**Eastern Orthodox Church**

The Eastern Orthodox Church shares its earliest history with that of its western counterpart, the Roman Catholic Church. The term *orthodox* means "correct belief" and became an official church label after the defeat of iconoclasm in the eighth century. The Roman Catholic Church and the Greek or Eastern Orthodox Church represent the oldest unbroken traditions in Christianity. The division into "Latin" and "Greek" halves was gradual, the result of a number of misunderstandings, growing cultural differences, and unfortunate acts of hostility. Until the ravages of the Fourth Crusade in the early 13th century, when western knights massacred the inhabitants of Constantinople, a permanent breach was unlikely, notwithstanding the serious theological battles of the ninth and 11th centuries. To early medieval Christians of either side, the expanding gulf between east and west was less obvious than it has been since the later Middle Ages, when two councils, one in 1274 and another in 1439, failed to heal the breach. As the two halves went their separate ways, each faced a series of challenges that led them to develop unique traditions. Though the two churches held many beliefs in common, like traditions of apostolic succession, monasticism, and a basic theology, the Greek and Latin churches also embraced divergent understandings, particularly with regard to the role and preeminence of the pope and the expression of the relationship between members of the Trinity.

**The Political Origins of "Eastern" Christianity**

Eastern Orthodox Christianity owes its development to a combination of political, theological, and cultural factors. Politically, the division of the Roman Empire into its successor states—the Germanic kingdoms of the west, the lands of the Islamic peoples, and the Byzantine Empire—created geographic, social, and political changes that, in time, fragmented the Church. That slow dissolution into a multitude of states and into two main halves of the Church happened gradually. Historians are quick to point out that the Church survived the great changes around the Mediterranean intact during the period in which most of those transformations occurred. For example, from 654 until 752, five popes were Roman, several were Greek, and still more were from such Greek cultural areas as Syria and Sicily. This suggests far more communication and contact between east and west than a simple look at differences would suggest. Moreover, many authors in the west wrote in Greek, including Irenaeus and Saint Jerome.

In some degree, however, differences between the Roman and Greek halves of the Roman Empire had always existed, culture and language being the most obvious. For example, Eastern Orthodox priests could be married, so long as they were married prior to ordination. The rules for fasting during Lent differed as well—in the east one did not fast on Saturday. When travel in the empire was easy, these differences were easier to adjudicate, and a series of church councils—like the Quinisext Council (692)—championed a spirit of toleration. However, when such events as the rise of Islam cut off travel, the differences, over time, became more pronounced. Like Rome, which faced a series of Germanic incursions, Constantinople faced Islamic armies until the 15th century.

The proselytizing armies of Islam cut a swath through former Roman territory in the seventh century. Within 100 years, much of North Africa, the Levant, and parts of Spain were Muslim possessions. Straddling Europe and Asia...
Minor, the Byzantine Empire absorbed much of the Islamic invasion. From the seventh century until 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Turks, the Byzantines battled Islam, and thus, had less time, inclination, or resources to worry much about their western cousins. One of the most significant outcomes of the rise of Islam was the new prominence given to Constantinople as the chief center of Christianity in the east. The three other patriarchal churches, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, all fell to Islamic armies in the seventh century, which left only Rome and Constantinople free. As a result, both the bishop of Rome and of Constantinople became the chief prelates in more than just honor (the pope and the patriarch had always enjoyed more prestige). In the Eastern Orthodox Church, however, the emperor remained the authority, in political as well as in ecclesiastical matters.

An Imperial Church

In the Byzantine Empire, both the emperor and the patriarch had key roles in the church. Since its inception, in fact, the office of Roman emperor had entailed a religious component, one that changed when the emperors became Christian, but which never disappeared. Ultimate authority continued to rest with the emperor, not only in the east, but also theoretically in Italy, notwithstanding the disappearance of the Western Roman Empire. Italy was considered part of the Byzantine emperor's domain until problems closer to his capital led the emperor to leave Italy to the pope. That helps account for the continued, albeit sometimes tense, relationship between pope and emperor in the centuries before 800.

The emperor was believed to be Jesus Christ's representative on earth, and thus, had the right to make pronouncements of faith and oversee church affairs. For example, the emperor appointed new patriarchs and other bishops, he issued religious decrees, and he persecuted heretics. Not surprisingly, the emperor and his bishops often clashed over theological issues. The most famous example is the Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries. Emperor Leo the Isaurian, for reasons still incompletely understood, proscribed the veneration of icons, a practice cherished among Greek Christians. Some scholars see this as the influence of Islam, which forbids the depiction or veneration of any image even as a tool of devotion. While there were certainly cases of excessive devotion, Leo's mandate upset lay people, monks, and many bishops. Penalties were severe for those who continued to use icons in their worship, and under Byzantine emperor Theophilus, who sat upon the throne during the second outbreak of iconoclasm, many were tortured and killed. The veneration of icons was deeply enshrined in the spirituality of Greek Christians, and in 843, when Empress Theodora replaced her recently deceased husband Theophilus, she ended the controversy and reversed the policy. Icons have remained an important part of Eastern Orthodox Christianity to this day.

Eastern Theology & Traditions

When Roman emperor Constantine I became a Christian, he inherited the problems of defining orthodoxy. A council of bishops, presided over by Constantine, issued the official orthodox position at the Council of Nicaea in 325, and by 381, the Council of Constantinople made that statement, the Nicene Creed, official. However, Christian theology is complex, and divergent ideas continued to plague the faith. One of the most troubling heresies the Byzantines faced was Monophysitism, a belief that Jesus had one nature, at once human and divine. Though on the surface, that view was not too far from the orthodox position, which posits that Jesus has two natures, one divine, one human, it was sufficiently divergent to embroil the Christian world in debate. The emperors tried various means to reach compromise, but those measures, like the Eastern Roman emperor Zeno's Henotikon, which used language that accommodated both sides, created more division than unity. The Muslim Conquests claimed much of the territory inhabited by Monophysites, which is one reason perhaps that by the late seventh century, the controversy had ended. There are still Monophysite Christian sects today in parts of the Middle East, but they are in the minority.
While the Church would continue to struggle with heresy, and in the process further explain official dogma, the key tenets of the orthodox position were established. Often the emperor, the patriarch, and their counterpart in Rome, the pope, tussled over theological issues, but until the seventh century nothing had truly separated them. Bishops all over Christendom debated points of theology and tradition and always had. However, some of the differences between the Latin and Greek churches made compromise difficult if not impossible. Of these, the Filioque Controversy and the emphasis on papal supremacy did more to separate east and west than anything else doctrinally, but more than that, they help highlight the differences in theological understanding and tradition.

The Nicene Creed had originally stated that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, but Latin churches added that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *"and the Son"* (in Latin, *filioque*). The origins of this clause are unknown, but sometime in the seventh century, perhaps in Spain, some Christians altered the language. Greek Christians found this formulation troubling because, while it emphasized the unity of the Trinity, it took away from the special place of the Holy Spirit. Greek theologians had been hesitant to explain how the Holy Spirit emanates from God because scripture did not make it clear. To make matters worse, Frankish rulers had made the change official within their territory, and given the influence of the greatest power in the west, the Frankish example spread. Rome retained the original phrasing (Pope Leo III had even recommended to King Charlemagne of the Franks that he drop the *filioque*), but by the 11th century, the papacy also used the new formulation. The Filioque Controversy was and is one of the chief sources of division between the Roman and Greek churches.

Another point of difference is the idea of papal supremacy, which along with the notion of infallibility, upset Greek ideas about the role of bishops and the position of the emperor. The pope had always been viewed as a "first among equals," but eastern Christians did not believe that this honor extended to the authority to decide religious matters on his own. From its first enfranchisement, the Church had relied on ecumenical councils as the arbiter of important issues, not the decision of one man. While an emperor or a bishop might attempt to enforce such a unilateral decision, opposition was usually fierce and any success short-lived, as the example of the Iconoclastic Controversy attests.

The traditions of east and west were different in other ways as well. Saints were important all over Christendom, but the popular devotion to them differed from place to place. In the east, Greek Christians used icons, colorful, two-dimensional images of holy people to assist in venerating God and his saints. The regulations for such depictions are firm, the idea being that icons, as spiritual windows, should avoid the reality of three-dimensional representation that might make them mundane. As Eastern Orthodox missionaries traveled to all parts of Eastern Europe, they took their icons with them so that today, the various offshoots of the Eastern Orthodox Church, like the Russian Orthodox Church, also venerate icons.

**The Isolation of the Eastern Tradition in the Later Middle Ages**

The medieval period witnessed several conflicts, like the Schism of 1054, which widened the gap between Latin and Greek Christians. In 1054, Byzantine emperor Constantine IX Monomachus and Pope Leo IX clashed over territorial rights to southern Italy. Two papal legates journeyed to Constantinople to work out the differences, but hot words ensued and the legates excommunicated the patriarch, who in turn excommunicated them. These mutual anathemas significantly split the Latin and Greek churches. The Fourth Crusade finalized the enmity between the churches, for in 1204 western crusaders made a bloody attack on Constantinople. The city was in their hands until 1261, when the Byzantines finally succeeded in expelling them. When the Turks took Constantinople in 1453, the chief city of Eastern Christianity became a Christian island in an Islamic sea. Despite those calamities, the Eastern Orthodox Church survived and today represents one of the major Christian
denominations. Even after the failed reconciliation attempts of the medieval era, and despite some persisting tensions, various attempts at reconciliation down to the present have helped improve the relationship between the Roman and Greek churches.

Further Reading


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