

THE Geneva Review

No. 17

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Feb., 1985

EASTERN ORTHODOXY: THE CURRENT INTEREST

by James B. Jordan

Eastern Orthodoxy is increasingly popular in evangelical circles, and for good reasons. We are witnessing the final collapse and death of Western stoicized Christianity, with its (protestant) barebones worship and architecture and its (catholic) meliorist ethics. The liturgical and Eucharistic movement which is currently sweeping through evangelicalism finds much to appreciate in Orthodoxy, and I share that appreciation at many points. There are problems, however. The purpose of this essay is to raise some of those problems, at least in a preliminary fashion. My occasion for doing so is the publication of three paperbacks by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press in a new series "Contemporary Greek Theologians."

The first of these, by Archimandrite Vasileios, *Hymn of Entry* (\$5.95), is an overview and explanation of Orthodox worship. Unfortunately, for the most part Vasileios simply tells us how wonderful the Eastern form of the worship of God is, without really explaining the whys and wherefores, and without interacting with Western criticisms. Except as a specimen of how one monk feels, I found *Hymn of Entry* to be of little value.

The second is Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man* (\$6.95). This is a study in the theology of Gregory Palamas, who lived from 1296-1359. At this time, the monks of Mount Athos had begun to practise a form of spiritual devotion which was purely pantheistic in method. Called "hesychasm," it entailed the repetition over and over again of a formula called the "Jesus Prayer," while staring at one's navel. The monks were charged with the heresy of pantheism. Palamas defended them.

In his writings, Palamas wisely side-stepped the matter of the grotesque and unBiblical meditation techniques of the hesychasts, and instead dealt with the theological issue. The hesychasts were seeking "deification." In the early Church, deification had meant what it means in Scripture: glorification (see my essay in *Christianity and Civilization* No. 3, "Rebellion, Tyranny, and Dominion in the Book of Genesis," for a discussion of the Biblical doctrine of deification). The hesychasts were virtually obliterating the Creator/creature distinction by seeking absorption into God. In defending them, Palamas distinguished between the essence and the energies of God. Man obviously cannot become one with the Creator in essence, he said, but man is destined to join with God's "energies."

In this there is, "through a glass darkly," a hint of the Biblical distinction between the metaphysical Oneness of God, and His covenantal Oneness of fellowship. Man is supposed to be covenantally one with God, as our Lord prayed (John 17); man can never be metaphysically one with God. While I think that the Eastern formulations of this doctrine are extremely weak and inadequate, I think we can appreciate that within their highly platonized context, there is here an attempt to safeguard the central truths of the faith. This book is well written and translated, and will be of in-

terest to those interested in Church history.

The most dynamic of the three books issued in this series is Christos Yannaras's *The Freedom of Morality* (\$12.95). It is a survey and discussion of Orthodox ethics. There is a lot of interesting stuff in this book, but it is hard going. The good parts come from the historic Christian tradition as preserved in the East; the bad parts come from a curious mixture of modern European existentialism at its worst with the traditional neo-Platonism of Orthodoxy.

Before looking at this book, I should like to set forth some general perspectives. First, the problem in both the Greek and the Western churches always boils down to the same thing (at the intellectual level): the rationalizing influence of pagan thought and categories. In the East, the influence has been from neo-Platonism, while in the West it has been from Stoicism. We can see this in the doctrine of the Trinity. In the East, it is insisted that the Oneness of God must be identified with the Father, and that the other two Persons of God are not "God in themselves" (*autotheos*), but have their "being" from the Father. This is pure rationalistic speculation, but of a Platonic sort. In the West, stoic rationalism came up with the formula "One in nature, three in Person," as if the Oneness of God were impersonal.

Though there had been some progress before him, it remained for Cornelius Van Til to deal adequately and Biblically with the matter. As Frame writes: "With regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, Van Til denies that the paradox of the three and one can be resolved by the formula, 'one in essence and three in person.' Rather, 'We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person' (Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 229). Van Til's doctrine, then, can be expressed 'One person, three persons'—an apparent contradiction. This is a very bold theological move. Theologians are generally most reluctant to express the paradoxicality of this doctrine so blatantly." (John Frame, "The Problem of Theological Paradox," in Gary North, ed., *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, \$7.50, available from Trinity Book Service). Frame goes on to explain why Van Til is so insistent on leaving the mystery of the Trinity a mystery, and avoiding rationalism. Frame concludes, "It is true, as the traditional formulae suggest, that God is one in one respect, three in another respect. Such language is necessary to guard against the possibility of a 'real contradiction; a chaos, in the Godhead. Yet Scripture does not clearly specify the 'respect' in which God is three as over against the 'respect' in which God is one. In other words, Scripture leaves us with an 'apparent contradiction' here. God is one, and God is three. And Van Til's view gives us an important warning not to go beyond Scripture in this matter." (pp. 306f.)

As someone raised in the stoicized West, the Eucharistic theology of the East, with its Eucharistic view of the cosmos, holds many attractions for me. At the same time, and this is the second general problem I want to discuss here, the East has simply refused to mature in the faith. The tendency to freeze the faith at one level of understanding is a continuing temptation to the Church, the temptation to end history, but we are called to grow up continually in Christ (Eph. 4:13, 15).

It is a curious but, I think, fairly obvious fact that the progress of dogma follows the life of Christ rather closely. In the early centuries, the primary focus of reflection was the incarnation. Once it had been fully established that Christ was fully God and fully man, it was possible to move to a clearer understanding of the atonement. The East, however, failed to move in that direction. It froze its theology at the point of meditating on the incarnation. As a result, the entire system of Biblical theology became perverted, and this reflected back into the very doctrine of the incarnation itself. The Creator/creature distinction came to be blurred at almost every point, so that, to take as one instance the matter already mentioned, it required Herculean labors for Palamas to extricate himself and the other Athosite monks

from the charge of heresy. The doctrine of deification moved from its Biblical form (man's **eschatological** investiture with the authority to pass judgment) to a mystical kind of absorption into God (but only His "energies"). The work of Christ came to be seen exclusively in **incarnationalist** categories: Everything He did was so that we could also become "**theanthropic**," our human natures joined to the Logos in a way similar to (though not exactly the same as) His.

At the same time, however, because of its "frozen" nature, the East has preserved at the heart of its agenda and theology certain extremely important insights which have been all but lost in the West.

Under the influence of Augustine, some of the speculative bent of incarnationalist theology was checked, and the doctrine of the *filioque* could develop (more on that below). As a result of this more relational, less platonized, view of God, the Biblical doctrine of the atonement as a transaction between the Father and the Son came to clearer view, and was developed by Anselm in the West. Roman Catholicism, however, froze at the point of the atonement. Jesus is always on the cross in Catholic churches (until recently), and the dying of Christ is extended throughout all time. (Today, however, the best Catholic theologians are rejecting this perversion.)

Luther progressed to the Resurrection. "No," he cried. "Christ's labor is finished, and we can have full assurance of salvation." Luther, however, refused to permit Christ to ascend, keeping his human flesh on the earth in the consubstantiation of the bread and wine, so that Christ's humanity was to this extent wrongly divinized. True divinization or deification is *official*, man's being enthroned in sabbath rest as an enrobed judge. False deification assumes that human nature is *metaphysically* transformed away from creaturehood, so that the supposed limitations of creaturehood are done away. This view necessarily presupposes monophysitism. (More on this below.)

Because Luther refused to let Christ ascend (in his theology), not only was there a taste of monophysitism in his thought, but he did not formulate an adequate doctrine of the sovereign enthronement of Christ in heaven. The result was that the church was not seen as a separate government, but was under the state. (See my essay in the *Geneva Papers* on "The Three Faces of Protestantism." Available from Geneva Ministries.)

Calvin permitted Christ to ascend, and freed his sacramental theology from monophysitism. In fact, the ascension of Christ is all important in Calvin's liturgics, for in the *sursum cords* ("lift up your hearts: we lift them up unto the Lord") we are taken up to heaven in union with Christ's ascension, there to fellowship with His fully true and therefore non-ubiquitized humanity. We, of course, are not ubiquitized—either; rather, it is the work of the Divine Spirit to bring about real mutual presence.

In spite of a strong emphasis on the lordship of Christ, however, the legacy of Calvinism has tended to freeze at this point: Christ ascended, but not enthroned. The result has been pessimistic eschatologies and a loss of theocratic vision. Thus, the agenda for today in those churches descended from the Swiss reformation is precisely the lordship of Christ at every point: the saviour-only versus lordship view of evangelism and salvation; the question of theocratic law; the lordship of Christ in apologetics versus rationalistic and/or evidentialistic apologetics; the question of an optimistic or pessimistic eschatology; the regulation of worship by stoic minimalist tradition or by Biblical precept and example; etc.

Turning now to Yannaros's study, we find in the early chapters frequent examples of the modern tendency to create false dichotomies. For instance, on p. 15, "Morality is not an objective measure for evaluating character and behavior, but the dynamic response of personal freedom to the existential truth and authenticity of man." Why not both? That is,

assuming we can even figure out what the second half of the sentence means. Yannaros might better have written that morality means not merely conformity to a set of laws, but the bringing the whole person into ever fuller conformity with the Divine image.

Such false dichotomies develop into pure pagan existentialism on p. 26, where in the first two paragraphs, Yannaros tells us that morality either consists of conforming to machine-like external laws of nature, or else consists of "love and communion in freedom." The problem is that this antithesis is not Biblical. Biblical law is not the same thing as a machine-like law of nature, because the law is simply a transcript of the character of God. Yannaros is bouncing around in a problem which simply does not exist in Biblical Christianity. Similarly on p. 18, "Evaluative categories could refer only to nature or essence, but then personal distinctiveness would be subordinated to the necessity imposed by natural definitions. . . ." But what if the evaluative categories arise from measuring the image of God (man) against the character of God (described in His law)? This is not "natural," but "personal."

So concerned is Yannaros to pit the "personal" against the "natural," that he winds up denying one of the cardinal points of Eastern (and Christian) theology. On p. 17, "The one God is not one divine nature or essence, but primarily one person: the person of God the Father. The personal existence of God (the Father) *constitutes* His essence or being, making it into 'hypostases': freely and from love He begets the Son and causes the Holy Spirit to proceed. Consequently, being stems not from the essence, which would make it an ontological necessity, but from the person and the freedom of its love which 'hypostatizes' being into a personal and Trinitarian communion." The Council of Antioch, however, stated that the Son is begotten by the Father *not* "by volition" (see Georges Florovsky, "St. Athanasius' Concept of Creation," in Florovsky, *Aspects of Church History*, Nordland Pub., 1975; p. 48). As Florovsky explains, Athanasius held against the Arians that "God is what He is: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an ultimate reality, declared and manifested in the Scriptures. But Creation is a deed of the Divine will, and this will is common to and identical in all Three Persons of the One God. Thus, God's Fatherhood must necessarily precede His Creatorship. The Son's existence flows eternally from the very essence of the Father, or, rather, belongs to this 'essence.' The world's existence, on the contrary, is, as it were, 'external' to this Divine essence and is grounded only in the Divine will" (p. 53).

There is, thus, a kind of unnoticed and certainly unintentional Arianism in Yannaros's approach. As Florovsky summarizes Athanasius's position, "The main demarcation line passes between the Creator and the Creation, and not between the Father and the Son, as Arians contended" (P. 51). Yet Yannaros is telling us that the bottom line on the begetting of the Son is that it is a free act of the Person of the Father, and how can this differ from the mode of creation?

A second large problem is Yannaros's perpetuation of the worst of the neo-Platonic errors of Orthodoxy. On p. 19, for instance, "Man constitutes an image of God as an ontological hypostasis free from space, time, and natural necessity." This assertion recurs frequently in this book. What Yannaros fails to see is something C. S. Lewis pointed out in several of his writings, that space, time, and nature are not limitations on human freedom, but rather are the preconditions of it. It is movement through space-time which creates forks in the road at every instant of time, and choosing between these forks is precisely what freedom is, in this sense. Nature also is not a limitation, but the field of human action, and a wonderful revelation of God. For man to be devoid of these "limitations" is for man to have the metaphysical attributes of God, and to cease to be a creature, which is why Biblical Christianity has always seen this kind of language

as heretical. The metaphysical attributes of God are a unity, and man cannot have one without having them all.

Now, if all Yannaros meant is that in the transfigured body of the resurrection, men will be able to move about through time and space at will, and even through doors, that would be another matter. Such a conception is arguable, and simply asserts that in the resurrection men will move to a more immediate stage of dominion. Such does not seem to be Yannaros's meaning, however,

A third area I should like to discuss is Yannaros's views on personhood. He rightly states in a number of places that true personhood only comes to flower in interface with other persons. Individualism is the heresy of autonomy, original sin. On the basis of this personalistic insight, he might have moved in the direction of Biblical covenantal theology. Sadly, he does not, and in my opinion this is because of the failure of the East to recognize the truth of the *filioque*. The Eastern doctrine is that the Father ultimately is alone God. The Father eternally begets the Son, and through the Son sends the Spirit. The Spirit is not, however, sent *by* the Son, because that would make the Son *autotheos*, or God in Himself. There can be only one principle of Godhood in the Trinity, says the East. This is monotheism, not trinitarianism; it makes the oneness of God more important than His threeness.

Under the influence of Augustine, the West made advances in theology along these lines. The West recognized that the threeness and oneness of God are equally ultimate, and that we should not try to reduce one to the other rationally. Thus, it came to be recognized that the Son also sends the Spirit. The sending of the Spirit by the Son is qualitatively different from the Father's sending, because the Son is a different person from the Father; and because there is an "order" in the Trinity (Father-Word-Spirit), the sending of the Spirit by the Father may be said to have a primacy of order over the Son's sending. But in all of this, the West refused to fail into the monotheism of the East.

The result was the development of a relational, personal theology in the West, and the development of a better understanding of Biblical law (in spite of the continuing influence of stoic Roman law concepts). Biblical law gives us the standard (but not the empowerment) of two things: individual conformity to the image of God, and social conformity to the covenantal relationships within the Trinity. Sin, thus, is the breaking of the right relationship with God.

How do authority structures function? By one of two ways: by laws and commands, or by manipulation. The first is personal, the second mystical. Because of its exhaustive personalism, Biblical religion presents God as relating to men personally, by command with rewards and punishments. Men know where they stand with God, and men can obey or disobey, and take the consequences. Man is, thus, free before God. The only alternative to this personal-command-law system of ethics is a system built on manipulation, and this is what has tended to develop in the East. Relational, covenantal theology did not grow in the East, and the result has been a rather mystical, impersonal approach to God (as in hesychasm). Yannaros, however, does not want this impersonal mysticism. He wants the personal relationship, but he does not have the presuppositions to sustain it.

In spite of everything, then, Yannaros cannot escape discussing sin and punishment in almost totally impersonal language: "God is not the 'judge' of men in the sense of a magistrate who passes sentence and imposes a punishment, testifying to the transgression." This boils down to saying God is not a person. Then, "He is judge because of what He is: the possibility of life and true existence. When man voluntarily cuts himself off from this possibility of existence, he is automatically 'judged.' It is not God's sentence but His existence that judges him. God is nothing but an ontological fact of love and an outpouring of love, . . ." (p. 36). Had Yan-

naros adequate presuppositions (available from Van Til), he would not have to pit God's personal anger and judgment against His being the source of all life.

I wish only to criticize one last aspect of this book, which is found on p. 153. Yannaros, in speaking of the West, tells us that "the image of God is identified with the archetypal 'sadistic father' who thirsts insatiably after satisfaction for his 'wounded justice,' and, by logical extension, delights in the torments of sinners in hell." This is nothing but a purely blasphemous attack on the revelation of God's wrath as found in the Bible, as any Christian schoolchild knows. Here we see that Yannaros is actually functioning with a great deal of the baggage of Western European liberalism.

Why read a book like this, then? I find many things of real value, which challenge my agenda, and which I think need to be considered carefully, though they need to be rethought on a sound presuppositional base. For instance, notice the following profound observation on page 91: "In the opening pages of the Bible, we read that God blessed the material goods of the earth and offered them to man 'to eat.' Eating, that immediate way in which man takes up the world and is physically united with it so that the good things of the earth are transformed into the flesh and life of man, is identified with the *blessing* God offers to man: it is an actual relationship between man and God."

Again, one of the best chapters in this book is the one on pietism. Yannaros argues that a non-eucharistic theology divorces truth from life, and sponsors the original sin of self-sufficient individualism in the very heart of the Church herself. "Pietistic ethics distort the liturgical and Eucharistic reality of the Church, the unity in life and communion of the penitent and the perfect, sinners and saints, the first and the last; they turn the Church into an inevitably conventional, institutional corporation of people who are individually religious" (p. 123). He goes on to write, "When piety ceases to be an *ecclesial* event and turns into an individual moral attainment, then a heretic or even a non-Christian can be just as virtuous as a 'Christian.' Piety loses its connection with truth and its ontological content; it ceases to be related to man's full, bodily participation in the life of God . . ." (p. 126).

His concluding remarks on Pietism should be cited: "In that particular, this real denial of the truth of salvation differs from previous heresies. It does not reject the 'definitions: the limits of the Church's truth; it simply disconnects this truth from the life and salvation of man. And this disconnection covers a vast range of distinctions and nuances, so that it is exceptionally difficult to 'excommunicate' pietism, to place it beyond the bounds within which the Church's truth and unity are experienced. But this is precisely why it is perhaps the most dangerous assault on this truth and unity" (p. 127'). There is much food for thought here. That's why I read books like this.

There is more of value as well, and I can recommend this book, but only to those who are well trained in presuppositional analysis. Otherwise, it is likely just to be confusing.

Recent Bible Study Materials

General: Zondervan, under the imprint "Academie Books," has published a valuable introduction to Bible study by Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (1984; 208 pp.; paperback; \$7.95 – available from Trinity Book Service). Ryken discusses the literary forms and structures in the Bible, as a way to come to grips with the message of particular passages. Practical directions abound, as on p. 65, where Ryken tells us to "assume that the storyteller has included every detail for a purpose, and do not hesitate to reflect on how the story is affected by the inclusion of a detail as compared with the effect if the detail were omitted." Ryken writes as a student of literature, and he brings a fresh breeze to the stiff world of exegesis. One of the best aspects

of this book is his defense of an allegorical approach to the parables (taking each detail seriously).

I should like to enter one caveat. While Ryken aptly discusses tragedy, satire, and other literary forms and structures in the Bible, he does not note that the Bible has its own peculiar literary structures which arise from Biblical theology. I have in mind, for instance, the "exodus pattern" (which I have discussed in my book, *The Law of the Covenant*), the creation-fall-decline-judgment-recreation pattern, or even such peculiarities as the dream/nightmare pattern (seen in Judges 19 and Zechariah 1-6). All the same, this book is a great introduction to better Bible study, and I highly recommend it.

Genesis: Paulist Press has issued an English translation of St. Augustine's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (trans. by John Hammond Taylor; 2 hardcover volumes; 640 pp.; fully indexed; \$42.90—available from TBS). This work is not included in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers set published by Eerdmans. Augustine wrote it toward the end of his life, while also working on *The City of God*. For Augustine, the historicity of the events recorded in Genesis constituted a definitive refutation of neo-Platonism and Manichaeism, and Augustine was convinced that the best way for him to purge his mind of the heresies he absorbed in youth was to study the early chapters of Genesis. He actually produced several studies of these chapters (Gen. 1-3), and this is his final and mature study. Even though we today would not agree with him at every point, this is still important reading for anyone dealing with the book of Genesis.

Deuteronomy: The latest in the series of translations of the Dutch *Korte Verklaring*, this one by J. Ridderbos (Zondervan; about \$20.00). The commentary has 318 pages, and so is not terribly detailed. Ridderbos misses the outline of the ten commandments in the middle section of Deuteronomy, and does not make modern applications (or suggestions). Also, in his interpretation of many of the ceremonial laws, he lapses into the simplistic notion that these were simply designed to steer Israel away from pagan practices. All the same, much fine Dutch covenant theology runs through this commentary, as through all of the works in this series, and it is well worth having for that angle.

1 Kings: Eerdmans is publishing a set of books giving analyses of Old Testament literature in terms of form and literary structure. One of the first of these is on 1 Kings, by Burke O. Long. Title: *1 Kings, with an introduction to Historical Literature: Volume IX The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*. (265 pp.; paperback; \$20.95). Long's approach is generally conservative, in that he deals with the text as it is rather than breaking it down into sources, supposed or real (obviously the books of Kings and Chronicles were written from other sources, which are mentioned in the books themselves). The weakness here is that theological comment is lacking, and the form and structure of the text cannot be understood apart from its theology. All the same, this would be of help to anyone planning to study or preach through 1 Kings.

The Gospels: Three excellent studies have recently come across my desk. Two are by Ernest L. Martin: *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* (188 pp.), and *The Place of Christ's Crucifixion* (104 pp.). (Both paperbacks, published by the Foundation for Biblical Research, \$8.95 and \$5.95 respectively—available from TBS.) These might seem of interest only to specialists, but actually both are fine specimens of Biblical theology. On the basis of very careful exegesis and a reviewing of information from the ancient world, Martin ar-

gues that Christ was born at the time of the Feast of Trumpets in 3 B.C. One of the most valuable aspects of this study is its discussion of the astral phenomena that the Bible refers to in connection with Christ's birth. In the other study, Martin demonstrates pretty convincingly that our Lord was crucified in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the place where the sin offerings were burned "outside the gates," due east of Jerusalem. Remarkable studies. We highly recommend them.

Easter Enigma by John Wenham (Zondervan; paperback; 162 pp.; \$6.95) is a harmonization of the gospel accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Unfortunately, Wenham did not know about or make use of the study by Martin mentioned above. All the same, this is an important and valuable study. Wenham discusses in depth the various persons involved in the resurrection stories, and I found fascinating his identification of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany (very convincingly argued) and his discussion of Jesus brothers and relatives (James and John, for instance, were our Lord's cousins). A must for any pastor's library.

7 Corinthians: Ralph P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation* (Eerdmans; 168 pp.; hardcover; \$11.95). This book is a typical example of the defects of modern evangelical New Testament exegesis. Martin writes without reference to historic interpretations which are virtually universal in the Church. For instance, 1 Cor. 13:8-10 says that the spiritual gifts will cease when the "perfect" comes. Historically, this has been taken to refer to the closing of the canon and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This interpretation is common among the Church Fathers, Reformers, Puritans, and many modern expositors. There are good reasons for it. Martin simply ignores it.

Secondly, Martin exegetes with a very inadequate knowledge of the Old Testament background. For instance, 1 Cor. 14:34 states that women are not to speak in church. The context has to do with the discussion of a prophetic oracle, and means that women are not to take part in "judging the prophets." Martin is unconvinced by this explanation of the text. The reason he is unpersuaded, I believe, is because of a failure to come to grips with the theology of the Old Testament. Adam was the priest who was supposed to guard the garden and his wife. It was Adam's task to judge the prophetic word of the serpent. This is the man's role. The women was "deceived," because God had not constituted her as a judge of prophecy. The situation in Corinth was the same: Some prophets spoke satanic messages such as "Jesus be damned." It was the task of the Adams to protect the Eves by judging the prophets. An awareness of Old Testament theology helps greatly in the understanding of this verse.

Similarly 1 Cor. 15:29 refers to baptism for the dead. This almost certainly refers to Numbers 19. Those ceremonially dead were sprinkled with water and ashes on the third and on the seventh day. This double resurrection pattern underlies the New Testament revelation. The first resurrection is a pledge of the second, and that is integral to Paul's whole argument here.

There is much interaction with liberal scholarship, but little with conservative. Geerhardus Vos's important essay on "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit" (found in Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, Pres. & Ref. Pub.) is not noticed in Martin's discussion of 1 Cor. 15, which is unfortunate.

The preacher and student will, though, find much of use here. He should be aware of the deficiencies, however.

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