

PROLOGUE



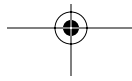
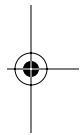
THIS BOOK IS FOR WESTERN CHRISTIANS WHO WOULD LIKE to learn more about Eastern Orthodoxy. For those who have learned to appreciate the insights of other Christian traditions than their own, this book offers the opportunity to be enriched by one with which few of us in the West are well acquainted. Eastern Christianity has its own distinctive approaches to the faith, and studying these Orthodox distinctives can be stimulating and edifying.

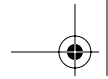
In this ecumenical age, we have found that faithful Christians can listen to and profit from others without forsaking either their own tradition or the Christian faith, and can do so without falling into a boundary-less relativism. Western Christians and Eastern Orthodox can and should speak with and listen to each other in ways that enable us to enrich each other and together draw nearer to that fullness of development to which we are all called in Christ (Eph 4:13). This book is offered as a contribution to such dialogue.

In what follows, I will clarify some terms used in this volume. After that, I will briefly indicate why we in the Christian West have usually known little about the Christian East. Then I will point out the particular focus of the treatment that follows, so readers will know what to expect.

TERMINOLOGY

As to the terminology adopted in this book, first of all, “Western Christianity” is a general term encompassing both Roman Catholics and Protestants, with all the subsets of the latter—including mainline churches, evangelicals, the “free” churches, charismatics of various stripes and fundamentalists. We Western Christians have usually been more aware of the differences between us than the similarities which mark us, so the term may at first be surprising, even in our ecumenically open age. Suffice it to note here that Eastern Christians, for all the differences they acknowledge among Western Christians, nevertheless discern





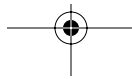
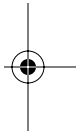
overarching similarities among us. They have observed that, while Western Christians often have opposing views, those views are all responses to the same basic questions; those questions have shaped Western Christianity. However, Eastern Christianity has been shaped by significantly different questions.¹ Thus, the Orthodox discern a similarity in basic approach throughout Western Christianity, an approach different from the one Eastern Christianity has taken.

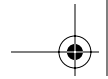
Second, we will often use the designation “Orthodox” or “Orthodoxy” without the adjective, “Eastern.” While it has become common for Western Christians to refer to “*Eastern* Orthodoxy,” this is not the usual Orthodox practice: they rarely use the adjective, unless they are consciously relating to Western Christianity. This book will follow this Orthodox pattern: when a contrast is being pointed out with Western Christianity (or if clarity otherwise recommends it for Western Christian readers), “*Eastern* Orthodoxy” will be used. When we are dealing with the teachings and practice of Eastern Christianity itself, we will use the designation “Orthodox.”

Third, “Eastern Orthodoxy” and “Eastern Christianity” will be used interchangeably. I acknowledge that “Eastern Christianity” is actually somewhat broader than “Eastern Orthodoxy,” since Eastern *Christianity* includes, in addition to the Orthodox, a few churches which split from the main body of Orthodoxy along the historical way. However, these churches—collectively called *Oriental* Orthodox—are few in number by comparison with the Eastern Orthodox, and we in the West are less likely to encounter them. Beyond this argument from size and presence, though, I note that even the distinctions between the Oriental Orthodox and the Orthodox mainstream are variations on a shared approach, one different in striking regards from Western Christian perspectives. Using Eastern Orthodoxy (or Orthodoxy) and Eastern Christianity as synonyms will allow for variation in terminology and still honor the basic Eastern Christian perspective.

Finally, when I use the designation “the West,” I intend the geographical and cultural area where Western Christianity has developed over the last several centuries—specifically, Western Europe and North America. Orthodoxy’s historical pathway has wound through Eastern Europe and Russia, as well as the Middle East. References to “the Christian West” intend no claim to specifically Christian foundations of any Western nations or any comment as to the actual practice of

¹For a pointed presentation of this assessment, see the excerpts from the third letter of the nineteenth-century Russian lay theologian Alexei Khomiakov to William Parker (November 28, 1846), as cited in chap. 1, n. 2 (www.geocities.com/trvalentine/orthodox/khomiakov_palmer03.html).



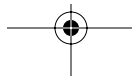


Christianity in the West; the same qualification applies to my usage of “the Christian East.” What I am referring to with either designation is the geographic area within which Western Christianity or Eastern Christianity developed and flourished.

WHY HAS ORTHODOXY REMAINED UNKNOWN TO US?

Why, though, have we in the Christian West usually known so little about Eastern Orthodoxy? In large part, that situation can be accounted for by historical factors—what we have focused on in Western historical study and also what has happened to the Orthodox in the last few centuries. In the West, our historical awareness has rarely ventured east of the German-speaking lands of Europe; our familiarity with the history of Eastern Europe and of Russia, the areas in which Eastern Orthodoxy has flourished, has been limited, at best. Even Western Christian treatments of church history have concentrated virtually exclusively on the Western Christian heritage; few such volumes accord more than a passing glance at Eastern Christianity. Perhaps unintentionally, but nevertheless surely, we have long ignored—and, consequently, been ignorant of—that vast segment of Christendom which has continued from the Greek church fathers of antiquity to the present and is known as Orthodoxy. What occasioned this?

During the last six centuries, the West rose to world dominance, and our historical interests have focused on our culture, its background, and its accomplishments. By contrast to our Western experience, as of 1453, all but one of the Orthodox churches had fallen under the domination of the Ottoman Turkish Empire; for more than half a millennium they languished in this oppressive atmosphere, but they survived. Only the Russian Orthodox Church knew freedom during that time, but it was usually dominated by the tsars; beyond that, Russia was so exotic and unquestionably foreign to Western experience that understanding of its experience in any regard—including its religious commitment—was minimal. Beyond all this, for most of the last half of the twentieth century, with the Communist domination of Russia and Eastern Europe, the vast majority of worldwide Orthodoxy was captured behind the Iron Curtain. Given Soviet Communism’s atheistic basis, the Orthodox churches faced intense hostility; given the Russian Communist control of information dissemination, that half-century proffered little opportunity to become acquainted with Orthodoxy. Thus, for several centuries, obstacles have cluttered the path toward familiarity with Orthodoxy. That, along with Western culture’s longstanding and undeniable self-preoccupation, has conspired against Western Christians learning much about Eastern Christianity.





In the last few generations, though, the obstacles have been getting cleared away. The substantial emigration from various Eastern European countries and from Russia since the late 1800s offered a small window on the faith to which so many of these people were committed. This opening has been dramatically increased in the last few years: with the collapse of the Communist Bloc in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991, Orthodoxy entered upon a freedom unknown for several centuries. Since then, Western Christians have had more opportunity to become acquainted with this Eastern Christianity which has stood faithful to its ancient roots through centuries of dreary oppression and, more recently, fiendish persecution.

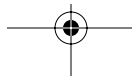
As some acquaintance has developed, Western Christians have often been struck by approaches and emphases in Eastern Orthodoxy which distinguish it from Western Christianity. The desire to understand these distinctives has spawned further interest in Eastern Christianity. This book has been written to respond to that interest in things Orthodox.

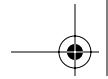
FOCUS: ORTHODOXY'S "DISTINCTIVES"

Even so, we Western Christians should recognize that in asking about the distinctiveness of Eastern Christianity, we are assuming and reflecting our Western Christian perspective. From the vantage point of an Eastern Christian, those "distinctives" are, simply, what Christianity is all about. Correlatively, that Eastern Christian could speak of distinctives of Western Christianity, and do so by pointing to items which we probably take for granted as essential to Christian faith and practice. Learning from each other requires openness and humility.

For us Western Christians, becoming acquainted with Eastern Orthodox distinctives can be enriching: it can stimulate a renewed appreciation of the depths and riches of the Christian faith, the Scriptures, doctrine and the joyful privilege of worshiping and serving God. As a Western Christian myself, I have experienced this. Over the last few years, I have also had the privilege of helping numerous Western Christians explore Eastern Orthodoxy; they too have found the experience rewarding. In this book, I seek to present some of those Orthodox distinctives in a way that we in the Christian West can understand and appreciate.

I hope that Orthodox readers will find this book helpful too. It may serve to remind them of the richness of their tradition by letting them see it anew through the eyes of a Western Christian who deeply appreciates their heritage. I trust that the presentation of Orthodox distinctives, against the backdrop of Western Christian patterns, will help Orthodox readers see how to relate their faith to that of



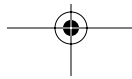


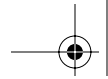
their Western Christian acquaintances (and thus how to communicate better with them), in addition to serving as a review of significant elements of their heritage of faith and practice.

Teaching at a small undergraduate university has helped prepare me for this venture: curricular necessities and budget constraints force professors at such institutions to teach more than just in the areas of expertise developed during their graduate training. Specifically, I have taught courses in the histories and cultures of ancient Greece and ancient Rome, the Middle Ages and the Reformation era in Western Europe, Byzantium, Eastern Europe, Eastern Orthodoxy and church history. Together, these have given me the opportunity to examine and compare cultures and perspectives as they developed in the West and in the lands where Eastern Orthodoxy has taken root, have enabled me to discern commonalities and differences in historical and doctrinal patterns, and have acquainted me with the scholarly divergences of interpretation which require caution.

In what follows, I have tried to survey the terrain fairly without running roughshod over either historical or doctrinal qualifications upon which someone might insist. Comparing the different cultural settings in the Greek-speaking and the Latin-speaking halves of the ancient Roman Empire has necessitated a broad sweep, as has comment on either “the Christian East” or “the Christian West” in subsequent historical periods. It has also been necessary to sketch out common patterns in Western Christianity’s approaches to the faith, so as to set forth the different approaches found in Orthodoxy. Consequently, I have had to paint the picture, at times, with rather broad strokes, historically and doctrinally; the need for both brevity and general comparisons prohibited too much qualification. If we were examining Western Christian perspectives themselves, these presentations would require greater nuance, but my purpose has been to show basic patterns or similarities among Western Christian perspectives, for all their admitted diversity, as they have been discerned by the Orthodox or by Western Christian scholarship.

This book will not attempt to recount the long history of Eastern Orthodoxy, to present a complete exposition of Orthodox doctrine or to present a collection of significant utterances by Orthodox authors; all these can be found in other volumes currently available. The purpose of this volume is to introduce Western Christian readers to some of the distinctive perspectives and emphases of Eastern Orthodoxy in a way that facilitates understanding and appreciation. To achieve this, I have sometimes found it preferable to shape the treatment by categories familiar to Western Christian thought (as, e.g., with “The Accomplishment of Salvation” [chapter seven] and “The Application of Salvation” [chapter eight]); usu-



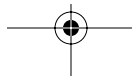


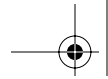
ally, though, the treatment follows categories common to Orthodox thought.

This book is intended to serve as a stimulus to Christian growth and development—but obviously in an ecumenical sense. I hope that reading this volume and reflecting on what it presents will be enriching to the piety and insight of Western Christians. With that, they should be drawn to a greater appreciation for brothers and sisters in the Eastern Christian tradition. If some of those Orthodox brothers and sisters also find this book helpful, I will count the labor expended in producing this work doubly blessed.

At the beginning of the third millennium, it may seem odd to devote attention to a segment of Christendom which traces its roots back to the earliest history of the Christian church and emphasizes its fidelity to that antiquity: after all, with the constant advertising brouhaha in the West about new and improved products, Christians too can become impatient with that which is longstanding. But we must remember that Christianity is, undeniably, a historical religion; the Christian faith is rooted in the soil of history. Into history God sent his Son to accomplish salvation—in this world, and in time as we mark it on calendars. He also promised to be with us throughout history, to its end (Mt 28:20), and to guide his church by the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:13). The path Orthodoxy has traversed over the centuries shows Christ's faithfulness to his promises and to our Eastern Christian brothers and sisters; considering what they have learned is a way to appreciate his work among them—and might even stimulate us to become more familiar with the history of Western Christianity than we often are. If this can help wean us from our cultural obsession with the allegedly "new and improved," it would also enable us better to live up to the apostolic summons not to be conformed to this present world (Rom 12:2); if we have ears to hear what the Spirit has said (Rev 3:13) to the Orthodox churches through their long history, we may ourselves find ways to live more faithfully in our own day. Recent history has shown the resilience and strength of Orthodoxy, which survived the worst that its atheistic Communist foes could do. Indeed, the survival of Eastern Orthodoxy through the past half-millennium shows that this portion of Christendom possesses considerable spiritual resources—resources from which Western Christians might well learn.

My approach in this book does not imply that I think all things Eastern Orthodox are as well as they might be. Respected and often outspoken Orthodox leaders recognize foibles, problems and areas that need to be vigorously addressed in their communions, whether in the émigré Orthodox churches in Western Europe and North America or those in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It would be arrogance on the part of an Orthodox Christian to assume that noth-





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ing could be improved within Orthodoxy. Equally, it would be hubris for Western Christians to act as if they had so well mastered the Christian faith and its practice that they could not sit at the feet of Eastern Christians and learn from them. On either side, that kind of arrogance is spawned by ignorance, cradled in pride and nurtured in a triumphalism that cannot rightly claim the name Christian.

This book should also not be taken to imply that the Christian East is only to be teacher. Indeed, there is much in Western Christianity that might be of benefit to Eastern Christianity. However, this book is intended to set forth some of the riches of Eastern Orthodoxy for Western Christians—specifically, for those who have already learned to appreciate insights of other Christians in the West and who are willing to open themselves to enrichment from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. I hope that through this book some light from the Christian East will fall on our pathway and help us see even better how to journey through this life toward the ultimate hope set before us.

