

BOOK REVIEW

“Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes” through Eastern Eyes: An Eastern Reflection on Donald Fairbairn’s *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002; 209 pp., appendices, bibliography, indices.). - *reviewed by Walter D. Ray.*

“Almost... not quite...” That summarizes my reaction, as an Eastern Orthodox, to Donald Fairbairn’s *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*. Fairbairn begins well. He acknowledges that Eastern Orthodoxy is truly different from Western Christianity not only in its external forms but in its “underlying vision of the world, of life, and of Christianity” (2), and that this vision is not necessarily wrong simply because it is different. Before evaluating it, he seeks to understand the Eastern church on its own terms, as it sees itself. Looking first at the sources of the Orthodox vision (Part I) and then at the vision itself (Part II), Fairbairn is able to show that “Eastern theology...presents a remarkably unified vision of the Christian faith...that is systematic and internally coherent” (153). Yet at each point of the discussion I had the feeling that something was missing, something was not quite in focus. Almost, but not quite. This lack of focus becomes especially apparent when Fairbairn turns to a critique of the Orthodox vision from a Western perspective (chapter 8 and conclusion), and even, though to a lesser extent, when he evaluates contemporary Orthodoxy in its popular expressions using the standard of its “official” vision (Part III). Many Orthodox will find Appendix B, which contains suggestions for Western church workers (mainly Protestants) working in Orthodox countries, especially troubling, and not simply because of their Orthodox triumphalism or religious nationalism. Rather, this appendix betrays a continued lack of appreciation for the central value of the Orthodox vision, unity, and the indispensable role of the Church as the manifestation and realization of unity.

Fairbairn begins his discussion with the question of “authority to determine truth,” or as he also puts it, “Who speaks for God?” (11). This is an appropriate starting point, since it reveals a fundamental contrast between East and West. Finding a source of authority, whether in the Bible alone or in the hierarchical structure of the Church, is where Western Christian theology begins, but the question is scarcely raised among the Orthodox. In contrast to the West’s search for authority, in the East “the emphasis lies on the stream of grace, the truth and life embodied in the Church as a whole.” (18). There is no source of authority outside of, or different from, the Church in its entirety. No one person or group of people within the Church, no bishop or council of bishops, can be said *a priori* to “speak for God.” The Orthodox Church does recognize the authority of councils, e.g., the seven ecumenical councils, but even these were seen to be authoritative only in retrospect, after their decisions had been found by the whole Church to be consistent with its experience of truth. Many other councils have not stood this test of time. In fact, it is not possible at any given time to say who in the Church possesses truth or “speaks for God.” It has happened at times that much of the hierarchy

has been in error and that only a few, and not necessarily the clergy, have “spoken for God.” On the other hand, we would say that the Church as a whole always fully manifests the truth even if some or all of its members fail to fully grasp that truth in their individual lives. It is incumbent on each of the Church’s members, from the least to the greatest, to struggle to discern and authentically represent the truth made available to all in their life together as Church.

Fairbairn attributes this difference in approach to cultural factors. Western culture focuses on the individual and thinks in juridical categories, and therefore Western Christians seek to make precise distinctions among individuals or theological sources in terms of degree of truth possessed. By contrast, “Eastern Orthodoxy’s corporate understanding of reality and its comprehension of Christianity in terms of participation in divine life (rather than in juridical categories) have helped to create a climate in which there is very little developed understanding of theological authority at all” (14). In fact, however, the difference is much more fundamental and concerns the nature of truth itself. The difference is between truth understood as statements of fact and what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the truth.” Western theology, it seems, thinks of truth primarily in the first sense. Truth is a message, a set of statements about reality, God, Jesus, salvation. For Eastern Orthodoxy, truth is understood primarily in the second sense, as the Reality itself, from which the Church, as Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit, is inseparable. Fairbairn captures something of this distinction when he says that “in Orthodoxy, tradition is not primarily a deposit of writings given in the past that must be faithfully preserved and proclaimed. Tradition is rather a future life, a future union with God on the basis of which the Church judges present teaching and experience now” (20). The use of “future” makes the contrast with the Western focus on the past especially stark, but it would have been better for Fairbairn to retain the extra-temporal terms “*eschata*” and “Kingdom of God” used by his sources (John Zizioulas and Alexander Schmemmann, respectively). Orthodoxy has an “inaugurated” eschatology, which, while admitting a “not yet” to salvation, has a strong sense of the “already” that has begun in Christ. While confronting “this world” in their individual lives, Orthodox Christians believe that in their life together as Church, and particularly in the liturgy, they experience the “already” of the Kingdom of God. This is the reality, the Truth, to which they are called to bear witness: God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Both the strengths and weaknesses of Fairbairn’s book are apparent in his treatment of *theosis*, the central idea in the Orthodox understanding of salvation. It is here that he finds both “the heart of the Orthodox vision” (49) and “the heart of the differences between Eastern and Western Christianity” (76). He correctly locates the Orthodox view of salvation within the larger framework of its understanding of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Trinity is a communion of persons that humans enter into through relationship with the divine person who became human, Jesus. Participation in the divine life of the Trinity through Christ is what the Orthodox call *theosis*, deification. *Theosis* does not mean becoming god by nature, but rather participation through grace in the life of God. The Orthodox

often talk about this as participation in the energies (outward activity) of God as opposed to God's essence, which is inaccessible to humans. God's part in this relationship is called grace, the gift of God's self in Christ. Humans meet this gift of God's self by voluntary participation in God's activities. Human "synergy," co-operation or co-activity with God's grace, is a necessary aspect of *theosis*.

Fairbairn finds ideas comparable to *theosis* in Western theology: "developing godly qualities, sharing in divine immortality, and sharing communion with God" (71). "Significantly different for Western Christian thought, however," Fairbairn continues, "is the Orthodox idea that people were created with a vocation to obtain union with God, rather than being created already in such fellowship" (73). He contrasts what he sees as a two-act Orthodox scheme of salvation with a three-act Western scheme. In the first act of the two act scheme, humans are created with the vocation for union with God but because they are immature they deviate from the path and are enslaved by sin and death. In the second act, humanity is raised "to a new level altogether, a level of complete fellowship with God and sharing in divine life" (76). In the three-act drama (1) humanity is created in mature fellowship with God, (2) humans sin and lose fellowship with God, and (3) fellowship with God is restored. Fairbairn thinks the second scheme is preferable partly because Orthodoxy's "forward-looking spirituality" (125), in which salvation is a process leading to union with God, runs the risk of minimizing what God has already accomplished in Christ. The question is, he says, "Are human beings saved primarily through an instantaneous action of God to restore us to fellowship with himself, or through a synergistic process by which we gain union with him?" (122).

Fairbairn's schematization is helpful, but he has missed the central difference between East and West, and that is how each thinks about the relationship with God. The Western, or at least Fairbairn's, conception of the relationship is as a state to be gained at a particular time, either now ("instantaneously") or at some future time, at the end of a process. For Orthodox, however, the process *is* the relationship which is begun now and continues forever. Even the images used are different. Fairbairn, and I think the West in general, characterize the relationship as "friendship" or "fellowship." Friendship (Greek *philia*) is, to borrow an image from C. S. Lewis, a "side by side" relationship; it is not primarily about the other, but about a common interest. Friendships can grow, but their essential nature is "being with." Orthodox are more likely to speak of the relationship with God in terms of the love Lewis contrasts with friendship, *eros*, the "face to face" relationship.¹ *Eros* is precisely about the other, a movement out of the self toward the other in self-giving. For this reason it is the natural image of *agape*, the closest analogy to which is the marriage relationship. Interestingly, the West since at least Augustine has subsumed even marriage under the category of "friendship."

The Bible does, of course, speak about the relationship with God as friendship (cf. James 2:23, John 15:13-15). But more often it uses the imagery of marriage. Christ is the bridegroom (Mark

¹ Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), 66, 71.

2:19-20, John 3:29, 2 Cor 11:2); the Church is the bride (2 Cor 11:2, Eph 5:23-32, Rev 19:7-8, 21:2, 22:17); the Kingdom of God is like a marriage banquet, or even the bridal chamber (Matt 22:2, 25:10). The Old Testament prophets used nuptial imagery to describe God's relationship with Israel. In the New Testament the marriage is with God in Christ. The image can be seen in John's language of humans "abiding" in Christ and Christ in humans (Jn 15:5), and in Christ's prayer that his disciples might be one (Greek *hen*) even as he and the Father are one (Jn 17:11, 21-23). I would take issue with Fairbairn's idea that "speaking more of communion with God and less of union would be more biblical and also more consistent with the best of Orthodoxy's Trinitarian and christological thought" (118). "Union" (Greek: *henosis*, becoming one) is a perfectly biblical idea. Just as the couple become one flesh in marriage, the Christian and Christ become one spirit (*hen pneuma*; 1 Cor 6:17), and through the one Spirit all become one body (*hen soma*), which is the body of Christ, or simply Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-13, 27). In the Trinity it is the constant movement of one person into the others that realizes the oneness of God. In Christology, it is the interpenetration of the natures, "the whole of one enter[ing] the whole of the other,"² that constitutes the hypostatic union in Christ.

Even Paul's language of justification or righteousness in Romans, which Fairbairn cites extensively in support of a Western understanding of justification (123-24), can be understood in terms of nuptial imagery. Through Christ God showed his faithfulness (Rom 3:3), righteousness (Rom 3:21-26), and love (Rom 5:8) to those who were faithless and unrighteous sinners (cf. Hosea 2:19-3:1). Christ's death is God's demonstration of what the Hebrew scriptures call *hesed*, God's steadfast love and mercy toward God's bride/people. In Christ, and only in Christ, this *hesed* is met in kind from the human side by faithfulness and righteousness (Rom. 5:18). Fairbairn notes that only in Romans and Galatians do we find the phrase "justification by faith" (176). But also in these two books we find the phrase *pistis Christou* (as in Rom 3:22 and 26), often translated as "faith in Christ" but which many have recently argued should be better translated as "faith(fulness) of Christ." The question becomes "by whose faith, justification?" And the answer is first Christ's and then ours as Christ shares his faithfulness and righteousness with us insofar as we are "in" Christ. Christ's faithfulness meets the Father's faithfulness, manifesting in time and space the eternal union of Father and Son and making that union accessible to humans. Paul uses nuptial imagery interchangeably with the imagery of the parent-child relationship. In the latter case, the Father's love is met in Christ by obedience (Rom 5:19). In the parent-child imagery it is obedience, in nuptial imagery, faithfulness; both are realized in the "one man's act of righteousness" (Rom 5:18).

This dynamic understanding of the Christian relationship with God brings into clearer focus several things observed but not clearly understood by Fairbairn. First, because salvation is a

² Maximus Confessor, *The Church's Mystagogy 2*, translated by George C. Berthold in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writing*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York/Mahwah, NJ/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1985), 189.

relationship of self-giving, and not simply of being-with, its beginning can only be a beginning. While it is conceivable that God could create or restore free beings to a state of perfect or mature being with God (the Western idea), it is not conceivable that God could create or restore free beings to a state of perfect or mature self-giving to God (the Eastern idea). To enter into and remain in a relationship of self-giving requires the free choice of free beings. Human beings at the beginning of their relationship with God can only be described as immature in that relationship. Such a description is not, as Fairbairn suggests, inconsistent with scripture (cf. Heb 5:12-14; Fairbairn, 120-22).

Second, *theosis* is not simply equivalent to the Western notions of sanctification, growth in holiness, or becoming righteous, as Fairbairn suggests (cf. 123-24). These are byproducts of the relationship. We become holy and righteous, god-like, as in the words of Maximus the Confessor (7th c.), “all of God entirely fills [us] and leaves no part of [us] empty of his presence.”³ Our righteousness is not imputed to us, as in one common Western understanding of justification, but is God’s righteousness in us. That is why the whole process is called *theosis*. This idea of becoming god-like does not depend upon the distinction between “image” and “likeness” in Gen 1:26, as Fairbairn thinks (119-20), though this distinction has been used by some authors to describe the process.

Third, the relationship is personal. It is not that human nature is altered but that human persons realize the potentialities of human nature at the same time as they fulfill their personal identities in relationship with God. And because it is a relationship of persons, the process has no end. The movement toward the other can never reach a conclusion, at least from our perspective. Even human persons have infinite depth; our movement into them in love can never reach an end. Marriages, to remain vital, must constantly grow. Likewise, our movement into God continues even after death.

Finally, *theosis* involves persons not in isolation but in and through union with others. We move into God in love not only with each other, but also through each other. Jesus’s prayer is that we all might be one. This union of humans and God is manifested and already realized in the Church, especially in its worship, in which the Church directs itself toward God. The central role Orthodoxy gives the Church, which Fairbairn finds puzzling (154; cf. 88-89), is directly related to its vision of salvation. The worshipping Church, then, is not only the means toward salvation, it is also an end, the manifestation in this world of the life of the world to come.

Having said all this, we can still concede Fairbairn’s point that there is a danger that *theosis* will be understood by those on the margins of the Church as a process of making oneself acceptable to God for a future relationship with God (125, 176-77). This danger is especially present when relationship with God is understood in a static sense, which is perhaps why Western Christians are

³ Maximus, *Mystagogy* 21; Berthold, *Maximus*, 203: Those who worthily share in the Church’s communion “can be and be called gods by adoption through grace because all of God entirely fills them and leaves no part of them empty of his presence.”

especially sensitive to it. The solution, however, is not to embrace this static view, which distorts the reality of the relationship, but to constantly recall the relationship's dynamic quality. We are not seeking a relationship; we are in a relationship. This relationship was not initiated by us, but by God in the act of creating us. In the liturgy we are constantly reminded that we are dependent upon God's mercy by the refrain, "Lord, have mercy." This is not mercy in the juridical sense, but *hesed* (Greek *elaios*), the steadfast love God showed already in the act of creation, as one prayer in the liturgy says, and definitively in Christ. This refrain does not, as Fairbairn conjectures (116), show a lack of confidence in what God has done. Rather it recognizes that we may have no confidence in our own efforts in this relationship but must rely completely on God's *hesed*. But efforts we must make, because relationship is not a state but an activity. To be in a relationship we must *be* in the relationship; as God embraces us in Christ, we must embrace God in Christ; we must co-operate with God in our salvation.

Fairbairn again attributes differences in vision to differences in culture. In its vision of salvation "Orthodox thought wanders from the message that Western Christians (especially Protestants) claim to find in Scripture," especially in its emphasis on the Church, "an emphasis that oversteps the role many Westerners believe Scripture assigns the Church" (153-54). How have East and West arrived at such different visions of salvation? By reading the Bible through different "cultural lenses." "[T]he differences between the Western and Eastern Christian visions derive from the varying perspectives that the Eastern and Western minds bring to Scripture." (154). But "culture is not neutral..., and we cannot assume that all lenses for looking at Scripture are valid just because some group wears them." (157). The contrast Fairbairn draws is between the Greek East and the Latin, Roman West. The Latin West emphasizes the individual, the Greek East the community. The West thinks in juridical terms, and thus emphasizes status before God, the East in mystical, personal terms, hence the focus on personal relationship. Finally, the West is text-based, the East image-based in its approach to reality. Fairbairn concedes that the Eastern relational and personal perspective can balance the legal perspective of the West, and the individualism of the West can be complemented by the East's corporate vision. But he is "haunted" by the East's reliance on the image as opposed to the West's focus on the text. The very fact of Scripture, he suggests, means that the text is primary. "[T]he primary way God communicates, in both the old and new Testaments, appears to be through word, through texts and proclamation. Of course, the content of the proclamation is a person, Jesus Christ, not simply words. But the medium of the proclamation seems to be preaching and writing, rather than visual images" (158). This implies that the West, with its focus on text, is in a better position to read Scripture, though Fairbairn does not say so in so many words.

By "image-based" culture Fairbairn has in mind the Orthodox use of icons (visual images). The East's image-based approach to reality encompasses more than reliance on visual representation, however. It is a way of thinking that finds image at the very center of the structure of reality. The

image has the power of putting one in contact with Reality in a more profound way than mere statements about Reality. Through images God is known not abstractly, but concretely, experientially, the only way God can be truly known. Here we come again to the difference in the way East and West understand truth.

Because the human is an image of God, for example, God can be known in the human. Thus Maximus the Confessor can say both that “nothing is...properly close to [God]” since “[God] is in fact a simple existence, unknowable and inaccessible to all and altogether beyond understanding”⁴ and that the human person can be not only close to God but *be* “God by grace and participation” through “imitat[ing] the energy and characteristic of [God’s] doing good...That one [will] be God who by loving [people] in imitation of God heals by himself in divine fashion the hurts of those who suffer.”⁵ In synergy with God, imitating God’s actions in this world, humans realize their vocation as images of God.

Similarly, “holy Church bears the imprint and image of God since it has the same activity as he does by imitation and in figure,” says Maximus. “The holy Church of God is an image of God because it realizes the same union of the faithful with God. As different as they are by language, places, and customs, they are made one by it through faith. God realizes this union among the natures of things without confusing them but in lessening and bringing together their distinction...in a relationship and union with himself as cause, principle, and end.”⁶ “Union without confusion” is the way the Orthodox speak about both the Trinity and the incarnate Word of God. Both are imaged in the Church.

Scripture is also an image of God. St. Ephrem of Syria (4th c.) says, “The Scriptures are laid out like a mirror/ and he whose eye is lucid sees therein the image of Truth.”⁷ Much of Scripture has an iconic quality, and necessarily so. Scripture does not just give us information about God and Jesus, but it brings us into relationship with God and Jesus. Paul in his preaching does not simply talk about Jesus to the Galatians, he “portrays him crucified before [their] eyes” (Gal 3:1). The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus, they are portraits. In response to Fairbairn an Orthodox Christian might be “haunted” by the West’s apparent inability to see Scripture as image. This does not mean that the Bible does not give us facts, but that it functions as scripture not as a collection of facts but as a means of our relationship with God, that is, as image.

Fairbairn’s vision of Orthodoxy is out of focus in part because he is insufficiently attentive to his own cultural lens. There is a problem with the way Fairbairn poses the cultural question. The

⁴ *Myst. proem.*; Berthold, *Maximus*, 186.

⁵ *Myst.* 21, 24; Berthold, *Maximus*, 203, 212.

⁶ *Myst.* 1; Berthold, *Maximus*, 187-88.

⁷ Hymns on Faith 67:8, cited by Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World View of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies Series 124 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992, revised ed.), 47. Anyone interested in Eastern Christian approaches to Scripture should read this book.

suggestion that Christianity is or can be derived solely from the Bible is already a culturally conditioned understanding, one that is belied by the facts of history. It also presumes that the Bible is culturally neutral, which it is not. It is the product of a particular culture at a particular time and place. Using this understanding of biblical culture, which is different than Fairbairn's, a case can be made that the Greek, Eastern Christian culture is closer than the Western to the culture of the Bible. Fairbairn underestimates, in fact does not acknowledge at all, the impact that the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the rise of the Frankish Holy Roman Empire had on the development of Western Christianity. In many ways, the separation between late-antique and medieval culture is a greater divide than that between the Greek East and the Latin West of the ancient Roman Empire. The Westerner Augustine displays no less "corporate consciousness" than Paul when he says that "the sacrifice of Christians...which the Church continually celebrates on the altar" is that "'We, the many, are one body in Christ.'"⁸ By the late Middle Ages, this corporate sense of the Eucharist had all but disappeared, leaving only the "true" body of Christ the individual, whose presence in the Eucharist proved so difficult to understand and explain.

It should be clear that unity is at the center of the Orthodox vision and self-understanding. Unity is not absent from Western Christian thought, as one popular camp song demonstrates: "We are one in the Spirit/ we are one in the Lord/ and we pray that our unity may one day be restored." But the practice of Western, especially Protestant, Christianity in its multifarious forms suggests that unity is far from central to its thought. Fairbairn has not grasped its central importance for Orthodoxy. When he does notice it, he dismisses it as a cultural leftover, the East's "corporate consciousness" (6, cf. 12-13), or rejects the way it is expressed as unscriptural (cf. 118-19), or notes that "Eastern Christianity is not nearly as united as some of its adherents would like us to believe. Orthodoxy is plagued by deep divisions and significant power struggles, just as much of Western Christianity is" (186, n.6). This may be true. But it does not diminish the fact that unity remains the norm for Orthodoxy, a norm it finds in Scripture and at the heart of its theological vision. Fairbairn has not grasped this, and for the same reasons he does not grasp the central role of the Church as image and realization of unity.

Because of their understanding of unity and the role of the Church, and because of the disunity that appears to pervade the West, the Orthodox will remain suspicious of the Western missionary working in their midst. This suspicion is not simply an expression of Orthodox triumphalism or religious nationalism, both of which are significant problems in modern Orthodoxy, and both of which, as Fairbairn has shown, are antithetical to Orthodoxy (137-39, 150). Both betray the value of unity, especially when they give rise to an anti-ecumenical spirit. Because it values unity so highly, Orthodoxy must be willing to talk to all who claim the name of Christ. But when the

⁸ Augustine, *The City of God* X.6, citing Romans 12:5; translated by Gerald G. Walsh and Mother Grace Monahan, OSU, *The Fathers of the Church* 14 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1952), 127.

Orthodox see Western missionaries in their countries working to set up or promote rival Christian groups, they will suspect that such Westerners do not value unity, and they may wonder to what extent they can be called Christians at all; it will be difficult for Orthodox to talk with them.

This book, especially its Appendix B, "Suggestions for Christian Workers in the East," will do little to allay their suspicions. Fairbairn does ask those who work in the East to ask themselves, "Are we going to the East to build Christ's kingdom or simply to expand our denomination or group?" (168). And he does tell them that "God does not work merely through Protestantism; he can and does also work through the Orthodox Church" (169). But in place of promoting a particular group, he counsels indifference to whether people become Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox, as long as they "come to know Christ truly." "We should resolve," he says, "to seek the advancement of Christ's kingdom by whatever means God might choose" (ibid.). Orthodox will wonder what he can mean by "the advancement of Christ's kingdom" if he does not mean the furtherance of Christian unity, if he finds the divisions in Christianity acceptable and even normal or desirable. I would add to Fairbairn's list another question for Western church workers in the East: "Do I pray that unity may be restored? Will I work for unity?" And I would rephrase his first question to make it more biblical: "Are we going East to build up the Church?" (cf. 1 Cor 14:12). I am sure the Orthodox would welcome those who seek unity, who truly want to build up the Church in this place, to help them extend the love of Christ to those on the margins of their churches.

Because of such weaknesses as I have identified, many Orthodox might reject this book out of hand. That would be a mistake. It is an honest attempt to understand us. Fairbairn does tell us how we are perceived by Western Christians, and in doing so he helps us to better understand Western Christians. He also shows us where our witness is obscured because we fail to live up to our own vision. Western Christians who read this book should be opened at least to the possibility of an authentic Christian vision that is significantly different from their own. To the extent that he has succeeded in doing this, Fairbairn has opened the possibility for further fruitful dialogue. One of Fairbairn's goals is "not simply to help Western Christians to understand *Orthodoxy*, but also to help us see *ourselves* more clearly by borrowing the lenses with which the East views Christian life" (156, his emphases). His Western readers may, as he hopes, recognize that their own vision of Christianity is also culturally conditioned. Perhaps they will "not be content to view [their] faith through [their] own lenses" but "want to make the cultural matrix through which [they] view the Bible a part of [their] investigation" (159), though Fairbairn has not taken them very far in this direction. I think he has succeeded, however, in helping them at least to "begin to look at Christian faith through other eyes" (156), though not quite through Eastern eyes. Almost, but not quite.

Walter D. Ray, Assistant Professor of Sacramental Theology and Philosophy, St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota