

Review of “Through Western Eyes” by Robert Letham

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Book: Robert Letham, *Through Western Eyes – Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective* (Rossshire, Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2007)

Introduction

What is Eastern Orthodoxy? For most Christians in the West, Eastern Orthodoxy (EO) seems mysterious, and looks like an older Roman Catholicism without the Pope. Into this lacuna of knowledge, Reformed theologian Robert Letham has written a book seeking to “demystify” Eastern Orthodoxy for the rest of us Christians of the Western tradition. Specifically, Letham seeks to put forward and analyze Eastern Orthodoxy according to his Reformed perspective, thus helping us understand what Eastern Orthodoxy is about.

Letham divides his book into three sections. In part one, he deals briefly with the history of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Part two deals with the theology of Eastern Orthodoxy, and part three is where he does a comparative evaluation between Reformed theology and Eastern Orthodoxy. He ends with a glossary of terms and a rather comprehensive bibliography for the study of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Eastern Orthodoxy claims continuity with the early church, so it is fitting that Letham begins his introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy with the history of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Letham traces the history from the early church through the ecumenical councils (Chapter 2), then moves onto the later ecumenical councils called in the Eastern Church (Chapter 3). He then looks at the prominent fathers of the Eastern Church in Chapter 4, both the ones common with the Western Church and those unique to the East. Lastly, in Chapter 5 he completes the narrative beginning in the seventh century to modern times and to the state of Eastern Orthodoxy today.

Concerning theology, Letham looks at EO under 5 headings: Of Prayer and Icons (Chapter 6), Scripture and Tradition (Chapter 7), Church and Sacraments (Chapter 8), the Trinity (Chapter 9), and Salvation (Chapter 10). All of these are in some sense the flashpoints between EO and the Reformed churches, and Letham goes through what EO teaches and contrasts that with his Reformed perspective.

Chapter 12 ends the book with a plea for biblical unity. This is not the wishy-washy unity of liberal Protestantism, but in recognition of the present differences, to seek a way forward through them. Letham’s first principle thus is a “firm commitment to the truth of the gospel” (p. 296), which he regards as non-negotiable. His second principle is “a readiness to remove misunderstandings,” followed by “a need to recognize genuine disagreements,” “an onus to persuade,” and “patience” (p. 296). In this, and throughout

the book, Letham exhibits a spirit of charity towards Eastern Orthodoxy, seeking to find as many points of commonality with them while pointing out what he thinks are their errors.

The goal of this book is to introduce Eastern Orthodox to Christians of a Reformed slant. Therefore, the book has to do three things: (1) Portray Eastern Orthodoxy correctly, (2) Portray Reformed theology correctly, and (3) Compare and Contrast the two well. Has Letham succeeded in the following? We will look at the chapters and see if he has succeeded in what the book is meant to do.

The History of Eastern Orthodoxy: The Councils of the Church

On the telling of church history, Letham narrates briefly the events leading from Jerusalem to Chalcedon well. The narration of the last 3 ecumenical councils are helpful for Protestants, especially since the councils are called by the Eastern Roman Empire since the collapse of the Western half to barbarians. Geopolitics come into play as the ecumenical nature of a council run by only the eastern churches is suspect. How can something be called “ecumenical” if the entire church is not present?

Rather than call into question the ecumenical nature of the last three councils, Letham argues that the sixth council, Constantinople III (680-1 AD), is ecumenical because “Pope Leo II approved the Definition, had it translated into Latin and distributed it to all bishops in the West” (p. 72). The sixth council considered the fifth council, Constantinople II (553 AD), ecumenical, and various popes accepted the fifth council (p. 65), so accordingly Letham seems to consider it ecumenical as well. Letham narrates the events leading up to and flowing from the seventh council, Nicaea II (787 AD). Concerning its status of being “ecumenical,” Letham points out that the pope at that time was a “Western ally of Nicaea II” while the Franks opposed Nicaea II (p. 76), thus its ecumenical status is somewhat in question.

The facts are clear as to what had transpired in those last three councils. The issue of ecumenicity however cannot be so easily settled in the manner Letham has done. If being ecumenical implies that the **entire church** is involved, then having a council made up of half the church, and then having the decrees promoted by one man the Pope to the other half of the church, is not truly being ecumenical. Likewise, having various popes accept a council after it has met does not make that council ecumenical. The edicts of Constantinople II and III could be right, but being theologically correct and biblical does not ecumenical a council make.

Letham correctly represents the views of those who accept all seven councils as ecumenical, which EO does as well. But history has facts, and the interpretation of facts. The question of calling all seven councils “ecumenical” is not a question of fact, but of interpretation. Letham seems to hold to at least the ecumenical nature of the first six councils, while at this point leaves open the nature of the seventh council. From the way each of these councils are narrated, Letham might use the facts that the Franks were

against Nicaea II as a way to reject its ecumenical label. However, the fact that for all councils there are someone or some group who have rejected the findings of each council means that such a criterion would not be a proper way to reject an ecumenical label if the tactic were to be tried. Therefore, based on historical reasons, it seems to me that there is no way to simultaneously hold to the ecumenical nature of the first six councils while rejecting the ecumenical status of the seventh one. Much more consistent therefore it is to label only the first four councils “ecumenical,” and consider the last three councils regional councils.

What is in a label? The Vincentian Canon¹ asserts that the orthodox catholic faith comprises teachings that are believed everywhere, always and by all (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*).² To assert ecumenicity is to assert orthodoxy over and against heresy. To assert ecumenicity is to assert that anyone who rejects said teachings is a heretic, in danger of or have already fallen away from the faith. If one denies that is what the label “ecumenical” means, then one is not in line with the spirit of the early church. After all, the early church did not pronounce Arius a heretic just because they merely have a difference of opinion with him! The early catholic church believed their dogmas to be true, including their anathemas. One may disagree with their beliefs and their judgments, but one is not free to reject the fact that this is what they had believed and what they had judged to be the case.

To assert the ecumenical nature of the first four councils (Nicaea (I), Constantinople (I), Ephesus, Chalcedon) is to assert that the decrees of the first four councils concerning doctrine are binding on all Christians. All Christians everywhere have to in some way believe these doctrines in order to be considered Christians. To assert that the last three councils are not ecumenical is to assert that their decrees are not binding as to the nature of true Christianity. This is not to claim that any of the decrees are or are not biblical, but just to assert that they are not *de jure* binding on believers.

In his telling of the history of the councils, it is therefore disappointing to see that Letham does not address the nature of ecumenicity and the status of the last three councils. The fact of the matter is that Eastern Orthodoxy holds to the same view of ecumenicity as I have described here. In Eastern Orthodoxy, the seven councils are considered ecumenical and non-negotiable.³ As they claim to be the one true church,⁴ this implies that one can only be recognized as a Christian if one believes in the decrees of the seven councils, either explicitly or implicitly. While acceptance by the whole church is indeed

¹ From Vincent of Lerins

² Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* 2.6. Accessed http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/main/vincentoflerins/catholic_faith_and_heresy.shtml (Oct 25, 2021)

³ “Among the various elements of Tradition, a unique preeminence belongs to the ... the Creed, to the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils: these things the Orthodox accept as something absolute and unchanging, something which cannot be cancelled or revised.” [Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity* (London, UK: Penguin, 1963, 2015), 191]

⁴ C.f. Ware, 300--2

held by EO,⁵ the view that they are the only true church implies that mere acceptance by those outside EO is not what EO teaches, since EO asserts that it can call an ecumenical council anytime it wishes,⁶ implying that any “acceptance” is restricted to those already within EO. Since Letham is not an Eastern Orthodox believer, it is clear that he either rejects EO’s view of ecumenicity or the ecumenical status of the last three councils, but it is unclear if he rejects either or both of them. What is clear is that this very important difference between any Reformed perspective, which must certainly reject the decrees of the seventh council, and EO is not adequately discussed by Letham in his book.

The History of Eastern Orthodoxy: Blind spots and decline

While Letham does not deal with the differences concerning the perception of the seven councils between EO and the Reformed churches, he does point out a particular blind spot of EO. For all their vaunted respect for the seven councils, EO has neglected the condemnation of Pelagianism (through condemnation of the Pelagian Celestius) in the Council of Ephesus (pp. 77-8). Without going into the doctrinal issue for now, it is not consistent to claim to hold to all seven councils as being ecumenical while punting on the issue of Pelagianism which was condemned at Ephesus in 431 AD. EO is therefore not as consistent in their veneration of the seven councils as they claim to be.

The decline of EO as compared to the Western churches is apparent, as the East in practice tied themselves very closely to the political sphere. While it is not exactly true that the emperor is the Eastern pope (caesaropapism), in practice the Eastern church is tied too closely to their political leaders.⁷ The fall of the Byzantine Empire ensured the total conflation of church and state,⁸ while simultaneously causing the intellectual collapse of the Church causing it to enter a “time warp” (p. 119).⁹ From then on, Russia took center stage in the telling of the Eastern Orthodox story, until the Communist takeover of 1917. Yet the conversion of the Slavs was rather superficial (p. 135), and does nothing to change the picture of decline of EO into modern times.

The Doctrines of Eastern Orthodoxy: Scripture and Tradition

In Eastern Orthodoxy, Scripture and Tradition are not pitted against each other since Scripture is considered part of Tradition, which includes spiritual experiences, creeds,

⁵ According to Metropolitan Timothy Kallistos Ware, one particular Eastern Orthodox theologian in Khomiakov, and his school, held that “a council cannot be considered ecumenical unless its decrees are accepted by the whole church.” (Ware, 245)

⁶ Ware, 240

⁷ Ware, 39

⁸ “With their civil and political life organized completely around the Church, it became all but impossible for the Greeks to distinguish between Church and nation.” (Ware, 86)

⁹ See also Ware, 88

councils, liturgy, the Fathers, canon law, and icons.¹⁰ The debate over Scripture and Tradition between Protestants and Rome just does not happen in Eastern Orthodoxy, since “Tradition” is construed differently in Eastern Orthodoxy than in Roman Catholicism. Eastern Orthodoxy sees Tradition as a dynamic construct and an ongoing revelation onto the Church.¹¹ Scripture is considered the written record of that revelation showing forth a “dynamic history of oral tradition” (p. 179). But even this written record is different, with the Orthodox having the Apocrypha in their canon, and some of the Pseudepigrapha (e.g. Book of Jubilees, Martyrdom of Isaiah, Assumption of Moses) as their apocrypha books (p. 181).

Since Scripture is the written record, it can be inferred that Scripture would have the preeminent authority in the Eastern Orthodox Church, and this is what we see (p. 188). However, having preeminence is not the same as being the ultimate authority, and this should be a major issue to focus on.

We should here note the doctrine of continuing revelation in the Eastern Orthodox churches, noticing that it is contrary to the Reformed doctrine of the finality of God’s revelation in Scripture (c.f. WCF 1.1). It is disturbing that Letham blithely passes this over as it is a major point of difference between the Reformed perspective as confessed in major confessions like the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), and Eastern Orthodoxy. In fact, another chapter could be added to the book discussing the nature of revelation and EO’s belief in continuing revelation. But I will just note this for now, and move on to look at the topic of Scripture itself.

In dealing with Scripture and Tradition, Letham surprisingly minimizes the differences between EO and the Reformed position. Letham asserts that “the Reformed need to realize the commitment of the Orthodox to the Bible as the word of God” (p. 196), and that the Reformed position allows for development of doctrine in the church, citing WCF 1.6 as proof (p. 197). It must be said that it might be helpful for the Reformed to realize that Eastern Orthodox actually believe the Bible to be the word of God, but then the same can be said about Roman Catholics, Jehovah Witnesses, and Mormons. Believing the Bible to be the Word of God does not mean a lot when it comes to dealing with differences between groups who call themselves Christian. The question is not whether EO holds that the Bible is to be the Word of God, but rather what does it believe the Scriptures to be.

This is where things get a bit sticky. Letham is right to praise EO as seeing the Bible as the book of the Church. Radical individualism and the secularization of the academy in matters of theology are contrary to the spirit of the Scriptures. In this sense, both the Reformed tradition and the EO are in agreement. But again, pointing that out is the same

¹⁰ Letham, 177. Also Ware, 189-201

¹¹ This might sound like the more recent Roman Catholic view of tradition, promoted by John Henry Newman in his book *John Henry Cardinal Newman, Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (USA: ReadAClassic.com, 2011). However, Newman’s developmental hypothesis still views Tradition as separate from Scripture, whereas in Eastern Orthodoxy, Scripture is situated within Tradition.

as pointing out that EO believes the Bible to be the Word of God. Helpful to some extent, but does it point out where the differences between EO and the Reformed position is?

What should be the key point of contention is EO's rejection of Scripture as the final authority. Letham is right to argue for reading the Bible with the Church, but a proper interpretation of Tradition 1 (as advocated by Jaroslav Pelikan)¹² is not a rejection of *Sola Scriptura* by any stretch of the imagination. As Letham himself says while rejecting biblicism, "the Bible is the highest court of appeal in all matters of religious controversy" (p. 197). What Letham seems to downplay is that EO rejects this principle. After all, while Scripture has the preeminence, can any EO use Scripture to reject other parts of tradition that are contrary to Scripture? Theoretically, that might be so, but woe is the EO theologian who attempts a biblical critique of icons and a rejection of Nicaea II. Whereas while the Reformed theologian treasures tradition, he also believes thus:

All synods or councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both. (WCF 31.4)

A rejection of Tradition 0 (the Anabaptist position) does not imply an embrace of Tradition 2 (the Tridentine Roman Catholic position), or some mixed version of Tradition 1.5. A proper rejection of biblicism does not equal a rejection of the ultimate authority of Scripture. The Eastern Orthodox, due to him situating Scripture within a continuum of ongoing revelation, is unable to put Scripture as the ultimate authority, for to do so would imply that all those other "revelations" are at best mediated and normed by Scripture, something which EO does not allow.

Letham therefore downplays a major difference between the Reformed tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy as it regards to the ultimate authority of Scripture. But what about the idea of the development of doctrine? On a superficial level, both sides seem to hold to doctrinal development. However, note the language of WCF 1.6 which Letham cites, and I which I now reproduce with more context:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. ... (WCF 1.6)

I note that WCF 1.6 categorically rejects the idea of continuing revelation either of the "spiritual" type or the human authority type ("traditions of men"). But what should be noted here is that the doctrinal development spoken about in WCF 1.6 is one of inference through "good and necessary consequence." In other words, it is through rigorous thinking through Scripture that we see the logical implication of Scripture more clearly. This kind

¹² See M. Lee, "Scripture and Tradition," in Daniel H. Chew and Jonah Tang (eds.), *Faith Seeking Understanding – Volume 1: The Legacy of the Reformed Tradition* (Proceedings from the 2009 CREDO500 Conference; San Jacinta, CA: Daniel H. Chew, 2020), Location 158-427, Kindle

of logical development is not the same as an idea of development through the Holy Spirit working now in the church, or as the WCF puts it, “new revelations of the Spirit.”

Thus, concerning doctrinal development, Letham fails again to note the real difference between the Reformed tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy. While both traditions hold to doctrinal development, the Reformed tradition categorically rejects the EO view of development as an errant view. Letham is in error in trying to conflate the views of both traditions, instead of pointing out this real, and very important, difference that actually exist between the two.

The Doctrines of Eastern Orthodoxy: The Trinity

Both Eastern and Western branches of the early church have a common heritage in the four ecumenical councils. While it is disputed whether the fifth and sixth councils are ecumenical, the decrees of these councils are generally orthodox. The main division between both branches concerning the doctrine of the Trinity lie in the famous (or infamous) *filioque* clause, which the West in the Third Council of Toledo (589 AD) added to the Nicene Creed. The *filioque* clause (“and the Son”) was added to the phrase concerning the Holy Spirit “proceeding from the Father (and the Son).” While certainly the addition of this phrase itself is not the sole cause of the rupture between Eastern and Western branches of catholic Christianity, it became the doctrinal flash point for the split between East and West.

According to Letham, the Western tradition stemming from Augustine begins with the one being of God and reasons to the three (p. 222). Letham critiques Aquinas as defining the persons simply as “mutual relations within the one essence” such that the personhood of the persons seem sorely lacking (*Ibid.*).¹³ Letham likewise states that Western trinitarianism possesses a “tendency towards modalism” (p. 223). While one may dispute particular elements of Letham’s case, it should be abundantly clear that at least in popular Christianity, the focus of Western Christianity has been on the one God and less on the three persons of the Godhead. There is a reason after all why Unitarianism and Oneness Pentecostalism have sprouted from the Western Church and not from Eastern Orthodoxy

It is from this beginning with the one essence that the *filioque* issue arose. According to Letham, the *filioque* was added to fight Arianism (p. 224), and used to support the equality of the Father and the Son. The East however focuses on the monarchy of the Father and views the filioque as coming up with two principles of origination in the Godhead (pp. 229-30), among other reasons. Letham goes through the trinitarian discussions and looks at the problems of both the East and the West, before settling with looking at the quote by Gregory Nazienzen where he “oscillates back and forth from the one to the three” (p. 240). Borrowing an analogy from modern physics, Letham asks us to consider the particle-wave duality of light (photons) and electrons to consider that maybe the truth is so much

¹³ See also Ware, 209, citing Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, Question 40, Article 2

more beyond our logic, that God “infinitely transcends the capacities of our minds” (p. 242).

On this particular issue, Letham does justice to the differences between East and West. There are however two things I want to point out. First, the tendency of the West is towards modalism, regardless of how much they wish to be trinitarian, precisely because they continue to preserve the metaphysics of classical theism. Second, the way forward can be to have less trust in philosophy in seeing it as something more than being descriptive of things. As it pertains to ontology, philosophy should not deal with the manner of material things, as science (the successor to natural theology) has shown us how things in this world actually work. This is not an argument for the obsolescence of ontology, only that most of its domain during the time of Aristotle is no more under its domain. Ontology as it deals with real things is descriptive, not prescriptive. This is further complicated when we deal with God, who is *sui generis*. Therefore, much of the philosophical discussions here are probably overthinking things.

Lastly, Letham does note the promotion of the essence-energies distinction within Eastern Orthodoxy.¹⁴ However, he regards that as bringing forth a God that is unknowable as to who He is; it “defies rational discourse” as we “can say nothing about who God is” (p. 237). While Letham is correct to point out that Eastern theology has an air of unknowing around it, he fails to recognize that the whole point of the essence-energies distinction is to make God available to the believer. The real culprit of this air of unknowing is Neoplatonism as mediated by Pseudo-Dionysius.¹⁵ Gregory Palamas inherited the Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius, and the essence-energies distinction was meant to be a philosophical category in addition to Neoplatonism so that God can “communicate Himself to humanity.”¹⁶ Thus, despite Neoplatonism making God unknowable, God is still knowable as He communicates Himself through His energies. Therefore, Letham is in error in misunderstanding the essence-energies distinction, which is a helpful concept that I believe can be appropriated for orthodox (small ‘o’) trinitarian theology.

The Doctrines of Eastern Orthodoxy: Salvation

As it pertains to salvation, Letham addresses the issue through looking at EO on the state of humanity and sin, justification, atonement, deification (*theosis*), and synergism. On humanity and sin, Letham correctly points out EO’s view of man as believing that man “was created in a state of innocence with the potential for moral perfection” (p. 244) and

¹⁴ The *essence* of a thing is what the thing IS. *Energies* refer to the operations the thing IS DOING, its workings, its “power” [c.f. Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, III. ii. 6; this version Gregory Palamas, *The Triads* (The Classics of Western Spirituality; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 94; Also Ware, 65]. “Energies” are not works, because in energies, the persons exist completely in those energies (Ware, 65)

¹⁵ See Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (SUNY series in Ancient Greek Philosophy; Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2007)

¹⁶ John Meyendorff, “Introduction,” in Palamas, 20. Also Ware, 66

that “all people inherit the corrupt nature received from Adam but there is no inheritance of Adam’s guilt” (p. 246). On the topic of sin therefore, there is a great divergence of EO from the Western tradition. Nevertheless, as Letham points out in his discussion of justification (which the EO lacks a formal doctrine for), the language used in the liturgy seems to demand a view of sin and a need for the mercies of God.

Thus, the most we can say about EO is that it is semi-Pelagian-ish in orientation. This comes into play when we discuss the topic of synergism, which EO holds to be true.¹⁷ In fact, since EO operates from a different metaphysic of humanity and sin, the term used to describe their view should be “synergism” more than “semi-Pelagianism.” Since, “for the East, fallen man is diseased but not dead” (p. 266), thus he can respond with his free will to God’s grace even though he is severely marred by sin.

Here, Letham addresses an accusation that he has probably heard against the Reformed view of predestination and irresistible grace. The accusation is that the Reformed view is both a form of fatalism and a form of Monothelitism. Letham refutes this by stating that in Reformed theology, we believe in “*both* the sovereign action of God in our salvation *and* full human responsibility and free agency” (p. 267. Italics original). While what Letham says is true, for the latter charge it is unclear how a Christological teaching (that Christ has two energies or wills; dyothelitism) has any bearing on the situation with us normal humans. Thus, the accusation of Monothelitism seems curious at best.

On the atonement, the East has traditionally focused on the motif of *Christus Victor*, where the atonement is all about Christ being triumphant over the powers of evil at the cross (p. 252). Nevertheless, as Letham points out, this is a manner of difference in emphasis, as the Western church does hold to *Christus Victor* while the Eastern church does believe in some form of vicarious substitutionary atonement as well.

Concerning justification, Letham states that “justification by faith is not an item that poses an insuperable barrier between Orthodoxy and the Reformed” (p. 252). Formally, Letham is correct, since EO does not really have a doctrine of justification by faith. However, the issue is not that clear cut. The reason why EO does not have a doctrine of justification by faith **alone** (the “*Sola*” in *Sola Fide* is very important) is because justification itself is not as important in the soteriology of EO as in most Protestant theologies. In EO soteriology, man is fallen, but through the grace of Christ, those who respond are saved through Christ with the end goal of *theosis*.¹⁸ Since the focus is more **relational** and towards the end-goal of *theosis*, it seems to matter little to EO what position one takes on the **forensic** declaration of justification.

That being said, the classic Reformed doctrine of *Sola Fide* asserts that one is declared right before God from faith apart from works. In other words, while we do not say that

¹⁷ Ware, 215

¹⁸ I prefer to use the transliterated Greek term since I do not think the term “deification” is a good rendering of *theosis*. “Deification,” from the terms “Deus” and “facere,” seems to mean “making or becoming God.” *Theosis* however is a participation in the energies of God, not His essence, thus the term “deification” does not seem to adequately convey the true meaning of *theosis*.

works are unimportant in the life of the Christian, we assert with the Scriptures that God is the one who “justifies the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5). This teaching, more than just a mere idea of “justification by faith,” is contrary to the teachings of EO, whereby man must turn to God first. To assert that a person is considered just before God before he even does a just act — I do not believe that would be acceptable in Eastern Orthodoxy.

Lastly, on the issue of *theosis*, Letham correctly points out that it does not mean becoming God in His essence or being (p. 260). Letham tries to draw an analogy to the doctrine of union with Christ, and asserts that there can be some form of common ground between union with Christ and *theosis* (pp. 254-62). However, is *theosis* the same as union with Christ? I would suggest not.

Theosis is participation in the energies of God, not the essence of God. It is a form of union to be sure, and in this union, the one united does not cease to sin.¹⁹ We note here that this union is a participation in the *divine* energies, which in EO’s idea of such participation, involves some form of transfiguration of the body. According to Timothy Kallistos Ware, some of their saints have undergone such a form of transfiguration, as “when Arsenius the Great was praying, his disciples saw him ‘just like a fire.’”²⁰ While certainly *theosis* does not necessarily involve bodily transfiguration with light, the focus of *theosis* seem to be more towards a union of matter involving the physical body than fellowship with the divine.

This focus on the material points towards what is a flaw in EO thinking, and where it diverges from the Reformed tradition on union with Christ. As Eric Perl has shown, Pseudo-Dionysius is heavily indebted to Neoplatonism,²¹ and this Neoplatonism enters Eastern Orthodoxy through the Eastern Church Fathers John Damascus and Gregory Palamas. The essence-energies distinction was made to serve the purpose of making God available for believers,²² since otherwise the Neoplatonic “the One” as “beyond being” is unknowable and incommunicable, certainly not the God of the Bible. Neoplatonism has shadowed Eastern Orthodoxy since then. As Michael Horton has pointed out, the Eastern Orthodoxy tradition possesses “abundant examples also of a quite different emphasis on the ascent from matter to mind, which funded ascetism and monasticism.”²³ Thus, while Palamas found it necessary to utilize the essence–energies distinction to preserve communion with God, the rest of the Platonic and Neoplatonic influence continues on in the Eastern churches in its focus on ascetism and monasticism.

A view of union is thus created that is ambiguous as to what the union of *theosis* actually refer to. The view of union promoted in Neoplatonic spirituality is the view of *methexis*

¹⁹ Ware, 230

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 227

²¹ Perl, *Theophany*

²² See footnote 16

²³ Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville, KY: WJKP, 2007), 304

(μεθεξις), or as Horton puts it, “overcoming estrangement.”²⁴ In this view, union as *methexis* sees “being” as being on a continuum and the union happens as one progresses towards the One beyond being through contemplation and thought.²⁵ On the other hand, the essence-energies distinction prohibits a merger between the creature and God. By focusing on the physical, on transfiguration, and that this transfiguration can be seen in the ascetics like Arsenius the Great, *theosis* in practice seem to hold to union as *methexis*. Yet in theory, such a union is punted into a union with God’s energies, and therefore it is not a true Neoplatonic union at all.

In the Reformed tradition, union with Christ is a true union, but it is a union of intimate fellowship (κοινωνία) with God.²⁶ That such is the case can be seen in the text used most often to argue for *theosis*, 2 Peter 1:3-4, which states

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. (2 Peter 1:3-4 ESV)

Ὡς πάντα ἡμῖν τῆς θείας δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ τὰ πρὸς ζωὴν καὶ εὐσέβειαν δεδωρημένης διὰ τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ καλέσαντος ἡμᾶς ἰδίᾳ δόξῃ καὶ ἀρετῇ, δι’ ὧν τὰ τίμια καὶ μέγιστα ἡμῖν ἐπαγγέλματα δεδώρηται, ἵνα διὰ τούτων γένησθε θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως ἀποφυγόντες τῆς ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐν ἐπιθυμίᾳ φθορᾶς. (2 Peter 1:3-4 BGT)

The phrase “become partakers (κοινωνοὶ) of the divine nature” is γένησθε θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως, where we can see the word *koinonia* as the Greek word that is translated to “partakers.” It is thus through being in fellowship and close communion with God intimately that we are therefore “partakers of the divine nature.” We “partake” insofar as we are in communion with God, meeting God covenantally as He is our Lord and Savior.

In contrast to this, it is disappointing that Letham derived the opposite conclusion from the same passage. After quoting the same biblical passage, Letham claimed that “this is more than mere fellowship” (p. 257). If the comparison is with mere *human* fellowship, then such a sentiment makes sense. However, how is it possible to claim that it is not just fellowship when the Greek word for fellowship (*koinonia*) is literally staring at his face? And if union is more than fellowship, and fellowship itself is not opposed to a mystical or spiritual union, then what is this “union” promoted by Letham supposed to be?

In light of all this, it seems clear that there is a real difference between the Reformed tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy as it pertains to *theosis*. While we should agree that *theosis* is not as heretical as it might initially sound, the Eastern view of *theosis* seem

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153. Horton made an error in his book by calling it “metathexis,” which he corrected later in his systemic theology; See also Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 602-5

²⁵ Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, 165; Perl, 71

²⁶ Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, 181-8

confused as to the nature of its union with the divine that it is promoting. If it is merely a participation in God's *energies* that can happen in this life, how does that work out and is perceived in practice? How does ascetism and monasticism cohere with the idea of *theosis*, and in what sense is physical transfiguration an expression of *theosis*? Eastern Orthodoxy's Neoplatonic legacy and its Palamite improvement, however it is synthesized, seem far removed from Reformed theology on this issue.

In Ware's depiction of *theosis*, *theosis* is combined with the doctrine of glorification.²⁷ This certainly makes it more orthodox while simultaneously obscuring why it should be called *theosis* in the first place. In glorification, there is some sense of ontological transformation, but that ontological transformation is from creature to glorified creature, at least in the Reformed tradition. In Reformed theology, as much as we are changed, we still remain creatures, and the creation still the creation. The New Earth is not going to become somehow "god-like." We will become like God ("partakers of the divine nature") in that believers will be in full and intimate communion with God and join Him in His work, but we will never become "like God" in somehow becoming semi-divine (the lie of the Devil in Genesis 3:5).

Thus, we see that there is a real difference between the Reformed and the Eastern Orthodox on the issue of *theosis*. Unlike what Letham says, we should see *theosis* as a major point of difference between the Reformed tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy. The following points should be investigated: (1) The nature of *theosis*: Is it a form of ontological union? (2) The significance of ascetism towards achieving *theosis*; (3) To what extent does the Palamite essence-energies distinction, as it is operative within EO, preserve the Creator-creature distinction. All these are great questions to be investigated, which one does not get with Letham in this book.

The Doctrines of Eastern Orthodoxy: On icons

A noticeable difference in an Eastern Orthodox service, as compared to any Protestant service (even Anglicanism with her ceremonies and vestments), is its liberal use of icons. An EO service is a sensate service, with incense and ceremonies and icons everywhere.

What is an icon? As Letham points out, "Nicaea II defined icons or images as any representation of Christ, the Mother of God, or the saints and angels, or the cross 'made of colours, pebbles, or any other material that is fit, set in the holy churches of God, on holy utensils or vestments, on walls or boards, in houses and in streets'" (p. 146). Since Nicaea II is considered by Eastern Orthodoxy to be the seventh ecumenical council, the use of icons is considered to be an article of faith. Icons or holy images are however not to be worshipped, since worship (*latreia*) belongs to God alone. Rather, icons are to be venerated (*proskunēsis*) (p. 146). The ground for EO's use of icons is that icons mediate the divine, following the view of Pseudo-Dionysius as mediated by John of Damascus (p.

²⁷ Ware, 226-9

151).²⁸ From the Scriptures, EO points to the Old Testament's use of signs and images, and then further assert that Jesus' incarnation somehow sanctifies nature so to speak and thus the use of icons (created pictures) is now mandated (p. 153). In this light, the rejection of icons is seen as a rejection of the Incarnation.

Letham's response to the issue of icons is mixed. On the one hand, he points out that pictures in themselves are not an issue, but he states that their "placement in the context of worship" is "confusing" (p. 156). Secondly, following Reformed Christology, he asserts that "to make an icon of Christ is to abstract his humanity from his person (the eternal Son), and so to fall into the trap of Nestorianism" (p. 158). Letham's second point is certainly the Reformed position concerning any depiction of Jesus. Letham's first point however concedes too much. In elaborating his first point, Letham points out that an elderly couple in a church he had been preaching in "quite frequently" had a picture of the late Martin Lloyd-Jones, and asserts that "presumably these good people venerated it" (p. 155). Of course, Letham knows they did not kiss the photo or anything of that sort, but he asserts that such is due to mere cultural differences. However, is having a picture of Lloyd-Jones really veneration?

Letham's argument here is basically that veneration, since it is not worship, is ok, and even Reformed Christians have been doing it. The only issue he has is that EO does it in the context of the worship service, thus potentially confusing veneration and worship resulting in the possible worship of the icons. I however dispute that Reformed Christians have been doing veneration of any sort, and that is not because of any difference in the supposed cultural expression of veneration. The key point of veneration in EO, as opposed to just remembrance, is that veneration involves the objects of veneration being used as mediators to mediate the divine. This borrows from Dionysius and Neoplatonism where the signs through their hiddenness reveal the God beyond being.²⁹ In other words, veneration is an act of mediation towards divine things. Either one venerates the icons and through holy things come to know God, or venerates the holy men and through them come to know God. Having said that, is it possible for veneration to be perceived as high honor and remembrance? Perhaps so, but if that is the case, then their presence in the worship service is optional, yet it is all but impossible to get the Eastern Orthodox to treat their icons as optional aids and have a proper service without them, so perhaps they are not there just for honor and remembrance.

Since veneration is more than just respect and remembrance, Letham is in error in asserting that even Reformed Christians venerate photos of departed saints. On the EO distinction, we can certainly agree that there is a theoretical difference between veneration and worship. If grasped, it might be true that EO believers are not actually worshipping idols. That being said, Letham's point about the use of icons in the context of the worship service is valid. After all is said and done, how many congregants in any EO church are able to not just articulate but practice the difference between worship and

²⁸ Perl, 104-8

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 104

eneration, while icons are used during the worship service? Do the saints, as in Roman Catholicism, come to be seen as minor deities of sorts in practice, no matter what official dogma asserts to be true?

Letham's two points concerning icons are therefore somewhat true, although it is false that veneration is at all practiced in a properly functioning Reformed or even Protestant church. In some Protestant churches, the portraits of former pastors and the church founder may even be found within the sanctuary, yet there is no confusion involved. Why is that the case, if a photo of Lloyd-Jones in a couple's home is considered an icon? That is because Protestants in general do not have icons, and we do not venerate them. This brings us to Letham's third point.

In an effort to find common ground, Letham makes the astonishing claim that "Reformed theology believes in icons too" (p. 160). Letham continues by making his case on the Reformed view of images through the Greek word *eikon* (εἰκόν). If Letham wanted to make the case that God uses images and signs to reveal Himself, then certainly what he said would be true. However, the EO teaching on icons includes also the part about the veneration of icons. It makes no sense to assert that one believes in icons as the EO do yet say that veneration is not due them. Since as we have said, veneration is not merely honor or remembrance, but involves using the objects to mediate the divine, then it is false that Reformed theology believes in the EO view of icons. Letham's attempt to make Reformed theology seem closer to EO on this issue thus fails.

Through the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius, Neoplatonic ontology has infected EO and its view of icons. The EO view that the incarnation validates and mandates icons is a doctrine invented to justify icons rather than an actual biblical proof of icons. After all, veneration as a concept separate from worship cannot be justified from Scripture, much less the idea of any created things being able to mediate the divine apart from God's express command to do so.

Letham's response to the issue of icons is, as I have said, mixed. There are some valid points he made, particular the second point and part of the first point. However, ultimately, his take on icons is a failure. In a book discussing EO, the focus on icons should not just be on the word "icon" but also on the entire doctrine concerning EO iconography. Once this is done, we should see that there is a world of difference between the EO view and Reformed view on the presence and use of icons.

The Doctrines of Eastern Orthodoxy: On Prayer

Concerning the issue of prayer and liturgy, Letham points out that EO liturgy is full of Scripture (pp. 163-6), and certainly this is something that the Reformed tradition can learn from. That said, having more Scripture does not necessarily mean the service is more biblical, so perhaps we should hold off on that admiration for a bit longer.

More concerning to us, as Letham points out, are the prayers to the (dead) saints, especially Mary. In line with this is the elevation of Mary, similar to how Roman Catholicism elevates her. First, concerning the prayers to the dead saints, Letham states that “all Christians make intercession to the saints” (p. 167) and that the main question “surrounds the propriety of asking *dead* saints to make intercession for us” (p. 168). In response, I am questioning Letham’s first assertion. Do all Christians make intercession to the saints? Notice here that the question is not whether Christians talk to the living saints. The question is whether Christians ***make intercession*** to the saints.

What is the difference you may ask? Let’s say I have a friend called Gabriel. If I want him to pray for me, do I just call him and ask him to pray for me? Certainly. But would I pick up my phone, get him, then proceed to say this to him:

O Gabriel, my friend and saint in Christ, would thou prayest for me in this my hour of need. You who are pure of heart

No, I would most certainly not say that! We ask fellow believers to pray for us, but we do not pray to them asking them to pray for us! Letham’s point here involves a confusion of categories, as if asking for prayer is the same thing as making intercession to request for prayer.

Since that is the case, the second (and main) question of the propriety of asking *dead* saints to make intercession for us is already moot. But let us look anyway at Letham’s argument. Letham points out correctly that the saints in heaven have no contact with the saints on earth (pp. 168-70). Therefore, one cannot call upon the dead saints in prayer. This is most certainly true, but, as we have seen, we do not even have to go there. Letham’s response here errs in his first assumption but overall he correctly states that we are not to make intercession with the dead saints, in contrast to EO which practices that.

One thing that Letham does not point out, and in fact seem to be at least sympathetic towards, is the EO view of Mary. EO shares with Rome her view on the bodily assumption of Mary, her being ever-virgin, and her role in the church as the holy Mother of God, but rejects the doctrine of the immaculate conception (that Mary is born without sin). All of these the Reformed tradition generally rejects, although vestiges of such are held during the early stages of the Reformation. EO, like Roman Catholicism, do direct their prayers to Mary. The Reformed tradition on the other hand holds that Mary is the God-bearer, but is otherwise no more different from any ordinary human. In other words, Mary has sinned, Mary has other children besides Jesus, Mary was born and she died just like any ordinary human being, and she was not taken up bodily into heaven. Her status as the bearer of God in the person of Jesus Christ does not change her being in any way. Thus, although we agree with the *theotokos* (θεοτοκος), we prefer the translation “God-bearer” instead of the one more favored by Roman Catholics: “Mother of God,” since she is the mother of God in the person of Jesus Christ as pertaining to His humanity, not mother of the entire divine Godhead, or even Christ according to His divinity.

One's view of Mary is separate from whether one ought to pray to Mary. It is possible, though unlikely, to hold Mary as the elevated, holy, ever-virgin, and immaculately conceived Mother of God, without praying to her. Letham, by focusing only on the issue of prayers to the dead saints, missed out on an opportunity to elaborate on the differences between the Reformed and EO on the subject of Mary, instead of merely stating what EO believes about Mary without any comparison and contrast with the Reformed view of Mary.

The Doctrines of Eastern Orthodoxy: Church and Sacraments

Eastern Orthodoxy is made up of a bunch of self-governing (autocephalous) churches, with primacy given to the apostolic sees: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople (and Rome). However, there is no central authority figure in Eastern Orthodoxy, and none yield the power of infallibility as the Pope does in Roman Catholicism.

Concerning sacraments, EO has seven sacraments: baptism, chrismation (similar to confirmation), the Eucharist, confession, holy orders, matrimony, and anointing the sick (p. 209). However, as Letham points out, the number seven here is not dogmatically insisted on. After all, there is a "vast range of quasi-sacramental blessings and rites in Orthodox from which the sacraments proper cannot be isolated – 'blessings of corn, wine, and oil; of fruits, fields, and homes; of any object or element'" (p. 210). This is not surprising since we know that Neoplatonism with its view of signs is the base foundation for much of EO theology, as mediated by John Damascene and Pseudo-Dionysius. As Perl said of the Neoplatonism of Dionysius, "All things, then, are in effect symbols of God."³⁰ While this is not to state that EO is Neoplatonism, we can see the effects of Neoplatonism in EO through the presence of the quasi-sacramental blessings of created things.

Other differences of note are the Eucharist, where the real presence is celebrated but without a definitive view of what this "real presence" means, as opposed to the dogmatic view of transubstantiation held in Roman Catholicism, and Marriage, whereby priests and many church officers can marry (as opposed to mandatory celibacy in Roman Catholicism).

All of these are noted by Letham, but not addressed according to the Reformed tradition. In a sense, that is to be expected since addressing them will take up even more space in a supposed condensed book.

Letham's comparative evaluation

In Letham's penultimate chapter, Letham concludes his evaluation of Eastern orthodoxy, beginning with praising its focus on the Trinity, its participatory stress preserving the

³⁰ Perl, 103

theme of union with Christ, its freedom from concerns raised by the Enlightenment, and its unity of theology and piety (pp. 271-7). As we have looked through Letham's work, we can agree with the virtue of EO's focus on the Trinity. However, I would beg to differ on the "participatory stress," holding that Letham is not correctly representing EO here, with his own view of "union" being ambiguous. EO's freedom from concerns raised by the Enlightenment and its unity of theology and piety are linked, and this is more a matter of historical circumstance than actual virtue, for the Eastern churches simply were not as affected by the Enlightenment as the Western churches are.

On areas of agreement, Letham states that there is a real *concursum* on the issue of justification by faith. As I have shown, I doubt there is a real *concursum* on the issue of justification by faith **alone**, and EO would probably balk once they realize what *Sola Fide* actually teaches. Letham states that the Eastern doctrine of deification is "no more incompatible with justification by faith than are the Reformed doctrine of sanctification and glorification" (p. 278), and I respond that this is due to a misunderstanding of *theosis*.

On areas of supposed Reformed misunderstandings of the Orthodox, Letham states that "the Orthodox, in using icons, are not engaging in idolatry" (p. 279). As we have shown, that may be true in theory, but questionable in practice. Again, there is a deeper issue than mere idolatry (i.e. violation of the first commandment) in the use of icons, and one that Letham does not address. Letham puts in this category as well the Orthodox prayers to the saints, of which I have shown Letham's arguments on the issue to be in error.

Letham is correct in pointing out that both sides appeal to both Scripture and tradition (p. 279), thus the error of EO is not just about using tradition. However, the deeper question is not about the use of tradition and Scripture, but about the definition of tradition as it relates to Scripture, of which EO has a unique take on the topic.

On areas of supposed Orthodox misunderstandings of the Reformed, Letham is right to point out the misunderstanding of the Reformed doctrine of predestination as fatalism, a misunderstanding of the Reformed doctrine of the Eucharist as mere memorialism, and of accusing Reformed Christians of ignoring the church,

Lastly, on the supposed areas of substantive disagreements, which I have already shown to be much larger than Letham's list, Letham is correct to assert that "the East tends to downplay the preaching of the Word of God" (p. 280), he is correct to show that the relation of Scripture to Tradition is a major issue, although he continues to minimize the differences ("There is a great area of common ground" (p. 282)), and there are concerns with regards to the veneration of Mary and the saints, though Letham is wrong on our current intercession with living saints. The East also practices soteriological synergism which the Reformed tradition rejects (p. 285). Letham finds fault with the Eastern doctrine of the Trinity that follows Palamas, attacking the essence-energies distinction as driving a "wedge between the immanent and economic trinities" (p 283). However, as I have said, this is a misunderstanding of the Palamite distinction in its pure form.

Conclusion

Eastern Orthodoxy is not well known by many people outside its traditional geographical boundaries. That lends it an aura of mystery which may intrigue some. However, in desiring to know world Christianity, such an aura does not help. Robert Letham in writing this book has done us a service by introducing Eastern Orthodoxy to us.

Notwithstanding this fact, Letham's book misses the mark in many an instance. He does not deal with the issue of ecumenicity, he does not address the nature of the last three councils, he minimizes the differences between the Reformed tradition and EO on Tradition and Scripture, he fails to note the importance of continuing revelation in EO's relation of Tradition and Scripture, he does not seem to notice the difference between justification by faith and justification by faith **alone** (*Sola Fide*), and he does not seem to understand well the EO concept of *theosis*. On the doctrine of God, Letham does well in his recount of the controversy over the *filioque*, but fails to properly represent the Palamite doctrine of the essence- energies distinction. On icons, Letham focuses on the issue of icons in general but fail to note the greater issue of veneration which are determinative of the use of icons within EO. On prayer and liturgy, Letham is right to laud the overt trinitarianism of EO yet he conflates the concepts of "asking to pray" with "making intercession for," thus his case against prayer to the saints is not as strong as it should be. He also does not address the issue of Mary herself, which I would think the Reformed would have significant differences with EO. Lastly, on church and sacraments, Letham correctly notes the differences without much comment.

In the beginning of this review, I said that in order to live up to its name, the book has to do three things: (1) Portray Eastern Orthodoxy correctly, (2) Portray Reformed theology correctly, and (3) Compare and Contrast the two well. How well did it fare in the following? From the analysis of the book, I can see that Letham has generally portrayed Eastern Orthodoxy correctly, although there is substantial misunderstanding of *theosis* and the essence- energies distinction. I regret to say that Letham has not portrayed Reformed theology as well in comparison. Lastly, Letham could have done a better job comparing and contrasting the two. Has the book succeeded in its task? In part, but it paints a rosier picture of the actual differences between the two traditions than is warranted by the evidences we have seen so far.