

Payton, James R., Jr. *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007. 240 pages.

Letham, Robert. *Through Western Eyes: Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective*. Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2007. 319 pages.

Reviewed by Donald Fairbairn

As Western contact with Eastern Europe has increased over the last two decades, so also have sympathetic treatments of Eastern Orthodoxy by Western Protestant theologians begun to proliferate. Earlier, harshly-critical assessments based on significant misunderstandings have given way to much more careful and nuanced treatments, as Western scholars have begun to show both a desire to learn from Orthodoxy and a willingness to critique their own traditions in light of it. These two books are welcome additions to this growing body of Protestant literature interacting with Eastern Orthodoxy. This review will attempt to summarize the basic approach of the two books, delineate some of their important strengths, discuss some of the pitfalls into which (in the reviewer's opinion) each one falls, and offer some suggestions for further theological reflection and dialogue.

The two books are quite different and cover much less of the same ground than one might expect. Payton's work (as is clear from its title) is an attempt simply to help Western evangelicals learn from the Eastern Church, not to evaluate or critique Orthodoxy. After a relatively brief historical introduction (chapter one) and a discussion of typical Western reactions to Orthodoxy, Payton concentrates the bulk of his attention on Orthodox theology and practice in chapters two through thirteen. These chapters are arranged in a way that is readily comprehensible to a Western reader, and each chapter describes the major differences between East and West on the issue at hand. Payton concludes each chapter with several specific lessons that he believes Western evangelicals can learn from Eastern Orthodoxy on the issue that chapter has considered. In contrast, Letham's book (as its title also makes clear) is an assessment of Orthodoxy. Letham is also quite willing to learn from the East and is in some cases refreshingly critical of Western Protestant theology. At the same time, his explicit point of departure in approaching Orthodoxy is not merely Western, or even Western evangelical (as Payton's is), but specifically Reformed. Letham devotes nearly half of the book to the history of the seven Ecumenical Councils (the dogmatic basis of Orthodoxy theology and practice) and the major theologians of the Church whom Orthodoxy regards as its doctrinal fathers. The second half of the book consists of a fairly detailed comparison of Reformed evangelical theology and Eastern Orthodox theology, with a great deal of

assessment and evaluation along the way. The book concludes with a brief recapitulation of the major similarities and differences between the two traditions and an appeal for further dialogue on certain key issues. As a result of these differences in purpose, Payton's book will be useful almost exclusively for evangelicals who desire to enrich their own understanding of the Christian faith by learning from the East, whereas Letham's book will serve this audience and also a broader constituency of people from both Protestantism and Orthodoxy who are committed to ecumenical dialogue.

Both authors have done significant research in ancient Eastern and modern Orthodox sources, and they are also thoroughly conversant with modern Western theology. Not surprisingly, then, the two books have many impressive strengths, and I would like to mention some of the most noteworthy ones. For example, Payton's historical sketch (chap. 1) includes an outstanding short summary of the differences between the Greek and Latin mindsets that helped to foster diverging Eastern and Western Christian traditions. Later, as Payton discusses grace, he gives the reader a truly insightful window into a major problem with Western theology when he writes, "With all our concentration on grace, we have considered carefully *what grace does*, how it operates upon us, the effects it has on believers and so forth. But we have not often directed our attention to the question of *what grace is*" (p. 156, emphasis his). This Western focus on what grace does, vs. an Eastern focus on what grace is, epitomizes a great deal of the difference between Eastern and Western theology. Similarly, Payton helps the reader to understand differences in Eastern and Western debates about religious art when he points out that what the Medieval West affirmed (and thus what the Reformers criticized) was only a small part of the Eastern Church's much more comprehensive theology of the visual. Protestants have rejected the *use* of icons without ever even knowing that the Eastern *theology* of icons was richer and more persuasive than that of the Medieval West (pp. 180ff). In addition to these and other theological insights, Payton also offers very helpful descriptions of Orthodox practices, perhaps the best of which is his extensive analysis of the content and the spirituality of the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.") in chapter thirteen.

Letham has written major theological books on the Trinity and the work of Christ, in both of which he has interacted significantly with Eastern theology. The fruit of that labor shows up very clearly in the many theological insights of *Through Western Eyes*. For example, his explanation of the relation between the Holy Spirit, the apostolic writers, and

the Church in both the inspiration and the canonization of the New Testament books (p. 189) is excellent. Also outstanding is his discussion of the Orthodox misunderstanding of *sola scriptura* (p. 195), a misunderstanding that is quite common among Protestants today as well. Perhaps the most significant parts of Letham's book are chapter nine on the Trinity and chapter ten on salvation. He argues (correctly, in this reviewer's opinion) that the excessive Western focus on the oneness of God leads to an incipient modalism that ultimately divorces Christian life and worship from their roots in the Trinity (p. 223). Here Letham sides very dramatically with the *early* Eastern understanding of the Trinity, but at the same time, he insists (again, correctly) that the *later* Eastern development of a distinction between essence and energies leads to a divorce between God in himself and God as he has revealed himself, thus unwittingly fostering agnosticism about God's character (pp. 234-7). Here, Letham's trenchant criticism of modern Eastern and Western understandings points both sides toward a more accurate and biblical portrayal of the Trinity. In chapter ten, Letham marshals impressive Greek patristic evidence to show that the Eastern Church does, in fact, affirm what Protestants call "justification by faith" (pp. 249-52), and he brings forth clear biblical evidence to show that the Greek doctrine of *theosis* (understood as union with the Trinity through Christ and the Holy Spirit) should be a part of our teaching as well (pp. 255-65). On these and other points, Payton and Letham give readers a great deal of theological and spiritual teaching to ponder, to evaluate in light of Scripture, and perhaps to incorporate into their own conceptions of Christian life.

In spite of these many strengths, certain pitfalls are inherent in the two approaches that Payton and Letham take, and in the opinion of this reviewer, neither author is completely successful at avoiding these traps. When one attempts to help Western evangelicals learn from Orthodoxy, as Payton does, there seem to be two major ways in which one is prone to distortions. First, in an effort to make clear distinctions between evangelicalism and Orthodoxy, one might tend to exaggerate the differences in order to give Westerners clear lessons to learn *from the East*, lessons they allegedly could not learn from Western theology. From time to time, Payton seems to fall into this trap. For example, he argues (p. 99) that the Orthodox approach to creation could help Westerners avoid the acrimonious debates about "creation vs. evolution." But when he writes that Orthodoxy simply affirms that all creation comes from God, without seeking to explain *how* creation took place, Payton is affirming the same thing that Western theologians also claim. *All* Christians believe that creation comes

from God, but if Orthodoxy stops with this affirmation, it is simply doing what “liberal” Westerners do, in contrast to “conservative” Westerners who *also* claim that Genesis 1 tells us how God created the world. Orthodoxy offers no new insights into this debate. Similarly, when Payton asserts that Orthodoxy can help the West explain the *good* that unbelievers do (p. 117) through its insistence that fallen humanity remains God’s handiwork, he is again affirming nothing but what Western theologians also affirm. Almost all serious theologians admit that something of the original goodness remains even in fallen human beings, and the idea that there is no good at all in us after the fall is a popular distortion of Western theology, not an actual theological teaching that needs to be corrected by the East.

A second, and probably more serious, pitfall that Payton falls into is the reverse of the first one. In places where Orthodoxy is particularly problematic, a work that is trying to be irenic and focus on lessons we can learn from the East tends to minimize the differences between East and West, to put the best possible “spin” on an Eastern teaching that in fact is rarely so acceptable. For example, Payton claims that the Greek fathers were well aware of the dangers of Neoplatonism and thus that they adequately distanced their articulation of Christian from that pagan philosophy (pp. 51-56). The first half of this claim is true, but the second is much more doubtful. The fact that the fathers were *trying* to avoid Neoplatonic errors does not necessarily mean that they *succeeded*, and I believe that some of the fathers (such as Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor) who were most influential on later Eastern Orthodoxy were not nearly rigorous enough in rooting out dangerous Neoplatonic teachings from their thought. Moreover, in his discussion of the fall, Payton asserts that the Orthodox emphases are legitimate interpretations of the biblical texts (p. 108), an assertion that minimizes the vast chasm that separates Eastern and Western understandings. Some of the differences (for example, the Western view of the fall as *guilt* vs. the Eastern view of the fall as *mortality*) are indeed differences of *emphasis* that may be complementary, but others (such as the Western assertion that the serpent tempted Eve with something that *could not* be gained, vs. the Eastern claim that he tempted her with a shortcut to a goal that she *should* reach in another way) are virtual contradictions.

It is ironic that an understandable desire to help us learn from the East can lead a writer both to exaggerate East-West differences in some cases and to re-cast Orthodoxy as closer to us than it really is on other issues. But both of these distortions can happen, and have happened from time to time in Payton’s book. They are the unintended consequences of

his purpose to let Orthodoxy teach us, without also seeking to critique Orthodoxy from our perspective. The reader thus needs to be alert to the places when Payton is unable to avoid these natural pitfalls.

Not surprisingly, Letham's very different purpose and approach present a different set of pitfalls, to which the reader also needs to be alert. First, a sharp division of material into historical and theological sections creates the danger that the depiction of Eastern historical theology will not mesh with the theological discussion of Orthodoxy later. In some ways, Letham's book reads like two discrete works (one historical and the other theological), rather than as a unified whole, and I fear that some readers will not see the connections between the two halves very clearly. In this reviewer's opinion, the book would have read more smoothly if the historical and theological material had been integrated more thematically. Another problem that comes from this sharp division into historical and theological sections is that the historical discussion of the ecumenical councils (which relies heavily on Western scholarship) is not quite consistent with the way the Eastern Church itself tells the story of those councils, although admittedly this is a problem that most readers will not notice or regard as significant.

Much more noteworthy than these organizational and historical problems is the theological pitfall that comes when one starts from a specific tradition (in this case, Reformed evangelicalism) and analyzes another tradition from that perspective. When Reformed concerns are as much in the foreground as they are in Letham's book, it is difficult to understand Orthodoxy on its own terms. For example, Letham insists that praying to departed saints is wrong because there is no possibility of communication between the living and the departed (pp. 170-2). This assertion may or may not be true, but it fails to take into account the fact that Orthodoxy makes no distinction between the living and the dead. Praying to saints makes perfect sense within an Orthodox mindset, in which all believers (living and departed) surround the worshiping community on earth and worship with that community. Letham is certainly entitled to critique this mindset, but he does not appear to be aware of it because his own concerns have hindered him from understanding this particular Orthodox practice on its own terms. Similarly, Letham's Reformed focus on the preaching of the Word leads him to criticize Orthodoxy's visual approach to worship and its relative inattention to the sermon (pp. 219-20). But in making this criticism, he does not seem to take into account the abundance of scriptural readings that permeates the Orthodox liturgy. One might have

hoped for a more nuanced and extended discussion of the relative value of *reading* the Word and *preaching* the Word, to set the stage for a balanced assessment of Orthodoxy on this point. But Letham's attachment to the preached Word as the centerpiece of worship precludes this kind of balance, even though he has previously commended Orthodoxy for its attention to Scripture in the liturgy (pp. 163-4). Again, the choice of Reformed evangelical distinctives as the starting point creates a set of problems. Overall, Letham does a remarkable job of being evenhanded, but he is not always able to avoid these problems, and readers need to be attuned to the possibility that on issues that are of central concern to his tradition, his presentation of Orthodoxy might be distorted or his assessment unfair.

Despite the pitfalls to which these two books sometimes succumb, I believe both of them make a helpful contribution to the West's understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy and to the ongoing task of all Christian theologians to understand our faith more comprehensively. I would like to conclude this review by mentioning some issues on which Payton and Letham touch separately that could use further consideration together.

Both Payton and Letham recognize that the Trinity should be central to all of Christian doctrine, and both of them write often about the communion between the trinitarian Persons and about our communion with God. Both of them affirm that Christ is God the Son who has taken humanity into his own person (rather than a person who has arisen through the combining of divine and human natures). Payton, furthermore, raises the crucial question of what grace actually is, a question that Western theology rarely raises. And Letham criticizes Orthodoxy for its synergistic focus on human action, for failing to recognize the priority of divine action in salvation. What neither of them does directly (although Letham's discussion of the "unions" of the Christian faith on pp. 273-5 comes close) is to tie all of these ideas together. In my opinion, the best and most biblical strand of thought in the early Greek Church *did* tie all of these together, by arguing the following: First, the significance of the Trinity lies in the fact that God consists of three Persons who are in eternal communion one with another. Second, the purpose of creation (and thus also of redemption) was to share with human beings that very communion. Third, the incarnation brought humanity (*Christ's* humanity, but his humanity represents ours, as Letham recognizes) into this very communion and thus made such communion available to specific human beings as well. And finally, Christian life begins with an unequivocal act of God by which he unites us to Christ through the Holy Spirit, thus bringing us into participation in the very communion between the Father

and the Son. This gift of participation in *that* relationship is the heart of grace.

This way of tying the central truths of Christianity together shows very clearly why the Trinity is the ground of all aspects of Christian life, it asserts the unequivocal priority of God the Son in Christ's person and of God's action in salvation, it links the Persons of the Trinity to the work of the Trinity, and it makes clear where the heart of Christian life lies. A great deal of what Payton and Letham assert hints at all of this, yet they never quite put these truths together directly. The reason, perhaps, is that modern Orthodoxy does not quite put these concepts together directly either, because the strand of thought in which these truths are clearest (the strand represented best by Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Cyril of Alexandria, among others) is not the strand that has had the most influence on later Orthodoxy (that strand is best represented by Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas, among others). The strand that has dominated modern Orthodoxy has been somewhat less personal in its focus, emphasizing (as Payton affirms in chapter 9) grace as participation in God's energies, rather than as participation in the communion that unites the Persons of the Trinity.

I suggest, then, that a fruitful direction in the growing evangelical-Orthodox interaction would be to consider the *other* strand of Greek theology during the patristic period besides the strand that has most directly influenced modern Orthodoxy. The strand of thought I have sketched above, while it has not been the most influential on subsequent theology in either East or West, is a *part* of the theological tradition in *both* East and West. I believe that both Western evangelicals and contemporary Orthodox theologians have much to learn from this strand of Greek Christian thought, one which succeeded (I think) in tying together and personalizing the great truths of the Christian faith that we too often either consider separately or understand in less personal ways.

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Bojan Aleksov, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and the National: Nazarenes in Hungary and Serbia 1850-1914*. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2006. pp 205.
Reviewed by Angéla Ilić

This interesting read is definitely one that fills a gap in the English language literature on the subject matter, exploring the origins and the spread of a little-known and somewhat enigmatic religious movement.

In the first half of the book Aleksov chronicles the birth of the Nazarene faith and its relative quick spread to Hungary in the mid-19th century. After exploring the popularity the new religion found particularly among the country's Serb population, he moves on to examine the strategies of the Nazarenes for maintaining their communities and for continual expansion. The second half focuses on the interaction of the Nazarene movement with other actors in their context: with politics, with the Serbian Orthodox Church and with the emerging Serbian nationalist movement.

The main thesis of the book, which actually is the author's revised doctoral dissertation from the Department of History of the Central European University in Budapest, is laid out at the beginning in a clear and well-structured way. Aleksov builds his work on the premise that the Nazarenes represented a new, modern way of life, and that is why they came into conflict with (Serbian) nationalism, which in his view, seemed to be an expression of pre-modern ideas. The author tends to contrast these two notions (modern vs. national) as if they were antonyms of each other. Nevertheless, the question whether the Nazarenes were truly ahead of their time by focusing on the individual rather than exclusively on the community, or by drawing clear lines between the religious and the secular, remains unanswered.

Religious Dissent first recounts the history of how Nazarene beliefs took root in mid-19th century Hungary. The teachings of the founder of the Nazarene faith, Samuel Heinrich Fröchlich spread to Hungary through traveling apprentices, who had embraced this new way of believing and brought it back with them upon their return home. The Nazarene movement in Hungary can trace its beginnings to Lajos Hencsey, who was the first convert there to get baptized. Later, however, the social group that embraced the Nazarene faith in greatest numbers, especially in Vojvodina, was village folk. In consecutive chapters the author provides insight into the everyday life and rules of the community, relying on previous publications as well as on some personally conducted interviews. Topics examined include

the leadership structure of the churches, their worship services and the role of faith in family and social life.

Drawing from a limited number of primary sources, some from inside the Serbian Orthodox hierarchy, Aleksov constantly compares the morally and socially strictly controlled behavior of the Nazarenes to that of the Serbian peasantry. He also emphasizes the devoted spiritual life and work ethics of the Nazarene believers, in contrast to the financial excesses and lack of religious discipline that characterized their Orthodox counterparts, by and large. Exploring the social and religious influence of the Nazarenes, he claims that they actually played an important part in the formation of Serbian identity. First, they did this mostly inadvertently, as they were perceived as the enemy by many and were often used as a negative example of those who had strayed away from the true faith. Later, when certain leaders in the Serbian Orthodox hierarchy (most notably Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović) advocated change and spiritual renewal, the Nazarenes were employed as a positive example, although this was usually done without any overt reference to them.

The available literature in Serbian tends to emphasize pacifism as a major factor of the Nazarene faith and is generally restricted to superficial observations. Aleksov also picks up on the strong commitment of the Nazarenes not to bear arms and blames their rigid attitude toward conscientious objection as making a significant contribution to their ultimate demise. Aleksov's thesis is that the Nazarenes were always persecuted and that their very strengths that first caused them to spread so successfully eventually led to their decline and (almost complete) disappearance.

One of the crucial issues is whether and how the lack of primary sources affects the quality of the present work. The book definitely could have benefitted from the use of more primary sources. Although it does a good job at describing the traditions, organizational structure and history of the Nazarene communities, it is almost exclusively from an outside perspective and adds no significant new information to already existing literature. The Nazarenes did not leave much archival information behind about themselves on purpose. However, some such records do exist, as particularly Swiss visitors and church contacts habitually made reports about their trips available.

On the other hand, the chapters on the reaction of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and on internal changes within the Church, which Aleksov claims, were inspired by and done in order to counteract the Nazarenes, to a great extent, do provide a glimpse into the

lesser-known historical aspects of this ecclesiastical body. How the Nazarenes unintentionally encouraged the emergence of a nationalist Serbian historiography and the nationalistic empowerment of the SOC, is insightfully presented.

Finally, a few observations regarding the form. Throughout the book Aleksov has very long and complicated sentences, which is typical of the German (and also Serbian) academic writing style but makes the English text difficult to follow and digest. The constant lack of articles or their incorrect use, while understandable for a Slavic speaker, makes for cumbersome sentences and takes away the enjoyment from reading. There are also many misspelled words in practically all of the languages Aleksov uses, which shows poor line editing. All in all, the presence of so many linguistic mistakes proves that the book would have benefitted from review by a native English speaker.

On the whole, this is a highly engaging work which will allow the reader a look behind the curtains of the emerging modern Serbian national identity and its religious component. Furthermore, it will certainly deepen one's understanding of the various social, religious and political processes taking place during this formative time period in the country's history.

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