

Eastern Orthodoxy

Background

History

Eastern Orthodoxy originated in the 11th century as a result of the first major split in the history of the Christian church. This split is often referred to as The Great Schism and was the result of enormous religious, cultural, and political differences between the Eastern and Western churches that began to emerge after the death of Emperor Constantine.

The political background of the schism dates back to when Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople. When he died, the empire was divided and his two sons took the leadership – one over each half. One ruled the Western part from Rome, while the other ruled the Eastern part from Constantinople.

The disagreements between the two halves had, actually, been building over many years. And while there were still a lot of common beliefs, there were also some very serious disputes – particularly related to such topics as the use of icons, the nature of the Holy Spirit, and the date for celebrating Easter.

These disagreements finally came to a head in 1054 A.D. when the head of the Western church in Rome, Pope Leo IX, excommunicated the head of the Eastern church, the patriarch of Constantinople. In turn, the Eastern patriarch condemned the Roman Pope. The two groups have been divided since that time.

The Orthodox Church is not centralized in quite the same way as the Roman Church. Rather than a pope, Orthodox Christianity considers the scriptures to be its religious authority. The standard, however, for interpreting scripture lies in the seven ecumenical councils of the church.

During the first one thousand years after the birth of Christ, a number of heresies emerged challenging the beliefs of the Christian faith. Whenever a significant heresy came into being, the church leaders from the major Christian communities would gather and hold a council in order to come to a consensus about how to deal with them. The findings of these councils are referred to as the "Sacred Tradition." Along with the Bible, this tradition is the source of both their faith and doctrine. The seven councils and their conclusions include:

1. The First Council of Nicaea, in 325 A.D., denied the Arian heresy and adopted the Nicene Creed.
2. At the First Council of Constantinople, in 381 A.D., the Nicene Creed was revised into the form now used in the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches. It also banned changes in the Creed without the agreement of a council gathering.
3. The Council of Ephesus, in 431 A.D., repudiated the Nestorian heresy and declared the Virgin Mary to be "the Mother of God."
4. The Council of Chalcedon, in 451 A.D., denied the Eutychian heresy and affirmed Christ to be both human and divine. It also adopted the Chalcedonian Creed.
5. The Second Council of Constantinople, in 553 A.D., reaffirmed the decisions and doctrines of the previous councils and condemned new Arian, Nestorian, and Monophysite writings.
6. The Third Council of Constantinople lasted from 680 – 681 A.D. This council denied Monothelism and affirmed that Christ had both a human and a divine will.
7. The Second Council of Nicaea, in 787 A.D., restored the practice of venerating icons.

The Orthodox Church is not structured as a single church. Rather, it is organized as a number of autocephalous regional churches (self-governing bodies headed by their own bishops). The head of each Orthodox church is called a patriarch or metropolitan. By tradition, the patriarch of Constantinople, in Istanbul, Turkey, is recognized as the chairman of the council of bishops. As chairman, however, he has no doctrinal or administrative authority over the church.

The other regional heads of churches are:

- C The patriarch of Alexandria, Egypt, with jurisdiction over Africa,
- C The patriarch of Antioch who resides in Damascus, Syria, and heads Arab speaking Orthodox Christians in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq,
- C The patriarch of Jerusalem, who has jurisdiction over Israel and Palestine,
- C The patriarch of Moscow who presides over all of Russia,
- C The patriarch of Georgia,

- C The patriarch of Serbia,
- C The patriarch of Romania,
- C The patriarch of Bulgaria,
- C The archbishop of Cyprus,
- C The archbishop of Athens who presides over all of Greece,
- C The metropolitan of Warsaw who presides over all of Poland,
- C The archbishop of Albania,
- C The metropolitan of Prague and all Czechoslovakia, and
- C The archbishop of New York and North America.

Three other churches also enjoy a large degree of independence, although the election of their lead bishop is subject to the approval of a mother church. These are the churches of Crete and Finland (both under Constantinople), and the church of Japan (under Moscow). The patriarch of Constantinople also exercises authority over the Greek speaking churches outside of Greece.

Currently there are about 250 million Orthodox Christians worldwide. The nations of Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Russia and Ukraine are predominately Orthodox.

Basic Beliefs and Practices

Regarding religious observance, the Orthodox Churches consider that truth must be experienced personally. As a result, there is less stress on defining religious truth in propositional terms and more emphasis on creating a personal and corporate religious experience. This mindset emerges from the idea that humans were created in the image of God and made to participate fully in the divine life. They teach that Adam and Eve, before the fall, enjoyed total unity with God. As a result of that fellowship, they experienced complete freedom and true humanity. It is this experience of unity that salvation and worship is meant to recapture.

Distinctive beliefs and practices of Orthodoxy include:

1. Deification - This is the process of reestablishing the unity between God and man. Not that human beings become gods, but that humans join fully with God in unbroken fellowship.
2. Salvation - Rather than justification by faith, Orthodoxy embraces what they refer to as theosis – a gradual process of becoming more and more like Christ. The basic understanding is that there is nothing that individuals can do to earn their way into Heaven. It is, rather, a gift from God who is seeking to restore the original relationship with mankind that was lost in the fall. God is continually offering this free gift to mankind, but will not force himself on any individual. This gift of relationship must be freely accepted by the believer. They also acknowledge the possibility of losing one's salvation and of receiving it after death.
3. The Trinity - The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is extremely important in Orthodox theology and has practical importance for the individual Christian. Since humans are made in the image of God, it is considered that individual Christians cannot understand their own nature without understanding this doctrine. God's triune essence expresses his ability to interact within a personal relationship which, in turn, demonstrates that God can personally interact with human beings.
4. God the Father - Orthodox Christians believe that God is so far beyond our ability to understand that he is unknowable to us. As a result, when we speak of him, we can only express what he is not, not what he is. That being said, he is not cut off from His creation. While the Father's essence cannot be known, his personal expressions in the forms of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit allow us to experience his presence.
5. Jesus Christ - Humanity's ability to be reunited to God, after Adam's fall, is made possible by the work of Christ on the cross. This union is very concretely experienced in corporate worship, as well as in the lives of individuals as they place themselves under God's protection.
6. The Holy Spirit - As a theological principle, Orthodoxy understands the Holy Spirit to flow only from the Father (not from the Father and the Son as in Roman Catholic Theology).
7. Apostolic Succession - The bishops of the Orthodox Church claim to be able to trace the order of their succession, in an unbroken chain, all the way back to Christ and the apostles.
8. Icons - The Orthodox believe that the entire church, past and present, is present during worship services and are mystically united in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. In recognition of this conviction, they fill their churches with images of the saints to remind them of this reality. The icons are understood to be sacramental signs of the

presence of the entire body of Christ. Worshipers will kiss the icons as a way of showing reverence to the saints. This reverence is not, however, to be understood as saint or icon worship.

9. Sacraments - Along with Roman Catholicism, Orthodox theology also adheres to a sacramental approach to salvation. Their sacraments are basically the same ones as the Roman church – communion, unction (last rites), ordination, confession, marriage, chrismation (confirmation) and baptism.

10. Baptism - Baptism is understood to be the sacramental ceremony that creates the forgiveness of person's sins and union with the body of Christ. By this ritual an individual becomes a member of the Orthodox Church. In Orthodox baptism, the holy water used for the service is blessed by a priest and the baptism is performed by total immersion in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In addition to the sacramental nature of the ceremony, baptism represents death of the "old man" by participation in the crucifixion and burial of Christ, and a rebirth into new life in Christ by participation in his resurrection. Children from Orthodox families are normally baptized shortly after birth. Converts from other faiths must also be received by baptism. This is the only one of the sacraments that does not have to be done by an ordained priest.

11. Worship Style - Orthodox worship services are characterized by a highly formalized liturgy which is always sung. Elements in the service include prayers, recognition of icons, use of incense, singing of hymns, responses, Scripture readings and sermons. Worship is intended to help people experience the presence of God which is done by engaging the whole person – body, mind, and spirit.

12. The Virgin Mary - Mary is considered to be blessed because she is the one who gave birth to Jesus (the very Word of God). She is regarded as the greatest of missionaries because she brought the Word of God into the world. As in Roman Catholicism, they believe that Mary remained a virgin all her life. 13. Confession - A priest is recognized as the sacramental agent of Christ. When an individual confesses a sin to a priest, he is able to grant forgiveness.

14. Prayers for and by the dead - Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that Christians who have died remain part of the Church. It is thought that they are able to pray for those left behind and to receive the benefits of the prayers of people who remain on earth.

15. Priests - Married men may become priests, but bishops and monks may not marry. The Orthodox Church allows married priests, as long as the marriage takes place before ordination. Unmarried priests usually live in monasteries. Widowed priests may not remarry. Bishops are always celibate. The Orthodox church considers men and women to be equal before God, but only men may be ordained as bishops or priests.

16. Holy Communion - The Eucharist is considered to be one of the sacraments which bestows saving grace to believers. In the Orthodox church, as with Roman Catholicism, the bread and wine are believed to be the actual body and blood of Christ. Unlike the Roman church, both elements are given to participants who have prepared themselves by fasting, prayer, and confession. The priest administers the elements directly into the recipient's mouth.

Authority

The Orthodox Church accepts the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments as God's inspired revelation. However, they also accept church tradition, particularly the decrees of the seven councils, as equally authoritative. They discourage individuals from interpreting the Bible apart from church tradition.

Evidence for the Authority

The basic worldview understanding of Orthodox Christianity is in line with Biblical Christianity. However, the same basic concern that was expressed regarding Roman Catholicism is also a concern in Orthodoxy. In order to accept the sacramental concept of salvation, their view of Mary, and the concept of icons, they have to rely on an authority which lies outside of Scripture.

This requires that human reason and church tradition be put on an equal footing with the Bible. Here, too, it is possible for individuals to be in error regarding these doctrines and still be within the bounds of Relational Revelation. But as before, if they are truly depending on the church, rather than Jesus Christ, for their salvation, they have stepped across the line into a different form of theism.

