

Eastern Orthodoxy (from Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Christian Churches of America*, 22-31)

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost. (Acts 2:1-4)

These descriptive words of Luke unfold to members of the Eastern Orthodox communion the historical origin of their church, for according to these Christians, the one and only true church was originally constituted on the memorable day of Pentecost. After the apostles had gathered at Jerusalem, the Holy Ghost descended with visible power upon them. On that occasion, these special witnesses of Christ preached, baptized, and then organized the believers into the first Christian community. Within a few years, other bodies of saints had been gathered in all the major centers of the Roman Empire, and eventually Christianity spread from these towns into many other parts of the Old World.

Although there was only one major body of Christians in Europe and the Near East during the early Middle Ages, it was characterized by striking diversity of belief and practice. There was also a lack of central leadership in the early Medieval Church, for no one person or group of religious leaders was universally recognized throughout the church as the supreme head. Meanwhile, political, cultural, and economic differences emerged, dividing Europe into an eastern and a western civilization. It is not surprising, therefore, that significant religious differences developed separating the Eastern and Western Christians and that the first major schism in the Medieval Church occurred when Christians living in these two sections of Europe failed to harmonize their differences.

The doctrinal dispute that ignited a disruption of the church and provided the occasion for a permanent separation was on two fundamental issues: the primacy of the pope and the procession of the Holy Ghost. Eastern Christians refused to acknowledge the western claim of universal supremacy of the bishop of Rome, contending that all bishops have equal authority. Moreover, they held that Roman Catholics erred when they altered an ancient creed with the insertion that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and Son. The Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father alone, Eastern Christians contended. The theological estrangement led to bitter debates. In A.D. 1054 a papal legate arrogantly laid on a church altar a bull of excommunication against the patriarch of Constantinople. Although this event has been traditionally labeled as the date of the "great schism" and was a bitter episode in ecclesiastical history, it was not the first nor the last event in the long process of separation.

Conscientious attempts at reconciliation were sought for generations by leaders of both churches, until finally the actions of insolent crusaders cemented the schism. During the fourth Crusade, the vengeance of embittered warriors was diverted from the Muslim enemy to Christians residing in Constantinople. In 1204 western Christians sacked the historic city, robbed churches, and returned to their homes with what many regarded as priceless sacred relics. The offending swords of these crusaders shattered all hope of reconciliation in that era of history, and doctrinal diversities

have persisted, preventing a successful healing of the rupture.

While the East and West engaged in theological controversy, Eastern Christianity spread into Russia. During the reign of Vladimir (980-1015) Orthodoxy became the state church of Russia and remained so until 1917. At first the church was feebly superimposed on pagan religions, but in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Orthodox faith effectively replaced the old religions throughout Russia. Then after the Turks captured Constantinople in 1453 the Russians assumed temporary leadership of Eastern Christianity, becoming in one respect the successors of Byzantium.

For many centuries Orthodoxy was almost purely an eastern religion, confined to eastern Europe and portions of Asia. During the past two centuries, however, there has been a major dispersal of this faith. As early as 1794 Russian Orthodoxy was carried by missionaries to Alaska, and during the last half of the eighteenth century Russians commenced missionary work in Japan and Korea and established churches in the continental United States. Meanwhile, Greeks were also establishing societies in various parts of the world. Greeks organized the first permanent Orthodox church in London in 1838 and gathered the first group of Orthodox Christians in the continental United States in New Orleans in 1864.

The most significant dispersal of Orthodoxy in modern times has taken place during this century. At the turn of the century the first truly substantial immigration of Greeks to America occurred. This tidal wave was followed by a great stream of Russian immigrants who fled their native land after the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Orthodox churches followed these immigrants. Between 1906 and 1956 this religion, which grew primarily through a steady stream of the uprooted, was one of the fastest growing faiths in the United States, increasing from an estimated membership of 130,000 to about 2,400,000 during this fifty-year period. During the decade from 1956 to 1966, the growth was from 2,400,000 to 3,172,000, or an increase of 32 percent. Since some local groups report family membership rather than enumerating every member, various historians estimate that Orthodox membership in the United States is closer to 5 million than the reported 3 million.

There is no single headquarters of this community of churches in the United States. Many of the churches, such as the Greek, Romanian, Serbian, and Syrian are organized along national lines and are connected with their respective national churches in Europe or Asia. However, most of these churches have been Americanized in the sense that English is being used both in the worship service and in the teaching and preaching of this faith.

The great dispersal of Orthodoxy through immigration has certainly not been confined to the United States, for in recent years there has been a significant growth in this community of churches in Canada, Australia, western Europe, and portions of Africa. Orthodoxy has, therefore, recently emerged as a worldwide movement.

While Orthodoxy has been increasing in the western world, it has been declining rapidly in numbers and influence behind the iron curtain. A large percentage (possibly 85 percent) of this communion now live under Communist rule and are subject to rather severe religious restrictions. In fact, Orthodoxy has been affected more by this political ideological revolution than any other denomination. As a result of legal limitations and the constant flood of atheistic propaganda imposed upon the masses, some Orthodox churches have almost been exterminated. But other churches have adjusted, have reorganized, or have entered a modern Christian underground. In spite of fifty years of persecution, organized religion in Communist lands has not withered away.

Although Greece is the only country in the world today which is still officially Orthodox, Eastern Orthodoxy has remained one of the leading (numerically speaking) religions, with an estimated world membership of from 60 to 90 million practicing Orthodox Christians and from 120 to 150 million believers. Excluding Protestantism, which is a grouping of many Christian religions, Orthodoxy ranks second among Christian faiths and sixth among the world religions.

There are four historic centers of the Eastern Orthodox church: Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. The Patriarch of Constantinople is recognized today by many Orthodox Christians as the first bishop among equals and has the primacy of honor. This primacy of honor among the four equal patriarchs was almost universally acknowledged among members of this faith between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. After the fall of Constantinople to the Muslims in 1453, however, some of the autonomous national churches (particularly the Russians and Slavic Orthodox churches) looked to Moscow for spiritual leadership.

In addition to the four ancient patriarchates with their many geographical and ecclesiastical subdivisions, there are other major autonomous societies, including the Orthodox churches of Greece, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Albania, Serbia, and Cyprus. Each of these societies maintains a separate and independent administrative structure and is directed by councils of bishops called synods. While they are free in their inner life and management, they are in full communion with each other and united in their liturgical life and traditional beliefs.

One of the important beliefs of Eastern Orthodoxy is that all bishops are theoretically successors of the apostle, Peter. They generally specify that Peter was given an honorary position among the apostles as head of the theologians. They further emphasize that while the jurisdiction of Peter and the other apostles was over the entire church, the bishop's jurisdiction was and should perpetually remain over a specified geographical region.

To substantiate their belief in the equality of bishops, Orthodox Christians frequently turn to the writings of church

fathers, such as Ignatius of Antioch, who declared:

Follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father... Nobody must do anything that has to do with the Church without the bishop's approval...Where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. Without the bishop's supervision, no baptism or love feasts are permitted.

Prior to the ninth century, Orthodox Christians maintain, bishops in the East and West were essentially independent of higher ecclesiastical authority, but gradually after that date the bishop of Rome began to assert himself over other bishops. In the eleventh century, they assert, the papacy was greatly strengthened by the Cluniac reform movement which sought to purify and unify the church under a central leader. For years the bishop of Rome (or pope of Rome) remained a successor of Peter, but after he endorsed programs that conflicted with traditional Christianity, such as advancing a view of primacy, his special position of honor was conveyed to others.

When the Orthodox consider the controversial text in which Christ declared that his church would be built upon the rock (Matt. 16:18), they generally conclude that the rock is not Peter but Peter's faith. Peter's faith, they explain, made it possible for him to become the rock upon which the church was founded and in one respect all who share his faith are his successors and are eligible to return to God's presence. In support of this belief, Orthodox Christians again turn to the writings of early church fathers and note that a majority of them endorsed this interpretation.

Similar to Roman Catholics but unlike most Protestants, Eastern Christians believe that there are two sources of revelations: the Bible and tradition. The Bible, they maintain, was not meant to be a constitution upon which God's church should be built. Since this sacred work is not a complete description of the gospel of Christ and is susceptible to a variety of interpretations, they contend that another source, tradition, must be employed to determine religious truth. Some Orthodox even conclude that tradition is the sole source of gospel truth, claiming that scripture is one of the outward forms in which tradition is expressed.

Orthodox Christians further believe that tradition includes more than the faith that Jesus conveyed to the apostles. It includes such outward forms as the Nicene Creed, the decisions of the first seven ecumenical councils; definitions by local councils and letters prepared by bishops and approved by the church; the liturgy; canon law; and icons. The decisions of the first seven ecumenical councils (but not others regarded as general councils by Roman Catholics) are regarded as infallible, and other expressions of faith become infallible only when approved by the whole Orthodox community.

There is an emphasis in this communion on the study of the writings of the church fathers. Some of the fathers are regarded as authoritative interpreters of the faith, but Orthodox Christians recognize that these expositors taught conflicting opinions in the areas of theological speculation, such as the fall, the atonement, and life beyond the grave. Moreover, they have not universally endorsed the decrees of councils such as the Council of Trent, which defined Roman

Catholic beliefs on a variety of subjects. Therefore, there is no single authoritative document describing the basic beliefs of Orthodox Christians.

There has been and currently is a major emphasis in this church on the doctrine of the Trinity. Orthodox Christians teach that God is a spirit, an immaterial being, and that he is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. They further explain that God is three persons of one essence, coeternal: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is the creator of all things, visible and invisible. Christ was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, becoming man for our salvation; and the Holy Ghost was sent by Christ to guide His church.

Orthodox Christians also emphasize that their theology is a negative approach to God, for they insist that God is a mystery who cannot be comprehended by man. Positive statements about God, they say, must be offset by describing what God is not. As St. John of Damascus (ca 675-749) asserted, declarations specifying that God is "good, and just and wise . . . do not tell God's nature but only the qualities of His nature." Although "it is plain . . . that there is a God," the essence and nature of deity is "absolutely incomprehensible and unknowable." It is evident, he concluded, that God is incorporeal, formless, intangible, invisible, infinite, incognizable, and indefinable. "It is not within our capacity, therefore, to say anything about God or even to think of Him, beyond the things which have been divinely revealed to us."

In addition to emphasizing the dogma of the Trinity and the incomprehensible nature of God, Eastern Orthodox Christians devote much attention to the sacraments. Recognizing the importance of the sacramental life among the membership of this church, Orthodox authors sometimes refer to their communion as "primarily a worshipping community. As do Roman Catholics, they teach that there are seven major sacraments. They say these outward, visible signs convey inward spiritual grace to recipients. While Protestants teach that grace is an attitude of God, or God's graciousness, Eastern Christians, in harmony with Roman Catholic belief, assert that grace is divine power or the saving power of God by which men receive the benefits of the atonement. This grace is stored in the church, is administered through the sacraments, and is absolutely necessary for salvation. Some Orthodox theologians also claim that there are more than seven sacraments, adding that there are many other actions in the Church which possess sacramental characteristics, such as performing services for the burial of the dead, anointing a monarch, and blessing churches, icons, homes, fields, animals, cars, and the water on the day of Epiphany (the feast celebrating Christ's baptism).

Through baptism, Eastern Christians maintain, recipients are cleansed of their personal sins and the original sin and become members of the earthly kingdom of God. This sacrament is performed by threefold immersion. In some instances only part of the body is immersed (as in the case of infants), and water is poured over the body, once in the name of the Father, once in the name of the Son, and once in the name of the Holy Spirit. In infant baptism, two sponsors who are not the parents of the child confess the Orthodox faith on behalf of the infant and accept for the infant the offer of fellowship into the church.

In addition to practicing threefold immersion, there are other significant differences between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic positions regarding the sacraments. Whereas Roman Catholic children are not confirmed until after they reach the age of accountability, infants of Orthodox parents and converts are confirmed or chrismated (a special sacramental ordinance) immediately after baptism.

Although another difference in the two major Catholic churches is that young Orthodox children are invited to partake of Holy Communion, the two denominations agree that during this service Christ is crucified in an unbloody crucifixion. Christ is not only regarded as the literal victim of the sacrifice, but he is also considered the priest who invisibly performs this ceremonial act. This sacrifice is not regarded merely as commemorative, but is considered a true and literal sacrifice of the very body of Christ. During the liturgy (or Mass, as Roman Catholics would say), Orthodox Christians teach that the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ. After the bread and wine have been consecrated, Orthodox members receive both the leavened bread and wine. Roman Catholics usually receive a sacrament of one kind, a wafer of unleavened bread.

There are also significant differences in the beliefs of members of the two Catholic communions regarding confession. In the Orthodox church the penitent stands next to a small desk during the confession and a priest stands by the side of the confessor. The priest is not regarded as a judge but as a counselor who strives to recover the spiritual health of the sinner. In most Orthodox churches, priests do not claim authority to forgive sins but petition the Lord to grant the penitent "assurance of repentance, pardon and remission of his sin, and absolve him from all his offenses, voluntary and involuntary."

Marriage is another visible sign in which couples receive special blessings from God. Orthodox Christians, unlike Roman Catholics, permit divorce under certain conditions and also permit remarriage. Married men are permitted to become ordained priests and most parochial clergy are married, but bishops cannot be married for they are taken exclusively from the monastic clergy. Marriage to a baptized Christian of another faith is permitted if the nonmember promises to baptize the children of the marriage in the Orthodox church.

The sacrament of holy unction and the last rites are different services in this communion. While the sacrament of holy unction is administered to those who are physically or mentally ill and to those seeking purification, last rites is a service reserved for dying members.

Ordination is considered another of the seven sacraments. In addition to emphasizing apostolic succession, Orthodox Christians stress lay participation in the appointment of the clergy. During the ordination service, the congregation hails the new clergymen with the word, *axics*, signifying that the individual is worthy to be ordained. Then bishops lay their hands on the candidate's head, ordaining him in the name of the church.

Orthodox Christians, like Roman Catholics, also emphasize veneration of icons, religious pictures, and saints. They also pray to saints, asking saints to pray for them, but they do not

venerate three-dimensional statues. In every faithful Orthodox home a corner, usually in the bedroom, is dedicated for the family sanctuary. In this sanctuary are placed icons of Christ, Mary, and a patron saint, a cross, a prayer book, dried flowers of Good Friday, holy water, and other such religious objects. An icon is also placed in the eastern corner of the living room, and, according to custom, Orthodox guests who enter an Orthodox home venerate the icon by making the sign of the cross and bowing. Before entering the sanctuary of their church, Orthodox members approach a wall in the nave containing pictures. The worshipper first kisses the Christ icons, then the Mary icons, and then the icons of the angels and saints. He also venerates the icons by bowing and crossing himself.

Mary is held in high esteem because she is the mother of God. Orthodox Christians believe that Mary was a virgin when she bore Christ and that she remained a virgin throughout her life. Most members of this society further believe that the original sin was not imputed to Mary (nor in the Augustinian sense to other people), and many conclude that after Mary's death, her body was taken into heaven, being made fully spiritual.

Even though there is no dogma of the church regarding the fall, atonement, and life after death, many members do hold certain beliefs regarding these subjects. Most Orthodox members believe that our first parents rebelled against God, and because of their transgression all men are born into a state of moral and physical (meaning we shall suffer death) corruption. They further believe that as a consequence of the original sin, man's nature has assumed a corrupted form.

Most Orthodox Christians also speculate that through the atonement of Christ, man is able to regain the Holy Spirit. Although Christ's sacrifice is applicable to all, men do not benefit from this act until they are baptized and reborn. God, they explain, initiates the word of salvation by arousing the seeds of moral and spiritual powers remaining in man after the fall; man plays a vital role in the salvation experience by accepting this precious gift.

When an Orthodox member considers life beyond the grave, he usually declares that death is the separation of the body and spirit. The spirit is partially judged at death and enters a state of happiness or misery. At the time of the general judgment, the body (defined usually as a spiritual body) will be resurrected, and men will be assigned to everlasting happiness or everlasting punishment. While some Orthodox members speculate that possibly the punishment of the wicked will not continue eternally, others insist that this view of universal salvation has been condemned by the church. Most agree that the Roman Catholic belief of purgatory, limbo, treasury of merits, and indulgences are doctrinal innovations and should not be endorsed by members of their communion.

In the twentieth century, members of the Orthodox church recognize that modern confrontations are producing new challenges. While many behind the iron curtain are striving to combat the debilitating influence of communism, Orthodox Christians living in the free world are confronted with other problems. Theories advanced by Bible critics and modern scientists sometimes conflict with beliefs that have been popular for generations. The new ecumenical spirit is

also creating tensions in the church. While some Orthodox are striving to advance a program designed to create Christian unity, others insist that in order to enthusiastically and effectively support such a program the Orthodox Christian will be forced to compromise on basic traditional beliefs and practices. The problem Orthodox immigrants have in adjusting to a new life in a new nation has also beset many families, but a great many have adjusted admirably to this challenge and have become respected, productive workers and loyal leaders in the lands that have given them new hope and opportunities.

Although the modern history of Orthodoxy contains sorrowful notes of religious persecution and economic oppression, these years of unparalleled change have not altered the major religious emphasis of this community of churches. The traditional emphasis on veneration of icons, daily worship, and the importance of the sacrament has not lessened. Eastern Orthodoxy has remained "primarily a worshipping community."

Distinguishing Beliefs

Although there are many parallels in the beliefs of Eastern Christians and Roman Catholics, there are also a number of differences that have prevented these two communions from reuniting. Included among the most distinguishing beliefs held by most members of the Eastern Orthodox family of churches that are not endorsed by Roman Catholics (and are generally not held by Protestants) are the following doctrines and practices.

While Eastern Christians agree with Roman Catholics by asserting that the authority of Christ was conveyed by Peter and the other apostles to the bishops, unlike Roman Catholics they claim that all bishops were and are today equal in authority. However, they explain, some bishops have obtained honorary positions on the basis of the location of their ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

They also teach that religious tradition must include more than the faith which Jesus conveyed to the apostles. It includes not only outward forms such as the Bible, the Nicene Creed, and decisions of the first seven ecumenical councils, but also definitions by local councils, the liturgy, canon law, and icons.

Eastern Christians further hold that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father alone.

Other differences in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology relate to the sacraments. In the Eastern Orthodox church, baptism is performed by threefold immersion, and immediately after baptism, infants (or converts) are confirmed or chrismated, thereby receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. According to members of this faith, by means of this sacrament members receive a portion of the royal priesthood and are granted the right to participate in the administration of other sacraments. Moreover, during the Orthodox communion services, leavened bread is placed in the wine and both elements are conveyed to the communicants who are served by a spoon from the chalice. Orthodox priests may celebrate only one liturgy on a given day.

Three other differences in the practices of these churches are that Orthodox Christians stress lay participation in the appointment of the clergy, require celibacy among bishops only, and perform the rite of holy unction with the priest reading seven lessons prior to anointing the afflicted with oil.

Although there are many monastic communities in the Eastern Orthodox Church, there are no orders. Each monastery is a self-governing unit.

Other differences in these two religious communities pertain to beliefs held by Roman Catholics that are rejected by Eastern Christians. While Orthodox Christians emphasize veneration of icons, they do not approve of the veneration of three-dimensional statues. Most Eastern Christians (and Protestants) also reject the Roman Catholic beliefs, as traditionally conceived, concerning the immaculate conception of Mary, the assumption of Mary, purgatory, limbo, treasury of merits, and indulgences.

Miscellaneous Beliefs

Most Eastern Christians endorse many beliefs that are also held by Orthodox Roman Catholics and most orthodox Protestants, such as a triune God, angels as special creations of God, the world being created out of nothing, Adam and Eve being created through the will of God, and death being the separation of the body and spirit. Moreover, they share with Roman Catholics (but not with most Protestants) the belief that grace is a divine power of God, that during the liturgy (or Mass) Christ is the victim of the sacrifice, and that the bread and wine are changed to the body and blood of Christ.