

James R. Payton Jr. *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007 (240 pp.) [ISBN: 978-0-8308-2594-3]

Payton's book introduces readers to the major themes of Eastern Orthodoxy while focussing particularly on the points at which East and West differ most in doctrine and practice. The title captures his intention to enlighten Western readers through a sympathetic presentation of Orthodox faith perspectives.

Beginning with a historical section on Latin and Greek mindsets, he contrasts the development of a pragmatic law based theological approach in the West that dealt with questions of guilt and legal standing, with a philosophical approach in the East that concerned itself with questions of light and dark, life and death, and the limits of human reason. Though somewhat simplified, this historical background helpfully sets the framework for later comparisons in doctrine. Although Payton acknowledges the significant differences within Western theology, including distinguishing Roman Catholic from various Protestant positions, he generally chooses one position to contrast with the East.

Payton observes that the dominant intellectual leadership of the Church through the period of the early councils was unquestionably Eastern. He also argues that the intellectually sophisticated East managed to maintain a healthy caution concerning human reason compared with Western medieval scholasticism where he says reason knew few bounds in its attempt to master the knowledge of God (he does not mention that the East also produced scholastic theologians).

Chapter Two answers some Protestant misunderstandings of Eastern Orthodoxy including the naive notion that they are 'a Greek version of Roman Catholicism' (p. 43). Payton notes that the Orthodox ironically consider Roman Catholic and Protestant theology to have much in common because both ask the same kind of legal questions, and both largely treat theology as a matter of establishing truth claims, which the East considers an inadequate approach. Two further Protestant misunderstandings of the Orthodox - that they are a relic of history shackled to tradition, and that they are compromised by an uncritical accommodation to pagan Greek thought - receive detailed responses from Payton.

Having criticised the West for its approach to doctrine, Payton outlines the Orthodox approach (Chapter Three) by placing emphasis on the Eastern insistence that theology is inseparable from contemplation, because 'knowing God means having an intimate relationship with him,

not just a wealth of data about him' (p. 60). With the Western medieval shift in theological training from monasteries to universities, doctrine was divorced from what the East still considers its proper mystical grounding in meditation and the practice of faith.

Chapter Four addresses a number of foreign concepts for many western readers. Apophatic (negative) theology, which declares what God is not, rather than presumes to assert what he is, is presented as a humble methodology that the West might learn from. There is also an explanation of Orthodox teaching on God's essence and energies (Western: *ad intra* and *ad extra*), which seeks to distinguish and define how God's transcendent being relates to his immanence and activity within creation.

The treatment of Orthodox doctrines of God, creation, humanity, and sin in chapters five and six contains a technical discussion of creaturely *logos* (Godward-directedness) and *skopos* (the goal of communion with God). The Orthodox see all created things as essentially orientated towards God who alone is their final fulfilment. The Fall frustrates this purpose, leaving humanity corrupted and led by creation rather than exercising their priestly role of leading creation towards its own *skopos*. Death follows for all, but guilt is personal (Adam's guilt is not ours), and our nature is not depraved (sin is a matter of persons not nature), neither is our will bound. East and West (think Augustine) perceive fallen humanity somewhat differently, although the West itself is not easily grouped under one banner.

Orthodox teaching on the 'accomplishment of salvation' (Chapter Seven) stresses the redemptive role of the Incarnation, the recapitulation of human nature in Christ the last Adam, and the resurrection of Christ the victor who defeats death - rather than Christ the crucified victim. Concerning the 'application of salvation' (Chapter Eight) they are less interested than the West in the order of salvation (justification—sanctification—glorification), and more interested in our union with Christ by which we participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:3-4). Human deification (*theosis*) begins at the Incarnation and is made accessible to us through the Spirit and the sacraments. Salvation as deification is a process not an event for the Orthodox, who trust that they are 'being saved' (p. 146).

Reminding the reader that the Orthodox have asked questions overlooked by the West, Payton notes that rather than only consider what grace *does*, the East has contemplated what grace *is*. Their findings: Grace is not an 'influence' of God upon us, but grace is God himself at work within us (Chapter Nine). A chapter on ecclesiology (Chapter Ten) begins with criticism of the individualism that plagues the Church in the

West before describing the Eastern Church as a believing community constituted through worship (liturgy), with a sense of connection to one another in all places and at all times, including the departed saints.

Icons (Chapter Eleven) are explained by recounting their exegetical and christological defence during the ancient Iconoclastic Controversy. The authoritative relationship of Scripture and Tradition (Chapter Twelve) has of course been a major debate between Protestants and Roman Catholics, which Payton outlines before offering the Orthodox understanding of Scripture as part of the one authoritative source of Christian faith, Tradition. Prayer is the subject of the final chapter (Chapter Thirteen) which simply promotes the Orthodox Jesus Prayer: a rhythmic repetition of the phrase 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' What better way to learn to pray without ceasing, says Payton. What of other forms of prayer?, the reader might ask.

Payton's contribution to a Western comprehension of Eastern Christian thought and practice is to be celebrated for the fact that he patiently and carefully explains Orthodox perspectives, going into some depth where possible, while always keeping in mind how each new concept may sound to Western ears. This book truly teaches, reflecting the author's sensitivity to students and years of dialogue with the Orthodox.

However, the book does have its flaws. In order to contrast East and West, Payton unfortunately oversimplifies both positions in places, such as in his initial assessment of Western theology as obsessed with truth claims, while the East is portrayed as concerning itself more with knowing God directly. Admittedly to distil differences one must simplify complex positions, but sufficient nuance is still needed to avoid misrepresentation, which I'm not sure Payton always achieves. An observation that sin in Western Christianity is deemed a violation of rules, while the Orthodox consider sin a violation of a personal relationship with God (p. 119), surely presses his point on law and relationship too far. And yet, pithy contrasts, such as the difference between what grace does and what grace is, do helpfully highlight ways in which East and West have dealt differently with the same theological issue.

Because of the nature of his project Payton repeatedly emphasises what the West can learn from the East. Only occasionally does he highlight the fact that East and West have much to offer each other. One such example can be found in his closing comments on the 'application of salvation' (pp. 152-4) where he mentions that while the West might learn something from the East on deification, the East might equally

listen to the West on justification and sanctification. One or two further comments of a similar nature would have assured his readers that mutual appreciation could be the rule, rather than a rarity.

In places Payton simply berates the Western Church for its inadequacies. A harsh indictment of individualism in the West (pp. 167-72) dominates his comments on Western ecclesiology. The comments are too narrow and overlook the extensive theological attention paid by Western theologians to the problem he raises. He might have also balanced his remarks by noting that if the Church in the West is faced with the problem of individualism, Orthodoxy has its own ecclesial challenges: especially the problem of how to foster deep personal faith in members who see their Orthodoxy as little more than a matter of national identity - an issue confronting the Eastern Church in Greece and Russia for example.

Some of the Orthodox scholars Payton draws on readily acknowledge weakness in the Orthodox Church, as Payton's own note 3 on p. 194 shows. There, to his credit, he quotes Kallistos Ware on the Orthodox tendency to stagnate by uncritically venerating the past. Perhaps Payton might have supplied some critique of his own to sit alongside the praise he lavishes on the Orthodox. The reader is left with the impression that the Eastern Church not only has something of immense value to offer the Western Church, which is certainly true, but that their teaching and worship is thoroughly superior and preferable to most expressions of Western Christianity - a less certain point.

Payton's bias does not detract from the skilful manner with which he articulates his chosen Orthodox doctrinal perspectives and practices of faith. The selection of topics is excellent, and the clarity with which he presents each is impressive. He does indeed shed light on a tradition that has beauty, depth, and breadth in its theology and worship. Without a doubt the Orthodox have profound riches to offer Western Christianity, and for those wanting to understand and appreciate those riches (while considering points of poverty in their own tradition) this book is a valuable resource.

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