

# Just Say No

## *An Evangelical Assessment of Eastern Apophaticism*

By Lawrence W. Carrino

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Among the various distinctives of Eastern theology, apophaticism is perhaps among the most compelling and distressing. It is compelling because it employs a principle familiar, even intrinsic, to special revelation, but distressing because it takes this principle out of its enscripturated and enculturated context. The employment of apophatic methodology within the Eastern theological tradition addresses once again the age old issue of the “knowability of God” as well as the ramifications for one’s approach to this issue.

Apophatic theology is the theology of negation. It is an attempt to express knowledge of God in the negative, by affirming what He is *not* rather than what He *is*. Apophasis (negation) is evident early in the history of the Church’s witness (particularly in the writings of the Cappadocian fathers in the fourth century). However, apophaticism, as a full-orbed approach, with all of its attendant applications is more distinctly Byzantine than most Eastern writers care to admit. Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff explains the apophatic approach to theology this way:

The whole of Byzantine theology—and particularly its

“experimental” character—would be completely misunderstood if one forgets its other pole of reference: apophatic, or negative theology...By saying what God is not, the theologian is really speaking the Truth, for no human word or thought is capable of comprehending what God is (John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends & Doctrinal Themes*, pp. 11,12).

That God is transcendent does not pose a problem to the Evangelical looking in on this characteristic feature of Orthodox (or should I say, Byzantine) theology—God’s transcendency has always been a part of theology proper for Western Christians; Catholic and Protestant alike. In fact, the controversies circulating in the 1960’s regarding “God talk” express recent Protestant considerations of the difficulties of understanding a transcendent deity who is also immanent and has revealed Himself both personally and propositionally to men in terms they can understand and relate to. When John of Damascus wrote that “God does not belong to the class of existing things: not that He has no existence, but that He is above all existing things, nay, even above existence itself,” he stands shoulder to shoulder with the general consensus of Western theological confessions and formulations on this issue. What concerns this Evangelical, and, rightly so, all who stand within the tradition of the Reformation, is the apophatic construct leading from God’s transcendency, (and the customary adjective “utter” or “wholly” on the part of Eastern writers when modifying God’s transcendency) as well as the ramifications such a construct has upon the Christian experience. Orthodox theologian, Timothy Ware, provides a popular explanation of this issue when he writes:

This emphasis on divine unknowability might seem at first sight to exclude any direct experience of God. But in fact, many who have used the apophatic approach saw it, not just as a philosophical device for indicating God’s utter transcendence, but also, and much more fundamentally, as a means for attaining union with him through prayer. The negations, as well as serving to qualify positive statements about God, acted as a springboard or trampoline whereby the mystical theologian sought to leap up with all the fullness of his or her being into the living mystery of God (Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, pp. 63,64).

In the overall scheme of things pertaining to man’s relationship with God, what place does this issue occupy? A casual glance at Jesus’ High Priestly prayer in John 17

provides us an answer:

And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent (John 17:3).

What then does it mean to know God? Within the apophatic tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, knowing God consists of an ascent which first involves “unknowing” then union with the divine energies. Vladimir Lossky recounts the opening of *Pseudo-Dionysius’* seminal work on Eastern Mystical Theology in his own work on the same subject with the following summary of such an ascent:

It is necessary to renounce both sense and all the workings of reason, everything which may be known by the senses or the understanding, both that which is and all that is not, in order to be able to attain in perfect ignorance to union with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge. It is already evident that this is not simply a question of a process of dialectic but of something else: a purification, a *kaqarsis*, is necessary. One must abandon all that is impure and even all that is pure. One must then scale the most sublime heights of sanctity leaving behind one all the divine luminaries, all the heavenly sounds and words. It is only thus that one may penetrate to the darkness wherein He who is beyond all created things makes His dwelling (Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 27).

Sound esoteric to you? I must stress that, to the Western reader, the temptation to label such an approach as subjective and esoteric must be tempered by first taking the time to understand the whole of such an apophatic template for theology as well as the particulars of its dynamics and experimental consequences for Christian living. There are two extremes to be avoided here—the hyper-critical extreme of quickly labeling Eastern spirituality with a pejorative before truly taking time to understand it and appreciate its noble elements. The other is the non-critical extreme of celebrating Orthodox spirituality as innately superior and whole in fear that to criticize it would evoke the typical, “well, you just don’t understand it” defense from Orthodox apologists. The purpose of this short article is to provide a critique of Eastern apophaticism which appreciates its nobler aspects while addressing concerns pertaining to dogmatic and practical theology.

Whatever position one ultimately decides to take regarding Eastern apophaticism, it

cannot be denied that concerns about the influence of Greek philosophy on such an understanding of the nature of man's relationship with God will be a vital part one's investigation of this Byzantine distinctive. The very defensiveness evident in the writings of Eastern Orthodox theologians on this subject, and the hostile reactions by Orthodox faithful whenever charges of "neo-Platonism" are leveled against any facet of Eastern theology demonstrate that this is a "sore subject" within Orthodox camps. For instance, Lossky's attempt at mediating this difficulty is evident in his comments about apophaticism:

Despite the undeniable fact that the negative elements of a progressive divesting of the mind along Christian theologians are in general linked, in their elaboration, with the speculative technique of Middle and Neo-Platonism, it would be unfair necessarily to see in Christian apophaticism a sign of the Hellenization of Christian thought. The existence of an apophatic attitude – is implied in the paradox of the Christian revelation: the transcendent God becomes immanent in the world, but in the very immanence of his economy, which leads to the incarnation and to death on the cross, he reveals himself as transcendent, as ontologically independent of all created being (Vladimir Lossky, *In The Image and Likeness of God*, p. 14).

Throughout this volume, Lossky takes heroic (albeit unconvincing) steps in assuring the reader that, although the seminal works of Eastern Apophaticism (which he identifies with Clement of Alexandria and most importantly with Pseudo-Dionysius) contain considerable parallels with neo-Platonism (particularly with Plotinus and his famous work, the *Enneads*), the Dionysian product differs from Plotinus "where it counts" and grants Eastern theology an apophaticism that corresponds with true Trinitarian theology. His complimentary insistence that an "apophatic attitude" is implicit within the paradox of Christian revelation fails to take into consideration the more cataphatic (theology of affirmation) nature of Western or Latin theology, which also commutes with this same alleged paradox, as well as the absence of any such *apophaticism* within the Hebrew religion, which affirms God's immanence as well as predicts its ultimate expression through the incarnation. While it is true that the tension between God's immanence and His transcendence is both real, and potentially complicated (for our finite minds) through revelation, can we forget that the very advantage the Jews possess, according to the apostle Paul is that they were

the first to receive “the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1,2)? Can we simply discount natural revelation as part of this epistemic tension (Romans 1:18–25)? If an “apophatic attitude” is implicit within the paradox of Christian revelation, how does the Old Testament revelation, as well as the function of natural theology exist independent of it?

Yale scholar Jaroslav Pelikan ‘s penetrating analysis of the golden age of Greek philosophy’s encounter with Christian thought and its synthesis through the lives and works of the Cappadocian fathers demonstrates the tenuous and highly interpretive nature of this distinctive evolution and its impact on the Eastern Church (See: Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 1993, Yale University Press). Pelikan’s insistence that the Cappadocians effectively integrated Hellenistic philosophy into the formulation of Christian doctrine is admirable and certainly insightful on many points, however, in the end, fails to fairly consider the overarching issue that guides one’s interpretations on this matter, giving what this author believes, an unbalanced “benefit of the doubt” to the Cappadocians in regard to the Biblical (revelatory) fidelity of such an integration. Historical Theologian W.H.C. Frend provides a realistic assessment of the challenge associated with the Hellenization of Christian thought in this general period of Church History. Commenting on the cultural milieu of the empire in the third century, a period preparatory for the work of the Greek apologists in general and the Cappadocians in particular, he observes:

In the West, Rome, its institutions, and its language had been imposed, whereas the cities in the Greek East had tended to absorb Roman values and to transform them into a common Greco–Roman culture in which the Greek element predominated. In much the same way, we find Christianity tending to absorb Greek philosophical values, until by the end of the third century the line between the beliefs of the educated Christian and the educated pagan in the East would often be hard to draw. After the conversion of Constantine, the empire now directed from New Rome (Constantinople) moved with astonishing ease from the patronage of the immortal gods to that of the supreme God (W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 368).

Roger Olson expresses well the Evangelical’s concerns regarding the roots of Eastern apophaticism in his discussion of the second century apologist Athenagoras, the

Greek philosopher turned Christian. Regarding Athenagoras' description of the Christian God in his apology to Emperor Marcus Aurelius entitled, *A Plea for the Christians* (c. A.D. 177). Olson observes that:

Athenagoras described God primarily with negative attributes. This is, he explained what God is not rather than what God is. Later Christian theologians labeled this approach "apophatic theology," and it became a major part of the story of Christian theology. Apparently Athenagoras and later apophatic thinkers assumed that God's perfection means being unlike anything created. Thus God can only be truly described by saying what He is not rather than what He is. He is not imperfect, and to change or suffer or even be comprehensible to the human mind is to be tainted by creaturely imperfection. The result, of course, was a gradual diminishing of the Biblical God's personal nature. Of course, neither Athenagoras nor any other Christian thinker rejected God's personal being, but some of the ways in which they began to describe God seem to be more like the transcendent origin and ground of all things (*arche*) in Greek philosophy, which is rather abstract, than the very concrete, personal and interactive God of the Hebrew Bible and apostolic writings (Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, p. 63).

Olson concludes his discussion of the second century apologists with this helpful historical insight:

The apologists' use of Greek philosophy has been hotly debated among Christians. Seventeenth-century French Christian thinker Blaise Pascal declared, "The God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!" Many critics accuse the apologists of unwittingly creating a hybrid of Hebrew and Christian thought about God with Greek — especially Platonic — notions of deity. The influential Protestant church historian Adolf Harnack called this the "Hellenization of Christianity" and traced its course from the apologists on through later church fathers. Other church historians defend them and their theologies against such accusations. Perhaps Robert Grant is closest to the accurate assessment of the apologists when he writes that "in spite of

their inadequate semi philosophical theology, the apologists did maintain much of the biblical teaching. Their tendency toward an overemphasis on God's infinity and perfection — defined in Greek philosophical terms — contributed to difficulties Christians later experienced in understanding and explaining the incarnation — God in human flesh experiencing human sufferings, limitations and even death. And yet one finds many gems of Christian truth and great insights into Christian living in their writings (Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, pp. 66,67).

The overarching issue guiding one's assessment of Greek philosophy's encounter with Christian theology on any point must principally concern itself with what I call the "hermeneutical substrata" of the given system. Is the theological system consistent with, and hence, faithful to the fundamental presuppositions and interpretive schema of the culture and language in which it was enscripturated? Although the content of [special] revelation is, of necessity, transcultural (or better, hyper cultural, as it transcends the linguistic and epistemic categories of any given culture) it must be meaningful within the confines of the culture which God sovereignly determined for it to be revealed. The author's greatest difficulty with the apophaticism of the Eastern Orthodox Churches is not that it is foreign to Protestantism, but that it is foreign to the Hebrew culture of the Old Testament. The essential continuity between the Testaments provides a fundamental framework through which one may gauge the appropriateness of theological and linguistic contextualization. Paul was not a Greek, he was a Jew (a Pharisee) who spoke Greek. Peter and John were Jews who spoke Greek, and who, like Paul and the other New Testament writers, were conversant with the Greco-Roman world in which they lived. This fact does not discount the usefulness of ALL Greek etymological (and even epistemic) categories within the New Testament revelation (one can hardly discount their existence) but modifies our hermeneutical application of such to the overall redemptive message. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob IS the God of the New Testament as well, and although He can be expressed propositionally through the Greek language within New Testament revelation, the foundational concepts for *all* Christian revelation (which cannot ontologically be separated from Hebrew revelation) are clearly rooted in a Hebraic setting and must conform to that general scheme if faithfulness to the Biblical message is to be maintained. Comments such as Pelikan's opening statement in his monumental work on "Christian Hellenism" resonate with this triumphalistic oversight:

It remains one of the most momentous linguistic convergences in the entire history of the human mind and spirit that the New Testament happens to have been written in Greek—not in the Hebrew of Moses and the prophets, nor in the Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples, nor yet in the Latin of the imperium Romanum, but in the Greek of Socrates and Plato, or at any rate in a reasonably accurate facsimile thereof, disguised and even disfigured though this was in the Koine by the intervening centuries of Hellenistic usage (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, p. 3).

While one can appreciate the profundity of God's choice of the Greek language to express the revelation in the New Testament, this must not be appreciated at the expense of the Hebrew of Moses and the prophets. Nor should it be forgotten that the Aramaic of Jesus and His apostles and the Latin of the Roman empire in which Christianity grew and flourished provide a diversity linguistically and culturally which should diffuse any attempts at making Jehovah the God of Socrates or Plato, or of the imperium Romanum. The genius of Protestantism, and particularly Evangelical Protestantism (despite its many flaws) is that it does not seek to promote a deity in accordance with Eurocentric tendencies (despite some Orthodox claims to the contrary!) but to consistently reform itself to present to the world the God of Scripture as faithfully as humanly possible—within the boundaries of the culture in which it operates, but aware of the dangers of undue cultural accommodation in its mission to properly contextualize the message. Any instance of failure to do so is seen as such within Evangelical circles, and not proclaimed as evidence of some divine culture which transcends the whole of the Bible itself. Orthodoxy cannot be Eastern or Western, it must be both, operating in concert with the fundamental emphases and categories of the language in which its principle concepts were revealed. Jesus said that “salvation is from [of, through] the Jews” (John 4:22). Paul said that the Jews had the advantage of receiving the oracles of God (Romans 3:2). When one considers the highly concrete and personal emphasis in the Old Testament's revelation of Jehovah, and that the Son is also presented as such, and that His nature and acts are predicted within its pages, the abstract, mystical description of God endemic to Eastern apophaticism and its ancillary doctrines demonstrate a considerable discontinuity with this essential characterization. Olson's comment regarding later difficulties with understanding the incarnation due to the overemphasis on God's infinity and perfection [may I add, His transcendence]

defined in Greek philosophical terms, is clearly expressed in Maximus the Confessor's theandric vision of reality and its relationship to Eastern apophaticism. Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff correctly notes that:

In fact, Maximus can be called the real father of Byzantine theology. Only through his system, in which the valid traditions of the past found their legitimate place, were the ideas of Origen, Evagrius, the Cappadocians, Cyril, and *Pseudo-Dionysius* preserved within Eastern Christianity (John Meyendorff, *Christ In Eastern Christian Thought*, pp. 131,132).

Maximus developed what is called a "theandric" view of reality. This ontological premise depends on the assumption that everything in the created order is an expression of the Logos. When the Logos became human (John 1:14) through the incarnation, this introduced an entirely new relationship between God and the created order, particularly man. Whereas creation was originally established to become eventually united with God through the Logos (united with His being through His uncreated energies), the fall of man in the garden held this process (theosis) off until the original plan of God was fully reinstated through the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity. The incarnation of Jesus Christ did more than send man a Savior who was the God-Man, it affected the whole of the created order as God participated in creation by becoming man by setting into motion the salvation of the whole cosmos—a salvation understood not in terms of guilt or righteousness, but in terms of metaphysical union and participation in the divine. Through man's free choice to cooperate with God in the union of the cosmos with God through Christ (His incarnation) the goal of theosis (deification—not becoming a god by nature, but by becoming unified with the energies of God; a distinction popularized by another Orthodox theologian, Gregory Palamas, in the fourteenth century) can be attained. Man's sin does not bring guilt (principally), as much as it brings death and corruption; most tragically, it introduces passions that are directed away from God and one's unification with Him (His energies). Salvation then, is set in a "cosmic" context, and becomes, by nature, mystical union with the Unknowable through the mediatory organ of God's energies. Although the distinction between God's essence and energies predates Palamas, (as in Basil quoted below) the theological justification for the "knowledge of the Unknowable" which is the essence (no pun intended) of Eastern Orthodox soteriology, is systematized. Basil the Great makes this observation:

The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach (St. Basil, Letter 234.1).

The connection with apophaticism should be clear: God's unknowability profoundly affects man's "relationship" with/to Him, and is definitive for one's doctrine of redemption. Celebrated Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff concedes that the Hesychast controversy which precipitated Palamas' famous distinction:

At the beginning [of the controversy], the issue was the doctrine of man's knowledge of God and the nature of theology (John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 76).

The ramifications of this theandric view of reality and cosmic redemption are spelled out by Meyendorff when expressing Palamas' essential theological distinctives:

Knowledge of God is an experience given to all Christians through Baptism and through their continuous participation in the life of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. It requires the involvement of the whole man in prayer and service, through love for God and neighbor; and then it becomes recognizable not only as an "intellectual" experience of the mind alone, but as a "spiritual sense," which conveys a perception neither purely "intellectual" nor purely material. In Christ, God assumed the whole of man, soul and body; and man as such was deified. In prayer — for example, in the "method" — in the sacraments, in the entire life of the Church as a community, man is called to participation in the divine life; this participation is also the true knowledge of God (John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 77).

Timothy Ware explains:

When we say that the saints have been transformed or "deified" by the grace of God, what we mean is that they have a direct experience of God Himself. They know God — that is to say, God in His energies, not in His essence (Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 68).

There are so many problems with this outworking of Eastern apophysis that one hardly knows where to begin. Most importantly, this distinction between essence and energies reduces “salvation” to an impersonal encounter. Evangelical scholar Paul Negrut explains why this is so:

Since the divine energies express what the persons are, without being themselves persons, the three divine Persons are removed a step back from the economy of salvation (Paul Negrut, Ph.D. Dissertation, p. 25).

If man is to have “relationship” (note: the idea of “union” is more abstract and impersonal than the relational categories of the Old Testament revelation, or the New for that matter) with the “energies” of God, which on one hand are said to be inseparable from His essence, and on the other, only relate or mediate the Persons of the Triune God, then it is something less than God Himself that man is in relationship with. Christ did not say to the Father that eternal life is to be “in union with Our energies” in John 17:3; He speaks of a meaningful and direct knowledge with the Person of God. Secondly, and perhaps most ironically, this mystical ascent to God, based on the foundations of apophaticism is said to be achieved through the vehicle of the Church. To restate Meyendorff’s words:

Knowledge of God is an experience given to all Christians through Baptism and through their continuous participation in the life of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

However, it is this apophatic-inspired mysticism that undermines any true concept of community within the redemptive scheme for the Orthodox. As Negrut perceptively notes:

Lossky’s view of revelation as mystical union does not constitute a solid foundation for communion. The Church’s dogma and sacraments are only the starting points of the mystical journey. The higher the ascent of the mystic, the more isolated he becomes, until eventually, in total separation from other human beings, he reaches that point of “total ignorance” when he knows only that he knows nothing (Paul Negrut, Ph.D. Dissertation, pp. 36,37).

If man’s ultimate purpose in “knowing God” is unknowing, or releasing himself from all creaturely forms of knowledge (for God is above all rational understanding or

comprehension), then this “ascent” toward God through theosis will of necessity alienate men from one another, and plunge them into this nebulous abyss where propositional truth knows no place. However, if sanctification is akin to theosis in terms of ascent or progression toward God’s goal for man (which Orthodox concede to) then the very words of our Lord prayed for the believer, pose a serious problem to this approach:

Sanctify them in the truth; Thy Word is truth (John 17:17).

His Word is also propositional, and enculturated. Remember Peter’s response to Jesus’ query as to whether they (the apostles) would abandon him too:

Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

And even Moses, whose ascent to the mountain of God has been a favorite analogy for the mystical ascent upwards to God, said to Jehovah, “show me Thy glory!” (Exodus 33:18) and was not given mystical instruction on how to achieve theosis through sacramental effort. Orthodoxy’s explanation for this (the soteriological and eschatological dimensions of man’s relationship to God prior to the incarnation) are even more frightening (and are too detailed to examine here) as they only deepen the chasm between the Testaments and undermine the essential continuity within God’s redemptive program. These narratives from the Testaments express the reality of both personal and propositional dimensions of knowing God; not out on the periphery, nor in some preliminary function (to which Orthodoxy would assign them) but as central to its nature. Perhaps the most concerning aspect of this mystical theology produced by Eastern apophaticism is that its internal inconsistency demands that the mediating agent (allegedly the energies of God) put on a more personal, and dare we say, human face. John Meyendorff quotes Macarius the Egyptian (4th century Eastern writer):

Divine grace arranged things in such a way that everyone participates in spiritual growth as he chooses, according to his own will, his own labor, and his own effort, in proportion to his faith and zeal. The more one loves, the more one gives oneself to the fight, in one’s body and in one’s soul, in order to accomplish the commandments, the greater the communion one achieves with the Spirit into the spiritual growth of the renewing of the mind; acquiring salvation by grace and divine gift, but receiving

by faith, by love, and by the effort of free choice, progress and increase in the measure of the spiritual age. Thus eternal life will be inherited by grace [note: in the East, grace is defined as “communion or participation in/with divine life” not a created gift as in Western Catholicism], but also in all righteousness, since it is not only through the divine grace and power without human collaboration (*sunergia*) and effort that progress is made; nor is it only by one’s power, one’s own effort and one’s own strength, without the collaboration and help of the Holy Spirit, that the perfect accomplishment of the divine will and the full measure of all freedom and purity shall be reached (John Meyendorff, *Christ In Eastern Christian Thought*, pp. 124,125).

Meyendorff’s feeble attempts at avoiding a tag of Pelagianism (or Semi-Pelagianism) through his employment of the Eastern concept of grace (not something God gives us but participation in His life through His energies) accomplishes nothing. The categories are distinct, but not different. This is synergy: man coming to know God (not knowing Him now) through God’s help and his own efforts and will (ascent implies unattained relationship); it is the tragic error of moving toward relationship with God, not from it. What is even more concerning is this “human face” which the apophatic system of Byzantine theology requires. The spirituality of the Eastern Church, which is a logical outgrowth of apophatic suppositions, inevitably necessitates a “mystical vehicle” through which this ascent is achieved. Timothy Ware writes:

First, it is presupposed that the traveller on the Way is a member of the Church (emphasis his)... Secondly, the spiritual Way presupposes not only life in the Church but life in the sacraments (emphasis his) (Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, pp. 107,108).

He then elaborates:

Earlier we noted, with St. Mark the monk how the whole of the ascetic and mystical life is already contained in the sacrament of Baptism: however far a person advances upon the Way, all that he discovers is nothing else than the revelation or making manifest of baptismal grace. The same can be said of Holy Communion: the whole of the ascetic and mystical life is a deepening and

realization of our Eucharistic union with Christ the Saviour. In the Orthodox Church Communion is given to infants from the moment of their baptism onwards ... So his experience of Holy Communion extends over the whole range of his conscious life. It is above all through Communion that the Christian is made one with and in Christ, “christified”, “ingoded” or “deified”; it is above all through Communion that he receives the first fruits of eternity (Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 109).

This ecclesio-centric view of “salvation” through mystical ascent is necessitated through the apophatic foundations of Byzantine theology. God is known through His energies, which are, ultimately, distinguished from His essence (and, this author believes, His Person). Russian Orthodox theologian Michael Pomazansky explains the Eastern Orthodox concept of grace, which relates clearly to the concept of God’s energies, which the Christian is to allegedly participate in:

First, by the grace of God, the grace of Christ, is to be understood as the whole economy of our salvation, performed by the coming of the Son of God to earth, by His earthly life, His death on the cross, His resurrection, and His ascension into heaven...Secondly, grace is the name applied to the gifts of the Holy Spirit which have been sent down and are being sent down to the Church of Christ for the sanctification of its members, for their spiritual growth, and for the attainment by them of the Kingdom of heaven (Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, pp. 257, 258).

John Meyendorff clearly asserts:

Grace is participation...“Participation” in God—as we have shown—is the very nature of man, not its abolition. This is the key to Eastern Christian understanding of the God-man relationship (John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 153).

Orthodox literature is filled with references to the necessity of the sacramental life of the Church as the vehicle through which the grace of God (defined as the energies of God in which the Christian participates), positing the institutional Church, with all of its “mysteries” (sacraments) as the divinely appointed dispenser of all “graces.” Although the precise meaning of this phrase is distinct from Western Catholicism, in

the end, it is a distinction without a difference. O.C.A. priest, Theodore Bobosh, explains:

In the sacraments, we personally experience the sacrifice of Christ which saves us. In Holy Communion and in Baptism, we participate in the reconciliation with God that Jesus Christ has obtained for us. Thus, the Church, our faith, the sacraments, and our membership in the Church, should all be instruments of reconciliation for the whole world (Theodore Bobosh, *Am I Saved?* pp. 34,35).

The Reformed view of the Church, and its place in the life of the believer, is that of the communion of the saints which shares in the means of sanctifying grace, not justifying grace. Growth in Christ is based on a mystical union with Him (defined very differently than that of the mystical categories of the Eastern Church), but not characterized by a mystical ascent through the agency of a sacramental system. “The Way” that Timothy Ware speaks of is not a mystical ascent, but a Person (John 14:6). Hence, Evangelicals reject any form of sacerdotalism or sacramentalism precisely because grace is understood in Biblical terms: relationally. Grace is God’s unmerited favor toward man. It expresses itself through His many “benefits” (Psalm 103:2ff) to those who are united to Christ through faith, and through faith alone. Since grace is not a metaphysical dynamic (as it is a metaphysical substance or entity in Western Catholic theology) but a relational dynamic, the sanctification of the believer is firmly distinguished from his justification, and is defined as a growth in a grace obtained, not attained, a growth from grace fully received, not toward a grace hopefully (and cooperatively) merited. The lack of assurance in the Orthodox system of salvation is both distressing and tragic. The insistent caricature among so many Orthodox of Biblical assurance (most clearly explained through the classic Reformed confessions and works) reduces this blessed element of God’s salvation in Christ to a “formula” or “arrogant assumption” in their minds. Biblical assurance is not careless or built on some external religious experience—it is based on the sure and complete work of Christ who makes us more than “savable,” but saves us completely in His once for all propitiatory sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. While the sacraments celebrate this complete work accomplished through Christ, they do not function as the vehicle through which the quasi-personal energies of God are extended to us for the sake of metaphysical and abstract union with them.

Before this article draws to a close, it must be said that there are most certainly

noble elements of Eastern expressions of apophysis. The transcendency of God and His holiness both in their ethical and ontological considerations are certainly faithful to God's self-disclosure through the revelation of His Word. The necessity of human interaction with God within the economy of salvation is also admirable, since salvific categories are intensely relational and must, of necessity, contain reciprocal elements. The failure of human reason and language to contain God or comprehend Him, and the repulsion for any enthronement of human reason or resource in the sight of God so intrinsic to Eastern theology must be commended. The desire for and the recognition of the importance of the mysterious can be conducive to proper reverence for God which is too often lacking in Western (and particularly Evangelical) communions.

However, these noble elements are subject to an excess that warps them and distorts the powerful revelation of who God is and how He is known. I am sorry, but all of the Orthodox insistence to contrary will not expunge the reality of the neo-Platonic influence that contributes significantly to this distortion. While there are certainly differences between pagan neo and Middle Platonism and the early Christian apologists and theologians of the East, the excessive reliance upon these categories have confined the Byzantine vision of God to a pseudo-philosophical "box" that eclipses the rich personal dimensions that free Him of the need for an institutional and hierarchal apparatus to be known, under the guise of mystical encounter.

The internal inconsistencies of this apophaticism for community—the propositional affirmation of such and the practical expectations to the contrary—can create a spiritual schizophrenia in the life of the Orthodox faithful who seriously seek "ascent" toward God. The most serious flaw in apophaticism is the "ism"—the unwarranted reliance of negation and hence mysticism for the whole of Eastern theological vision. Yes, God is known analogically, yet He is Personally and meaningfully known. Yes, He is unapproachable light, but He makes Himself approachable in a meaningful sense without the need to reduce His relationship with man to the quasi-personal dimensions of Palamite distinctions between "essence" and "energy." How is God known? He is known personally. The epistemological details of such are not ventured into by the Biblical authors—however, the affirmation that men and women who believed on Him had a real, personal, and conscious relationship with Him is unmistakable throughout its pages. The tragedy of apophatic mysticism is that the surrogate becomes the truest mate—the vague deity who hides behind the thick veil of darkness is most practically known through

the host of intermediaries that rush to the foreground in “assisting” the eager seeker to know God, be they sacraments, saints, icons, or the institution that “dispenses the graces.”

The distinction between Eastern Orthodoxy’s foundation for knowledge of God and Evangelicalism’s are most clearly expressed by two selected quotations representing the “hermeneutical substrata” of each tradition respectively. These expressions speak to the foundation upon which one’s relationship with the Almighty is based. You be the judge:

If Orthodoxy is characterized by a single trait, that would surely be the apophatic orientation of its entire theological tradition. “All true Orthodox theology is at its root apophatic; apophaticism is the fundamental characteristic of the whole theological tradition of the Eastern Church” (Daniel Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, p. 55, Quoting Vladimir Lossky in *Mystical Theology*).

I would propose that the subject of the ministry of this house, as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshipers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ. I am never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist; I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist; but if I am asked what is my creed, I reply, “It is Jesus Christ.” My venerated predecessor, Dr. Gill, has left a [theological heritage] admirable and excellent in its way. But the [legacy] to which I would pin and bind myself forever, God helping me,...is Jesus Christ, who is the arm and substance of the gospel, who is in Himself all theology, the incarnation of every precious truth (C.H. Spurgeon, first words in the pulpit of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London).