



Through Western Eyes

Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective



Robert Letham







Through Western Eyes

Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective

Robert Letham

MENTOR





Dr. Robert Letham is Lecturer in Systematic and Historical Theology at Wales Evangelical School of Theology. He has been in pastoral ministry for 25 years - and at Emmanuel Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware since 1989. He has taught at London Bible College and is Adjunct Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia and visiting Professor of Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington/Baltimore.

ISBN 1-84550-247-7
ISBN 978-1-84550-247-8

© Robert Letham

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published in 2007
in the
Mentor Imprint
by

Christian Focus Publications, Ltd.,
Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire,
IV20 1TW, Great Britain.

www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Danie Van Straaten

Printed and bound by
CPD, Wales

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or a license permitting restricted copying. In the U.K. such licenses are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.





Abbreviations

ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> , ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, rev. A.C. Coxe (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969–73)
BDEC	Parry, K. et.al. <i>The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity</i> , (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001)
BQ	<i>Baptist Quarterly</i>
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1956–77)
CO	John Calvin, <i>Opera quae supersunt omnia</i> , ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reiss, 59 vols. Corpus Reformatorum, vols. 29–87 (Brunswick, 1863–1900)
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LN	Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains</i> (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988)
LS	Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, <i>A Greek English Lexicon</i> , rev. Henry Stuart Jones, 9th edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940)
LXX	Septuagint
NPNF ¹	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> [First Series] ed. P. Schaff (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978–79)
NPNF ²	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> [Second Series] ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979)
OCP	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
OS	<i>Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta</i> , ed. P. Barth and W. Niesel, 5 vols. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926–52)
PG	J.P. Migne, et. al. ed., <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> (Paris, 1857–66)
PL	J.P. Migne, et. al. ed., <i>Patrologia Latina</i> (Paris, 1878–90)
RechScRel	<i>Recherches de Science Religieuse</i>
SBET	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
Service Book	<i>Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church</i> , comp. and trans. Isabel Florence Hapgood, 3rd ed. (Brooklyn, New York: Syrian Antiochene Orthodox Archdiocese of New York and All North America, 1956)
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
StPatr	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
StVladThQ	<i>St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i>
TB	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
VE	<i>Vox Evangelica</i>

Citations from the English Bible, unless otherwise indicated, are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2001).





A Chronology of Persons and Events

AD	
30	Death and resurrection of Jesus, Pentecost
c36	Conversion of Paul
44	James beheaded
49	Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)
52	Thomas takes the gospel to India
64	Persecution at Rome spearheaded by Emperor Nero
64-67	Martyrdom of Peter and Paul
70	Destruction of Jerusalem
95-100	Death of the apostle John
130-140	Birth of Irenaeus
c150	Birth of Clement of Alexandria
c170	Muratorian canon listing New Testament books
185	Birth of Origen
c200	Death of Irenaeus, birth of Cyprian
215	Death of Clement of Alexandria
240	Mani founds Manichaeism
c242	Death of Ammonius Saccas
249-251	Persecution under Emperor Decius
254	Origen dies in prison
258	Death of Cyprian
270	Death of Plotinus
295	Birth of Athanasius
303-305	Persecution under Emperor Diocletian
312	Conversion of Constantine, and his accession as Roman Emperor
313	Edict of Milan, legalizing Christianity
318	Outbreak of the Arian controversy in Alexandria



- 324 Constantine establishes a new capital, calling it Constantinople
 325 Nicaea I, called by Constantine, condemns Arius
 328 Athanasius becomes Bishop of Alexandria
 336 Death of Arius
 355-360 Athanasius writes his *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*
 362 Council of Alexandria prepares the way for the resolution of the trinitarian crisis
 370 Basil writes *On the Holy Spirit*
 370-389 The writings of the Cappadocians (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus) resolve the trinitarian controversy
 373 Death of Athanasius
 379 Death of Basil
 381 Constantinople I, called by Emperor Theodosius I, condemns Eunomius pronounces on the Trinity
 382 Emperor Theodosius I makes Christianity the official religion
 386 Chrysostom (349-407) writes *On the Priesthood*
 387 Augustine (354-430) baptized by Ambrose in Milan
 391 Deaths of Apollinaris and Gregory of Nazianzus
 394 Death of Gregory of Nyssa
 396 Chrysostom becomes Bishop of Constantinople
 407 Chrysostom dies in exile
 415-420 Augustine publishes *On the Trinity*
 418 Council of Carthage condemns Pelagius
 428 Outbreak of the Nestorian controversy; Cyril (378-444) attacks Nestorius
 430 Death of Augustine
 431 Council of Ephesus condemns Nestorius
 444 Cyril of Alexandria dies
 449 The 'Robber Council' of Ephesus backs Eutyches
 451 Council of Chalcedon, called by Emperor Marcian, condemns Eutyches
 476 End of the Roman Empire; thereafter the Empire is based at Constantinople
 484-518 Temporary schism between Constantinople and Rome
 c500-550 Dionysius the Areopagite, whose mystical theology is seminal
 527-565 Justinian I is Emperor
 532-536 Leontius of Jerusalem contributes to the Christological debate
 551 Edict of Justinian
 553 Constantinople II, called by Justinian I, condemns Origenists and monophysitism, refines Chalcedon
 580-662 Maximus the Confessor, who opposes the monothelites
 597 Augustine of Canterbury sets foot in England, sent by Pope Gregory the Great
 610-641 Emperor Heraclius I
 634 Synod of Jerusalem proclaims that Christ has two wills
 635-845 Nestorian mission to China at its height
 636 Ecthesis, issued by Bishop Sergius of Constantinople, adopts monoenergism



Timeline

9

638-645	Muslim invasions
649	Dyothelite Council called by Pope Martin I at the Lateran Palace
650-662	Monothelite reaction; deaths of Martin I and Maximus the Confessor
680-1	Constantinople III, called by Emperor Constantine IV, condemns monothelism
692	Quinisext Council
673-735	The Venerable Bede, notable for Biblical commentaries and a history of England
c675-749	John of Damascus; in mid-eighth century writes against iconoclasts
726	Outbreak of the iconoclast controversy: John of Damascus defends icons
740	Emperor Constantine IV defends iconoclasm
750	Abbasid dynasty (until 945): center of Islam switches from Damascus to near Baghdad
754	John of Damascus condemned by the iconoclast Council of Hieria
780	Empress Irene suspends persecution of iconodules
787	Nicaea II, called by Empress Irene, condemns iconoclasm
795	Crisis over Emperor Constantine VI's divorce and remarriage
800	Charlemagne crowned Roman Emperor in Rome by Pope Leo III
815	New attack on icons instigated by Emperor Leo V the Armenian
826	Death of Theodore of Studion (b759)
843	The Triumph of Orthodoxy, as Empress Theodosia ends persecution of iconodules
858-67,	Photius is Patriarch of Constantinople; writes 880-86 against the <i>filioque</i> clause
c988	Conversion of Russia to Orthodoxy
1050-84	German reforms of the Papacy
1054	Mutual anathemas between the Bishops of Rome and Constantinople
1093-1109	Anselm Archbishop of Canterbury
1204	The Crusaders ransack Constantinople and stay until 1261
1222-3	Tatar (Mongol) invasion of Russia; the church is granted freedom and exemption from taxation
1225-74	Thomas Aquinas
1274	Council of Lyons; agreement on the <i>filioque</i> accepted in the West, rejected in the East
1296	Birth of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359)
1322	Birth of Nicholas Cabasilas (d ?)
1439	Council of Florence; the East, desperate for Western military support, rejects its declarations
1453	Fall of Constantinople and the end of the Byzantine Empire
1517	Martin Luther nails his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg
1536	John Calvin (1509-64) publishes the first edition of his <i>Institute of the Christian Religion</i>





1623-38	Cyril Lucar Bishop of Constantinople
1643	The Westminster Assembly is convened by Parliament
1721	Peter the Great regulates the Russian Church, making it a department of state
1792	Birth of Makary Glucharev (1792-1849)
1797	Birth of Innokenty Venyaminov (1797-1879), missionary to the Far East and Alaska
1850-1917	Revival of Russian religious, theological and philosophical thought; together with rapid missionary expansion to the east
1917	Bolshevik revolution, ensuing persecution and emigration of church leaders and theologians to the West
1965	Anathemas of 1054 withdrawn





Preface

The doorbell rings. Outside there stands a complete stranger. It is obvious he is from Australia – the hat, with pieces of cork dangling on string to ward off the flies, is a giveaway, and so too is the tanned complexion. First impressions are confirmed by the nasal drawl. Apparently, he is a distant cousin. How can this be? He seems so different and alien from one's comfortable surroundings in the English Home Counties. He is a stranger. But you let him in, you sit and talk, and gradually – bit by bit – there are fleeting points of recognition; facial expressions, the shape of the nose, the physical build. After a while it seems credible that there is, after all, a real flesh and blood connection there – despite the differences.

This experience is not too dissimilar to impressions of Eastern Christianity common among Western Protestants. The culture of the Eastern Church is alien to their experience. I remember many years ago listening on the BBC to a broadcast service from a Russian Orthodox cathedral. The liturgy – with the magnificent music – was impressive but strange, and after some time we switched off. A while later we returned to the



broadcast and, as far as I could determine, it seemed no different to when we had heard it earlier. Yet the more we familiarize ourselves with the Eastern Church the more we recognize, for all the differences, the family resemblances. The family has been parted for a very long time. But chances have arisen to meet again and get to know one another.

In recent years, Eastern Orthodoxy has emerged vividly on the radar of Western Christians. Hitherto, it was largely ignored. Theologians of the stature of B.B. Warfield (1851–1921) hardly refer to the Eastern Church or its theologians, and show little direct knowledge of it. This has been due to the long-term historical disruption caused by differences in language, outlook and theology and eventually by the depredations of Islam. East and West went their separate ways. As a result, their respective theologies appear at times to inhabit parallel universes.

According to Timothy Ware Kallistos ‘... western Christians, whether Free Churchmen, Anglicans, or Roman Catholics, have a common background in the past. All alike (although they may not always care to admit it) have been profoundly influenced by the same events: by the Papal centralization and the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages, by the Renaissance, by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. But behind members of the Orthodox Church – Greeks, Russians, and the rest – there lies a very different background. They have known no Middle Ages (in the Western sense) and have undergone no Reformations or Counter-Reformations; they have only been affected in an oblique way by the cultural and religious upheaval which transformed western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Christians in the west, both Roman and Reformed, generally start by asking the same questions, although they may disagree about the answers. In Orthodoxy, however, it is not only the answers that are different – the questions themselves are not the same as in the west.’¹ Ware goes on to observe that ‘Protestantism was hatched from the egg that Rome had laid’.²

¹ T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 9.



However, this ignorance is changing. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia drove leading Russian theologians into exile in the West, especially Paris. Latterly, many found their way to the United States. This enforced exposure to the Western intellectual scene brought significant interaction. Eastern Orthodoxy is increasingly popular in the Anglo-Saxon world. It conveys a sense of mystery, of continuity with the past, of dignified worship at a time when evangelical Protestantism is increasingly cheapened and trivialized.

This book examines the history and theology of Orthodoxy from a Reformed Protestant perspective. I will argue that there are clear and significant areas of agreement, a common allegiance to the triune God, to the person of Christ, to the authority of Scripture and the truth of the gospel. At the same time, there are many areas of disagreement, where it seems that Orthodoxy and Protestantism are at odds. However, there are also misunderstandings on both sides, where proponents of either position are not normally dealing accurately with what the other holds to be true. I hope that, in drawing attention to the agreements and misunderstandings, readers may come to a better understanding of exactly where the real differences lie. My aim has been to learn from Orthodoxy, on the assumption that the most important thing is to grow in our knowledge of Christ. I have sought to represent the Orthodox as accurately as I can. Where I may have failed, I beg indulgence and ask for kind correction.

As for terminology, Anastasios Kallis points out that *Orthodox Church* is the most common term in use today; *Orthodox Catholic Church* expresses the ecclesiastical reality in Orthodox eyes; the phrase *Eastern Orthodox Church* underlines the cultural and geographical aspects, since the bulk of Orthodoxy is located to the east of the Latin Church; the term *Eastern Church* goes back to the division of the Roman Empire in AD 395, and so has long historical use, but is rather outdated, since neither the Eastern nor the Western Church is an ecclesial unity; *Greek Orthodox*

²Ibid., 10.



Church stresses the common bond of all Orthodox churches, since the Greek cultural tradition influenced the development of the theological structure and spirituality of Orthodoxy more than any other; while the phrase *Catholic Church* which was preferred by the older Councils and the Church Fathers stresses its historical continuity, and is now paired with *Orthodox* to denote its division from Rome. In turn, we may add that *Oriental Orthodox Churches* refers to those churches that were unable to accept the Definition of Chalcedon and so were separated from the *Eastern Orthodox Church* – among these were the Nestorians and the Coptic Church.

I want to thank Malcolm MacLean and Willie MacKenzie of Christian Focus Publications for their interest in this project at respective stages in its production. The staff of the Montgomery Library, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia have, as usual, been very helpful. I have also been grateful for the facilities of the Library of Congress. I wish to thank Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company for permission to use some sections of chapters in my book *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (2004), on the Arian controversy, the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), and the Filioque controversy. These occur in chapters one, nine, and ten here and are noted where appropriate. In particular, I am greatly indebted – beyond what I can say – to Dr. Gary Jenkins, Van Gorden Professor of History at Eastern University, Pennsylvania for his immense help, way beyond the call of duty, in reading the manuscript and making many invaluable suggestions and corrections. His own commitment to, and knowledge of, the Orthodox faith, and of the Presbyterianism with which he was previously connected, has provided much needed input. Any inaccuracies or other inadequacies in what I have written cannot under any circumstances be laid at his door; responsibility rests with me alone.

The reader should be warned in advance, in Kallis' words, that 'Orthodoxy as a living organism expressed in liturgy cannot be studied solely on the basis of accepted scholarly criteria and



analyses, for in its essence it is a multifaceted life in which there is participation in an existential process that calls more for feeling and sensibility than for rationality. Examining special issues by means of objective academic criteria can give a knowledge of facts but not a knowledge of the essence itself, a knowledge best attained through the liturgical life of Orthodoxy.' And 'Many misunderstandings and prejudices concerning the Orthodox Church thus go back to a wrong approach as students try to form, merely with the help of sources and scholarship, a picture of Orthodoxy, which is not really doctrine but a way of life, with its own system-related criteria and thought forms.'³ In this, I express my appreciation for the welcome and help received at the Syrian-Antiochene Church of Saint Athanasius, Claymont, Delaware and its priest, Father James Dougherty, and for the helpful comments of Father Mina of the Egyptian Coptic Church (one of the *Oriental Orthodox Churches*), Newark, Delaware.

My own interest in Orthodoxy goes back many years, stemming in particular from my reading of the Greek Fathers, especially Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Cyril of Alexandria. In an earlier book on the trinity I refer positively to the contribution of John Calvin and John Owen; Owen himself had in his library volumes of Gregory Palamas, while Calvin referred frequently to Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus (not always in context it is true). It is my hope that, like them, we may learn with discrimination from those from whom we may in some ways differ, 'until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God' (Eph. 4:13).

Pentecost

June 2006

³ Anastasios Kallis, 'Orthodox Church,' in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3:866-8.

