

What is Eastern Catholic Theology?: Beyond Classicism Towards Liberation¹

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Abstract

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Bernard Lonergan's definition of theology as mediation between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix is used to analyze the "classicist" worldview that constrained Eastern Catholic theology in the past. This enables a validation of all theology done previously by Eastern Catholics regardless of how it was or is viewed by those inclined to define it as "other." The insights of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are then applied to the situation of Eastern Catholics. The very term "Eastern Catholic" is questioned because of its inability to characterize the experience of communities as diverse as Ukrainians and Malabars. The author concludes by listing several characteristics of an authentic and effective Ukrainian Catholic theology.



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A Definition of Theology

Implicit in the question “What is Eastern Catholic Theology?” is the need to clarify an understanding of “theology” itself. Theology, I suggest, is essentially discourse. But whose discourse? Many Orthodox note that a Western perspective sees theology as human discourse upon divine revelation – *fides quaerens intellectum*. Orthodox scholars have viewed the Western perspective as “rationalist formulae”: a grasping of divine realities by means of reason, intellect, philosophical discourse.² These same scholars will define Orthodox theology as divine discourse “experienced” by the human and apprehended on the order of intuition rather than of intellect.³ Staniloae states that Orthodox theology “allows the light of the inexhaustible mystery to appear”; for him theology is a “theology of spirituality and communion.”⁴ Similarly, some Western thinkers do not challenge this binary analysis and are comfortable describing the difference between Eastern and Western theology as that of intellectual inquiry “vs.” mystical experience.⁵ Some will, of course, also argue that the difference lies in the distinction between “true” theology, that is, reflection upon the Trinity, and discourse on the divine economy.⁶ The true theologian meditates, “knows” as much as is possible, sees the Trinity; whereas others only philosophize on the divine economy and thus participate in a theology of a lesser sort. I do not think that these distinctions are particularly helpful or accurate. Can we “know” God as other than revealed – albeit revealed by the Divine Self?

² Dumitru Staniloae, “The Problems and Perspectives of Orthodox Theology” in *Theology and the Church*, Trans. Robert Barringer (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1980), 214. John Meyendorff describes Western theology as “a rational deduction from ‘revealed’ premises.” *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 8.

³ Meyendorff, 9.

⁴ Staniloae, 218.

⁵ A.M. Allchin, *The Kingdom of Love and Knowledge*. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 4.

⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Culture*. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), 203–204, 265–66.

All we can convey is God communicated, described, “apprehended” within and by our limiting human condition. In other words all theology, both “high” and “low,” is about appropriating, comprehending, and communicating the Divine Self-Communication. All theology is about human discourse, just as everything human involves and is conditioned by human discourse. Thus, my operative definition of theology can be found in the masterful work of Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.⁷ A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.

This definition is extremely helpful in addressing our primary question: *What is Eastern Catholic Theology?* Lonergan comes to this definition of theology after reflecting upon the demise of what he calls the “classicist worldview.”⁸ This perspective captured both Western and Eastern European Christianity, each in different ways, by the time of the Fourth Crusade and led each part of the continent to regard its own experience, its own perspective, as not simply normative, but as universal. Let us remember that the much decried universalist claims of Western Pontiffs are no less absolutist than the Byzantine claim to encompass the *oikoumene*. Classicism had the beauty of being singular, absolute, and unerringly certain of its own correctness. Culture and religion were one: theology was the great achievement of this marriage. In this *Weltanschauung* the Byzantines had no doubt: there was but one way of being civilized, Christian, and enlightened – their way. Similarly, to be a citizen of the “Christendom” of the tenth, twelfth or fourteenth centuries, one was faithful to the Church of Rome, prayed in Latin, and knew the central contribution to civilized thought of Augustine of Hippo. Theology, in those two parts of the world, was within the particular areas singular and normative. The

⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1979), xi.

⁸ For Lonergan’s discussion of the classicist world view and its demise see his work: “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness” and “Theology in Its New Context” both in *A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J.* ed. by William F.J. Ryan, S.J. and Bernard J. Tyrrell, S.J. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974).