

The Contribution of Eastern Liturgy to the Understanding of Christian Worship¹

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Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 297)

The West tends to define Eastern liturgy in terms of what it perceives itself as lacking. In doing so it ignores the very real defects of Eastern liturgy. This romantic vision is based on an idealization of “the Golden Age of the Fathers” and the spirit of its liturgy, the suspicion that the West has lost this spirit, and the supposition that the East has preserved it intact. But in fact this “Golden Age” is itself a creation of Western romanticism, and Eastern liturgy today reflects some of the very abuses the Fathers railed against.

This does not mean we can ignore the real riches of Eastern liturgy. For the modern science of liturgy is comparative, and no one understands Christian liturgy by studying only one tradition. This is a lesson that needs to be heard also by the Orthodox, who too often limit their scholarly interest to their own tradition.

¹ Annual 1997 public lecture of “The Sir Daniel and Countess Bernardine Murphy Donohue Chair in Eastern Catholic Theology at the Pontifical Oriental Institute,” by the present titulary of the chair, Prof. Robert F. Taft, S.J., delivered at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome, 24 April 1997. [The delay in publication of the present (1996) issue of *Logos* accounts for the “proleptic” appearance of this lecture – ed.]

Eastern Christianity finds itself in crisis because it has not yet learned to face modernity, a lesson learned in the West only with great pain and many failures. But Eastern Christianity has no need to fear modernity. The East has preserved elements that are not only desperately needed but also of great appeal to modern men and women. The East also needs the more typically “Western” virtues, however. For if Christianity is to survive as a viable modern lifestyle, it will not be as an obscurantist, anti-intellectual culture of folklore and ritualism, sustained by the rejection of modernity and change.



The very formulation of this paper’s title presumes that there is a single thing one can call “Christian worship,” a notion that some Eastern Christians, secure in the conviction that their “Orthodoxy,” their “*pravoslavie*” or “right glorification,” is unique, might not share.

Indeed, the very notion that “*pravoslavie*” means “right worshipping” confronts us with a basic problem in the study of any cultural phenomenon that has evolved from reality, to myth, to banalisation in popular cliché. I mean the dialectic between perception and reality, between what people think and what, in fact, is. *Pravoslavie*, as any Slavic philologist knows, is a calque, i.e., a translation, via real or perceived etymological roots, of a word the translators did not understand. The Slavs, thinking that the Greek “*orthodoxia*” came from the roots “*orthós*” and “*dóxa*” or “glory,” transformed it into “*pravoslavie*,” “right glorification,” whereas in fact “*orthodoxia*” comes from “*orthodokeo*,” “right teaching,” and has, absolutely nothing whatever to do with the way it is presently interpreted. That’s the reality.

Perception, however, is also reality, and there are clichés and clichés. Some clichés are popular distortions of reality. Others are simply reality banalised by repetition. Like inflated currency, they have lost their power. But the repetition of a truth does not make it untrue, any more than the fact that “*pravoslavie*” is a calque makes untrue the Orthodox perception of the unbreakable unity between right belief and right worship.

So when one speaks of “the understanding of Christian worship,” one must ask, “whose understanding?” For the “understanding” of which one speaks is not a univocal but a highly analogous reality. Does one mean the understanding of the Eastern worshipper or of the Western aficionado? Does one mean the understanding of the liturgical scholar and theologian? My intention here will be to understand my topic in the present context of modern liturgical studies, which even among the Orthodox have been fuelled largely by Western liturgical scholarship.

But that is an equally complicating factor. For liturgy is not its study, and both liturgy and its study has each a life and history of its own. The philosopher Karl Popper said the world as we know it is our interpretation of observable facts in the light of theories of our own invention. In other words, we invent our world even while we think we are just observing it and reporting on it. Of nothing is this truer than of the Western study of Eastern liturgy. I have often been tempted to write a book entitled “inventing Eastern Orthodoxy,” in which one chapter would have to be “inventing Eastern liturgy.”

For the Western study of Eastern liturgy has gone through several phases, each taking as its point of departure not anything in Eastern liturgy, but the felt needs of the viewer. During the Reformation period, the first serious studies and translations of Eastern liturgies were apologetic in intent, done mostly by German Catholics actively engaged in the Reformation upheaval, like Georg Witzel (†1573), Johannes Cochlaeus (Dobeneck) (†1552), and the Dominican Ambrose Pelargus (Storch), OP (†1561).² Their intention was to strengthen Catholic theological positions with support from the East.

In the 17–18th centuries the baton passes to France and Italy, in the period of what David Knowles called “the great historical

² Cf. A. Strittmatter, “Missa Treverensis seu Sancti Simeonis Syracusani,” *Studia Gratiana* 14 (1967): 495–518, esp. 508 note 9; A. Walz, “Pelargus,” *LThK* 8:251–2; id., “Ambrogio Pelargo a Trento,” in *Il Concilio di trento e la riforma tridentina. Atti del Convegno storico internazionale (Trento 2–6 settembre 1963)* (Rome 1965) II, 749–66.