pointed out, the viewer is being invited to sit at the fourth, open seat at the table, the one that faces him. This is probably my favorite icon.

Payton concludes with thoughts on the relative importance to Orthodoxy of Scripture and tradition, quoting Bishop Anthony Ware, “In reality there is only one source [of the Christian faith], since Scripture exists within Tradition.” And he adds thoughts on prayer, especially the important Orthodox goal of prayer being as constant as possible, often through the use of the Jesus Prayer as a nearly subconscious device. After two thousand years, this book can only scratch the surface of the topics it covers, but for the interested layman, this book is a great introduction to the matters within.