

THE SPIRIT OF EASTERN CHRISTENDOM (600 – 1700), VOL. 2 OF
THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION: A HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

Ex Oriente Lux

In this second volume of *The Christian Tradition*, Jaroslav Pelikan sheds some much-needed light on the doctrinal history of Eastern Christianity from the seventh to the eighteenth centuries. He begins by noting the rather dim view which Western historians have often taken toward the doctrinal history of the East.¹ By contrast, Pelikan, who would later join the Orthodox Church in America in 1998,² intends to provide a sympathetic treatment of his topic (7). In fact, while acknowledging that this is “a history for Western readers,” he nonetheless anticipates their noticing his “profound affinities . . . in piety and in theology, with ‘the spirit of Eastern Christendom’” (7). Naturally, such “affinities” did not escape the notice of his reviewers. Stanley Harakas, of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, praises the book, observing that it “could have been written by an Orthodox Christian with little or no substantial change.”³ And Reinhard Slenczka agrees, noting how Pelikan “completely rectifies” the ignorant and prejudicial views which many Western scholars have of Eastern Christendom.⁴

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, vol. 2 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 1. Note: future references to this text will be given in parentheses within the body of the paper.

² Wolfgang Saxon, “Jaroslav Pelikan, Wide-Ranging Historian of Christian Traditions, Dies at 82,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/16/obituaries/16PELIKAN.html> (accessed March 30, 2010).

³ Stanley S. Harakas, review of *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, vol. 2 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 22, no. 2 (June 1, 1977): 233.

⁴ Reinhard Slenczka, review of *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, vol. 2 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Ecumenical Review* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 1976): 113.

Chapter 1: The Authority of the Fathers

This chapter might just as easily have been entitled, “Development under Authority,” for it treats of early doctrinal development in the East as occurring not only under the authority of the Fathers, but of Holy Scripture and of authoritative councils as well. At this time (i.e. the seventh century), the most important theologian in the East was Maximus Confessor, who considered himself duty-bound, as a faithful son of the church, to pass on what had been taught by the fathers in all its purity and truth (8). This regard for the Fathers was not a view unique to Maximus; it was in fact the accepted view in the East (9).

The key theological notion of Eastern Christendom was that of deification (10). Although many biblical passages were cited in support of this doctrine, the two primary texts were Psalm 82:6, “you are ‘gods,’” and 2 Peter 1:4, which speaks of becoming “partakers of the divine nature.” Deification was granted to those who were united to Christ by grace through faith (11-13). This was one of the divinely revealed, changeless truths of salvation (13).

“The source of this changeless truth” was contained in the writings of the Old and New Testaments (16). These writings were to be interpreted not merely literally, but symbolically and sacramentally, in order that their deeper, “spiritual sense,” might not be missed (17-18). However, it was not just the biblical writings which were “inspired by God.” This phrase could also be applied to the church fathers (19). For this reason, it was impossible that the Fathers, properly understood, could ever be in conflict over matters of doctrine (21). When there was doctrinal disagreement, however, this could be solved (in theory) by an authoritative, ecumenical council of the church (23). In practice, however, only those councils were acknowledged as authoritative whose doctrine was regarded as orthodox (24). In the East, seven councils were eventually considered to have met this strict doctrinal standard (30).

Ultimately, however, the East also felt a need to make appropriate room for “religious experience” in its theology (31). Language about God is not univocal, for in a very real sense, God is ineffable. For this reason, in addition to Scripture, the Fathers, and the councils, the East also recommended the *via negativa* and sincere worship for a true knowledge of God (32-36).

Chapter 2: Union and Division in Christ

This chapter delves into some of the subtle theological, philosophical, and terminological issues surrounding the Christological controversies in Eastern Christendom from the fifth century forward. The story begins with the theological divisions which arose among Nestorians, Monophysites, and Melchites (or Chalcedonians), as a result of the doctrinal formulations of the Councils of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451 (37).

Condemned at the Council of Ephesus, Nestorian theologians stood their ground and declared their allegiance to the prior promulgations of the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople (39-40). Then, in the early seventh century, the Nestorian theologian Babai the Great, utilizing some of the concepts and vocabulary of “Nicene trinitarianism,” crafted a precisely formulated position on the person of Christ: “two natures, two hypostases, one person of the sonship” (43). Although this differed from the formulation of Chalcedon, Nestorians tended to view the latter formulation as hampered largely by unfortunate deficiencies in the Greek language (49).

Differing with both the Chalcedonians and the Nestorians were the Monophysites, who opposed the doctrine of Christ’s two natures (50). The Monophysites accepted the first three ecumenical councils, but rejected Chalcedon because of its perceived “doctrinal innovation” (52-53). They insisted on describing the Incarnation as “from two natures,” rather than “in two natures” (57). In their view, it was a blatant contradiction to speak of “two natures” after the hypostatic union (60).

To complicate matters still further, there was also debate concerning the notions of “action” and “will” in Christ (62-75). Eventually, at the Third Council of Constantinople in 681, the Orthodox view was declared to be that Christ had both two actions and two wills, one for each of His natures (71-72). Pelikan concludes his discussion in this chapter with a detailed look at probably the most important doctrinal work of this period, *The Doctrine of the Fathers on the Incarnation of the Logos* (76-90). This work offers a comprehensive discussion of the “new christological orthodoxy,” carefully reviewing the many (and varied) controversies, as well as helping to adjudicate the complex issues involved in these discussions (76).

Chapter 3: Images of the Invisible

Eastern Christendom eventually embraced the legitimacy of worshipping icons (145). But this conclusion was not reached without a serious fight. Throughout the eighth and ninth centuries, Eastern Christians disputed with one another about “the propriety of the use of images in Christian worship and devotion” (91).

On the one hand, the iconoclasts, who opposed the use of images in worship, argued that the practice violated the traditions handed down from Christ, the apostles, and the Fathers (106). Indeed, the prohibition against graven images went all the way back to Exodus 20:4-6, in which the Israelites were forbidden either to make, or worship, an image of anything in all creation. As the iconoclasts saw things, it was simply impossible to make a valid distinction between the idol-worship of the pagans and the icon-worship of the Christian Greeks (114). Both were instances of idolatry, and both should be condemned by all true Christians (113).

On the other hand, the iconophiles, who promoted the use of images in worship, set forth a variety of arguments which, in their minds at least, served to vindicate the practice. For example, Leontius of Neapolis argued that paying worshipful respect to an icon of Christ, or Mary, or one of the saints, was really no different than kissing the garment of one’s departed wife. In both cases, the affection paid to the object was, in reality, an expression of love for the dearly departed—whether one’s wife . . . or Christ Himself (120-21). In light of such arguments, iconophiles “indignantly” rejected the charge of idolatry (122). In their view, it was important to distinguish different kinds of worship. The “worship of adoration” was appropriate only to God, but “worshipful respect” was appropriate toward the saints and their icons (126).

Eventually, the iconophiles prevailed. On March 11, 843, the icons were officially restored to their place of prominence and worship within the churches of Eastern Christendom (145). The anniversary of this event came to be called “the Feast of Orthodoxy.” Each year in the liturgy which remembers this event, the Orthodox Church celebrates “its restoration to ‘the reaffirmation of true devotion, the security of the worship of icons, and the festival which brings us everything that saves’” (145).

Chapter 4: The Challenge of the Latin Church

This chapter chronicles the events of the ninth through the eleventh centuries which led to a separation between Eastern and Western Christendom. Although the East revered the Roman church as a champion of doctrinal orthodoxy, nevertheless, the perceived differences between East and West eventually became so great that, like Paul and Barnabas in the book of Acts, they decided to part company (161; see also Acts 15:39). So what led to this tragic state of affairs?

Among other things, Pelikan mentions the differing views of doctrinal development held in the East and West (172), differences regarding the nature and function of the church (173), disagreement over the use of images in worship (176), and the type of bread used in the Eucharist (177), and doctrinal disputes concerning the nature of man, sin, grace and salvation (182). But while each of these played an important role in the parting of the ways between East and West, the primary issue appears to have been the dispute about “whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Son as well as from the Father, ‘ex Patre Filioque,’ as the Latin church had come to teach, or only from the Father, as the Greek church maintained” (183).

As one might expect, each side combed through the records of the past to find support for their view. Latin theologians showed that the Filioque could be found in the writings of Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers, Augustine—as well as in the Greek Father, Didymus the Blind (188-89). But Greek theologians countered that the doctrine was absent from the teachings of Jesus, Irenaeus, and Leo I—as well as the ecumenical councils of the church (190-91).

Ultimately, however, the disagreement over the Filioque may have been largely due to two distinct “conceptions of the Godhead” (196). The West, following Augustine, tended to view the Spirit as the one who unites the Father and the Son in holy communion (196). The East, on the other hand, viewed the Father as the sole, uncaused cause of the Son and the Spirit (197). Unfortunately, these differences made it impossible for East and West to preserve “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). The schism is often officially dated to 1054 (147).

Chapter 5: The Vindication of Trinitarian Monotheism

This chapter discusses some of the philosophical and theological disputes which Eastern Christianity had with Judaism, various forms of dualism, Islam, and Greek philosophy—particularly as these impinged upon the nature of God. For example, although Christianity had arisen in Jewish soil, it had come to embrace a very distinctive doctrine of God; namely, that although there is only one God, there are three persons who are God. Although the rabbis found this problematic in light of the Shema's declaration of the oneness of God (Deut 6:4), the Christians insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity was completely monotheistic (203). Moreover, they claimed that it was even taught (in a somewhat veiled form, to be sure) in the Old Testament itself. Thus, when God said, "Let us make man," in the Genesis creation narrative, He was not speaking to the angels, as certain Jewish rabbis argued. Rather, this was an instance in which God the Father was addressing His Son (204).

Not only was the doctrine of the Trinity problematic for Judaism, however, it was also so for Islam. Whereas the Jews found this doctrine difficult to reconcile with the Shema, Muslims saw it as fundamentally at odds with the Shahādah, the most basic confession of Islam: "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet" (229). Indeed, Islam was (and is) explicitly anti-Trinitarian and "imposed on Christian theology the obligation to specify why it was that the dogma of the Trinity did not imply any sort of tritheism" (231). Essentially, the Christians offered a three-pronged response to the Islamic challenge. In the first place, they too cited the Shema's declaration concerning the oneness of God (230). Secondly, they noted that while Christianity did affirm that there were three persons (or hypostases) in the Godhead, it explicitly denied that these were three gods. Rather, they claimed, "the three hypostases had one nature and were one ousia" (232). Finally, they attempted to correct Islam's misunderstanding that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son (232-33). Although Eastern Christians did revere Mary as Theotokos, they insisted that she was only a very special creature—and not a member of the Holy Trinity (233). Interestingly, these continue to be important (and often necessary) responses to Islam even in our own day.

Chapter 6: The Last Flowering of Byzantine Orthodoxy

This chapter discusses some of the doctrinal developments which occurred in Eastern Orthodoxy from about the twelfth through the seventeenth century. One of the most interesting of these developments was termed “Hesychasm”—“which found in its practices of devotion and prayer a new resource for Christian doctrine” (254). Probably the most important representative of this school of monastic mystical theology was Gregory Palamas, a fourteenth century theologian who brought about a new “development in the Eastern doctrine of God” (262). Although it’s a bit complicated, Gregory essentially argued for “an extension of the trinitarian dogma, one that would move from the distinction between ousia and hypostasis to the distinction between both of these and action, and yet would acknowledge the ousia, the hypostases, and the actions as God” (269).

Doctrinal development in the East also resulted from several failed attempts at reunion with the West during the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries (271). Although the doctrinal differences between East and West were thoroughly discussed at both the Council of Lyons in 1274 and the Council of Florence in 1439, lasting union was never achieved (280). Nevertheless, Eastern clarity on a number of doctrinal issues was often significantly enhanced as a result of these arguments and conversations with the West (280). In addition to this, the Eastern Church was also forced to draw up more comprehensive doctrinal statements as a response to the work of the seventeenth-century patriarch of Constantinople, Cyril Lucaris (282). In 1629, he published his *Eastern Confession of the Christian Faith*, a work in which he made “many concessions to Protestant doctrine” (283-4). Condemned by official representatives of Eastern Orthodoxy, Cyril’s work nonetheless forced the church to take a more explicit doctrinal stand on a number of important issues: the canon of Scripture (288), the doctrine of the church (288), the person and work of Christ (289), icons and the sacraments (290), and the doctrine of original sin and the nature of human freedom (294).

The work concludes with a brief discussion of the establishment of Eastern Orthodoxy in Russia and other Slavic cultures (295-98).