

4. Byzantine Christianity & Eastern Orthodoxy

I. The Byzantine Empire

II. Distinctives of Eastern Orthodoxy

A. Mystery

Orthodox theology is generally apophatic (ἀπόφασις < ἀπόφημι to deny), aka negative theology, the *via negativa*, versus the kataphatic theology of the West. The post-Enlightenment West prizes reason and logic, and distrusts mystery. The Eastern Church produces no systematic theology (e.g. Aquinas' *Summa theologica*; Calvin's *Institutes*; Barth's *Church Dogmatics* in the West). Instead it relies on the ecumenical creeds which contain much negative language.

Eastern theology favors adoration, contemplation, vision rather than rational intellectual abstractions.

1. Hesychasm

Hesychasm and hesychasts (ἡσυχία silence, stillness, NT 4×, incl 1 Tim 2:11,12; ἡσυχάζω 5×, ἡσύχιος 2×) is a strong movement within the Eastern church. It takes literally the command to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17), with long repetition of the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me."

B. Icons

"icons are essential to the very identity of Orthodoxy. Icons are rooted in the entire religious psychology of Eastern Christianity."¹

For a century the validity of icons was fought over by iconoclasts (icon-breakers) and iconodules (icon-servers) or iconophiles (icon-lovers).

726 the Byzantine emperor Leo III issued an edict prohibiting the use of icons.

754 Leo's son Constantine V (741-75) was an even more fanatical iconoclast, convening the Iconoclast Council (754).

787 Empress Irene convened the Seventh ecumenical council, which defeated iconoclasm.

813 another burst of iconoclasm under Leo V (813-20).

843 Another council confirmed the decision of 787 Council; established the first Sunday of Lent as a holy day to celebrate the Triumph of Orthodoxy.

The iconodule position was championed by John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite:

1. The OT prohibition of idolatry (Exod 20:4; Deut 4:15-18; 5:7-9) does not apply:
 - a. Christian icons are very different from pagan idols.
 - b. In Christ, God has made himself visible. Christ is the icon (εἰκών) of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15)
 - c. not all OT commands apply in NT age
2. Made a distinction between worship and veneration, between the prototype and the copy
 - a. absolute worship (λατρεία, λατρεύω) for God alone
 - b. relative worship = veneration (προσκύνησις, προσκυνέω) people and objects sanctified by God. An icon is venerated not worshiped.
 - c. The icon (of Christ) is a copy or shadow of the prototype (Christ).
3. Christology: iconoclasts argued that an icon broke the Chalcedonian Definition: the two natures of Christ exist in

1. Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 80.

one person “without confusion (vs. monophysitism) or separation (Nestorianism).” If an icon tried to portray both human and divine natures it confused them; if it portrayed only the human nature it separated them. The iconodules replied that an icon portrays Christ’s *person* not *nature*.

C. Tradition

Scripture and Tradition are closely related for both Jews and Christians.

1. The Jews

The Pharisees believed that at Sinai God gave Moses two types of Torah: a written Torah and an oral Torah. Each generation received (παραλαμβάνω) the oral Torah from the previous generation and passed it on (παραδίδωμι) to the next. This tradition of the fathers (ἡ παράδοσις τῶν πατρικῶν) or tradition of the elders (ἡ παράδοσις τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, Matt 15:2; Mark 7:3, 5) concerned *halakah* (הַלְכָּה), detailed instructions for daily life.

During the Babylonian Captivity, the Jews understood that God’s judgment was justified because they had broken covenant and failed to keep Torah. This produced a renewed commitment to Torah, and the emergence of a group devoted to the study and teaching of Torah: the scribes (סֹפְרֵי גְרָמַמַּאטֵּי). The Pharisees intensified Torah, building a hedge around it to prevent them from inadvertently breaking it.

The oral Torah was codified in written form as the Mishnah ca. 200 under the leadership of Judah ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince or the Patriarch). Over subsequent centuries a commentary (Gemara) was written on the Mishnah. Mishnah and Gemara together form the Talmud (תַּלְמוּד). There are two Talmuds: the Palestinian Talmud (*Yerushalmi*) developed ca. 350-450 by the Jewish community in Palestine, and the Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*) developed ca. 550-600 by the large Jewish community in Babylon.

Jesus dismissed the tradition of the Pharisees as “the tradition of men” (ἡ παράδοσις τῶν ἀνθρώπων, Mark 7:8), for which sake they broke, nullified, let go and set aside God’s command/word (Matt 15:3,6; Mark 7:8,9,13). By contrast, Paul says that what he has received and passed on is from the Lord not from men (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3; Gal 1:12).

2. The NT Church

Paul, too, has a tradition (παράδοσις) which he has received (παραλαμβάνω) and is passing on (παραδίδωμι) to the next generation. But he received this tradition from a new source: not Sinai but the Lord (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3; Gal 1:12). He tells Timothy, “what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2). Here are four generations in the chain of tradition:

Paul → Timothy → faithful men → others

3. Tradition in the Church Today

A gross simplification: the Orthodox Church holds a fixed Tradition; the Catholic Church holds an expanding Tradition; the Protestant Church rejects Tradition but holds many traditions.

1. Orthodox: seeks to preserve the tradition of the early Church, especially as developed by the early Church Fathers. This commitment is evident in liturgy (the usual liturgy is that developed by St John Chrysostom), in theology (largely unchanged since the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa), and in the continued relevance of the seven ecumenical councils (325–787).
2. Catholic: Tradition is the official teaching of the *magisterium*. Scripture must be interpreted by the Church. Dogma is open to expansion, e.g. immaculate conception (1854), papal infallibility (1870), bodily assumption (1950).
3. Protestant: the reformers rejected Catholic Tradition, seeking to return *ad fontes*, to the source, basing its theology and practice on Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*). Protestant churches have been busy ever since developing many traditions. At the same time, most Protestant churches, especially evangelical ones, are largely ignorant of church history. This was not true of the Reformers.

Christianity and the Middle East

“Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”²

D. Theosis

What is the destiny of God’s people?

1. Be in God’s Presence

Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q1: What is the chief end of man?

A: To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

2. The Beatific Vision: to see God (Rev 22:3)

3. Theosis, deification, divinization: to be like God.

The Son “was made human so that we might be made divine” (Athanasius).

Emphasized by Eastern Church. Largely ignored by the West, but not totally absent:

Augustine: “God received a body and a soul in order that the body and soul of man may be blessed: the soul with his divinity and the body with his humanity” (*Enchiridion*).

III. The Great Schism

The official separation of East and West was the Great Schism (1054), but the separation was centuries in the making.

1. Linguistic difference: the West spoke Latin, the East spoke Greek. The divide ran through modern Yugoslavia and Libya. For the first 2-3 centuries learned men could speak both, but lost that facility.
2. Philosophical differences: theologians in East and West had different emphases.
3. Patriarchal supremacy: the Second Council (381, Constantinople) recognized Rome as first on the list of five patriarchies, but as first among equals. But the Bishop of Rome started to insist he had authority over the others, based on the Pauline and Petrine authority of the church in Rome.
4. Filioque clause: the Western church unilaterally added a clause to the Nicene Creed: the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (Lat. *filioque*).
5. Pope’s coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor (800): the Roman Empire already had an emperor in New Rome.
6. Great Schism (1054): papal legates placed a bill of excommunication on the altar in Hagia Sophia as the Patriarch was celebrating the Eucharist.
7. The Sack of Constantinople (1204) after a siege by the Fourth Crusade, followed by a 3-day looting. Western powers ruled Constantinople as the Latin Kingdom (1204-1261).

IV. The Eastern Orthodox Church today

A. Autocephalous Churches

The Eastern Orthodox Church comprises mainly 14 autocephalous churches:

- 1. Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople: incl. Mount Athos, Exarchate of Patmos; Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain, of Italy and Malta, of America, of Australia; etc.
- 2-4. Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria; of Antioch (incl. Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of

2. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), 65.

North America); of Jerusalem.

- 5-14. Orthodox Church of Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, Czech lands & Slovakia.

In the USA

- Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
- Orthodox Church in America (OCA)

B. Evangelical Movement to Orthodoxy

What attracts evangelicals to the Orthodox Church?

1. mystery: transcendence in worship; apophatic theology versus Western rationalism
2. tradition: rooted in 4th-6th centuries
3. claim to be the True church: the one holy, catholic and apostolic church