

DIVINE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY IN EASTERN ORTHODOXY AND REFORMED THEOLOGY

Tim Shimko

Westminster Seminary, Sacramento, California, USA

Introduction

Theology, in its most basic and fundamental form, is the study of God. Before God can be studied, a pressing question must be engaged – can God be studied? Various answers have been given to this question. In this paper, however, two views will be analyzed; both begin with the fundamental tenet that God is incomprehensible. A striking difference, however, arises in the manner by which God can be known. On the one hand, Eastern Orthodoxy, especially in its more contemporary form as presented by Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff, views that a mystical experience is theology *par excellence*. On the other hand, in Reformed theology God can and should be known intellectually, but this knowledge is analogical. Though both begin with the same fundamental tenet, both arrive at two different conclusions. Not only are the conclusions different, the entire structure and paradigm of these two systems are different. Due to the different views of how God can be known, both have striking differences in anthropology, Christology, and pneumatology. The two different views and their resultant paradigms will be explored in this paper.

Eastern Orthodox Position

The Eastern Orthodox position begins, as was mentioned, with the fundamental tenet that God is incomprehensible. God is eternal and uncreated, while creation was made from nothing. It was not made from his essence, but by his mere command – he spoke and creation came into being. In the act of creation, therefore, there exists a fundamental difference between God and that which he created. His creation is not in any way similar to him. Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958), an Eastern Orthodox theologian, wrote:

All knowledge has as its object that which is. Now God is beyond all that exists. In order to approach Him it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to Him, that is to say, all that which is. If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him.¹

¹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 25.

God cannot be known because of the sharp Creator/creature divide. To claim to know him in a direct, intellectual manner is to bring him from the realm of transcendence into the created realm. Such a claim is essentially presumptuous and arrogant.

Aidan Nichols, describing Lossky's views, wrote: "The human mind and human language are incommensurate with the divine reality. God escapes all our concepts and images, and thus all our words."² The cause of this incomprehensibility is described later: "God's darkness may be regarded as the effect on us of the super-abundance of his radiance, his light."³ Not only is God of another imperceptible realm, the radiance of his glory blinds all and leaves them in insurmountable darkness. All that may be known about God is that which relates to his nature, or in the words of John of Damascus: τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν.⁴ His essence cannot be known; only that which is about him or, to speak crudely, that which is on his perimeter can be known.

In the light of his utter incomprehensibility, in which neither notions nor words suffice to describe him, Orthodox theology resorts to apophaticism as a means of knowing God. Simply put, apophaticism is a negative knowledge. It does not seek to understand who God is, but who God is not. Lossky remarked: "Apophaticism ... is, above all, an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God. Such an attitude utterly excludes all abstract and purely intellectual theology which would adapt the mysteries of the wisdom of God to human ways of thoughts."⁵ God cannot be brought down and placed into human structures of thought; instead, to know God, humanity must be absorbed by the divine realm. God can only be truly known when the seeker resigns his capacities of thought, or as John Chryssavgis wrote: "The unknowability constitutes the crux of His knowability."⁶ The negative character of apophaticism is excellently illustrated in Lossky's quotation of Gregory Palamas, a fourteenth century monk and theologian: "For if God be nature, then all else is not nature. If that which is not God be nature, God is not nature, and likewise He is not being if that which is not God is being."⁷

The use of positive, or cataphatic, theology is subordinated to that of apophatic theology. Theology which seeks to know God intellectually, wrote John Meyendorff (1926–1992), another Orthodox theologian, is "the lowest and least reliable level of theology."⁸ Even the positive knowledge that is attained is not conceptual, but iconic. Lossky noted: "These are not the rational notions which we formulate, the concepts with which our intellect constructs a positive science of the divine nature; they are rather images or ideas

² Aidan Nichols, *Light from the East: Authors and Themes in Orthodox Theology* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 35

⁴ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 36; John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (NPNF² 9:4).

⁵ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 38-9.

⁶ John Chryssavgis, "The Origins of the Essence-Energies Distinction," *Phronema* 5 (1990): 16.

⁷ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 37.

⁸ John Meyendorff quoted in Nichols, *Light from the East*, 49; cf. Meyendorff quoted on the same page: "Because the concept of *theologia* in Byzantium as with the Cappadocian Fathers, was inseparable from *theoria* ['contemplation'], theology could not be – as it was in the West – a rational deduction from 'revealed' premises, i.e. from Scripture or from the statements of an ecclesiastical magisterium; rather, it was a vision experienced by the saints, whose authenticity was, of course, to be checked against the witness of Scripture and Tradition."

intended to guide us and to fit our faculties for the contemplation of that which transcends all understanding.”⁹ The function of this knowledge is not to produce intellectual stimulation, but to create a living communion with God. The chief end of theology is not theory, but practice.

In Orthodox theology, the incomprehensibility of God is not meant to drive a complete wedge between God and man; the end of this knowledge is not deism or agnosticism. The infinite chasm can be bridged and man can come near to God. The bridge, for the Orthodox, lies in the essence-energies distinction. David Bradshaw explained: “The best general description of the essence-energies distinction remains that which is implied by the meaning of the word *energeia* itself: it is the distinction between an agent and that agent’s activity.”¹⁰ The divine energies are the things which John of Damascus describes as being about God (τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν). Citing Basil the Great, Bradshaw wrote: “we are led up from the activities of God (τῶν ἐνεργειῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ)... and so come in this way to an understanding of His goodness and wisdom.”¹¹ God is inaccessible in regard to his essence, but can be approached in regard to his energies.¹²

These energies are not operations that come into existence with the creation of the world; instead, they are coeternal with God’s essence.¹³ God’s essence can be likened to the sun and his energies to its rays. The existence of the rays does not depend on the objects which encounter its presence. The energies are not created, but they are also not his essence; instead they are the operations of his essence.¹⁴ Chryssavgis aptly noted:

The energies are not one with the essence, they do not contain its totality (only He who possesses the essence contains it entirely!); but they do transmit what is *specific* to the total essence. The object of communication is more or less modified with respect to the state and measure of the person who is the recipient of these operations, that is to say in relation to the receptivity of the believer.¹⁵

The energies do not depend on creatures and yet it is through them that creatures come to know God.

Since the means of knowing God is not intellectual, it is argued by the Orthodox that he can only be known mystically. Instead of bringing God down into the realm of rational thought, humans must be brought up into his realm. The manner by which this is done is divinization, or *theosis* as it is also called. Lossky claimed: “The way of the knowledge of God is necessarily the way of deification.”¹⁶ As Demetrios Harper observed, “deification depends not on man transcending his substance or in overcoming his nature, but rather on the Logos’ outpouring of divinity into human nature, elevating both man’s

⁹ Ibid., 40; cf. Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 17.

¹⁰ David Bradshaw, “Essence and Energies: What Kind of Distinction,” *The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 6 (2019): 35.

¹¹ Ibid., 10.

¹² Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 86.

¹³ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴ Ibid., 70-76.

¹⁵ Chryssavgis, “The Origins of the Essence-Energies Distinction,” 27.

¹⁶ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 39.

noetic soul and material body to divinity through His descent.”¹⁷ God cannot be known intellectually and he infinitely transcends his creation. It is necessary, therefore, for man to be exalted to the realm of divinity to be near God.

The Orthodox position also builds its view of deification from its view of what the meaning of the knowledge of God in Scripture is. This knowledge is not intellectual and logical, but relational. Marios Begzos stated:

Apophatic theology aims at personal knowledge and absolutely denies any possessive knowledge. The apophaticism of the Eastern Church stands in the mode of being and not in the mode of having. To know God apophatically means to be in relation with God as person, and not to have, master or grasp God as a thing or object.¹⁸

To know God is to be united to him. It is not to know him as an object, but to exist in a state where the distinction between the subject and the object are blurred.¹⁹ Doctrine is revealed in Scripture to be ultimately experienced, not intellectually contemplated.²⁰ It is a means to an end, the end being divinization.²¹ Lossky wrote:

[T]he negations which draw attention to the divine incomprehensibility are not prohibitions upon knowledge: apophaticism, so far from being a limitation, enables us to transcend all concepts, every sphere of philosophical speculation. It is a tendency towards an ever-greater plenitude, in which knowledge is transformed into ignorance, the theology of concepts into contemplation, dogmas into experience of ineffable mysteries.²²

Hence, all of theology and doctrine is subordinated to this purpose. Theology is useful only insofar as it leads to a mystical experience with God.

Deification is achieved by synergistic means. God has provided all that is useful for us to achieve this end; it is our task, however, to make good use of those means.²³ Gregory Palamas stated that “they can only unite themselves to it and see if they have purified themselves by fulfillment of the commandments and by consecrating their mind to pure and immaterial prayer, so as to receive the supernatural power of contemplation.”²⁴ Through ascetic living and prayer, it is possible to approach the mystical experience. Prayer, in particular, plays a vital role in the process. Lossky noted: “The whole of the

¹⁷ Demetrios Harper, “Becoming Homotheos: St. Gregory Palamas’ Eschatology of Body,” in Athanasopoulos, *Triune God: Incomprehensible but Knowable—The Philosophical and Theological Significance of St. Gregory Palamas for Contemporary Philosophy and Theology* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 246.

¹⁸ Marios P. Begzos, “Apophaticism in the Theology of the Eastern Church: The Modern Critical Function of a Traditional Theory,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 41 (1996): 344; cf. Chrysavgis, “The Origins of the Essence-Energies Distinction,” 16: “The biblical word for ‘knowing’ (γινώσκω) implies a relationship.” Also, Meyendorff quoted in Nichols, *Light from the East*, 48-9: “...the mainstream of Byzantine theology uncovers the same vision of man, called to ‘know’ God, to ‘participate’ in his life, to be ‘saved’, not simply through an extrinsic action of God’s, or through the rational cognition of propositional truths, but by ‘becoming God.’”

¹⁹ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 238.

²³ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁴ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. John Meyendorff (Greece: 1341; Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983), 37.

attention must be given to the words of the short prayer: ‘O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.’”²⁵

It is important to note that the state of deification is not one of union with God in his essence, but a union with his energies. Lossky wrote: “In deification we are by grace (that is to say, in the divine energies), all that God is by nature, save only identity of nature.”²⁶ Yet, though this deification is by grace and in his energies, the Orthodox theologian can still say, “He remains entirely man by nature in his soul and body, and becomes entirely God in his soul and his body through grace.”²⁷ This deification is itself mysterious and incomprehensible; it cannot be explained, but only experienced.²⁸ The knowledge and sight that those who were deified have is mediated through their union with the Holy Spirit. As Palamas wrote, “Do you now understand that in place of the intellect, the eyes and ears, they acquire the incomprehensible Spirit and by Him hear, see and comprehend?”²⁹

Reformed Position

The Reformed position begins with the same fundamental belief as the Orthodox that God is completely incomprehensible. Scottish theologian Hugh Binning (1627–53) affirmed: “This is the chief point of saving knowledge, to know God; and this is the first point or degree of true knowledge of God, to discern how ignorant we are of him, and to find him beyond all knowledge.”³⁰ Though he is incomprehensible, he can be known in a certain manner and such knowledge is necessary for one’s salvation. Dutch theologian Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) wrote: “The Christian Church confesses on the one hand that God is the Incomprehensible One, but also on the other hand, that He can be known and that knowledge of Him is an absolute requisite unto salvation.”³¹ His incomprehensibility arises from two sources: his ontological separation from creation and his ethical separation from mankind. In regard to the ontological separation, the contemporary Reformed theologian Michael Horton remarked: “God is *qualitatively* distinct from creation—not just more than, but different from his creation.”³² God is not merely a larger or more

²⁵ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 209.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁷ Maximus the Confessor quoted in Palamas, *The Triads*, 109-10.

²⁸ Cf. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 172: “He *mysteriously* identifies Himself with human persons whilst remaining incommunicable” (italics mine). Also, Palamas, *The Triads*, 34: “No one has ever seen the fullness of this divine Beauty, and this is why, according to Gregory of Nyssa, no eye has seen it, even if it gazes forever: In fact, it does not see the totality such as it is, but only in the measure in which it is rendered receptive to the power of the Holy Spirit. But in addition to this incomprehensibility, *what is most divine and extraordinary is that the very comprehension a man may have, he possesses incomprehensibly*” (italics mine).

²⁹ Palamas, *The Triads*, 35.

³⁰ Hugh Binnings quoted in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 3.164.

³¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1941), 29; cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend (Netherlands, 1895–1901; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 2.47: “There is no knowledge of God as he is in himself. We are human and he is the Lord our God. There is no name that fully expresses his being, no definition that captures him. He infinitely transcends our picture of him, our ideas of him, our language concerning him.”

³² Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 42.

infinite version of the present universe; he is substantially and ontologically different. In regard to the ethical separation, in the presence of sin, any knowledge that can be gleaned about God innately or in nature is bound to be corrupted.³³

In the light of these two barriers, knowledge of God in Reformed theology has traditionally been thought to be characterized by accommodation and covenant. In terms of accommodation, what John Calvin (1509–1564) said in regard to anthropomorphisms would later be applied to all knowledge of God: “For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height.”³⁴ God does not reveal himself as he is in himself; instead, he reveals himself in accommodation to our feeble capacities. He speaks to us as if we were children and incapable of grasping the subliminal truths about him. The covenantal aspect of the knowledge of God concerns the truths that God reveals specially to his elect church, things that are not generally perceptible in nature.³⁵

In the seventeenth century, Francis Turretin (1623–1687) outlined three ways by which God can be known: *via causalitatis* (way of causation), *via eminentiae* (way of eminence), and *via negationis* (way of negation).³⁶ These ways were not ways by which God could be known directly, but indirectly (similar to John of Damascus notion of τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν). By the way of causation, he is known by the effects of his operations. By such means, his relative attributes are known, attributes such as grace and wrath. By the way of eminence, perfections known from creatures are attributed preeminently to God. His positive attributes are known by this way, attributes such as justice and love. By the way of negation, imperfections known to creatures are removed from God. By this way, negative attributes can be attributed to God, attributes such as sinlessness or omnipotence.

In terms of a more direct knowledge of God, a knowledge by which he accommodates to human capacities, Franciscus Junius (1545–1602) developed the distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology in his influential work, *A Treatise on True Theology*. According to Junius, archetypal theology is the knowledge that God has of himself; ectypal knowledge is the knowledge that creatures have of God. Archetypal theology is uncreated and intrinsic to God; it is co-eternal with him.³⁷ Ectypal theology, on the other

³³ Ibid., cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Geneva, 1545; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008), 1.5.15: “But while man must bear the guilt of corrupting the seed of divine knowledge so wondrously deposited in his mind, and preventing it from bearing good and genuine fruit, it is still most true that we are not sufficiently instructed by that bare and simple, but magnificent testimony which the creatures bear to the glory of their Creator. For no sooner do we, from a survey of the world, obtain some slight knowledge of Deity, than we pass by the true God, and set up in his stead the dream and phantom of our brain....”

³⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.13.1.

³⁵ I.e. special vs. general revelation.

³⁶ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George M. Giger (Geneva, 1687–90; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 3.2.8.

³⁷ Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology*, trans. David C. Noe (Netherlands: 1594; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 105.

hand, is created knowledge and is shaped and molded by God himself, accommodated to our finite capacities.³⁸ Junius explained:

[T]his created theology of ours and the one that is a communicated emanation of the former kind, since it is nothing other than a kind of relief image stamped by the essential theology, is not altogether part of the former theology's genus, nor can it be contained in it, but it only has some analogy to it and with it just as a painted image of a person is not of the same kind as the person....³⁹

Archetypal and ectypal theology, therefore do not merely differ in quantity, but in quality as well. Ectypal knowledge is not merely a simpler version of archetypal knowledge; on the contrary, the two do not intersect at any point. Though the two do not intersect, they are analogous to each other. Ectypal theology reveals shadows, as it were, of the divine essence. These shadows bear a similarity to the divine nature. They are not rationally deduced, but are defined and drawn by God. Man does not ascend to God with his intellect; instead, God descends to provide man with shadows of his being.⁴⁰

Junius subdivided ectypal theology into three types: theology of union, theology of vision, and theology of revelation.⁴¹ Theology of union is the knowledge that Christ possesses of God in his humanity.⁴² As God he possesses archetypal knowledge, as man he possesses a theology of union. This theology of union is the foundation of the other two. Junius wrote:

[T]he ectypal theology of union in Christ our Savior is the common principle of the rest of theology, both that which is perceived by those blessed spirits in heaven, and here on earth by wretched men. That archetypal is the matrix of them all, but the ectypal in Christ is the mother of the remaining types of theology. The archetypal is the fount of them all, but the ectypal is, as it were, the common reservoir or storage vessel.⁴³

It is through Christ and from his knowledge that the theologies of vision and revelation are drawn. The theology of vision (the theology of the saints and angels in heaven) is experienced by means of spiritual vision, while the theology of revelation (the theology of this present life) is obtained by means of God's revelation.⁴⁴ This ectypal theology is a theology of accommodation. It is not univocal in nature, but analogical: the sign and the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 119. Cf. 172: "He made His own grace remarkable when He enrobed (as we would say) divine, spiritual, and heavenly matters in a human, corporal, and earthly fashion, so that nothing of those things which it was profitable for us to know would escape us. In the first place, it is quite noteworthy in the mode of this divine communication that He conformed the instruction of saving grace to the order of the natural sciences and disciplines, and accommodated to our nature the doctrine of grace."

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 160: "[T]he Author of Good needed to approach man, wretched and degraded, since man could not mount up to Him by any reason."

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 123: "If He is 'like human beings in all things,' then we must also say He is like us in knowledge, although He is in other respects unlike us and far above our knowledge of all things."

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 130, in regard to the theology of vision: "...this theology is communicated by vision. For since the communication of spiritual matters is not possible except it be spiritual, nor can spiritual things be seen by spiritual things except in a spiritual way."

thing signified are not identical but similar by analogy. The sign and the thing signified are also not equivocal (the sign bears no relation whatsoever to the thing signified); instead, that which is familiar to humans is used as an analogy to describe God.⁴⁵

Not only is it a theology that is accommodated to human capacities, it is a theology that can only be truly apprehended by the elect; this knowledge is covenantal by nature. A person does not discern the nature of God by unaided reason, but by the revelation. God is not merely the object of theology, but also its subject: he defines it and illumines the elect to understand it.⁴⁶ Berkhof wrote: “[E]ven after God has revealed Himself objectively, it is not human reason that discovers God, but it is God who discloses Himself to the eye of faith.”⁴⁷ Elsewhere he noted that a man can “acquire true knowledge of Him only from special revelation, under the illuminating influence of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁸ Those with whom God comes into covenant with can only understand him as he reveals himself. His nature is not rationally deduced or imaginatively conjured; instead, knowledge of him is received with childlike faith.⁴⁹ God himself is the epistemological source of knowledge about himself, not reason or deduction. God defines himself and it is the duty of man to acknowledge reality as God determines it. Horton argued: “One implication of the Creator-creature (i.e., archetypal-actypal) distinction is that although human beings, more than other creatures, strain naturally toward transcendence, they, no less than other creatures, never know reality as pure object. Only God sees reality in independent objectivity.”⁵⁰ It is the duty of man not merely to lay down his rebellion in submit to the authority of God, but also to submit to God’s definition and portrayal of reality.⁵¹

According to Horton, there is a difference in Scripture between sight and hearing. Sight makes man the measure of all things; he sees data and information and interprets it to his liking.⁵² Hearing, on the other hand, is not interpretive but receptive. Horton noted: “[H]earing the covenantal Word of our Lord is the source of that dethronement of the supposedly sovereign self...”⁵³ God does not merely present data and information only to leave it to human interpretation; instead, he portrays the world and its history and provides his own interpretation of it. His interpretation is ultimately a drama and a metanarrative that he has authored: the world was created in subordination to God, revolted against

⁴⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.48; cf. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.165: “[W]hatever is said or predicated of God is not God himself—for God is ineffable—but rather what the human mind in its limitation can apprehend about God.”

⁴⁶ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 34.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29; cf. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.165: “A regenerate mind is requisite for drawing correct theological and practical conclusions from the biblical text.”

⁴⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 30.

⁵⁰ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 77-8.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 49: “In a covenantal perspective, we are no less dependent on God for our knowledge than for our existence. Given both the positive ontological difference and the negative ethical opposition between God and fallen humanity, we dare not attempt to ascend to heaven by our own reason, will, and works, but we must meet God where he has promised to descend to us, meeting us in grace.”

⁵² *Ibid.*, 81-84.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87; cf. *ibid.*: “I am responsible for what I hear—a command or a promise; I am not a master. I can no longer construct a theology, project my own experience, offer my own speculations about the nature of a perfect being, or present a critical reflection on praxis. Rather, I am given a theology.”

him, and can now only find reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. This drama is reality as defined by God. In Scripture God is not merely portrayed absolutely or as he is in himself without relation to anything else, but relative to the deliverance and salvation that he effects. He is portrayed soteriologically. Horton stated: “[R]eceiving one’s identity from one’s God, through a story that one hears, is different from determining one’s own identity through idols that the worshiper has created and therefore controls.”⁵⁴ This knowledge is covenantal not only because God reveals it only to those with whom he has covenanted, but also because those recipients are required to lay down their prerogatives and independence and submit to the overlordship of their new master. The theology, then, that God reveals is not comprehended, but apprehended. Bavinck noted: “This mystery cannot be comprehended; it can only be gratefully acknowledged.”⁵⁵ God’s revelation is not normed to the standard of human reason; instead, human reason itself is subordinated to mystery. It is for this reason that Bavinck stated: “Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics.” Any attempt to explain or comprehend the mystery that God has revealed is a covenantal breach; it is to place reason on par with God’s revelation.

Analysis and Conclusion

Having reviewed the two systems, it is evident that the two begin with the same foundation, but arrive at two different conclusions. For the remainder of the paper, it will become evident that the two different conclusions shape the paradigms of both views. The conclusions directly affect the anthropology, hamartiology, soteriology, and pneumatology in both cases. In regard to anthropology, the Orthodox position is more fluid than the Reformed position. Meyendorff wrote: “[M]an’s nature is not a static, ‘closed’, autonomous entity, but a dynamic reality, determined in its very existence by its relationship to God.”⁵⁶

The Orthodox differentiate between image and likeness in Genesis 1:26. Adam was created in the image of God and was called to attain to the likeness of God. The image of God was a state of non-being, while the likeness of God was a state of fullness and union with God by deification.⁵⁷ Sin, then, is the failure to attain deification.⁵⁸ As a result, Christ came to make this possible for man once again. Lossky stated: “Deification, union with God by grace, had become impossible. But the plan of God was not destroyed by the sin of man; the vocation of the first Adam was fulfilled by Christ, the second Adam. God became man in order that man might become god....”⁵⁹ The work of the Holy Spirit is the result of Christ’s work. It is not subordinated to it or a continuation of it; instead, he works to

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.49.

⁵⁶ Meyendorff quoted in Nichols, *Light from the East*, 48.

⁵⁷ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 91.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 133. Cf. Harper, “Becoming Homotheos,” 240: “It is this willful failure and the misuse of his *eikonic* capacity on the part of man that constitutes the problematic aspects of bodily existence, that is, illness, corruption, and finally, physical death.”

⁵⁹ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 133-4. Cf. Harper, “Becoming Homotheos,” 235: “Christ is the *eschaton* of human nature, the paradigm to which all of humanity must aspire and in which all humanity must participate....”

bring men into the mold of Christ, into a mold of his divinity.⁶⁰ Grace is not unmerited favor; it is the power by which man becomes divine.⁶¹ In this system, the focus lies not with objective forgiveness, but with subjective deification. The system, then, is essentially one which focuses on ontology. Its focus is not ultimately on theology and law-keeping, but mysticism and experience.

Reformed theology, on the other hand, preserves the Creator/creature divide through and through. It never seeks to bridge that chasm. God is known, but only in covenant and by means of accommodation. Man is created as a vassal bound to serve and love his suzerain, God. Sin is a breach of that covenant by the vassal; it is lawlessness. The chosen recipient of God's theology is not capable of fulfilling the stipulations of the covenant and is therefore barred from any true knowledge of God. Christ, however, came to keep the covenant and fulfill its stipulations and penalties. His work has filled the ethical barrier and has enabled for some to receive the true theology.

It is clear then that in the Orthodox system, man mystically ascends to the Creator to possess fellowship with him. In the Reformed system, on the other hand, the Creator descends to fulfill the stipulations that were laid upon man and can thereby be known by him. The two views provide two portraits of how a bridge can be formed between a transcendent God and his creation. Both recognize an infinite chasm between the two and both recognize that fellowship is possible between the two; however, both provide different ways by which that chasm is bridged. One creates a mystical bridge, while other creates a covenantal one.

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Tim Shimko

Divine Incomprehensibility in Eastern Orthodoxy and Reformed Theology

Abstract: This article examines the views of the Eastern Orthodox and the Reformed on the subject of divine incomprehensibility. The two regard God to be entirely incomprehensible, but differ in the way that he can be known or experienced. The Eastern Orthodox maintain that God is not ultimately known intellectually but experienced mystically. Mystical experience, according to this view, is theology par excellence. The key means by which this mystical experience is enjoyed is theosis, or deification. The Reformed, on the other hand, eschew mystical experience and instead focus on the archetypal/ectypal distinction. God cannot be known as he is in himself (archetypal theology), but as he reveals himself to his creation (ectypal theology). Ectypal theology is not identical to, nor intersects at any point with, archetypal theology. It is, instead, analogous to it. With these different views on divine incomprehensibility, this article also briefly considers how these views affect other areas of study in theology (such as anthropology, hamartiology, soteriology, and pneumatology).

Key words: Eastern Orthodoxy, Reformed theology, divine incomprehensibility, theosis, archetypal/ectypal

Тім Шимко

Божественна незбагненність у східному православ'ї та реформатському богослов'ї

Анотація: В статті розглядаються погляди православних та реформатів з теми «Божественна незбагненність». Обидві ці течії вважають, що Бога неможливо абсолютно збагнути, але їх погляди різняться між собою тим, як його можна пізнати чи пережити. Православні стверджують, що Бога можна пізнати інтелектуально, але вищий спосіб – містичний. Містичний досвід, згідно з цим поглядом, є теологією *par excellence*. Ключовим засобом використання містичного досвіду є теосіс, тобто обожнення. На противагу цьому, реформати уникають містичного досвіду і взамін зосереджуються на архетипному та ектипному розрізненні. Бога неможливо пізнати таким, яким він є в собі (архетипне богослів'я), лише як він відкривається перед своїм творінням (ектипове богослів'я). Ектипова та архетипна теології не є тотожними і не мають точок перетину. Натомість ектипова теології є аналогом архетипній теології. З огляду на різні точки зору на божественну незбагненність, в цій статті коротко розглядається, як ці погляди впливають на інші галузі теології (такі як антропологія, гамартіологія, сотеріологія та пневматологія).

Ключові слова: Православ'я, Реформатська теологія, незбагненність Бога, обожнення, архетип/ектип

Тимофій Шимко, Вестмінстреська семінарія, Сакраменто, Каліфорнія, США

Timofey Shimko, Westminster Seminary, Sacramento, California, USA

timshimko@yahoo.com

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