A BASIC GUIDE to Eastern Orthodox THEOLOGY

Introducing Beliefs and Practices

Foreword by His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

EVE TIBBS
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Grace and peace from God to the esteemed readership of this publication, beloved brethren and children in the Christ Jesus, our Lord.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”
(Hebrews 13:8)

As He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, so too is His Holy Body, the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Often in bumper stickers displayed by some Orthodox Christians in the United States appears the phrase, “The Orthodox Church: Founded in 33 A.D.” This claim may appear oversimplistic and hyperbolic, but it still reflects the reality that those local churches that today call themselves “Orthodox” have a strong awareness about their close ties and their uninterrupted continuity with the origins and beginnings of Christianity in the ancient Eastern Christian centers in Middle East, Asia, and Northern Africa.

However, despite the fact that the Orthodox Christian Faith is today practiced in every corner of the world, with more than 250 million adherents worldwide, its rich history, beliefs, practices, and spirituality remain largely unfamiliar to many in the West. Even in regions where Orthodox Christians are relatively numerous, Orthodox Christianity, which has played an integral role in the development of civilization as we know it today, still is perceived as an exotic and picturesque remnant from an alien past.

If the Orthodox Church were approached only from the perspective of its history and institutions, it could indeed appear foreign and
fragmented to an outsider. For this reason, we take great pleasure in recommending this publication, titled *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology: Introducing Beliefs and Practices*, because it does not follow the abovementioned approach, but, instead, its perception is molded by the author’s experience of the Orthodox sacramental life, its life of worship. The very word “orthodoxy” means both holding the right beliefs and also right worship and practice, the proper way of giving glory (δόξα) to God, the communication of the basic truths of the Christian faith in ways that go beyond mere words and are readily accessible to everyone.

In congratulating the author of this textbook, Dr. Paraskevè (Eve) Tibbs, we warmly encourage the readers not only to come to a deeper understanding of the Orthodox Christian Faith, but to acquire a greater appreciation of the role which Eastern Christianity has played, and continues to play, in the West. May our High Priest Jesus Christ bless the readers, and provide them with a newfound awareness of Orthodox theology that will help them to discover—or rediscover—its living tradition.

At the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Winter 2021
Your fervent supplicant before God,

* Bartholomew
Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome
and Ecumenical Patriarch
Introduction

This book is an academic approach to Orthodox Christian theology, and yet—paradoxically—Orthodox Christian theology can never be merely academic. The word “orthodox” (Greek: *orthodoxia*) can be translated both as “proper opinion or belief” and as “proper glory or worship.” *Ortho* means “straight” or “upright,” and *doxa* can mean either “belief” or “glory.” Without minimizing the importance of correct belief, the Orthodox Church focuses more on the second meaning: “proper glory,” which more broadly encompasses faithfulness in both worship and belief.

In the Orthodox Christian worldview, as in the early Church, theology (Greek: *theologia*) is not principally an academic endeavor but the contemplation of the experience of God. Although information about God can be studied from a teacher or a book, a relationship with God comes through direct contact in prayer and worship. Nevertheless, since human beings have been created by God with the ability for rational thought, we may assume that our rational abilities, as with every divine gift, may be used to bring us closer to the Creator. This book, therefore, was written to contribute to the task of seeking greater knowledge about God, especially through the **doctrines** and **dogmas** that arose in the first millennium of Christian history and continue to be upheld, preached, and lived out in the Orthodox Church today.¹

This is not a book about personal spirituality, nor is it a catechism. It will not tell you what you should believe or how you should act, but it will certainly convey a sampling of what most Orthodox Christians believe and have believed over the past two-thousand-plus years. The “Eastern,” or Orthodox, Christian view of the created world and our place in it is often very different from the typical “Western” Christian understanding, whether Protestant, Pentecostal, or Roman Catholic. Therefore, I will occasionally situate Orthodox

¹. Terms defined in the glossary are set in boldface when they first appear in the book.
Christianity in contemporary thought. The comparison or contrast with other views can often amplify the unique characteristics of Eastern Orthodoxy that might otherwise be difficult to convey in a book and in isolation from Orthodoxy’s lived context.

Assumptions and Terminology

In any academic textbook in a specialized field of study, terminology is the basic tool of communication. In this book, precision about terminology is even more important since the Eastern Orthodox view of things is often different from that of the Western Christian world, even when the same or similar terms are used. For example, the Orthodox repeatedly confess belief in the “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.” Those four terms, which scholars often refer to as the “marks” of the Church, had a particular meaning in the early fourth century when they were inserted into the Nicene Creed, and they have the same meaning for Orthodox Christians today. Pentecostal Christian scholars also use the same “marks” to express their understanding of the Church, but with very different conceptions of where that one Church is and what it does. This means that even basic terms such as “Orthodox,” “Catholic,” “Apostolic,” and so forth will need to be clarified or defined throughout this book. The glossary should also be helpful in this regard.

What is the difference, one might ask, between doctrine and dogma? These terms are often used somewhat interchangeably. I tend to use “doctrine” to refer to the teaching of a person or a group, and “dogma” to refer to doctrine that has the “official” status of guiding and shaping the beliefs of a specific faith tradition. For example, it is not only a teaching but incontrovertible dogma in the Orthodox Church that Jesus Christ is God incarnate—fully divine and fully human. A term with lower status in the Orthodox world is theologoumenon. The word shares the same root as “theology” but has a different technical meaning. A theologoumenon is a pious belief or individual opinion that may or may not be true and cannot be substantiated. A simple example would be the details about Christ’s Second Coming. The Orthodox Church believes that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead (2 Tim. 4:1). Christ’s Second Coming is dogma, since this is what the Lord Himself promised His Church. However, the Orthodox Church considers speculations about the end times to be theologoumena that cannot be part of any authoritative teaching of the Church, since the details cannot be verified in this present life.
The Approach

Many of the discussions in this book might be likened to a tour bus repeatedly circling around four areas of interest: Scripture, history, people, and concepts. “Scripture” includes the witness recorded in the Old and New Testaments. “History” includes the events and ideas in history that affected Christian thought and life, beginning with the primitive Apostolic Church and continuing through the Church’s flourishing during the Byzantine era and into the present. “People” includes Apostolic, Patristic, and contemporary commentators. “Concepts” includes the definition of terminologies as well as an overview of major themes, doctrines, and dogmas of the Orthodox Faith.

Our task as students of theology is to seek to answer how, what, why, and who questions. For example, how did a certain dogma come to be? How did the Orthodox Church determine once and for all that it was proper to say that Jesus Christ shares the same essence as God the Father? Or, what is the belief taught by the Church and why is it to be believed? Why is it so important to acknowledge the Christian God as Trinity even though the word “Trinity” cannot be found anywhere in the Bible? And because theology for the Orthodox is always personal (but not individualistic), we must consider questions like these: Who is God? Who is Jesus? Who are we and what are we to do? Many of the most basic “how,” “what,” “why,” and especially “who” questions of Eastern Orthodox theology will be addressed in this book, sometimes in dialogue with answers from a Western Christian perspective.

It is crucial to recognize that the development of human theological language over the ages does not mean that Christian theology is “man-made.” As I hope to show in this book, the Holy Spirit has guided the one undivided Church through many challenges to a conciliar view of truth, not only in its theological doctrines and dogmas but also in all of its forms of expression, including Scripture, worship, ministry, iconography, and even its building architecture and administrative forms of governance. The theology that arose in response to challenges in the early Church was not merely an exercise in academic debate. The thought-world of the early Church was initially formed by an experience of the risen Lord in worship. Even today, Orthodox theology arises out of the lived experiences of God, not from scholastic concepts. This present book is a book about ideas, however, so at best it can be only a facsimile of actual Eastern Orthodox Christianity. I will nevertheless occasionally offer some insights into the Orthodox Church’s praxis within the context of its thought.

The basic dogmas of the undivided Church of the first millennium are affirmed by most Christians today, yet few know about the often-dramatic battles fought by the Church—sometimes over hundreds of years—in order to
arrive at unified expressions of the Apostolic Christian Faith. The Orthodox Church has protected the conciliar dogmas of the undivided Church in their original forms, despite the inbreaking of external challenges that have included Gnosticism, Arianism, and dozens of other heresies, and despite a history that has included vicious persecutions and martyrdoms and political oppression that continues into the present day. The Orthodox Church has also managed to withstand the contemporary challenges of pluralism and postmodernism. This book, therefore, offers a high-level sketch of how the essential dogmas of Christianity originated from the common experience of God by the “grassroots” faithful, how these teachings were defended by the conciliar witness of the Holy Spirit through the seven Ecumenical Councils, and how the Apostolic teachings continue to be faithfully observed in the Orthodox Church today.

Change?

There is a category of jokes that begin, “How many [fill in the blank] does it take to change a light bulb?” For example, “How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?” (Answer: “Only one, but the light bulb must really want to change.”) Here’s another: “How many sound technicians does it take to change a light bulb?” (Answer: “One-two, one-two, testing, one-two.”) The Orthodox version of the joke is “How many Orthodox does it take to change a light bulb?” The satirical answer: “Change . . . ?” (Do the Orthodox ever change anything?)

There is certainly some truth to this humorous example, in that some things intentionally do not change in the Orthodox Church. St. John of Damascus (676–749) wrote, “We do not remove the ancient boundaries set in place by our fathers.” One Baptist preacher who visited an Orthodox church 2. The past one hundred years have witnessed the elimination of many Eastern Christians by the Turkish government’s Armenian Genocide (1915), the anti-Christian campaign of the former Soviet Union (1917–1991), and—more recently in the twenty-first century—the mass murder of Eastern Christians by the militant Islamic State group (ISIS). It is estimated that over 25 million Christian martyrs have died in anti-Christian campaigns during the past century, more than in all previous centuries combined. See James M. Nelson, Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (New York: Springer, 2009), 427. Less dramatic but still noteworthy is President Erdogan of Turkey’s declaration on July 10, 2020, that the ancient Orthodox Christian cathedral Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in Istanbul, built by the Byzantine emperor Justinian in the sixth century, will be converted into a Muslim mosque again.

3. Nicæa I (AD 325), Constantinople I (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (680–681), and Nicæa II (787).

during the Divine Liturgy even called it “the most in-your-face, retrograde old stuff you could imagine.” As I will show in this book, the Orthodox Church has never been afraid of change per se—but it has been, and will continue to be, suspicious of changes that are promoted by an individual or a few if they are not in agreement with the shared experience of God by the entire Church. Orthodox theology offers the rest of the Christian world a unique opportunity to understand how the Church through history has balanced staunch dogmatic conservatism and the always-new and life-giving witness of the Holy Spirit across all ages and through a multitude of diverse cultures.

It is the stability of thought in Orthodox theology that has generated the greatest interest from my Protestant students, primarily because of their often-new realization that there still exists a “predenominational” and Apostolic Christian worldview that is largely unaffected by the polemical debates of the Reformation. In fact, many of the doctrines and dogmas of Eastern Orthodoxy can certainly be embraced by those outside the Orthodox Church, such as its trinitarian theology and its conciliar approach to leadership and administration. As we will also see in the course of this book, the Orthodox will always try not to speak for God, especially in consideration of whom God will bring into communion in His eternal Kingdom. Therefore, while the Orthodox Church claims to be the historically continuous New Testament Church without addition or subtraction, it makes no judgment about the salvation of anyone outside its sacramental borders.

In the preface to The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church, the twentieth-century Protestant churchman Lesslie Newbigin speaks of three ways to be engrafted into Christ. First, we are incorporated into Christ by hearing and believing the Gospel. Second, we are incorporated into Christ by sacramental participation in the life of the historically continuous Church. Third, we are incorporated into Christ by receiving and abiding in the Holy Spirit. Newbigin points out that that Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Pentecostal traditions, respectively, have exhibited priority on one of these three ways and to some degree have minimized or neglected the importance of the other two ways. Newbigin’s point is that the Church needs to be all three simultaneously and in balance. He concludes, “I am quite sure that the recovery of the wholeness of the Church must depend heavily upon what the

Orthodox have to teach us.” This is not to say that the Orthodox do not also learn and receive in other ways from other Christians. My own training speaks to this fact. Reciprocally, it is my hope that this humble, basic guide to Eastern Orthodox theology reflects and offers something of the balance that Newbigin had in mind for the whole of Christianity.

The Orthodox Christian Worldview

“Returning” to the Unknown Ancient Church?

In 1987, about two thousand North American Protestant Christians were received into the Orthodox Church en masse in Los Angeles, California. They were welcomed “home” by Metropolitan Philip Saliba to the Apostolic Church of Saints Peter and Paul. This was the culmination of many years of searching for the New Testament Church by regional leaders within the Campus Crusade for Christ organization. One of these campus ministry leaders, Peter Gillquist, reflected on the “big picture” questions that he and other campus leaders had been asking about the early Church during their quest: “Whatever happened to that Church we read about on the pages of the New Testament? Was it still around? If so, where? We wanted to be a part of it.”

Along the way, and as a result of their research into ancient texts, they had realized (much to their surprise) that the early Church was both liturgical and hierarchical. They had even tried to reconstruct what they believed to be the theological expression and worship life of the earliest Christians, using some of the ancient texts. “Our motivation was to be . . . a twentieth century expression of the first century Church.”

The amazing part of this story is that they were unaware that the New Testament Church they were trying to reconstruct still

2. Gillquist, Becoming Orthodox, 29.
existed, and in very much the same form that it had in the earliest centuries. Readers of this book may also be unfamiliar with the Orthodox Church, or at least may not have heard much about its theology or practices.

Even at the World Council of Churches, where one might expect to have found a broader understanding of global Christianity, the Eastern Orthodox Church simply did not fit into the council’s decidedly Western categories. For example, Fr. Alexander Schmemann (1921–1983), former dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary in New York and one of the most respected Orthodox teachers of the twentieth century, was a delegate at the very first assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. Fr. Schmemann described going through the typical registration process, during which he encountered an ecumenical dignitary who, in a very friendly fashion, informed him that the Orthodox delegates would be seated to the extreme right of the hall together with all the representatives of the “high churches,” such as Swedish Lutherans, Old Catholics, and Polish Nationals. Fr. Schmemann explained that while he certainly had nothing against those excellent people, he wondered how that decision had been made. The answer was that it simply reflected the “ecclesiological makeup” of the conference, categorized by the dichotomy of the “horizontal” and “vertical” ideas of the Church, and that Eastern Orthodoxy was certainly more “horizontal,” wasn’t it? Fr. Schmemann remarked that in all his studies he had never heard of such a distinction between horizontal and vertical, but—had the choice been up to him—he might have selected a seat at the extreme left, with those whose emphasis on the dynamic life of the Holy Spirit the Orthodox share.

His experience underlined a fairly common misconception that because the Orthodox Church is liturgical, it must also be formal and static.

Protestant author James Payton, in *Light from the Christian East*, has stated the Orthodox way of doing theology quite nicely:

Within Orthodoxy, study leads to wonder and, thus, to meditation; those who engage in such mystical contemplation come to know the one of whom the Christian faith speaks, and yet—paradoxically—the one whom it cannot adequately express. The knowledge of God that issues from such encounter is

3. “The truth is, none of us had ever to our knowledge been inside an Orthodox Church. Most of us did not know it existed. For that reason, I am chagrined to report that we decided to try to start it over again!” Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox*, 58.

4. Though “high church” was originally used to describe the Protestant Anglican tradition, some Westerners use the term to refer to Eastern Orthodoxy, even though it does not accurately reflect the pneumatological character of Orthodox Christianity.

rooted in the revelatory data, to be sure, but the fruit it bears certainly tastes different than what hangs on the vine of an academic study of doctrine.\textsuperscript{6}

All theology in Orthodox Christianity derives from knowledge of God, which is the fruit of direct encounter with the Holy Spirit. This means that Eastern Orthodox theology does not fit well into the typical scholarly categories of the Christian West. And yet the fundamentally different worldview of Orthodox Christianity is appealing to some precisely because of this difference.

Influential Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan, an ordained Lutheran pastor and Sterling Professor of History at Yale, shocked the Protestant world when he was received into the Orthodox Church with his wife in 1998. He indicated to his family that he was not so much converting as returning to the Orthodox Christian Faith, “peeling back the layers of my own belief to reveal the Orthodoxy that was always there.”\textsuperscript{7} A prolific author of more than thirty books, Pelikan reportedly commented that while others read their way into a conversion, he wrote his way into the Orthodox Church.\textsuperscript{8}

When Hank Hanegraaff, the popular evangelical radio and internet “Bible Answer Man,” was received into the Orthodox Church with his wife and two adult children on Palm Sunday in 2017, the internet exploded with questioning. Some Protestant bloggers were certain that Hanegraaff had left the Christian Faith for something akin to the Roman Catholic Church (the target of the Protestant Reformation) and warned Hanegraaff’s radio listeners that their salvation was now in jeopardy. This horror at a well-known Protestant joining the two-thousand-year-old “traditional” and “liturgical” Orthodox Church was clearly the outgrowth of a view of Christian history with roots in the sixteenth century, compounded by ignorance of the theological differences between the Orthodox Church and Roman Catholicism. It may be beneficial, therefore, to begin with a brief summary of the history of the Orthodox Christian Faith and the Church’s place in world Christianity.

The Orthodox Church in the Christian World

The Orthodox Church considers itself to be the Apostolic Christian Church because it has existed continuously since \textbf{Pentecost} with an unbroken visible

\textsuperscript{6} James Payton, \textit{Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 63.

\textsuperscript{7} “Dr. Jaroslav Pelikan Falls Asleep in the Lord,” St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary, accessed July 1, 2020, https://www.svots.edu/content/dr-jaroslav-pelikan-falls-asleep-lord.

and historical connection to the faith communities founded by the twelve Apostles and the Apostle Paul. It is also “Apostolic” because apostolicity, for the Orthodox, means preserving the fullness of the Apostolic Tradition. In other words, not only does the Orthodox Church have an uninterrupted connection to the Church of the Apostles in time, but it also has maintained the same faith and worship as the Apostles.

Until 1054, the Apostolic Church was undivided. There were five main centers, called “Sees,” in that one, undivided Church. Together, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople (Byzantium) in the Greek-speaking Eastern Roman Empire, and Rome in the Latin-speaking West, were referred to as the “Pentarchy” of the ancient Christian world. There was great diversity from place to place, and there was not always agreement on everything, but the Church remained unified nevertheless.

One little Latin word, *Filioque* (“and the Son”), was the spark that would later become a blaze. Some churches in the Roman provinces had added this word as a change to the Creed, which had been agreed upon by the undivided Church. The four Eastern Sees disagreed with the theology behind this move, but objected mainly because changes in dogma required agreement by the whole Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (The *Filioque* controversy is discussed in greater detail in chap. 7.) Other disagreements arose concerning Rome’s introduction of a celibate priesthood and the type of bread to be used in the *Eucharist*. However, most scholars point to the *Filioque* controversy as the issue that led to the notion of papal supremacy and became “the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

On a particular Sunday in July 1054, during the Divine Liturgy, Cardinal Humbert of Rome placed a papal edict of excommunication on the altar of the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Constantinople. This action marked the formal divide between East and West, which has been named “the Great Schism.” After 1054, the bishop of Rome became the head, or pope, of the new Roman Catholic Church, while the bishops in the Eastern Sees of the Christian world continued in communion with one another as spiritual leaders of the faithful in the Orthodox churches. These four ancient Eastern Sees are still intact as centers of Orthodox Christianity today.

Major shifts in the Latin-speaking Christian West began to occur about five hundred years after the Great Schism. A Roman Catholic Augustinian monk named Martin Luther gained notoriety by posting ninety-five points for reform he believed were needed in the Roman Catholic Church. By that time in the sixteenth century, several practices and ideas had been added to Roman Catholicism that had no counterparts in the Eastern Christian world. One such novel teaching was that Roman Catholics should contribute
their own merits to Christ’s merit (such as by attending Mass and buying “indulgences”) to lessen the time they might spend in purgatory after death. Luther passionately opposed the concept of indulgences, but nothing like the ideas of Christ’s merit, indulgences, or purgatory had taken root in the Orthodox Church.

Luther also complained about the Roman Catholic practice of not allowing regular laypeople to receive both forms of the Eucharist: the body and the blood of Jesus Christ. Since the time of the Apostles, the Christian East has offered the full Eucharist to all baptized Christians: young and old, laypeople and ordained clergy alike. Luther himself countered the Roman Catholic practice in his day by pointing to the Orthodox, exclaiming boldly that the “Greeks . . . are the most Christian people and the best followers of the Gospel on earth.” In *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, Pelikan (writing at that time as one of the most notable twentieth-century Lutheran scholars) notes that “Martin Luther appealed to the example of the East as proof that one could be catholic and orthodox without being papal.”

It is important to highlight, in case it is not apparent, that the Protestant Reformation took place on the Roman Catholic side of history after the split from Eastern Orthodoxy. By the time of the Reformation, however, the Eastern Christian world was under the hostile and oppressive subjugation of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, and thus the freedoms of and communication with and by the Orthodox were drastically limited. Despite the geopolitical and theological distance between East and West in the sixteenth century,

9. Indulgences in the Roman Catholic Church are seen as a means of purification from sin that can reduce one’s time in purgatory. Indulgences come in many forms and are still practiced in the Roman Catholic Church today, although they are no longer earned by monetary payment. For example, Pope Francis declared December 8, 2015, to November 20, 2016, to be a Jubilee Year of Mercy and offered indulgences to those who made pilgrimages to sacred basilicas and those who walked through designated doors of mercy in churches around the world. See Robert L. Fastiggi, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Anthropological and Scriptural Understanding* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2017), 126–30.


there was nevertheless an interest among the second generation of Protestant Reformers to gain the approval of the Orthodox. In the late sixteenth century, a group of Lutheran scholars from the University of Tübingen in Germany approached the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, Jeremias II. They expressed great respect for the Patriarch and the Orthodox Christian Faith in their letters and asked for his support for their new Augsburg Confession. The Lutherans had actually translated this foundational Protestant document into Byzantine-style Greek with the expressed hope of garnering a favorable response from the Patriarch. Patriarch Jeremias welcomed the discussion and complimented the Lutheran scholars’ enthusiasm for pursuing correct theology and practice.

Nevertheless, after a few exchanges of letters that lasted about five years (1575–1581), the Patriarch replied that he could not agree with many of the theological ideas promoted by the confession of the new Lutheran faith because these ideas departed from the teachings of the Apostles, the witness of the early Church Fathers, and the Ecumenical Councils of the unified Church. Neither could he agree, however, with many of the new Roman Catholic teachings, especially papal supremacy. The Lutherans, clearly disappointed in the realization that their new confession would not receive acceptance from the Orthodox, thanked the Patriarch and politely ended the exchange.

For the most part, this same “partial agreement” and “partial disagreement” characterizes how Orthodox theology compares to the Roman Catholic and Reformation traditions. There are many essential and ecumenically hopeful similarities, such as the belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ (in Roman Catholicism and most Protestant denominations), in our need for a Savior as a result of humanity’s Fall, and in the historical reality of Christ’s Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and promised Second Coming. The basic dogmas of the undivided Church of the first millennium are affirmed by most Christian traditions today, but it was the ancient Church that fought the theological battles necessary to prevent the spread of error in teachings about the Christian Faith, “to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Consequently, contemporary Christians share the opportunity to affirm their debt to the members of the early Church who defended core Christian beliefs at early and fragile stages.

14. For the details of this most fascinating exchange, see George Mastrantonis, Augsburg and Constantinople: The Correspondence between the Tübingen Theologians and Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople on the Augsburg Confession (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 1982).
East Is East and West Is West

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, / Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment seat. (Rudyard Kipling, “The Ballad of East and West”)

Where do East and West actually meet? The Nobel prize–winning storyteller and poet Rudyard Kipling suggests that the East and the West are so completely different from one another that they will never meet until eternity. The psalmist, too, ponders the great distance between East and West, yet as an analogy of the magnitude of God’s great mercy: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12). Both Kipling and the psalmist express facets of the genuine dichotomies between East and West: geographical, ethnic, political, social, and, of course, religious. There is no question that the Eastern Orthodox Christian world has experienced a very different history than the Western Christian world on these five counts. Yet it is equally true that there is only one God, in whom there is neither Greek nor Jew (Col. 3:11). On the crucial issues of Christianity, one of the foremost Orthodox scholars today, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, affirms that the “Orthodox agree in their doctrine of God with the overwhelming majority of all who call themselves Christians.”

Nevertheless, it can be pedagogically helpful to understand what something is not, in order to have a better sense of what it is. This is especially the case with the Christian East. As Payton observes, “The emphasis for Eastern Christianity is not on explanation but on mystery—on adoration of truth rather than its clarification.” As one might expect, “mystery” and “adoration” are far more difficult to express in a book than “explanation” or “clarification.” Since Orthodox theology is less about propositional logic and more about offering God “proper glory,” theology is to be experienced and not merely studied.

Orthodox theology is not monolithic, however. There is no one “Orthodox view” on many issues, especially with regard to pastoral concerns. Some theological ideas are also just theologoumena—pious ideas or opinions that may or may not be true, and thus should not be taught. For example, as already mentioned, Roman Catholicism has a well-defined “after death” dogma of

15. Rudyard Kipling, “The Ballad of East and West,” first published in Pioneer, December 2, 1889. The poem tells how an Afghan horse thief and an English colonel come to respect one another’s courage. In the end, ethnic and geographical differences will not matter on judgment day.
16. Timothy Ware (Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia), The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 2015), 204.
17. Payton, Light from the Christian East, 67.
purgatory. But purgatory is not an Orthodox concept, and there is no parallel, detailed after-death dogma in the Orthodox Church beyond the little that Scripture describes.

There are also semantic complications between East and West. In fact, the terms “East” and “West” are problematic in themselves. These two terms once had a particular historical meaning within the Church to denote the Greek-speaking East and the Latin-speaking West, but they are no longer accurate in that usage. The Orthodox Church in Russia is not located in the East, nor are Orthodox Christians in western Europe and the Americas, but they are all nevertheless called “Eastern Orthodox.” Most theological writers use these terms as technical shorthand, as I will continue to do as well: “Eastern” and “the East” refer to the Orthodox Church and family of Orthodox churches, and “Western” and “the West” refer to Roman Catholicism and the Protestant denominations that arose from the protest against medieval Roman Catholicism.

**The Way It Has Always Been?**

There are well-established teachings in Christian circles today that many faithful believers take for granted under the precepts that (1) this has always been the Christian teaching everywhere, and (2) this is the only way to think about the concept. These two affirming principles, however, cannot be stated unequivocally for all Christian teachings today, and not even for many common teachings. One of the specific goals of this book, therefore, is to shake things up a bit and offer a glimpse into other ways of thinking about basic Christian concepts from an Eastern Christian vantage point. Many of these other ways of thinking can certainly be assimilated by those who are not members of the Orthodox Church.

For example, when asked, “What did Jesus do to save you?” many Christians will immediately answer something like, “He died on the Cross to pay the price for my sins.” Yet the idea that God the Father required repayment from Jesus to satisfy humanity’s debt to God has not always been a Christian teaching. It is also not the only way to think about salvation in Jesus Christ. This atonement model developed in the West on a trajectory from the teachings of Anselm, an eleventh-century Roman Catholic bishop. The so-called satisfaction model of Anselm has not held sway in the Orthodox Church for several reasons, including that Orthodox theology is not transactional in nature (e.g., there are not even “vows” or promises in the Orthodox Sacrament of Holy Matrimony). The main reason, however, is that a sharp and narrow focus on the Cross obscures all that the Son of God has accomplished for
His fallen creation. In an Orthodox worldview, the full scope of what Jesus Christ has done must also include His Incarnation, His Resurrection, and even Pentecost.

**A Different Worldview and a Different History**

The Roman Catholic Scholastic thinker Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) wrote in his massive work, the *Summa Theologiae*, that theology is the “highest *scientia*” since a high degree of rationality is required to understand the most important and complex philosophical concepts about God.18 The universities that developed during the Scholastic period in the Christian West were intended to teach students how to deal in this “science” of theology through rigorous conceptual analysis. Theology was considered to be the preeminent Scholastic endeavor, a good thing in many ways. Yet, as a result of the high regard for logic and rationality in medieval Roman Catholicism, those who studied and taught (the “doctors”) came to be more highly regarded than the monks and nuns (the “religious”) whose main vocation was to pray.

Theology began to be expounded by scholars outside of the context of prayer, pastoral ministry, and liturgical worship. Pelikan traces this specific change in the West through the changing job description of the theologian. He notes that, between AD 100 and 600, most theologians were bishops; from 600 to 1500 in the West they were monks. But after 1500, Western theologians are university professors: “Gregory I, who died in 604, was a bishop who had been a monk; Martin Luther, who died in 1546, was a monk who became a university professor. Each of these lifestyles has left its mark on the job description of a theologian.”19 After the sixteenth century in the West, the task of theology increasingly became separated from its earlier moorings to the worship of the community and the spiritual disciplines.

From an Eastern Orthodox point of view, knowledge of God comes only from an encounter with the God who has revealed Himself: “What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:19). Thus, theology can never be separated from prayer, worship, and contemplation of the Holy Trinity. Metropolitan Ware affirms that all true Orthodox theology is mystical: “Just as mysticism divorced from theology becomes

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subjective and heretical, so theology, when it is not mystical, degenerates into an arid scholasticism, ‘academic’ in the bad sense of the word.”20 That is to say, Orthodox mystical theology guards against either unacceptable extreme: subjective and heretical, or arid and academic.

The separation of religious sensibilities and disciplines became even more exaggerated by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in western Europe, in a period historians refer to as the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. This time, the chasm arose between (1) that which could be proved by scientific method and observation and (2) the mystical claims of Scripture. Thinkers such as H. S. Reimarus, an eighteenth-century deist, insisted that no human testimony could prove something that present-day experience could not support. For example, if water is not being changed into wine in the present day, one should not expect that it occurred in the past at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12). In the Age of Reason, the truly rational person should be able to recognize not only that divine revelation is no longer needed but also that it was probably a human fabrication in the first place. The consequences of Enlightenment humanism were the seeds from which full-grown Protestant liberalism would sprout in the twentieth century.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Protestant West, the Jesus of history became more like a data point to be studied as an example of ethical living than the Incarnate Son of God who taught, performed signs and wonders, was crucified, rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit to the Church. Many thought of Jesus as a regular man who lived correctly and, in doing so, gained higher insights and knowledge that one might even think of as “divine.” The famous twentieth-century missionary doctor Albert Schweitzer, for example, did not believe that the Resurrection of Christ happened. Yet Schweitzer considered himself a Christian, believing that Jesus was an important role model for humanity since Jesus exhibited a life of self-sacrifice for those in need.21

The liberal Protestant skepticism about miracles and the loss of unwavering belief in an eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, and loving God-become-man was the environment from which Protestant fundamentalism emerged in vocal and staunch opposition. When popular liberal Protestants like Rudolf Bult-

20. Ware, Orthdox Church, 200.
mann began calling the entire thought-world of the Bible “mythological,” Protestant fundamentalists went public in their challenge with a formal statement acknowledging the Bible to be “fully inerrant” on all matters, including science and history. From this Protestant family arose the “Young Earth” or literal interpretation of creation, whose proponents believe that each “day” of creation was a literal twenty-four-hour day that took place about six thousand years ago. A supreme trust in the Bible as “God’s inerrant Word” and in the power of a sovereign Creator continues to uphold Young Earth creationist views, even though the preponderance of scientific evidence shows that the earth is at least four billion years old and probably originated with one or more cosmic explosions known as the Big Bang.

As will be discussed in chapter 3, the Orthodox hermeneutic for interpreting Holy Scripture is different from that of most Western Christian traditions; it is neither strictly literal nor strictly allegorical (although there is room for both kinds of readings). As a result, there is no Orthodox dogma asserting how God must have created, except that it was God who created (Gen. 1:1). This means that there is room in Orthodox theologoumena for many possible creation scenarios, without stating one definitively and without discounting any view on the grounds that the Bible does not describe it specifically.

The main point of this brief summary of major movements in Western religious culture since the twelfth century is that none of these challenges were part of the history of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Scholasticism was exclusively Latin and did not involve the Eastern Orthodox See, from which Rome had already separated by the mid-eleventh century. Similarly, the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation—the break from, or “reform” of, Roman Catholicism—also did not involve the Orthodox Church in any way whatsoever. Nor did the unbiblical worldview of the Enlightenment and the pendulum swings of liberal Protestantism and Protestant fundamentalism affect or alter the Apostolic Faith and practice in the Orthodox Church.

The Primacy of Worship

One of the prevailing themes woven throughout most topics in this book is that worship is primary in the Orthodox Church and that theological reflection,
while important, is nonetheless secondary. Reading this or that book on theology or being in a class that discusses theology is not “doing theology” in an Orthodox context, no matter how insightful the ensuing discussions. Metropolitan John Zizioulas, one of the most influential Orthodox bishops and scholars of the present day, articulates the centrality of worship in the Orthodox Church in this way: “Academic theology may concern itself with doctrine, but it is the communion of the Church which makes theology into truth.”

This means that in order to go beyond ideas about God, truth is revealed most fully by the Holy Spirit in and through worship, and especially in the Church’s celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The consensus of belief about the nature of the triune God has always arisen in and through the direct and personal experience of God—through prayer and worship—and not through academic study.

Doctrinal affirmations of the Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox Church were expounded not by professional theologians or by academics but by those who were “ overseers” (Greek: episkopoi) of the Eucharist, the bishops whose sacred liturgical role was to call upon the Holy Spirit to descend on the people and the gifts being offered, in order to make them both holy. One of the many blessings of studying Orthodox theology is that we are reminded again and again that one’s direct relationship with God through prayer and worship is what informs “head knowledge” about God.

Throughout its more than two thousand years of history, Orthodox Christianity has tried not to separate spirituality from theology or rational thought from faith. True theology is really true worship: both theology and worship arise only through actual encounters with God. An early New Testament encounter with God is Pentecost, described by St. Luke the Evangelist in chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles—a watershed and cosmic event that changed the course of history. The Apostles and others were gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. As Jesus Christ had promised them (John 14:16) and as the Prophet Joel had prophesied (Joel 2:28–29), God dramatically poured out His Spirit with the rush of a great wind and tongues of fire. Those who were in that room, and the multitude that had gathered around the home, were from a variety of nations, and they all heard the Gospel message wondrously being preached in their own languages.

Those in attendance were awestruck by the enormity of God’s mercy and power—a power that had now been fully released into the world. The very next thing that happened is that St. Peter, who had been a fisherman by trade,
immediately stood up and miraculously preached an articulate, logical, and
inspirational sermon summarizing salvation history with erudition far above
the typical level of education of a simple fisherman. Filled with divine inspira-
tion, Peter proclaimed boldly that Jesus Christ fulfilled all the prophecies
about the Messiah contained in the Jewish Scriptures.

Then as now in the Orthodox Church, the “wise” are not necessarily those
who have the most academic credentials, but those who have received—and
who follow—the Holy Spirit. This seminal day of Pentecost is also considered
by the Orthodox to be the formal inauguration of the Church—the day on
which the Church established by Jesus Christ was given new warmth and
power by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to make it grow and spread like
wildfire throughout the inhabited earth.

The event of Pentecost in Acts 2 also illustrates one of the most impor-
tant principles of Orthodox theology: worship of the uncreated Creator is
the Church’s primary task. To this point, imagine that you are one of the
Apostles of Christ, or even one of the faithful in that upper room on the
day of Pentecost. You have just been filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit
beyond what you can describe or even fully understand. Now imagine a
reporter who has witnessed the scene excitedly rushing up to you afterward
and exclaiming, “You have just received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and
miraculously preached the Gospel of Christ heard by all the people there in
their own language! What are you going to do next?” Would you say, “I am
going to go sit down with pen and parchment and write a theological reflec-
tion on the concepts I have just experienced”? This is not very likely. What
is more likely, after having been filled with the Holy Spirit, is an answer like

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**The Great Feast of Pentecost**

Pentecost is one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Lord in the Orthodox Church
and is commemorated annually through the Church’s liturgical worship on
the fiftieth day after Christ’s Resurrection on Pascha (Easter). The Orthodox
hymn for the Great Feast of Pentecost tells of the simple fishermen who were
thereafter revealed as “all-wise” because they were filled with the Holy Spirit:

> Blessed are you, O Christ our God, who have revealed the fishermen as
> most wise by sending down upon them the Holy Spirit; through them you
drew the world into your net. O Lover of man, glory to you!a

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*a. The Incarnate God: The Feasts of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, ed. Catherine Aslanoff,
this: “I am going to thank God for His generosity and mercy, and offer Him praise and worship always!”

The great seventh-century mystic St. Isaac the Syrian writes that when the Holy Spirit dwells in us we will never cease to pray, because the Spirit will constantly pray in us. 26 Indeed, the first activity of the Apostles and the thousands who were baptized on that day was not to begin developing a doctrine, or even to reflect in writing on their shared yet personal experience of the Spirit. As the New Testament shows, “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship [koinònia, or communion], in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” and they continued praising God “daily with one accord in the temple” (Acts 2:42–47). For Orthodox Christianity, worship is primary, because the Holy Spirit abides in the Church through its corporate prayer and worship. But also (and more importantly), the Orthodox understand that the rational and intellectual gifts needed to pursue theological reflection are themselves gifts of the Holy Spirit, as in the Orthodox hymn of Pentecost: the fishermen are now all-wise because Christ sent down His Holy Spirit upon them.

Come and See!

I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and see My glory. (Isa. 66:18)

Come and see the works of God; He is awesome in His doing toward the sons of men. (Ps. 66:5)

After Philip meets Jesus, he tells Nathanael that he has met the Messiah of whom Moses and the Prophets foretold. Nathanael is suspicious, though, that anything good could come out of Nazareth. “Come and see,” says Philip (John 1:46). Sometimes “come and see” (Ps. 66:5; John 1:39, 46) is the best way to understand. A fascinating historical example of the value of “come and see” as well as of the primacy of worship in the Orthodox Church comes from the story of how Russia became Christianized. Around AD 987, the pagan prince of Kiev, Vladimir, wanted to provide his subjects with a better religion as an alternative to paganism. The story goes that Vladimir charged his envoys to visit and experience the four Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Greek Orthodoxy—and return with a full report of what they saw and experienced.

27. Ware, Orthodox Church, 257.
Their first stop was with the Bulgarian Muslims in the Volga region. The envoys reported that the Muslims had no gladness in their religion, “only sorrow and a great stink.” (Apparently Vladimir also did not care for the Muslim ban on alcohol and pork!) Traveling on to Germany and Rome, the envoys found the Latin Masses and ceremonies more satisfactory, but not beautiful. But the emissaries of Vladimir had a completely different experience when they attended the Byzantine (Greek Orthodox) Divine Liturgy at the Church of Holy Wisdom (the Hagia Sophia) in Constantinople, as evidenced by their report:

We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for on earth there is no such splendor or beauty, and we are at a loss to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among humans, and their worship is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. . . . And we cannot forget that beauty. Every man who has partaken of sweetness will not afterwards accept bitterness, and so we can no longer remain apart from it.  

As a result of the envoys’ report, Vladimir declared in AD 988 that the Orthodox Christian Faith would become the religion of Russia. Byzantine

St. Vladimir, Equal to the Apostles

A troparion is a special hymn sung in commemoration of a saint or event. The troparion is chanted annually on the feast day of the saint or event and at every liturgy celebrated in churches named for the saint or event.

The Troparion of St. Vladimir offers poetic highlights of Vladimir’s life—the search for the priceless pearl of truth for his people and his coming to Christianity later in life through repentance and Baptism:

Holy Prince Vladimir, you were like a merchant in search of fine pearls. By sending servants to Constantinople for the Orthodox Faith, you found Christ, the priceless pearl. He appointed you to be another Paul, washing away in baptism your physical and spiritual blindness. We celebrate your memory, asking you to pray for all Orthodox Christians and for us, your spiritual children.a


28. From the Russian Primary Chronicle (ca. 1113), as presented in Ware, Orthodox Church, 257–60.
Orthodoxy would soon transform the entire Russian culture, not merely that of Kiev and not merely its religious worldview. Greek learning and culture would also be fully adopted throughout Russia. The significance of this example lies in the way in which Orthodox Christianity was chosen above the other religious options. Prince Vladimir never asked his envoys to study or to report on the beliefs or moral teachings of the various religions, but only to experience the religions in worship. Because of the beauty of Orthodox worship and the envoys’ experience of God’s presence among humans, Russia became Christian. Today St. Vladimir, prince of Kiev, is called “equal to the Apostles” because of his Christianization of the Russian lands, and he is remembered liturgically in the Orthodox Church every year on July 15.29

This story of Vladimir and the Christianization of Russia indeed exemplifies the invitation to “come and see,” since the Orthodox Christian Faith is found not in theology books but in worship. This story also highlights a Patristic rule, *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (paraphrased as *lex orandi, lex credendi*), which states that the law of worship establishes the law of belief.30 Belief is constituted by worship, which is an encounter with God. Roman Catholic liturgical scholar Fr. Aidan Kavanagh shows why the reverse is not the case: “It was a Presence, not faith, which drew Moses to the burning bush, and what happened there was a revelation, not a seminar. It was a Presence, not faith, which drew the disciples to Jesus, and what happened then was not an educational program but his revelation to them of himself as the long-promised Anointed One.”31 Belief arises from encounter.

“Doing Theology” in Orthodox Christianity

How does the Orthodox Church do theology? “Theology” (Greek: *theologia*) is composed of two words: *Theos* (God) and *Logos* (Word). The earliest understanding of *theologia* was the contemplation of God in Godself, without images or words. Often quoted in this regard are the words of an influential fourth-century monk, Evagrius of Ponticus, who states, “If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian.”32

30. Latin *statuat* = “makes stand.” In other words, it is only through worship that beliefs stand.
Prayer and worship are the most important activities of a Christian, and true theology includes praise and contemplation. A popular twentieth-century spiritual father, Silouan of Mount Athos (1866–1938), who was recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate as a saint in 1988, summarizes well the role of theology in Orthodoxy: “It is one thing to speak of God; it is quite another thing to know God.”

The Orthodox Church has formally given the appellation of “Theologian” to only three people in two-thousand-plus years. It is not the case that no one else can discuss theology in the Orthodox Church, but these three were so called because of their incomparably beautiful God-inspired theological orations, derived through the ascetic disciplines of prayer, fasting, repentance, contemplation, and worship. The three who are honored with the title “Theologian” are John the Evangelist and Theologian (first century), Gregory (of Nazianzus) the Theologian (fourth century), and Symeon the New Theologian (eleventh century). (Yes, in the Eastern Orthodox worldview, the eleventh century is considered “new”!) Each Theologian used words, but the words pointed beyond their own limits. A theological theme present in the works of all three Theologians is the theme of light: “God is light—and so reaches out towards us and makes the incomprehensible God knowable, but through participation and experience rather than academic enquiry.”

### The Troparion of St. Gregory the Theologian, Archbishop of Constantinople (Commemorated on January 25)

The sweet-sounding shepherd’s pipe of your theology overpowered the trumpeting of the orators; for having searched the depths of the Spirit eloquence was also bestowed upon you. Pray to Christ God, Father Gregory, that our souls may be saved.

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Apophatic Theology

Theology may be understood by the Orthodox as the experience of God, but of course “theology” also refers to the words used to describe ideas about God. Yet words from a finite being will always fall short of expressing the mystery of the infinite God. Though we can communicate in words (this book is filled with words about theology), it is wise to recognize in humility that our words will never begin to approach the reality of God’s unknowable essence: “The mystical presence of God . . . transcends the possibility of being defined in words.”35 In order to resolve this seeming paradox of needing to use words, when words will always fail to hit the mark, the Orthodox make use of what is referred to as apophatic theology. The apophatic theology of Orthodoxy is based on a position of humility that human reasoning will never approach the fullness of God. As the Lord God revealed to the Prophet Isaiah, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). Similarly, St. Paul told his spiritual son Timothy that God alone dwells “in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16).

One type of apophatic approach is to speak about what God is not by “the way of negation.”36 For example, we humans are mortal, finite, and created, but God is immortal, infinite, and uncreated. One of my favorite apophatic statements is from the Byzantine scholar St. John of Damascus: “God, then, is infinite and incomprehensible, and all that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility.”37

Mainly, however, the Orthodox use apophatic theology not as a counterbalance to positive statements about God, but rather to avoid forming concepts about God altogether. The fourth-century Church Father Gregory of Nyssa taught that it is not only wise but safer and more reverent to believe that the majesty of God is greater than we can understand. The disciple who has an experience of God will not go through the door of speculation. But if one does attempt knowledge of God beyond one’s finite abilities, Gregory

believed that error rather than truth is the likelier outcome: “The desire of investigating what is obscure and tracing out hidden things by the operation of human reasoning gives an entrance to false no less than to true notions, inasmuch as he who aspires to know the unknown will not always arrive at truth, but may also conceive of falsehood itself as truth.”38 In other words, it is best not to speculate at all about God’s being, since limited human reasoning may perceive falsehood as truth.

Consider the profound self-defining statement the Lord made to Moses from within the burning bush: “I AM THAT I AM” (Exod. 3:14 KJV). Even though this was a direct statement from the Lord God Himself, no concepts can be formed about God except that God has being and is present. The Orthodox mind is comfortable in the apophatic tension of God being far beyond us in “unapproachable light” and yet also fully with us.39 The same apophatic reserve is present in the writings of two of the most highly regarded Orthodox authors of the twentieth century, the Romanian priest Dumitru Staniloae (1903–1993) and Russian lay scholar Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958). Both agree that knowledge of God can never be abstract, as if God is a concept rather than a personal being. The apophatic approach instead seeks to raise the mind “to those realities which pass all understanding.”40

Apophatic theology does not discount the importance of positive or cata- phatic statements. Positive statements (e.g., God is love, God is good) are the starting points that enable us to contemplate the divine realities far beyond human experience. Finite human language may not fully reach the infinite God, but God reaches out to His creation. Apophatic theology is about God’s presence, not God’s distance. God is with us, even “where human understanding cannot reach.”41 The God who is perceived cannot be defined, even though the uncreated glory of God can be experienced in a way that transcends all possibility of definition.42

42. Staniloae, Experience of God, 99.
An Open Hermeneutic

From the time of Scholasticism in the eleventh century, the Christian West considered theology to be the “highest scientia,” and the medieval Roman Catholic Church had become the arbiter of all academic disciplines, theological and otherwise. The Bible was being interpreted as something like a scientific text, and scientific discoveries or opinions could not contradict the Roman Catholic teaching. For example, Roman Catholicism taught that the earth was a static body at the center of the universe and that the sun revolved around the earth. When in the seventeenth century Galileo insisted that he had scientific and mathematical evidence to prove Copernicus’s theory that the earth revolves around the sun, not the other way around, the Roman Inquisition declared him to be a heretic and imprisoned him until his death. “Geocentric” views persisted even into the twentieth century: the Missouri Synod Lutheran tradition officially held such a view until 1920.43 In both of these cases, the problem was ultimately not an “ungodly” science but a closed theology derived from a particular scriptural hermeneutic.

Despite our many twenty-first-century technological advances, there is still discord in the present day between empirical scientific evidence and the beliefs of some Christians. I am thinking again of the Young Earth creationists mentioned earlier, who hold to a strictly literal interpretation of the Bible and believe that the Bible supports an earth age of between six thousand and ten thousand years old. This view is in stark contrast to the belief of scientists in several disciplines today who are fairly consistent with one another in suggesting that the earth is 4.5 billion years old, give or take a few million years. For example, physical cosmologists and astrophysicists believe they have uncovered evidence in space about the earth’s age that aligns with the claims of geologists to have discovered rocks that have been on earth for four billion years. Geologists have also unearthed evidence that catastrophic volcanic eruptions took place on earth at least three billion years ago.

Once again, “East is East and West is West.” With intentional apophatic reserve, Eastern Orthodoxy has never officially stated more than finite humans can possibly know about how God created. We can indeed know and proclaim with certainty that God created, but we are not able to know exactly how God created. The early Church Fathers and contemporary Eastern Orthodox scholars have tried to leave room for God to be God without the need

43. Ron Miller, *Recentering the Universe: The Radical Theories of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2014), 689. The Roman Catholic Church burned Giordano Bruno at the stake for supporting Copernicus’s heliocentric view, but Galileo was more popular with the people and thus was merely imprisoned for life.
to explore or explain details. In this way, the latest scientific discoveries or trends need be neither shunned nor affirmed. Vladimir Lossky writes that “the Church always freely makes use of philosophy and the sciences for apologetic (explanatory) purposes, but she never has any cause to defend these relative and changing truths as she defends the unchangeable truth of her doctrines.”

Science discoveries and theories change, but God’s truth does not. The unchanging truth of creation is that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). In order to distinguish this God from the Gnostic deities who were thought to have created the universe from preexisting materials, the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council affirmed that God created everything “visible and invisible.” The Orthodox hold it as incontrovertible dogma that God spoke everything that exists into being out of nothing: “For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast” (Ps. 33:9). But there is no official Orthodox narrative about creation beyond the fact that God created everything at the beginning. This allows room for the Orthodox to entertain many possible creation scenarios without stating one definitively and without discounting any view on the grounds that the Bible does not specifically describe it. An open hermeneutic has also prevented the Orthodox Church from falling into the same error as geocentrists of the past who used the Bible as a scientific textbook, while still affirming the absolute truth of the Bible.

Astrophysicist Christopher Knight affirms that Orthodoxy has had no problem putting God at the origin of what scientists perceive as natural processes: “God may be seen as having worked as creator in and through the naturalistic processes that are perceived by scientists as providing a valid explanation of the cosmos’s development from the Big Bang to the present time.” Science should never drive Christian theology, however, and scientific knowledge can never lead to the meaning, purpose, or end (telos) of cosmology. Science needs Christian theology to supply answers to the “black box” questions of science, such as this one: If the Big Bang theory of the universe has scientific merit, what (or who) caused the Big Bang? The apophatic nature of Orthodox theology lends itself to this type of dialectic with science since, as Lossky writes, Christian theology “is able to accommodate itself very easily to any scientific theory of the universe.”

44. Lossky, Mystical Theology, 104.
46. Lossky, Mystical Theology, 106.
of science will change theology; but theology can ultimately provide meaning and insights into the purpose of whatever science may discover to be true.

Alexei Nesteruk, in his book *Light from the East: Theology, Science, and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, concludes that scientific research and activity can even be thought of in the context of religious experience: “Science thus cannot be detached from theology; it is in the complex with theology that it can be properly understood and treated.”47 The Orthodox interpretive hermeneutic makes room for God to be God, without limiting Him to whatever might be the current level of human understanding of the cosmos. There is also no battle between the Orthodox Church, the Bible, and science. The Orthodox reading of Genesis uncovers literal truth, but Genesis is not understood as a scientific textbook. Fr. Lawrence Farley states in an Orthodox context what many Western biblical scholars are also saying about the creation narratives: that the stories of Genesis should not be read apart from their original cultural context, which affirms that Israel’s God is the intentional cause of all that exists. “When we read them as they were meant to be read, we see that the creation story was a gauntlet thrown down before the prevailing culture of its time. The creation stories affirmed that the Jewish God, the tribal deity of a small and internationally unimportant people, alone made the whole cosmos.”48 The Orthodox scriptural hermeneutic will be discussed further in chapter 3 and generally throughout the remainder of the book.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Share something that you never knew about Eastern Orthodox Christianity before reading this chapter, or something in the chapter that surprised you.

2. How might the apophatic approach to theology in Eastern Orthodoxy be both a benefit and a challenge?

3. This chapter briefly summarizes the biblical account of the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. How does the Orthodox hymn of Pentecost reflect the meaning of the biblical event? What would have been your response had you actually been there?

4. In your opinion, what is the proper relationship between theology and science?
