

Eastern Orthodox Theology in Outline

GERALD BRAY

It is a great privilege for me to be asked to present to you the main features of Eastern Orthodox theology.¹ There are two ways in which a subject of such magnitude can be approached—historically and systematically. Given the weight which tradition occupies in Orthodox thinking, it is probably best to begin with the first of these and then move on to the second. This order is especially appropriate, because Orthodoxy has never developed a theological system which can be compared with the

great work of Thomas Aquinas, the sixteenth-century Lutherans, or the seventeenth-century Calvinists. What Orthodox theologians now believe depends very much on what aspects of their tradition they have chosen to emphasize, and on how much outside influence, especially from Western Christianity, they have absorbed.

Historically speaking, Orthodox theology divides most naturally into five distinct periods. These may be set out as follows:

1. *From the Beginning to AD 451*

This period is one whose theology all Christians share, and in theory at least, brings Evangelical Protestants closest to the Orthodox Church. We both agree about the inspiration and authority of the New Testament, and accept the process which led to its canonization in the first Christian centuries. At the time of the Reformation, scholars used the Byzantine ecclesiastical text as the basis for their translations into Western European languages, which to some extent brought Protestants closer to the Eastern Church than to Rome. However, the dominance of that text was effectively challenged about 1850, and since then Protestants have been in the forefront of textual criticism, which goes directly counter to Orthodox sentiment. At the present time, the Green Orthodox Church continues to use the Byzantine text for liturgical purposes, but many Orthodox scholars have recognized the importance of textual criticism, and the Church has authorized the publication of translations based on the Nestlé-Aland critical edition, whose superiority no responsible Orthodox would now dispute.

As far as the Patristic period is concerned, Evangelicals and Orthodox agree about the main decisions which were taken at the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). That is to say that we agree that Arius was a heretic, that God is a Trinity of three persons or *hypostases* in one substance (*ousia*), and that Jesus Christ is the divine person of the Son of God, who after his incarnation is manifested in two natures, one divine and one human. According to the definition of the Council of Chalcedon, in the incarnate Christ each nature retains its own integrity, but they are inseparably united in the divine person of the Son. However, this definition provoked a schism within the Eastern Church which has lasted to the present day, and which we need to consider briefly.

The condemnation of Nestorius at Ephesus (431) and the definition of Christ's incarnation at Chalcedon (451) produced two breakaway churches in the East, which continue to exist. The first of these is the Nestorian Church, sometimes called 'Assyrian', which was once very large but is now a small body of about 50,000 people. Many of them have now abandoned their homes in northern Iraq, and the Church's headquarters are in New York! They often have friendly relations with other Christian bodies, including Evangelical Protestants, but as a community they are now too small to have much impact on the international scene. Their main distinctive belief is that the human nature of Christ has an identity independent of the incarnation of the Son of God. Many modern scholars in the West are convinced that Nestorius was not a heretic, and that his theology was misinterpreted.

This is improbable, but there is no doubt that many Western scholars, especially liberal Protestants, feel a certain affinity for Nestorius, whose Christology bears certain resemblances to theirs.

It is a different story with the descendants of the Alexandrian Church, which broke with Constantinople after 451. This church continued to assert that Christ had only one nature after his incarnation, basing its position on the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria (d.444), who is accepted as Orthodox by both sides in the conflict. These so-called Monophysites, or non-Chalcedonian Orthodox, are now the dominant Christian body in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Armenia, and are well-represented in South India, where they are known as the 'St Thomas Christians'. Generally speaking, they have been more open to Protestant missionary work than the Chalcedonian Orthodox have been, and in some places, such as Ethiopia, co-operation with Evangelical missionaries has sometimes been quite close.

At the same time, they have re-established friendly relations with Chalcedonian Orthodox, and there is a real chance that the two branches of the Eastern Church may be reunited in the foreseeable future. It is now usually said that the theological differences between the two traditions are mainly terminological, not substantial, and that therefore some form of union can be worked out to the satisfaction of both sides. The main difficulty seems to be the past history of conflict; can a reunited Church honour as saints men of both traditions, who fought each other so many centuries ago?

When considering relations between the Chalcedonian Orthodox and the Western Churches, a rather different picture emerges. Chalcedon represented the agreement of Rome and Constantinople against Alexandria, and therefore, Orthodox and Evangelical Protestants are both Chalcedonian. But when Protestants question Chalcedon, it is usually because they have been attracted to some form of Nestorianism, whereas the Chalcedonian Orthodox have been greatly influenced by Monophysitism. We therefore approach our agreed Chalcedonian theology from different ends of the spectrum.

Furthermore, Latin theology, and in particular, the work of St Augustine (354–430), has never been absorbed into the Orthodox way of thinking. For the Eastern Churches, the patristic legacy is exclusively Greek, even though some formal recognition may be given to the Latin tradition. This matters, because Augustine is the filter through which all Westerners read the Fathers of the Church, though his writings were not even translated into Greek until the late thirteenth century, and have never played more than a marginal role in Orthodox thinking. Thus we find that even though we share a 'common' theological tradition

from this period, East and West have interpreted it differently, so that its role as a basis for unity is less significant than might be thought at first sight.

2. From 451 to 843

This was the early Byzantine period, in which the Chalcedonian Eastern Church established its distinctive identity and theology. In theory, it was united with the Western Church throughout this period, but in practice the two branches of Chalcedonian orthodoxy grew further and further apart as time went on. From the Eastern point of view, this was because Greek theologians after 451 were mainly preoccupied with restoring communion with the Monophysites. On several occasions this very nearly succeeded, but each time the main opposition came from Rome, which would not tolerate anything which suggested that the Chalcedonian Definition, which was largely the work of Pope Leo I, was less than fully orthodox.

In the course of these debates, Constantinople developed its own theological tradition, whose greatest representative was Maximus the Confessor (580–662) who was both a leading opponent of compromise with the Monophysites and the chief supporter of the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. This theology, which was a blend of Neoplatonism and Christian orthodoxy, became a standard feature of Orthodox piety, largely thanks to the work of Maximus. Its chief doctrine is that of *theōsis* (*obozhenie*), which we normally translate by the ambiguous word *deification*. This means that it is the destiny of the Christian to become by grace what Christ already is by nature—God. To the true believer is given the opportunity to share in the uncreated light which shone on Mt Tabor—we shall be transfigured in the light of Christ just as Moses and Elijah were. Mystics have a brief experience of this transfiguration in this present life, but the fulness awaits us all in the resurrection. Thanks largely to the influence of Maximus, Orthodox theology is mystical to a degree unknown in the West, even among mystics!

Somewhat later, the Christological debate took another turn, when the Emperor Leo III tried to abolish the veneration of icons (726). This led to a long controversy, in which the supporters of tradition were rallied by the theological writings of John of Damascus (675–c.749). His great *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* remains the classical synthesis of Greek patristic theology and is still the chief sources of systematic Orthodox doctrine today. Iconoclasm was defeated at the Second Council of Nicaea (787) though it enjoyed a brief revival in the early ninth century. It was finally conquered in 843, when the icons were restored in the cathedral church of Hagia Sophia on the first Sunday in

Lent, known since that time as the ‘Triumph of Orthodoxy’.

The Western Church supported John of Damascus on theological grounds, because it agreed with him that if Christ was truly a man, then his face could be painted. An icon was therefore a true likeness of the Son of God, and could be used to concentrate the worshipper’s thoughts on him in much the same way as we might use a photograph today to remind us of our loved ones. But the veneration of icons was condemned at the Synod of Frankfurt (794) and has never formed a part of Western spirituality. The Roman Catholic Church has preferred to venerate statues of its saints and of the Virgin Mary, a feature which is never found in Orthodoxy. The official theological reason for this is that veneration of a three-dimensional statue is idolatry, whereas veneration of a two-dimensional icon preserves the important principle that the third dimension is spiritual and transcendent. This fits very well with the Neoplatonic understanding of reality, which dominates Orthodox spirituality in a way unknown in the West, and which forms a natural counterpart to the concept of *theōsis*.

3. From 843 to 1453

This was the later period of Byzantine theology, and was the time when the East and West finally went their separate ways. The theological justification for this was set out by the Patriarch Photius, who in 867 composed a treatise in which he denounced the Western addition of *Filioque* (‘and from the Son’) to the Nicene Creed. Photius claimed, correctly, that the addition of this word had never been approved by an ecumenical council, though he may not have known that it was added to the Creed in Spain, sometime in the sixth century, as a defence against Arianism. The doctrine of the double procession of the Holy Spirit is Augustinian in origin, and is fully set out in his great work *On the Trinity*, which Photius would theoretically have regarded as the work of an orthodox doctor of the church, but of which he had no knowledge.

Photius’ opposition to the *Filioque* was based on the view, already articulated by Maximus the Confessor and by John of Damascus, that the Father alone is the Fountainhead of Deity (*fons Deitatis*) from whom both the Son and the Holy Spirit derived. To say that the Holy Spirit acquired his identity from the Son as well as from the Father was therefore to say that there are two sources of Deity and to overthrow monotheism! Photius’ attack did not immediately destroy communion between Rome and Constantinople, but it remained to irritate relations. These gradually deteriorated, not least because of conflicts over the evan-

gelization of the Slavs, which took place from both East and West.

Initially, the work of the Greek missionaries, Cyril (d.867) and Methodius (d.885) received support from Rome (Cyril died there!), but this changed as missionary work got caught up in the political struggle between the Western Empire and Constantinople. The line drawn across Europe by this struggle has remained one of the deepest cleavages on the continent. Finland and the Baltic States could never be Russified because of this, nor could Poland. Further south, Serbs and Croats speak the same language, but their religious differences have created two completely different cultures, which cannot live together in peace.

By 1054 it was possible for papal legates on a visit to Constantinople to excommunicate the Patriarch for his refusal to accept their authority. This date is usually taken to mark the separation of East and West, but in fact relations continued for another generation or more. What really pushed the churches apart was the Crusades. When the Crusading armies conquered Antioch (1097) and Jerusalem (1099), they established Latin bishops there—a formal assertion that the existing Greek patriarchs were unacceptable to Rome. Later, in the Fourth Crusade (1204), they captured Constantinople itself, and tried to Latinize the Greek Church by force.

The Greeks recaptured Constantinople in 1261, but their hold was never really secure, and they embarked on a long series of negotiations, aimed at achieving reunion with the West. This meant accepting universal papal jurisdiction, which the Easterners were unwilling to do. Some of them even began to claim that the *Filioque* was a papal plot—if the Holy Spirit, who is the creator of the church, proceeds from the Son, they argued, and the Pope is the Vicar of Christ on earth, that must mean that the church is subordinate to the Pope, who stands in the same relation to the church as the Son does to the Spirit!

This was a rather strange argument, but theological controversy was fuelled by a revival of mystical spirituality, known as hesychasm. Hesychasm is a form of spiritual devotion not unlike yoga, which was developed by the monks of Mt Athos in the early fourteenth century, and was vigorously defended by Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), who became Archbishop of Thessalonica in 1341. Hesychasm was denounced by its opponents as ‘navel-gazing’ (*omphaloskepsis*), and since its chief enemy was an Italian Greek, Barlaam of Calabria, many hesychasts detected Western, papal influence behind his attacks. This impression was strengthened by the emergence of a school of *Latinophronoi* among the intellectuals of Constantinople. These were people who admired medieval Western civilization, and embarked on a programme of translation which made the great works

of Latin theology available in Greek for the first time. They were influential in court circles, and it was from their ranks that the Greek scholars who went to Italy as forerunners of the Renaissance were largely drawn. Among the Orthodox Greeks, however, they were regarded as traitors and their Latin sympathies were rejected.

The final crisis came in 1439, when at Florence the Emperor John VIII, supported by the Latinophrones, signed the document of reunion with Rome which allowed the Eastern Churches to keep their canons and their liturgy, but obliged them to accept the theology and the jurisdiction of Rome. This split the church at Constantinople, which fell to the Turks only fourteen years later. It was also the excuse used by the Russian Church to declare its independence from Greek control; the Greek metropolitan of Kiev, Isidore, had signed the act of union at Florence—something no true Russian would ever dream of doing!

4. From 1453 to 1821

The fall of Constantinople was a tragedy for the Greeks, but it also brought a theological liberation of the Orthodox Church from the imperialist claims of Rome. The union of Florence was immediately repudiated, and has been regarded with intense hatred by most Orthodox ever since. It has however remained the basis on which Rome has pursued a policy of evangelizing inside the Orthodox world, and there are now a number of so-called Uniate Churches, which have accepted the Florentine formula as the basis for reunion. The Uniates, or ‘Greek Catholics’ as they are sometimes called, are regarded with extreme hostility in the Orthodox world, and they have sometimes been forced to dissolve themselves into the Orthodox Church. This was the express policy of Stalin after 1945, and led to what looked like the virtual extinction of Uniate Catholicism in Eastern Europe. Only since 1989 have these persecuted people come out of hiding—but the Orthodox remain as deeply hostile to them as ever.

But in spite of all this, the period of captivity was a time of Western influence on the Orthodox Church. The Reformers tried, with varying degrees of success, to enlist the Orthodox as allies in the struggle against Rome, and in the process to reform their church. Their most prominent Greek supporter was Cyril Lucaris (1572–1638), who as Patriarch of Alexandria (1601) and later of Constantinople (1618), did his best to modernize Greek theology and church life. Cyril even authorized a translation of the Scriptures into Modern Greek, and in 1629 produced a Confession of Faith which was clearly inspired by Calvin’s *Institutes*.

Lucaris fell victim to intrigue with the Patriarchate,

and was eventually murdered by a band of Turks who were probably in the pay of the Jesuits. His Confession provoked a lot of opposition, and before long alternatives were produced which reflected a very different theological position. The first of these was the work of the Moldavian (Romanian) theologian Peter Mogila, which was approved at the Synod of Iași, in 1643, and the second, more definitive one, was composed under the direction of Dositheus, Patriarch of Jerusalem, and approved at a Synod held there in 1672. Both of these Confessions reflect strong Roman Catholic influence, and their adoption created a situation in which the Orthodox world accepted Roman Catholic, counter-Reformation theology almost intact, with only a few concessions to Orthodox tradition (e.g. on the *Filioque*). In the Russian Empire, things went so far in a Westernizing direction that Latin even became the language of instruction in the theological academies!

Russia, which at this time was the only Orthodox country independent of Turkish control, soon went through a series of changes which reduced the power of the church to control its own destiny. The first of these was the great schism, or *raskol*, of 1666, in which the so-called 'Old Believers', who objected to the liturgical reforms of the Patriarch Nikon, left the church and created a kind of fundamentalist opposition which still survives, though its orthodoxy was formally recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1961. Then came the sweeping reforms of Peter the Great (1683–1725), who abolished the Russian Patriarchate and subordinated the church to the state along what he thought were Lutheran lines, borrowed from Germany and Scandinavia. From that time until the Russian Revolution, the church was a department of state, and was frequently used as an instrument of government policy.

It was during this period that Orthodoxy became identified with national feeling in all the countries where it has been historically dominant. The reason for this is that the Turks did not recognize nationality, only religion. They accepted that there was an Orthodox *millet*, as they called it, presided over by the Patriarch of Constantinople, who now wielded far more power than ever before. Throughout the Ottoman Empire, the church became the only recognized institution of the subject Christian peoples, a role which it still continues to play in the minds of the people. The same effect was achieved in Russia by different means. There, Russification included conversion to Orthodoxy, which was pursued with some vigour in the Baltic States and elsewhere. Today, when an Orthodox country becomes politically independent, it must have its own national church, and even its own patriarch, as the symbol of its nationhood. The recent changes in the former USSR are typical in this respect—the churches of Ukraine and (to a lesser extent) of Belarus want their

independence from Moscow as a sign that their nations are recognized as equal to the Great Russian nation.

5. From 1821 to the Present

The beginnings of Greek independence in 1821 may be said to usher in the modern phase of Orthodox theology. Once again, Western influence has been very strong, though now it is concerned with the Enlightenment principles of the leaders of the revolution. The Orthodox Church played an ambiguous role in the wars of independence, partly because it owed its power to the Turks and partly because most of the intellectuals who supported independence were atheists in the school of Voltaire. Nevertheless, there were enough priests who lost their lives in the struggle for freedom to give the church a strong claim to be officially represented in the newly independent Balkan states. In Russia there was a similar ambiguity, in that the intellectuals were under strong French influence but the Orthodox Church had led the popular struggle against Napoleon and was a bulwark of the tsarist régime.

Into this situation came Evangelicals, in the form of the Bible Society. In both Russia (where it was supported by Tsar Alexander I) and Greece, this organization tried to help the Orthodox Church to reform itself by producing Bibles in modern translations. These translations, or revisions of them, are still used, by Orthodox as well as by Protestants, but the work of the Bible Society and of Protestant missionaries was soon curtailed. Nevertheless, Protestant churches began to appear in Orthodox countries, where they faced persecution from the newly-independent states. In Greece for example, all Protestant missionaries were expelled in 1834, and they could work only among Greeks in the Ottoman Empire. The Turks even encouraged this kind of evangelism, because it helped to weaken the national cohesion of the Christian minorities in their empire, but it did not make Evangelicals popular with the Orthodox Church!

To take the Greek case as the most obvious one, by 1900 almost all Greek Protestants were living in the Ottoman Empire. Some of them became Greek citizens by accident in 1912, when Greece conquered Macedonia, but most were not included in the Greek State until the transfer of population in 1922–23, when they were expelled from Asia Minor. The Greek government however, influenced as it was by the Orthodox Church, did not really want them, and created difficulties for them as they settled in Macedonia. Even today, though, refugees from Asia Minor and their children form the backbone of the Greek Protestant churches—a legacy of nineteenth-century

missionary work and the restrictions imposed on it at that time. At the theological level, on the other hand, liberal German Protestantism became very influential, and has remained so in the Greek universities. Elsewhere, the advent of Communism created a different situation, to which we must now turn.

The destruction of the Russian Empire in 1917 at first gave the Orthodox Church its independence, and the patriarchate was restored almost immediately, but the triumph of Bolshevism forced the church to live on the margins of society and even to go underground. This pattern was not applied in Eastern Europe with the same degree of severity, but even so there was little freedom from state control. However, in spite of this, the Orthodox Church in these countries underwent a spiritual renaissance, whose origins can be traced back to the early years of the nineteenth century and even earlier.

One of Peter the Great's reforms was the abolition of monasteries, again on the pattern of the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe, and the eighteenth century was a low point of Orthodox monasticism. However, after the time of Napoleon, this situation began to change quite dramatically. A lone Russian monk by the name of Paissy Velichkovsky had translated a collection of monastic sayings, known as the *Philokalia* in Greek (*Dobrotolubie* in Slavonic), which became the basis for a renewed monasticism in Russia. By 1815 this was in full swing, and monasteries gradually became spiritual centres for 'serious' Christians. In spite of the widespread secularism of Russian high society, these were not few in number, and they became remarkably influential. Particularly in the writings of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, their ideas became the common property of all educated Russians, whether they believed in Orthodox Christianity or not.

By 1900 a growing number of intellectuals were becoming dissatisfied with secularism, and many of them returned to the Orthodox Church under the guidance of Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), who may be regarded as the spiritual father of this new generation of Orthodox thinkers. Many of them, like Nikolai Berdyaev, were former Marxists, who were feared and opposed by Lenin. This group virtually reinvented Orthodoxy as a mystical, spiritual religion, fundamentally hostile to the materialism of modern life. They abandoned the narrow nationalism which had afflicted an earlier generation of Orthodox (the so-called 'Slavophiles'), and appealed to the highest level of universal philosophy and culture. Those who survived the revolution were expelled in 1922, and most went to Berlin or Paris.

From that time, Western theologians have been made increasingly aware of the Russian religious renaissance, which has continued in different ways up to the present. There has been a similar movement in

Romania, under the influence of Dumitru Staniloae (b. 1903), who has done a great deal to revive the Palamite traditions of hesychasm. In Greece, which escaped communism, a different pattern has emerged. There, the revival of Orthodoxy has been much more nationalistic in tone, and it has been associated with extreme right-wing politics and anti-Western feeling. Even when the politics have changed, as in the case of Christos Yannaras, the undercurrent of anti-Western feeling is still there. For the most part, it consists of a rejection of the Catholicising theology imposed on the Orthodox world in the seventeenth century, but Protestant groups also come under condemnation. One must never forget that from the Orthodox standpoint, Roman Catholics and Protestants are not all that different from each other, just as from the Protestant standpoint, Catholics and Orthodox often appear to be much the same!

At the present time, Orthodox theology is more conservative than it has been in recent centuries, and more inclined to look to its Byzantine roots than ever before. At the same time, it is also more remote from the people it purports to serve. In Greece, this is because of massive Westernization which has occurred since 1945; elsewhere, it has been the product of communism, which has loosened the traditional hold of the church on popular culture. There are signs that in the former Soviet Union, for example, people may be turning back to the church, and the works of the great Russian theologians of the early twentieth century are now being made widely available for the first time, but it is still too early to tell what impact this will have. It may be that increased opportunities will lead Orthodox theologians to seek more contact with the West, but the opposite is also possible—now that they are free again, they may feel no need to look beyond the resources of their own tradition. What can be said with some certainty is that most students and young people have little knowledge of Orthodox theology and culture, though they may feel a sentimental attachment to it. It can also be said that those who are religious will be the most likely to have read some Orthodox theology, which has never been very popular in traditional village life!

Theological Themes

We may now look briefly at some of the main theological themes which govern Eastern Orthodox theology. The first of these is the doctrine of the Trinity. All branches of the Orthodox Church, whether Chalcedonian or not, agree that God the Father is the unique source of Deity, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from him. This doctrine may be held with varying degrees of intensity, and is certainly felt more strongly by the

Greeks than by most other Orthodox, but it is common to them all. For the Western observer it raises the question of the equality of the Son with the Father—does the Father possess something which the Son does not share, and if he does, does this not make the Son ontologically inferior to him? It also raises the question of whether it is possible for a Christian to attain to a knowledge of the Father through the Holy Spirit, without passing through the Son. This is a difficulty which has been raised largely as a result of the charismatic movement in the West, and would not be felt by most Orthodox, who are usually extremely anti-charismatic.

Orthodoxy avoids charismaticism by the distinction which it draws between the *essence* and the *energies* of God. God's essence is unknowable, but human beings may participate in his energies. Perhaps the easiest way to understand this distinction is to remember that for the Orthodox, the Holy Spirit is the *energy* of the incarnate Christ. They believe that God the Father bestowed his Spirit on the Son (as seen, for example, in the baptism of Jesus), and that the work of Christ in the world is done in and through the power of this Spirit. As Christians, we can also share in this power, as Christ bestows some of the Spirit's energy on us.

In its Christology Eastern Orthodoxy generally agrees with the Western Churches, although it reserves a special place for the Virgin Mary, who is venerated as the *Theotokos* (*Bogorodica*), literally the 'God-bearer'. Many Evangelicals mistakenly think that Evangelical theology differs from Orthodoxy on this point, but strictly speaking, it does not. We too confess Mary as the *Theotokos*, but are unhappy at the kind of veneration to which that has led in practice. It is important to clear up misunderstandings here, among Evangelicals as much as anyone else, because Mary is liable to be a stumbling block for many at the level of personal devotion. If Evangelicals overreact to this and deny the *Theotokos* doctrine, as many in ignorance do, they may end up justifying the charge of Nestorianism which is sometimes laid against them.

In its soteriology Eastern Orthodoxy does not deny or even seek to minimize the work of Christ, but it understands this somewhat differently from Evangelicals. For a start, it tends to regard the problem of sin as more closely connected with human finitude than with disobedience. Christ's work is a victory over the power of death more than an atonement for sin in the Western sense, and there is a latent tendency towards universalism which goes back at least as far as Gregory of Nyssa (330–c.395). Orthodoxy finds it very difficult to accept any idea of election or predestination as we understand these terms, and its teaching on these matters is bound to strike the average Westerner as Pelagian and/or Arminian, though these labels are not strictly applicable because the theological framework is so different.

The main reason for this is that in its anthropology, Orthodoxy puts the greatest possible stress on the idea that man is created in the image and likeness of God. Modern Orthodox theologians recognize that there is no difference between the image and the likeness, but they are forced to accept the fact that the Greek theological tradition has always understood the image to refer to something permanent in the human character, whereas the likeness is something additional, which was lost at the Fall. It is because of the image of God present in man that we all have the power to choose the good and reject the evil, even though we cannot ultimately save ourselves. Nevertheless, the emphasis is very much on restoring us to the state from which we fell, rather than on being born again as a new creation in Christ. The Calvinist doctrine of total depravity is not an Orthodox ideal!

Furthermore, it is Orthodox anthropology which gives rise to some of the most characteristic features of its theology. Its understanding of the image of God forms the basis for its teaching on *theōsis*, as well as giving encouragement to such ideas as Solovyov's 'Godmanhood' (*bogochelovechestvo*), according to which the incarnation of Christ has sanctified all creation, making it possible to achieve union with God by experiencing and practising the creative love which flows from the Holy Trinity. It is only fair to say, however, that a number of Orthodox are hesitant when they meet such theories, because they see in them a tendency towards pantheism. Certainly it is true that Orthodox theology, deeply influenced as it is by Platonism, has always found it difficult to understand evil as anything but the absence of good, or as 'non-being' (*to mē on; nebytie*), which leads it to affirm that everything which exists must by virtue of that fact partake of some aspect of the divine being.

In its sacramental theology Orthodoxy is closer to Roman Catholicism than it is to Evangelical Protestantism, though it is less legalistic than Rome. Orthodox believe in baptismal regeneration, and stress the absolute importance of the Eucharist as the centre and focus of the Christian life, but frequent communion is rare. Other rites, such as penitence and matrimony, are practised but do not carry the same sacramental connotation as they do in Western Catholicism. Divorce, for instance, has never been a major theological problem, though there is a limitation put on the number of times it may take place—no more than three in the case of any one individual!

Orthodox ecclesiology is more collectivist than anything found in the West; there is a deeper sense of being part of the mystical body of Christ. This can be seen from many of their church buildings, where the frescoes on the walls are meant to indicate the fellowship of the saints in heaven. To go into the temple (*naos; chram*) of God is to enter the gates of

heaven in a mystical sense. The liturgy, like the song of the saints in heaven, continues in its own unchanging way, while the worshippers may be doing almost anything! Western observers are immediately struck, when they enter an Orthodox Church, by the extreme disorderliness of it all—a significant proportion of the congregation appears to be paying no attention to what is happening in the service! But at the same time, there is a curious sense of togetherness—the people who are ‘paying no attention’ are not interrupting the proceedings either! This peculiarly Orthodox mixture of orderly disorder was turned into a spiritual principle by the Russian Slavophile thinker Alexei Khomyakov (1804–1860), who called it *sobornost’*, or as we might say, ‘individual diversity in free unity’. It is certainly something quite foreign to the regimentation of the West, but whether it is a virtue or a vice is a matter of debate!

As far as the wider church is concerned, Orthodox recognize only themselves as possessing the fulness of the Christian faith. They also accept the primacy of the Petrine See of Rome, though not in its present form. Protestant Churches are kept at greater distance, and are usually faulted on several counts, not least their failure to preserve the historic pattern of the church’s ministry. There is certainly no question of any form of intercommunion with any Protestant body, and a convert from another church must normally be rebaptized. On the other hand, the Orthodox have found it possible to join the World Council of Churches, though they dislike its liberalism and political involvement.

Internally, Orthodoxy appears to be a single communion, but in many ways it is a divided church. Each national group keeps to itself, and may not fully accept the others, whatever the official canonical position might be. This causes major problems in the United States, where different national churches mingle, and where there has been an attempt to create an American Orthodox Church. In reality, however, that church is mainly Russian—the other national groups generally prefer to maintain their distinctiveness.

However, national differences are not the only factor dividing one Orthodox group from another. Some local churches have broken away from the canonical obedience, and so are not recognized. The Macedonian Church has been in this position since it broke with the Serbs in 1959, and so is the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church, which was set up in 1918 and now exists mainly in North America. The Russian Church is further divided into an ‘exile’ church, which has recently canonized Tsar Nicholas II, and the Moscow Patriarchate, which of course is the only body recognized as legitimate in Russia itself.

Another difference concerns the calendar. Until 1700 all Orthodox used the Julian calendar and reckoned years from the so-called creation of the

world, which was supposed to have occurred in 5507 BC. According to this calendar, 1993 would be the year 7501! In 1700 Peter the Great adopted the Christian year, and the other Orthodox churches followed suit in the course of the eighteenth century. But he did not adopt the Gregorian calendar, which at that time was not used in Protestant countries either, because of its ‘papal’ origins! The first Orthodox country to change this was Bulgaria, which made the switch in 1916. It was soon followed by Romania, Serbia and Greece, though the Serbian Church did not make the change until 1958. This provoked an ‘Old Calendarist’ schism, which was strongest in Greece, and which still survives. Many of the stricter Orthodox are Old Calendarist in observance, and regard the Gregorian calendar as an imposition by the state.

In Russia the Old Calendar is still official in the church, though the state changed over in 1918. This means that holidays are 13 days behind the West, which is why Christmas is celebrated on 07 January (= 25 December, Old Style). On the other hand, all Orthodox continue to celebrate Easter by the Old Calendar—an anomaly which is explained by the need to keep all the Orthodox Churches together for this, the greatest of Christian feasts. Old Calendarism has now developed its own theological justification—not just the predictable anti-papalism, but also the belief that, as Jesus and the apostles used the Julian Calendar, Old Calendarists are somehow more in step with them! It is nonsense, of course, but it gives some idea of the ‘fundamentalist’ character of Old Calendarism, as also of the essentially ‘fundamentalist’ character of the Russian Church, which can be traced back to the Middle Ages.

In its spirituality Orthodoxy is radically different from any form of Western Christianity. The ministry of the World occupies a secondary place, and very often there is no preaching at all. This situation has changed somewhat in the twentieth century, especially in Russia, but it is still true to say that preaching is uncommon in Orthodox worship. On the other hand, services are frequent and usually very long, sometimes lasting up to three hours. The liturgies which are used are very ancient and contain a great deal of material which is no longer necessary. There is an enormous amount of repetition, and worshippers tend to drift in and out of the service as it goes on. The language used may vary from the spoken tongue, which is common in Western countries, to ancient liturgical languages which are now only half understood. In the main Orthodox countries, services are still conducted in Ancient Greek or in Church Slavonic, both of which have a rich variety of expression and of association for the worshippers which makes any changes to a more modern idiom extremely difficult.

Lastly, and perhaps most fundamentally, Ortho-

doxy works within a conceptual framework different from that of the Western tradition. Broadly speaking, the West uses juridical concepts, borrowed from Roman law. The great issues of Western theology—justification by faith, the jurisdiction of the papacy, the validity of sacraments and ministry—all these are expressed in legal language. Eastern theology does not, and often cannot, absorb this way of thinking. Take an expression like ‘the validity and efficacy of the sacraments’. It is virtually impossible to translate this into either Greek or Russian, because there are no terms which correspond closely enough to the Western concepts. ‘Validity’ exists mainly in the sense that a bus ticket is ‘valid’, and ‘efficacy’ tends to mean effectiveness. ‘Sacrament’ of course, is translated as ‘mystery’, which has a different flavour altogether. ‘The effectiveness of the mystery’ is not exactly the idea which the Western term is trying to convey!

Or consider the word ‘ordination’. This is a legal term—it means ‘putting in an order’. In the Orthodox Church, the equivalent word is *cheirotonia* or *rukopolozhenie*, but this means ‘laying on of hands’, for which there is no single term in Western languages. The conceptual background is completely different, going back as it does to the patriarchal blessing given by Abraham to his son Isaac—something which is absent from the word ‘ordination’. To what extent therefore can it be said that we are talking about the same thing?

This is probably where we reach the heart of the difficulty which we face when we enter into dialogue with Orthodox Christians. For a Protestant to debate with a Roman Catholic is relatively simple, because the language and the concepts are the same. It is only the way in which they are understood and applied which is different. But with Eastern Orthodoxy we are in another world, even when the words we use appear to be similar. How is it possible to argue for a forensic interpretation of *dikaiosynē*, for example, when the legal context is missing? Was Paul really speaking in that way, or did he have something else in mind? These questions are now being raised by New Testament scholars within the Western tradition, and this is not the place to enter into debate over them. But it is important to realize that Orthodox Christians simply do not have this kind of background to begin with.

We shall no doubt have much to say about

Orthodoxy in its various forms during this conference, but perhaps we can conclude our observations this evening with the assertion that in theological matters, the Orthodox tendency is towards the *apophatic*, whereas the Western tendency is towards the *cataphatic*. ‘Apophatic’ means ‘negative’—all attempts to discuss the divine mystery must end in silence, because there are no words to describe the transcendent majesty of the Godhead. ‘Cataphatic’, on the other hand, means affirmative—we must declare to the nations the wonderful works of God, and give a reason for the hope that is within us. Both forms of theology have their place—it is certainly true, for example, that Western theologians talk too much and pray too little! Both traditions have much to learn from each other in this respect, and neither has a monopoly of Christian truth. As Evangelicals we have much to give the Orthodox, but we also have much to learn. May God grant us the grace to do both of these in a spirit of humility and genuine love for those whose spiritual experience is at once so like, and so different from, our own.

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Footnote

1. This paper was originally delivered at an IFES Consultation on Evangelicals and the Orthodox Church in 1993. We are grateful to Dr. Bray for permission to print it here. We have retained its original form since this retains something of the sense of the original occasion.