

*Through Western Eyes—Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective.* Robert Letham. Fearn: Mentor Books, 2007. ISBN 1-84550-247-7.

Books concerning Eastern Orthodoxy abound. They represent quite a recent phenomenon, however, appearing late in the twentieth century. Previously, the Protestant, especially the evangelical world knew little of Orthodoxy, itself being a child of the West. The situation began to change beginning in the late 1960s, but then rapidly with the 1980s and the entry into Orthodoxy by high profile evangelicals such as Peter Gilquist and Frankie Schaeffer. This spawned a considerable number of books written by recent converts extolling the virtues of their newfound Orthodox spirituality. To these were added a flood of new books and reprints by Orthodox sources committed to engaging and even proselytizing the West. Much of the quality of these contributors was high, leaving the evangelical world to grapple with the 'new' old ideas of first-rate scholars such as Vladimir Lossky, George Florovsky, John Meyendorff, Alexander Schmemmann, Leonid Ouspensky, Christos Yannaras, Sergii Bulgakov, Dimitru Staniloae, John Zizioulas and Timothy Ware. Evangelicals were at first very slow to respond, given their general level of unfamiliarity. Along with a few highly polemical treatments, significant analyses such as those by Daniel Clendenin, Emil Bartos, Carnegie Samuel Calian, and most recently by Donald Fairbairn, began to provide evangelicals with additional information. To some degree, each of these was useful in acquainting us with different dimensions of Orthodoxy. At the same time, the highly differentiated, if not fractured, nature of evangelicalism itself left the reader with a bewildering array of opinions and perspectives. Some were tentative, while others were conciliatory. Calian's work focused on a 'bridging'

figure between Orthodoxy and evangelicalism, Cyril Lucaris. Bartos chose to closely critique one aspect of Staniloae's theology. Other works such as Fairbairn's and Clendenin's appear to be more comprehensive. Most attempted to explain Orthodoxy as it is in the present, while at the same time fully acknowledging Orthodoxy's tie to the past.

Robert Letham's offering is the latest and perhaps best in the line of serious responses. It may be the best compromise between comprehensiveness and depth. Letham himself represents a clear tradition, Reformed Christianity. This perspective carries with it several inherent strengths. It allows him to make clear theological statements because he only attempts to represent one perspective. An 'evangelical' response may now be difficult if not impossible given the wide diversity within its own ranks. In such a case, simplicity is also clarity. As a Reformed believer, Letham is also able to interact with Orthodoxy's traditional sources with an air of sympathy, given the Reformation's generally high view of the early church. He underscores Orthodoxy's long forgotten ties to the Reformation, citing both Calvin's reliance on early church Fathers, explored in depth by Tony Lane in his *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, and John Owen's interaction with Gregory Palamas.

Letham initiates his work by covering the structural and doctrinal development of Eastern Orthodoxy from Constantine's reign in the early 4th century to the influence of Palamas in the 14th. He weaves history, politics and theology together as he considers, step by step, the formation of the Orthodox ideal. Primary (and necessary) emphasis goes to the theological foundations laid by the first seven ecumenical councils. These highlighted the crucial development of the biblical concepts of incarnation, Trinity and Christology. The author

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underscores the importance of seeing this as an organic recognition of biblical doctrines by the church. In other words, the councils did not see their remit including innovation. They were simply, in their own minds, carrying forward the received tradition of the apostles. 'The councils did not look upon themselves as introducing anything new but rather as reaffirming the faith once for all delivered to the saints.' In this sense, they did not distinguish easily the Word from tradition. Though they did distinguish Scripture from human opinion, not having an equivalent to papal infallibility, they still saw canon, tradition and the structure of the church as all part of one act of revelation.

Letham places the councils under careful scrutiny, criticising some for being notorious in their day (Ephesus 449) and others (Constantinople 381, Chalcedon 451) for being vague or ambiguous at points, leading to future problems. At the same time, he also furnishes eyewitness testimony highlighting attitudes present at the councils that demonstrated attitudes behind the rhetoric. For example, he cites Athanasius' recollection of Arius and his followers winking at each other when agreeing to terminology stating that the Son came 'from God'. While Athanasius and the Orthodox fathers accepted this to mean that the Son had no other source than the Father and was not a creature, the Arians construed the words to mean that all beings, including Jesus, had to be created by God. The point made by Letham is that the Orthodox Church formed as it confronted the limitations of biblical language, forcing it to develop a careful theology as a direct outcome of Scripture and in contrast to Gnostics, Arians and others who used scriptural language to develop theology in conformity to their philosophical presuppositions. His painstaking work also highlights a significant

difference with Western evangelicals. We have very little connection to the church fathers. On the other hand, the Orthodox continue to live with the thought world of the early church. Positively, the corrosive effects of modernism do less damage to them. Negatively, they seem to have bypassed hugely significant issues that the West was forced to wrestle with, such as Pelagianism and justification by faith alone.

As the author traverses through history, he not only covers great events; he also focuses on the theologians who have had the greatest impact on the Orthodox identity. Most of these represented the early church. People such as Clement, Irenaeus and Origen, the Cappadocians and Pseudo Dionysius were instrumental in framing Trinitarianism, Christology and mystical theology. Letham demonstrates, however, that later theologians such as John of Damascus and Gregory Palamas have also shaped Orthodoxy dramatically. The former was absolutely instrumental in articulating the church's iconography and even more importantly posturing it as a defender of tradition. The latter provided the strongest articulation of the theology of deification (*theosis*), a key development that propelled Orthodoxy away from evangelical Protestantism. In the early 17th century, Orthodoxy stood at a crossroads between the Reformation, with its emphasis on the cross and justification and incarnational *theosis* emphasising the incarnation, free will and synergy. As Letham describes, with the death of the Reformation's advocate, Cyril Lucaris, the church swung back to Palamas and away from the West. It was, unfortunately not the only opportunity squandered. Letham recounts the series of misunderstandings and missteps that characterised the division in the church that erupted concerning the insertion of the bilious clause in the

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Nicene Creed by the Western church in the 6th century and its subsequent acceptance as dogma by the Council of Lyons in 1274.

Following his detailed analysis of the councils and early history, Letham addresses distinctive Orthodox theology. He frames his analysis by stating that the Orthodox emphasise the visual over the oral. As such, the entire visible church serves as a teaching tool or a sermon if you like. Icons are introduced as teaching tools for the church as they grant believers heavenly perspective. They serve, as Letham notes, as 'windows to heaven through which to perceive greater realities beyond'. He also makes a critical distinction that sets Eastern icons apart from Western representational, devotional art. In icons, the archetype, the thing represented, takes the initiative. In other words, God working through the icon takes initiative in sanctifying the believer as he or she venerates the icon. This is a solid contrast to Western spirituality where we, through faith, appropriate truth in visual representations, such as Catholic statues. Interestingly, by giving God the initiative, Orthodoxy positions itself closer in this way to Reformed Christianity rather than Catholicism. This fact, however, is undermined unfortunately by Orthodox soteriology. In any case, Letham provides a service in highlighting a strong distinctive of Orthodoxy.

Letham proceeds beyond this by justifying icons as objects of religious art. He first has to clear up an obstacle to their appreciation, namely the confusion between seeing icons as object of veneration, not worship. In order to do so, he compares the icon to a picture of Martyn Lloyd Jones. The picture of the Welsh saint provides us with a picture of faith and godliness. It inspires us in our Christian walk. It reminds us of how God filled his life and empowered it for service. More than that, it brings

our minds to contemplate the goodness and graciousness of God. We do not, however, worship Martyn Lloyd-Jones, living or dead. Neither do the Orthodox. Letham traces icons back to the Old Testament, noting the role of the cherubim as icons in the Temple. Behind his justification of visual, devotional art, is a larger objective. Letham seeks to promote the restoration of an appreciation of Christian esthetics within the context of worship. He declares, 'The church is not a lecture room'. So it isn't.

On the other hand, Letham distances himself from Orthodoxy with regard to iconography. He disagrees, for example, with Orthodoxy's insistence at placing icons as the most prominent feature of worship. As he notes, there is no evidence in the Bible that pictures of saints were placed in the place where the church worshipped. Additionally and crucially, using an icon of Christ as a representation of God is dangerously reductionistic, 'abstracting his humanity from his person, falling into the trap of Nestorianism'. As Letham advises, 'We have to worship Jesus as he is-as Jesus, the image of the invisible God'.

Letham clearly appreciates Orthodoxy and holds up its advantages to us. This is most helpful. For example, unlike our own evangelical worship that addresses a handful of biblical verses, the Orthodox liturgy is saturated with Scripture. This, he notes, is a 'stark contrast'. 'In Orthodoxy, the whole Psalter is read through every week'. The regular Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom contains 98 quotes from the Old Testament and 114 from the New. Special times of the year yield even more. I deeply appreciate Letham's point. There are right and compelling reasons for us to remain Reformed believers and not Eastern Orthodox, but that should not keep us from both appreciating the best in Orthodoxy and

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recognising our own shortcomings. Allied to Orthodoxy's rich use of Scripture, however, is a singularly non-Western, non-modern disregard for time. Orthodox services are long-long enough for methodically working through Scripture. By contrast, we Western evangelicals appear to be slaves to the clock. In addition, Letham observes that our services appear to be 'something hastily cobbled together'. Before we disagree, how many of us have not experienced the moment when, in the interest of time, we sang verses and four of our favorite closing hymn, rather than the whole thing? So eviscerating *A Mighty Fortress* or *And Can it Be* is an altogether too familiar phenomenon.

On the other hand, Letham wisely criticises Orthodoxy's insistence on prayers to the saints. He correctly distances the practice from the reckless charge of necromancy, but he does not let Orthodoxy off the hook. Praying to dead saints is not diabolical, but it is completely useless and more importantly, it takes our attention away from Christ our mediator. He also takes great exception to Orthodoxy's marginalisation of preaching in favour of visual worship and the eucharist. Letham's explanation is hugely useful as he recounts Calvin's great contribution in championing orality in answer to the excesses of medieval nominalist devotion. He terms this 'Calvin's hermeneutical revolution'. In contrast to the medieval church's pursuit of a beatific vision of God, unobtainable in this life, Calvin proposed that God fed us through words, appropriated through faith, that granted 'direct auditive intuitive knowledge of God'. Though we could not see him in this life, we could know him and his love through his words. We, unlike the struggling medieval church, could have real assurance. In my own opinion, his short description merits the purchase of the book, even without all of the other advantages.

He also critiques Orthodoxy's understanding of soteriology. Rather than positing an exclusive reliance on God's loving sovereignty overcoming our complete fallenness, Orthodoxy relies on infusions of grace as we cooperate with God's grace. The difficulty is that the Orthodox erroneously do not accept original sin. They also do not believe that Adam fell from perfection, but simply from a state of 'undeveloped simplicity'. The fall was not that drastic, in other words. Humans are therefore not that impaired from seeking and finding God. Salvation also does not have to correct that much. It does not need to requite an angry God. It does not focus on Christ standing in the bar, taking the judgment of God in our place. Rather, the resurrection provides us victory over Satan and this world. In modern, psychological terms, it actualises us. While we would not wish to dismiss the truth of salvation as *Christus victor*, we also would not overlook the heart of Pauline theology, something Orthodoxy seems to have done. Letham correctly sees the seeds of the mistake in Orthodoxy's over-reliance on Athanasius and his drastically 'truncated view of the atonement'.

Letham camps out on this point, seeing it as the most serious difference between Reformed evangelicalism and Eastern Orthodoxy. On this point, the idea that we cooperate fully with God – what the Orthodox refer to as synergy, Reformed Christianity differs more profoundly than it does with Catholicism. Orthodoxy cannot tolerate any hint at election or predestination, both of which it almost completely misunderstands. The misunderstanding has far ranging consequences. Those attempting to enter Orthodoxy, for example, have to renounce any such beliefs, though the Orthodox themselves clumsily equate predestination with something more akin to Islamic fatalism than

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Calvinism. Letham is quite right on this point. Not only do the Orthodox underestimate the devastating effects of the fall, they also misconstrue the Reformed position. This is for Letham as it is for us, an unavoidable barrier.

On the other hand, he also points out the enormous contribution made by Orthodoxy to our understanding of Trinity. Letham points out that for the majority of those in the West, 'it is little more than an arcane mathematical riddle'. How true. The author backs up his criticism of the West, noting how few hymns, for example, really address Trinitarian faith. Many accepted works to the contrary, present erroneous or sub-Trinitarian ideas. Not so with the Orthodox who promote Trinitarianism at every level of worship and life. Likewise, the Orthodox excel in promoting a central biblical doctrine—union with Christ and God. On the other hand, his comments concerning Orthodoxy's fidelity in holding the line against Islam and communism I find perplexing at best. He wishes to show that the Orthodox have been more faithful in holding the line against unbelief in their environment than Western churches have in theirs. Unfortunately for his point, the truth is more complicated than that. The church East and West has experienced a mix of fidelity and unfaithfulness. Orthodoxy is full of unholy alliances with the state, to include communist dictatorships and its relationship to early Islam was often ambiguous at best. Alain Becancon's work, *Trois Tentations dans L'Eglise* conclusively points out the less than consistent role played by the Byzantine church and state with regard to Islam. This does not absolve modernist Protestantism. It simply implies that Orthodoxy has no right to view itself as a paragon in this regard.

Additionally, the book is not easy reading. His

choice to start the working by plowing through detailed summaries of Orthodox doctrinal development, the history of early church councils, and doctrinal distinctives such as theosis, hesychasm etc., makes for slow, and for some, frustrating reading. The details do matter, but they often seem to serve as speed humps for the general reader. I do admire his reasoning. He intends to show the reader how, block by block, the Orthodox edifice was constructed. This serves a great purpose. One of Orthodoxy's claims is that it is essentially timeless; that it really did little to develop since the time of the apostles. Traditionally, Luke himself was considered the first icon painter, for example. Letham's careful work exposes the slow, careful, justifiable (in most cases) development of Orthodox doctrine and praxis.

I also remain unconvinced of his method. Letham defends his methodology by asserting that it is more understandable to his intended audience, Reformed readers, than a more Orthodox-centred approach. I am not sure that he is correct. Rather than jumping in with an intricate overview of the councils and the doctrinal disputes over which they contended, he could have coherently approached his material from the opposite perspective. For example, since Orthodoxy champions a visual theology, he could have started with worship and iconography, explaining their theology through these visual means. Perhaps this occurs to me because I have an Orthodox heritage. On the other hand, this is the approach that the Orthodox use when they proselytize the West. They do not simply address logical or historical categories when speaking to evangelicals. They bridge from the drama of liturgy and its confrontation of the world to a discussion of theology, not the reverse.

I simply suggest that their approach may work best

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for us as well. In part, it may be that Letham is inadvertently proving his point. He points out persuasively that Orthodoxy has much to teach Reformed Christianity. Perhaps one of its gifts is teaching us to embrace a more visual, more liturgical means of communication. I am by no means suggesting embracing the Divine Liturgy or the Mass. I simply propose that the Word, more effectively supported by visual worship exemplified by the liturgy, particularly the sacraments, would be a much better way of teaching doctrine and theology. Furthermore, rather than treating subjects such as iconography as either a separate item of theology or an act of worship, explain iconography together as both and then use icons to teach theology, just as the Orthodox do. The whole point of Orthodoxy is to collapse the distinctives of theology, worship and life into one, integrated life. We tend to separate them, incorrectly in my view, and we explain Orthodoxy's treatment of them in a way that distorts them because we divorce them from each other. I greatly appreciate Letham's understanding of the theology. I learned a great deal from his penetrating analysis. A more Orthodox-friendly presentation would have been easily as comprehensible and less likely to squeeze Orthodoxy into a Western mold. In Letham's defense, I add that his approach has good company. Neither the other Protestant writers nor Orthodox theologians writing for Western audiences attempt anything like the integrated approach I just suggested. All approach their material by describing practice, theology or history. Perhaps it is time.

In general, I have to say that I am impressed by the work. It is the first effort that really engages Orthodoxy critically and carefully. Letham clearly affirms the good in Orthodoxy, highlights the contentious, unapologetically underscores

non-negotiables that divide Orthodox and Reformed evangelicals, and gives some perspective with regard for the future. While I do think that he has to strain hard to try and affirm some points, such as the equivalence of Justification by faith alone with the Jesus Prayer, etc., in most cases he hits the mark. I also think that one of his greatest contributions, whether deliberate or otherwise, is to point to Reformed Christianity, especially as it was expressed by Calvin himself, as a logical point positioned somewhere between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. If I am correct about this, it implies that Reformed Christianity serves as a distinct alternative to the other Christian alternatives – complete as a comprehensive world and life view. Given the increasingly fragmented evangelical world, it points the way to a viable, evangelical alternative to either Catholicism or Orthodoxy that has the foundational strength and distinctiveness to thrive alongside the other two.

Letham's work ends with a brief exposition of John 17 and its call to visible unity within the church, whatever the obstacles. The unity revealed that is based on the unity of the Father and the Son has characteristics that serve as imperatives for us. Unity must be observable, physical and spiritual, diverse, loving, personal, differentiated and emphatically imperative. 'The Son prays to the Father in the Holy Spirit for precisely this. It is not a matter peripheral or optional. To avoid it is idolatry – at best sectarian. The fragmentation of Protestantism is indefensible'. As a son of the Reformation, I say amen and amen.