

The Roots of the Problem of Disconnect between Christianity and the Scientific Community [1] (Archbishop Lazar Puhalo)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The Scholastic Paradox

The dualistic conception of reality as consisting of abstract, disembodied ideas existing in a domain separate from and superior to that of sensible objects and movements became the most characteristic feature of Western philosophical and by a curious confluence of events, the last vestiges of Orthodox Christianity were snuffed out in Western Europe at a time when the only alternative sources of intellectual influence there were nascent in Spain: the Moslem schools of philosophy which would arise in the Iberia of the Saracens. The great Aristotelian scholars of Islam — such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna), the royal librarian of Bokhara, and his Iberian born disciple Ibn Roshd (Averroës) — were still in the future, but the foundations for their massive influence on Western theology and thought were laid in this epoch, almost ironically by the Arab movement of *falsafah* which might be called the Moslem Scholasticism. In the 800s, the *falsafah* had discovered the Hellenistic classics and began to apply both «natural science» and Greek metaphysics to Islamic thought. The scholars (called *faylasufs*) in this movement ranged from the mystic Abu Nasir al-Farabe, who died in the 980s to the rationalist Yakub ibn Isak al-Kindi (d.874) and Abu Bakir al-Razi (d.925) who introduced Gnostic ideas into his system. They were reformers of a sort, and inclined to asceticism and in a curious way are the progenitors of the Christian Scholastics.[i]



In the 800s Charlemagne (742-814) managed to exterminate Orthodox Christianity in Gaul, and his successors carried this through in the rest of Western Europe. They did so, not as a matter of theology, but as a matter of power and control and, in the words of Fr John Romanides, «*The incorporation of the episcopate of Carolingian Francia into the Frankish army and its [the episcopacy's] occupation by military officers, whose duty was to pacify the revolutionary Gallo-Roman population, is the key to understanding the so-called Great Schism between Roman and Latin Christendoms.*»[ii]

In fact, Charlemagne desired to be crowned Roman emperor. When the Gallo-Roman bishops refused, reminding him that there was a Roman emperor in Constantinople already, Charlemagne is reported to have responded, «But there is a woman on the throne, therefore the throne is vacant.» St. Irene the restorer of the holy icons was on the throne at that time. Charlemagne, through violence and threats, created a schism and crowned himself emperor with the helpless assistance of the Bishop of Rome. Roman Catholicism was literally created by the Carolingian rulers of the Frankish kingdom, based on political foundations laid by Charlemagne and his minister of education, Alcuin of York, and philosophical foundations laid by Augustine of Hippo. The birth of the Roman Catholic Church took place in an inauspicious, shadowy era between the closing decades of the Western Dark Ages of barbarian rule and the beginning of the medieval «awakening.»[iii] This was an era in which the great intellectual resurgence in Constantinople[iv] could cast no more than a noctilucous glow toward the West,

when the cruelty and savagery of the Dark Ages penetrated the religious philosophy of the West with the rudiments of «juridical justification theology,» and penetrated the faithful with dark superstitions and fears that have still not vanished. It was also the era when the Platonism and quasi-Gnosticism of Augustine of Hippo distorted theology in the West into a system of philosophical speculation, and forever separated it from the existential, living theology of Orthodox Christianity.

Western scholars were cut off and isolated from Constantinople increasingly by language, as the command of Greek was lost,[v] and sometimes by Carolingian and later Frankish imperial policy[vi] and by the Arab control of the Mediterranean. When the Dark Ages did draw to a close and the resurgence of learning began in Western Europe, the new schools would turn toward Spain, toward the Moslem academies, for their inspiration and direction. This development would produce the new movement among scholars called «Scholasticism» or «schoolmen.» While this whole series of events had a catastrophic doctrinal and spiritual result in the West, it also provided for an energetic resurgence of learning that would lead, eventually, to great advances in all the sciences and in medicine. Paradoxically, it would also lay the foundations for the huge conflict between religion and science in Western Europe — a conflict that is still being played out in America in the 21st century.

In the system of the newly arising Latin philosophical theology, the «schoolmen» failed to realise that dogma and doctrine,[vii] are only the algorithm for theology, and the artificing and refining of the algorithm became, for them, the very meaning of theology itself. Indeed, it often appears to us that the West in general lost the algorithm and ended up developing doctrine by means of iteration or in a heuristic process. In such a circumstance, theology lost its existential power as a vector for the ascent of man in real spiritual transformation and the experiencing of the uncreated energies of God and became no more than a system of religious philosophy and a school of ethics. The concept that theology is a living, healing force, experienced in the very depth of one's being, could not even have occurred to the schoolmen. Doubtless this is why Latin spirituality,[viii] strangled by the dry, lifelessness of philosophical theology and the moralistic religious fascism that it produced with its speculation in ethics, collapsed into romantic mysticism and thus into spiritual delusion (*plani; prelest*), as would Russian spirituality during the three hundred year «Latin captivity of Russian theology,» until it began to be emancipated by St Antony (Khrapovitsky) of Kiev and his co-workers.[ix]

i. The Scholastic movement in Islamic thought was called *kalām*. Its history

unfolded somewhat differently than in Western Europe. The *kalām* school did not seek to legislate knowledge in all fields, but focused almost exclusively on theological questions. Ironically, this allowed for more original thought in that field. It may be significant, when we look at Islam in Iran today, that the Shiite denomination was the main channel for the Scholastic philosophical tradition. The Sunni denomination, on the other hand, rejected and strove against Scholastic rationalism. The Asharite school rejected rationalism and defended its concept of Islamic revelation from Hellenistic rationalism. Sufi mysticism completed the defeat of Scholasticism (Hellenistic philosophical rationalism) in most of the Islamic world. Shiites, however, still tend toward the legalistic moral fascism of Scholasticism.

[ii]. «Church Synods and Civilisation,» *Theologia*, Vol.63, Issue 3, July-September 1992 (Romanides correctly refers to the Orthodox Church and to «Byzantium» as Roman and Rome, since the Eastern Roman Empire was the only actual remains of the Imperial Roman state).

[iii]. The quotation marks around «awakening» do not indicate disparagement. The word «medieval» is too often used as a pejorative, but a study of that time period, kept in proper historical perspective, might do more justice to the «awakening» that did take place, relative to the preceding centuries. The «awakening» period of the medieval era, which led directly into the Renaissance, was indeed a heady and exciting period of intellectual ferment, rediscovery and cultural development to those in a position to participate. It had a savage and dark side, which was really only the continuation of the Dark Ages, but to the degree that genuine humanism — that is, as opposed to the brutality of barbarian societal structure — developed in and from this era, it was also a great advance for humanity, because humanitarianism in its greater sense eventually arose from Christian humanism (that is, a realization of the relationship between God and humanity). The medieval era, with its own «awakening,» is the foundation upon which the Renaissance was built. The later period, which is officially called «The Age of Enlightenment,» might not have been as exciting as the medieval era, because by the time of the Age of the Enlightenment, so much ground had already been covered. Coming out of a tunnel into some kind of light, especially when it is the light of an early dawn, might be more thrilling than simply rounding a bend in the tracks at midday.

[iv]. This was an epoch in the Eastern Roman Empire — Byzantium — that would produce the brilliance and Christian humanism of Photios the Great (820-891) and his disciple Nicholas Mystikos (+925), and the scientist Leo the Mathematician, so

respected that the Caliph Mamun would offer a treaty of perpetual peace and a sum of tribute equal to about \$344,000 for his *temporary* services as a lecturer in Baghdad. This was the era when Caesar Bardas would reestablish the University in Constantinople, with a full curriculum of seven liberal arts, and tuition would be free to any student who could qualify for admission. Despite the depredations of the iconoclasts during part of this long period, the Eastern Roman Empire did not endure anything like the «Dark Ages.»

[v]. One must note that, at the same time, the knowledge of Latin was being lost in the East, and all this exacerbated the problem of communications and interchange of ideas.

[vi]. This was by no means a consistent policy of the Frankish kings and emperors. Lewis II, who was King of Italy (and essayed to be Emperor) could bring the matter of his brother, King Lothar II of France, before the Patriarch of Constantinople in the 860's, in an effort to thwart a decision of Pope Nicholas. It was this act which gave impetus to the council of 867, which, under St Photios the Great, condemned the Latin heresies. Otto II's marriage to Princess Theophano, the daughter of Emperor Romanos II and niece of John I Zimiskes, brought a certain influence of the East Roman Empire back to the West, though it seems to have had little effect except on the Franco-German concept of empire. Indeed, Byzantine influence in the West did not, from the beginning of the Dark Ages, appear to have had any impact outside the highest ruling levels in the West, and this influence was ephemeral.

[vii]. The holy fathers did not make a sharp distinction between dogma and doctrine. The fathers used the word *dogma* as something separate from *kerygma*. Whereas *kerygma* indicates the general exposition of the faith to all, in Orthodox Christianity, the word *dogma* is used in a deeper mystical sense, an empirical sense of knowledge of God that was ascertained by experience and *theoria*. They also use the term «theologia» in the same sense (i.e., *theologia*— God in Himself, or «knowledge of God,» as distinguished from *ekonomia*—which includes the Incarnation and everything God revealed for our salvation in Christ.

[viii]. For further reading, see Southern, R.W., ***Western Society & the Church in the Middle Ages***, Viking Penguin, N.Y., 1970.

[ix]. St Antony Khrapovitsky (1863-1936) began his struggle against Scholasticism in Russia during the closing decade of the last century, and up until the Revolution

in Russia. A number of other scholars and theologians were working in the same direction, although the Scholastics resisted this restoration of Orthodox theology in Russia, often quite aggressively.