

Chapter 1

The Orthodox Tradition

Orthodoxy has the longest history of the four major Christian traditions that exist today, and it preserves the ancient ideas and practices of Christianity more fully than any other tradition. In many ways, the past is still alive in Orthodoxy, so much so that some outsiders view Orthodoxy as locked in the past. But for its adherents, Orthodox Christianity is very much a living faith, connecting them to the present and future as much as to the past.

Geographically, the original heartland of Orthodoxy was the Middle East and the southern Balkans (the area that is now Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Macedonia). By 1500, however, under increasing pressure from Islam, the geographic center of Orthodoxy had moved north into Russia and Eastern Europe, where Orthodoxy remains the majority religion today. Three-quarters of all the Orthodox Christians in the world now live in Europe. In the twentieth century, Orthodoxy suffered greatly as most of Eastern Europe fell under Communist rule, but it endured and is currently enjoying a revival throughout the post-Communist world.

While Orthodoxy is the most geographically limited of the four major Christian traditions (see Figure 1.1), it too has become a global faith, with the Orthodox diaspora – the many communities of Orthodox Christians that now live outside of the Middle East and Eastern Europe – thinly circling the world. After Europe, Africa has the next largest number of Orthodox Christians, though most of the African Orthodox population (more than 90 percent) lives in just two countries: Egypt and Ethiopia. The Orthodox presence in Asia and Latin America (especially Brazil and Argentina) is generally small and spotty, but it exists. While the Orthodox population in North America and Australia is also relatively small, it is generally more robust. In North America, in particular, a significant experiment in Orthodox history is taking place. The Orthodox community in that region is highly complex – people from many different Orthodox Churches have moved to the area – and Orthodox leaders are currently trying to figure out how to unify all those Orthodox believers into a single “pan-Orthodox” movement. That process is prompting considerable theological

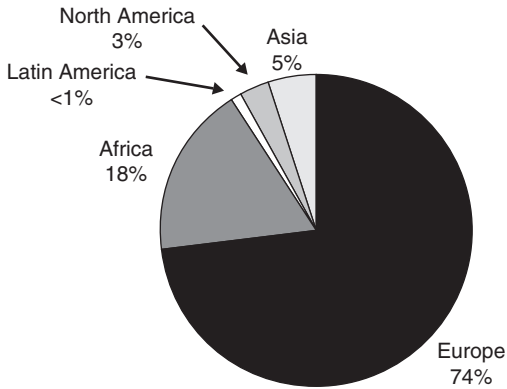


Figure 1.1 Where Orthodox Christians live (% of global Orthodox population living in each continent)

reflection and creativity in some circles (those favoring the Americanization of the tradition) and significant anguish in others (those wanting to hold on to the often deeply intertwined religious and ethnic identities of the past).

Spirituality

The spirituality of Orthodoxy focuses on worship, and to enter an Orthodox church is to enter a different place and time. Orthodox Christians view the liturgy (worship services held in the church building) as a way of participating briefly in the eternal worship of God that is always taking place in heaven. Most Orthodox churches have domed ceilings, and at the top of the dome there is an opening called the *oculus*.

This is a symbolic eye into heaven and it is often encircled with windows. A huge icon (holy painting) of Christ as *Pantokrator* (the ruler of all) is painted in the *oculus* (see Figure 1.2), and Christ with the angels and apostles around him looks down on the gathered congregation where traditionally everyone stands, rather than sits, as a way of showing respect to God and to all the citizens of heaven.

Within an Orthodox church, one is surrounded by icons: icons on the ceiling, on the walls, on the screen or partition at the front of the church which is called an *iconostasis*, and on stands scattered throughout the building (see Figure 1.3). Icons portray not only Christ, but also Mary, the angels, and the great saints of the past. Other icons depict the stories of the Bible or important events in the history of Christianity. This panorama of images is intended to make those inside the building feel as if they are enveloped within a great community of faith, extending back in time thousands of years and looking forward together toward the future when God will welcome all the faithful into heaven. On the Orthodox way toward God no one walks alone. Rather, the journey toward God takes place in the constant company and with the ongoing assistance of others. That company includes both the living and the dead. In Orthodoxy, the boundary between the living and the dead is thin, and the Orthodox believe that the saints – holy men and women who have died – can still hear their cries for help and assist them in times of need.

In the same way that the line between life and death is thinned in Orthodoxy, the line between the sacred and the secular is also visually blurred in Orthodox iconography. The sacred and the secular interpenetrate, overlapping in time and space. Thus angels are everywhere in the icons because the Orthodox think they are everywhere in reality. The Orthodox believe that at the time of baptism every Christian is assigned a guardian angel for protection from evil and for guidance in the way of holiness and truth, but fallen angels (demons) are also ubiquitously present, seeking to turn people away from God and the path of faith. Because this spiritual world is hidden from view, humans tend to forget it. The liturgy and the icons remind people that they live within an invisible spiritual world of angels and demons just as literally as they live in the visible realm of the material world. In fact, the brilliance of the colors used in the painting of icons – and most of them were originally

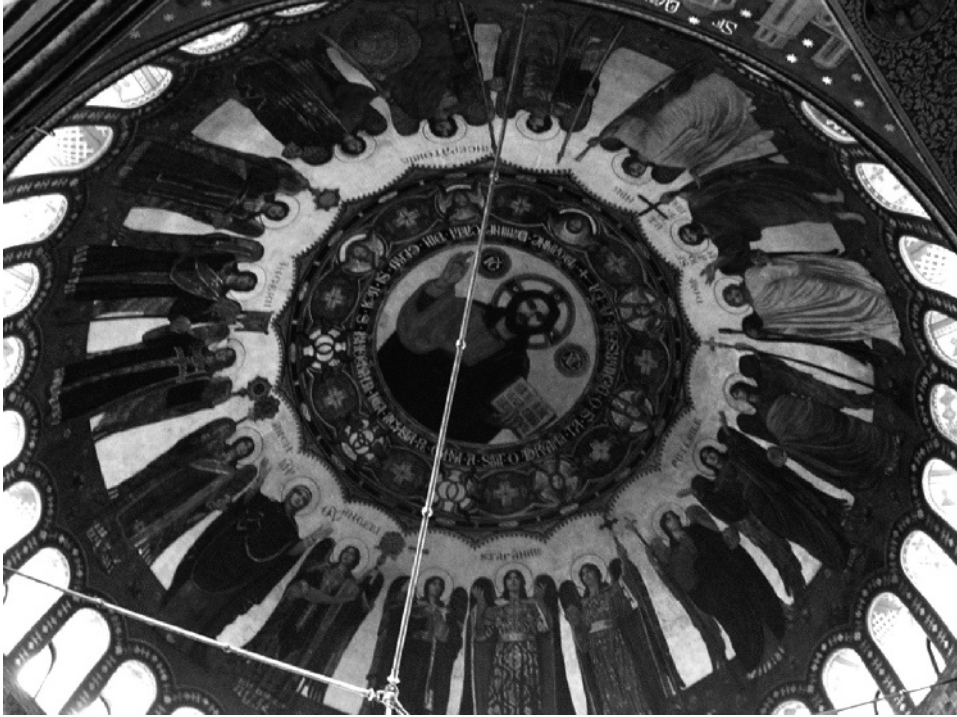


Figure 1.2 Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral (Sibiu, Romania), interior of main dome.
Photo by author.

quite brilliant even though many old icons have grown dark with age – are luminous reminders that the spiritual world is as real, or more real, than the earth itself.

All of this communicates that nothing is ever done in secret. Life is lived in community. God is watching; Jesus is watching; Mary is watching; the angels are watching. And the saints are watching too. In fact, Orthodox icons – which are often displayed in homes as well as in churches – are understood to be not merely spiritual representations, but are also observers of humankind. The eyes of an icon are always painted last, and when they are in place the icon becomes, in a sense, alive – a living portal connecting the earthly community with the spiritual community of God and the saints.

The most revered figure in the Orthodox tradition, apart from Jesus and the Trinity, is Mary, who is called *Theotokos* (“God-bearer” or “Mother of God”) because she bore God incarnate in her womb when pregnant with Jesus. Mary is venerated not only because she is the woman through whom God entered the world, but also because she models how every Christian should live. When the Archangel Gabriel told Mary that God had selected her to be *Theotokos*, she replied simply: “Let it be done to me, as I am your servant.” God comes to people gently offering life in its fullness and, like Mary, each person must respond. In addition to modeling obedience, Mary also models holy suffering, since she endured watching her son being crucified. Finally, she is considered the most compassionate of all the saints, and icons of Mary communicate her desire to comfort all those who seek help in times of pain and distress.



Figure 1.3 Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral (Sibiu, Romania), nave and iconostasis. Photo by author.

Orthodox theology needs to be understood in the context of this emphasis on the visual and the communal. Within Orthodoxy, theology is a form of spirituality – a way of seeing the world and living in it – more than it is a philosophical explanation of belief. This is very different from the way theology is understood in most non-Orthodox Christian circles. Within the Protestant and Catholic traditions, in particular, theology usually consists of the logical explanation and philosophical defense of Christian doctrine. But Orthodox theology focuses on experience much more than it focuses on ideas or beliefs, and its primary “logic” is not philosophical, but relational, focusing on one’s relationship with God and others. The purpose of Orthodox theology is not the achievement of intellectual understanding; the goal of Orthodox theology is to live in the holiness of God’s presence, in the fire and warmth of the “Divine and Uncreated Light” of God.

The Orthodox tradition tends to favor an “apophatic” style of theology. Apophatic theology describes “who God is *not*” – the many ways in which God can be misunderstood – rather than attempting what theology can never accomplish: to capture God’s character in human words. From the Orthodox perspective, the highest and best “theology” is a wordless theology of mystical communion with God that bypasses entirely the mediation of thoughts or ideas. A person cannot enter this encounter by thinking their way to it, but only through

contemplation, clearing the mind of all thoughts and distractions in a way that results in receptivity to the divine and not in mere emptiness. The fourteenth-century Orthodox theologian Gregory Palamas explains: “Contemplation ... is not simply abstraction and negation; it is a union and a divinization which occurs mystically and ineffably by the grace of God, after the stripping away of everything from here below which imprints itself on the mind, or rather after the cessation of all intellectual activity.”¹ The Orthodox do not deny that there is a place for words and thought – a time to try to explain the spiritual realities of life insofar as they can be translated into human discourse – but that kind of theology of words is clearly secondary to theology as it is expressed and embodied in the experiencing of God.

Contemplative theology takes time and spiritual leisure; it is a natural fit for the monastic life. But many Orthodox laypeople also try to follow a way of life that involves continual prayer and longing for the presence of God. The most widely used contemplative practice in the modern Orthodox world is the “Jesus Prayer,” a short prayer that says merely “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” These words are often repeated in solitude, almost inaudibly, inhaling as one says the first three words and exhaling with the last four. Laypeople pray the Jesus prayer in the midst of daily routines, repeating it as they work or travel or eat their meals. The goal is to use this practice to slowly turn a prayer of the lips into a genuine prayer of the heart, cultivating a holiness of life and tranquility of spirit that is open to God’s presence.

Orthodox spirituality has a focus on the higher world – the invisible world of God, the angels, and the saints – but Orthodox spirituality holds the earthly world in high regard as well. The Orthodox tradition teaches that human beings have both a material nature and a spiritual or divine nature, and both are good because both come from God. This is God’s world, and it was created to be both appreciated and enjoyed. Ordinary life is honored in the Orthodox tradition. Time together with family and friends is considered a blessing, and the church itself is an extended family. Living together in the fellowship of the church requires times to fast, but also times to feast – times for repentance and sorrow, but also times for celebration, including the enjoyment of good food and wine. Rather than conflicting with the other-worldly emphases of Orthodox spirituality, this earthy spirituality grounds it in the here and now. Orthodox spirituality is deeply life-affirming and simultaneously nurtures an awareness that all of life is lived in God’s holy presence.

Salvation

Compared to the Christian world as a whole, Orthodoxy holds a view of salvation that is broad and expansive. In non-Orthodox circles, salvation is often ascribed to the individual and to that person’s reconciliation with God. For Orthodox Christianity, salvation is something that happens to the whole world. The goal of salvation is not merely reconciliation, it is also the *theosis* (divinization or deification) of individuals, of humanity as a whole, and ultimately of all creation. In keeping with this broad and active sense of *theosis*, Orthodox Christians would never claim that they are already “saved.” Salvation in the past tense makes no sense; salvation is a process that draws one into a future of deeper communion with God

and others. Orthodox Christians might say they are, by God's grace, on the path toward salvation, but in this life no one attains the fullness of salvation.

The word *theosis* – deification – is jarring to many people who are not themselves Orthodox Christians. The image of deification is meant to be jarring; it is meant to be stunning in its claim. The claim is that the unfathomable God of the universe, maker of all that is and ever will be, has chosen to enter into a special relationship of unity with humankind. In Christ, God became human so that humanity could become divine. The goal of salvation is unifying fellowship with the Trinitarian God who is the great lover of the world and everyone in it. The eighth-century Orthodox theologian Manṣūr ibn Sarjūn (also known as John of Damascus) explained it this way: “Those who, through their own choice and the indwelling and cooperation of God, have become assimilated to God as much as possible . . . are truly called gods, not by nature, but by adoption, as iron heated in the fire is called fire, not by nature, but by its condition and participation in fire.”²

The image here is one of God as fire and of the deified person as a piece of iron that has become bright red through contact with the fire of God. In this process, the iron remains iron just as the human being remains a human being, but what one sees is not iron, but the fiery glow of God's presence. This image also reflects the fact that Orthodox theology has a genuinely positive view of human nature—significantly more positive than either Catholicism or Protestantism. Rather than seeing people as totally lost and overcome by sin, Orthodoxy sees humanity as weakened by sin in much the same way that sickness weakens people. Rather than being a total transformation, salvation is more like recovering from a disease and regaining one's natural strength. In fact, the consecrated bread and wine of Orthodox worship are sometimes described as “the medicine of immortality,” the means through which God strengthens people for the spiritual journey that will take them back to God.

God's presence in anyone's life is an expression of God's love not just for that individual, but for everyone in the world and indeed for the entire universe. To be truly aglow with God's presence is to be filled with God's love for everyone and everything, and a focus on one's own individual salvation becomes unthinkable. In the Orthodox tradition, salvation or deification is a process of ever deepening communion with all of creation. Salvation reverses the human propensity to see the world in terms of self versus others. The Orthodox tradition insistently proclaims that no one can ever be saved alone, but only in the company of others.

The breadth of Orthodoxy's vision of salvation raises the question of universal salvation: Will everyone without exception eventually be “saved”? The technical term for this kind of universal salvation in the Orthodox tradition is *apokatastasis*. Some church leaders and synods have condemned *apokatastasis*, arguing that evil humans who reject God's grace will, like the demons, be damned forever. But others, including some of the most respected theologians in the history of the Orthodox tradition, like Gregory of Nyssa (4th c.) and Maximus the Confessor (7th c.), argue that everyone, even the demons, will eventually be restored to fellowship and unity with God in Christ.

Such debates have little to do with the personal journeys toward salvation of most Orthodox Christians. Their journeys begin with baptism, when a baby is welcomed into fellowship with God and others in the church. In the act of baptism an infant receives a new kind of life beyond the merely physical, beginning a new spiritual relationship with the parents,

with the godparents who were part of the ceremony, with everyone who is already in the church, with the child's newly assigned guardian angel, and with God in Christ. As children grow up they slowly own their baptism for themselves, but they are not beginning from scratch. Even adult converts start in the middle, because others have helped them get going. No one comes to God alone.

Assisted by others in entering the path of salvation – a pathway that is itself a free gift from God – Orthodox Christians believe their own effort is necessary for progress to continue. There are two parts to that effort: first, sorrowing for the willful sin one discovers in one's own life (which can take many different forms) and, second, persisting in the practice of prayer (learning to push all of one's earthly thoughts and cares of life aside and simply *be* in the presence of God). But even here, Orthodoxy does not take an individualistic turn. It is in worship with others that one learns how to pray, and it is by feeding together on the bread and wine of the Eucharist – which is given even to children – that one receives the spiritual sustenance for continuing the journey toward salvation in the company of others.

Structure

Sometimes references are made to the “Eastern Orthodox Church” in the singular. While it is true that all Orthodox Christians see themselves as spiritual members of one church, there is no institutional entity called “the Eastern Orthodox Church.” The Orthodox tradition is not housed in one church, but in a diverse family of related churches. At present, that family includes about 40 separate churches. Fourteen of these churches are designated *autocephalous*, meaning that other Orthodox Christian churches consider them to be fully self-governing and independent. These would include, for example, the Orthodox Church of Russia and the Orthodox Church of Antioch. A significant number of other Orthodox churches describe themselves as *autonomous*, which typically means that they exercise full control over their own affairs, but that their independence has not yet been recognized by the other Orthodox churches.

The familial sense of relatedness that exists among the Orthodox churches is different than the way Christians in the other traditions understand their connections with each other. The Orthodox view is, in particular, much more organic and less institutional than the way most Catholics and Protestants think. In fact, the Orthodox tradition has developed its own cluster of words to describe the distinctive sense of community that exists within the Orthodox world, including words like synodality, conciliarity, and *sobornost* (fellowship). All of these terms communicate essentially the same thing: Orthodoxy exists as a family of churches defined by their mutuality of respect, concern, and compassion for each other and for the work that God is doing in the world through each of the separate Orthodox churches.

Agreement on a few basic essentials is expected. For example, all Orthodox churches acknowledge the authority of the seven great councils of the early church and follow the same basic format for worship. But total uniformity is rejected. It is assumed that each autocephalous Orthodox church has the right to its own locally adapted national style of faith. It is also assumed that new churches will constantly be forming as the gospel moves into new cultures, and when these younger Orthodox churches mature they will eventually

be granted the status of being independent or autocephalous. Like parents and children in ordinary families, tensions sometimes arise when a younger church seeks its independence and its older “mother church” may not yet be ready to grant autonomy. The situation can become even more complex and tense when several different Orthodox traditions are represented in one nation (as is the case, for example, in the United States) and lines of jurisdiction overlap. But the Orthodox tradition has a long history of negotiating these matters and almost always the issues are eventually resolved amicably.

Most Orthodox churches in the world today are organized along national lines, a relatively recent development fueled by two Orthodox convictions. One assumption is that each linguistically and culturally defined human community should have its own church so it can worship God in its own words and ways. A second assumption is that states and nations are to be respected because they exist by God’s will and grace – they are ordained by God – and, because of that, Orthodox Christians have rarely engaged in overt political protest. Even during times of government persecution Orthodox Christians have typically acted respectfully toward their rulers, though they have sometimes strongly resisted government policies designed to change or control the Orthodox churches. In certain cases, the linkage between nationalism and Orthodox faith has become so strong they have practically merged. Theologically, the Orthodox tradition makes a distinction between a proper sense of cooperation with the state (called *symphonia*) and an improper veneration of or subservience to the state (called *phyletism*), but sometimes that distinction is difficult to define with precision.

One other large-scale issue related to the structure of Orthodoxy has to do with theology. In the sixth century, what was then the pre-Orthodox tradition experienced a division over the issue of how best to define the relationship of the human and divine in Christ. One party, the group of churches that would later become known as Eastern Orthodoxy, favored the wording of the Council of Chalcedon (which was held in the year 451). The other group, which rejected the Council of Chalcedon, became known as the Miaphysite tradition. (This history is discussed in some detail in Chapter 15.) Today the Miaphysite Orthodox tradition (sometimes called “Oriental Orthodoxy”) is represented by the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, and the Armenian Apostolic Church. For years, these two groups (the Chalcedonian and the Miaphysite churches) considered each other heretics, but since the 1960s they have been in dialogue about possible reunification. Roughly 5 percent of the Orthodox Christians in the world are Miaphysite in theological orientation; the other 95 percent are Chalcedonian.

While these macrostructures of the Orthodox tradition are significant, it is important to remember that the real center of Orthodox organization is found on the local level, not the national or international. The local *see* or diocese is the most important institutional structure of Orthodox life. This is the heart of the church, where the faithful worship under the guidance and oversight of a local bishop. Every bishop is the spiritual equal of every other bishop. Thus titles like archbishop and metropolitan, which are given to bishops of important cities, are to some degree designations of honor and respect rather than power and authority. While archbishops and metropolitans do have special responsibilities within the Orthodox churches, they are not superbishops or minipopes and they never hand down decisions about matters of faith as if from on high. The goal is always to establish consensus

among all the bishops. Bishops in the Orthodox tradition are unmarried, and most were previously monks. The transition from monastery to parish is usually not difficult. Small monasteries are scattered throughout the Orthodox world – there is almost always one somewhere nearby – and they are not isolated. Many laypeople visit the monasteries on a regular basis, and many monks serve as spiritual directors for local laypeople and clergy.

In contrast to the bishops, most Orthodox priests are married. Priests frequently need to give spiritual advice to the married members of their parishes, and it is assumed that unmarried men would be ill-equipped for the task. The extended family is tremendously important in the Orthodox tradition, serving as the most intimate social container of the Orthodox faith. It is in the family that children first learn of God, and it is in the family that Orthodox Christians learn the joys and difficulties of living in relationship or synodality. Many Orthodox church buildings reflect this familial ethos. While those outside the tradition tend to think of Orthodox churches as large and impressive cathedral-like buildings, the vast majority of Orthodox churches are small and intimate places. In village settings, a church may accommodate only 15 or 20 people, and almost every worshipper in the room will be related to everyone else, sharing the communion of Orthodox faith and spirituality as a natural part of life.

Story

The history of Orthodoxy is long and complicated, but it can be divided into four 500-year subperiods for ease of understanding. The first of these periods (up to 500) represents the prehistory of the movement, a time when the roots of the Orthodox Church were developing. The years from 500 to 1000 are the “formative age,” when Orthodoxy first coalesced into its own separate and distinct tradition. This period can also be called the Early Byzantine Era because most of the key events took place in connection with the Byzantine Empire. The Late Byzantine Era (1000–1500) was a time of political decline for the empire, but it was also a time of theological advancement for the Orthodox Churches. Finally, the fourth era, starting around 1500 and continuing up to the present, is the “national church” period when the current state–church structure of Orthodoxy came into existence.

Prehistory: beginnings to 500

The deep roots of the Orthodox tradition extend back to the earliest Greek-speaking Christian communities within the ancient Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was bilingual, with Greek spoken by most people in the eastern half of the empire and Latin spoken in the west. Words and languages package reality, shaping the way people see the world. Greek-speaking Christians were more prone to think philosophically and abstractly about matters of faith, while Latin-speaking Christianity (which would eventually become the Catholic tradition) was generally more concrete and legalistic. To some degree this distinction remains in place even today.

But while the deep roots of the Orthodox tradition can be traced to the earliest years of the Christian movement in the Roman Empire, it makes little sense to speak about

a distinctly Orthodox tradition during these years. The Christian movement as a whole was just getting started and many different and sometimes contradictory impulses were being expressed. It was only after the year 325, when the first ecumenical (general or universal) council of Christian leaders was held in the city of Nicaea (in the northwest corner of modern Turkey), that the earliest framework for the Orthodox tradition began to coalesce. Three more ecumenical councils would be held before the year 500, culminating in the Council of Chalcedon (451), and these four councils represent the common base for both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

The formative (or early Byzantine) age: 500 to 1000

The Byzantine Empire is the name given to the Eastern half of the old Roman Empire (roughly equivalent to modern Greece and Turkey) after the Roman Empire lost political control of Western Europe. The name change is also often associated with the transition of the Eastern Roman Empire, around the year 600, from a bilingual society (Latin and Greek) to a solely Greek-speaking nation. The Byzantine Empire lasted until 1453, so the formative age represents only the first half of Byzantine history. It was during these centuries that the Catholic and Orthodox Churches – the Latin-speaking and the Greek-speaking Christian churches of the old Roman Empire – began to drift apart from each other, slowly taking on their own separate and distinctive identities.

The reasons for this drift are complex and include political and cultural developments as well as emerging theological differences, but by the year 1000 it was clear that Orthodoxy and Catholicism had become independent of each other and were no longer simply different branches of the same large tradition. As if to mark this fact, the so-called “Great Schism” that took place in the year 1054 (an event that involved the Pope condemning the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Patriarch of Constantinople denouncing the Pope in return) is often seen as the formal point of separation between the two churches. But Orthodoxy’s distinctive identity had really been forged several centuries earlier, during the 700s and the 800s when a tremendous conflict arose about whether icons should be allowed in the churches or whether they should be banned as idolatrous. The *iconophiles* (lovers of icons) won that contest, and icons have played a central role in Orthodox life ever since. While the Second Council of Nicaea, held in 787, settled this issue theologically, the final victory of the iconophile movement (often referred to as the Triumph of Orthodoxy) did not take place until 843, when the Byzantine Empress Theodora finally threw the full weight of the government behind the Council’s decision.

The Orthodox tradition faced another challenge during this period that deepened and solidified its identity: the rise of Islam. Heretofore, Orthodox Christianity had defined itself by explaining how it superseded earlier forms of religion, presenting itself as an improvement on and correction of both Roman paganism and Judaism. But Islam was a new religion that saw itself as the successor of Judaism and Christianity. The initial reaction of Orthodoxy was to treat Islam as if it was a Christian heresy, hoping it would soon disappear. Rather than disappearing, however, Islam became stronger and soon took over much of the territory where Orthodoxy had previously flourished. This Muslim conquest of the Middle East changed the church’s organizational structure. Before the conquest, the four Patriarchs of

the great cities of Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem had shared the leadership of the tradition. After the conquest, the Patriarch of Constantinople began to exercise greater authority because he was now the only Patriarch not living under Muslim rule.

The late Byzantine period

The late Byzantine period began on an upswing. The world of Orthodoxy was expanding northward as a result of the conversion of Russia, and the Orthodox Byzantine Empire seemed poised to reconquer much of the territory that had been lost to Islam. Under Basil II, who ruled from 976 to 1025, the Byzantine Empire made impressive gains in the East, in what is now Syria and northern Iraq, but then the tide changed and the Byzantine army suffered a huge defeat at the hands of the Seljuk Turks in the famous Battle of Manzikert (1071) in what is now eastern Turkey. That defeat marked the beginning of a long, slow decline in both the Byzantine Empire and its Orthodox church.

The weakening Byzantine Empire eventually felt compelled to ask the Catholic West for military assistance. That assistance came in the form of the Crusades which, at first, seemed to help. However, the armies of the Fourth Crusade (1204), rather than fighting against the Islamic forces in the region, attacked the Byzantine Empire itself, ransacking the city of Constantinople, raping Orthodox women, and stripping the churches of their treasures. Later a Latin-dominated puppet government was set up in the region with the intention of forcing the Orthodox Church to accept the supreme religious authority of the Pope. The Orthodox leadership never fully complied, and the Orthodox Church developed a deep and abiding suspicion of the Catholic Church that still impacts Catholic–Orthodox relations today.

Greek rule and Orthodox faith were restored in the region in the mid-1200s, but there was constant threat of attack from the Islamic Ottoman Turks. By the early 1400s, their situation was once again desperate and once again Byzantium turned to the West for help. And in repetition of the past, the Catholic West once again said that submission to the Pope was the cost of assistance. With no other option at hand, the Patriarch of Constantinople duly submitted to union with Rome at the Council of Florence in 1439. But despite that submission, no real aid was forthcoming, and Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, effectively ending the Byzantine Empire. Most Orthodox believers subsequently denounced the Council of Florence and repudiated any union with the Roman Catholic Church. The authority and prestige of the Patriarch of Constantinople also sustained serious damage because of complicity (even if it was essentially forced) in negotiating the union with Rome. Orthodoxy was clearly at a low ebb.

If there was any bright spot in the Orthodox history of this period, it was largely in the area of theology and spirituality, where the writings of Symeon the New Theologian (942–1022) and Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) helped shape a new “interior” expression of Orthodox faith and piety. Turning away from the abstract, philosophical, and scholastic theology of his contemporaries, Symeon stressed the inner experience of God, how humans search for and find the presence of God in life through the power of the Holy Spirit. Palamas similarly stressed the importance of the interior life, focusing especially on contemplation (including use of the Jesus Prayer) as a means of stilling the mind so that the light of God could be seen and experienced as fire within one’s soul.

The national church period: 1500 to the present

After the fall of the Byzantine Empire, the Orthodox tradition became increasingly fragmented, and individual Orthodox churches began to identify with the individual nations within which they existed. The Orthodox Church of Russia paved the way. In the early 1500s, Russia (and its Russian Orthodox Church) tried to position itself as the new successor to the old Orthodox Byzantine Empire, even going so far as to call Moscow the “third Rome.” But tensions and disputes within the Russian Orthodox Church weakened that claim. In the year 1700, the Russian Empire did away with the Orthodox Patriarchate altogether and made the Orthodox Church simply a branch of the national government under the control of a lay (nonordained) administrator. The Russian *Orthodox* Church became the *Russian* Orthodox Church, belonging to the Russian people and not to any other ethnic community. The interests of the broader transnational Orthodox community became secondary at best.

Similar national frameworks for Orthodoxy began to appear outside Russia in the 1800s as the Muslim Ottoman Empire, which had controlled most of Eastern Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, began to weaken. As the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire slowly slipped back toward Turkey like a receding glacier, the various peoples of Eastern Europe one by one reasserted their older national identities and simultaneously wedded their Orthodox religious faith to those new identities. The result was the creation of a new European map of Orthodoxy that merged nationhood and religious affiliation. This is when, for example, the modern Greek state and the Greek Orthodox Church were created, and the same dynamic was at work in Romania, Bulgaria, and elsewhere. The typical pattern was for political independence to come first, followed by a local declaration of ecclesiastical autonomy. Then a new Patriarchate was established whenever the other Orthodox churches recognized that ecclesiastical independence. Thus, for example, Greek political independence was restored in 1832 and this was followed by a declaration of Greek Orthodox Church autonomy in 1833 and full autocephalous status in 1850. In Romania the process was slightly different, with ecclesiastical independence coming first (1865), national independence next (1877), and finally Romanian Orthodox autocephaly in 1925.

In the twentieth century, the Orthodox nations of Russia and Eastern Europe faced yet one more bitter trial: life under Communist rule. In 1917, Communists took control of Russia; after World War II, they extended that control to most of the rest of the region.

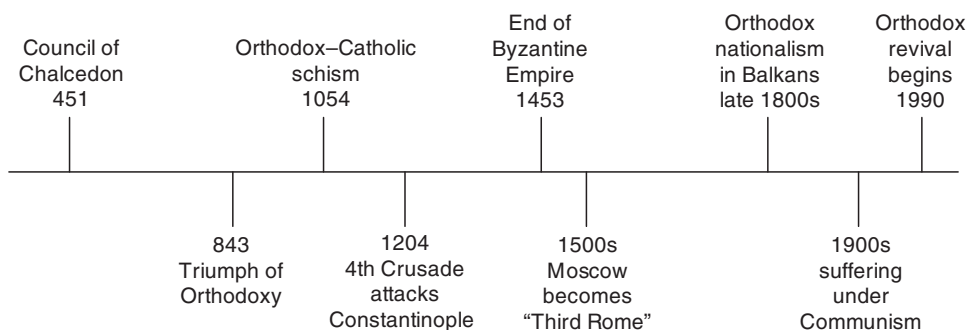


Figure 1.4 Key events in Orthodox history

Communists were atheists and were ideologically opposed to religion. Individuals were discouraged from belief in God, many churches were closed, and the religious education of children was often disallowed. This last restriction was especially harmful for Orthodoxy since the nurture of faith during childhood undergirds the Orthodox process of becoming Christian. Many churches declined in membership and attendance, sometimes drastically so, but Orthodoxy managed to survive. Since the fall of Communism in 1990, a revival of Orthodox faith has been underway, perhaps most prominently in Russia, but also in Romania, and to some degree in Bulgaria, Albania, and Serbia.

But the issue of nationalism remains, and nationalism in the modern Orthodox experience has sometimes verged on national worship. Orthodoxy's future will be determined largely by how it handles this issue. George Tsetsis, an Orthodox theologian associated with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, says:

If Orthodoxy is to give a convincing concerted and united Orthodox witness in today's pluralistic world, then the rediscovery of an Orthodox conscience ... that goes beyond ethnic and national cleavages is, I believe, an urgent matter. Orthodoxy will be credible only when all local autocephalous and autonomous Orthodox churches are able to speak and act *as one single body and not as separate ethnic or national entities*.³

That is both a harsh judgment and a high ideal, but it comes from deep within the Orthodox community itself and it reflects a genuine dilemma. The problem of nationalism in a now thoroughly globalized earth is forcing all the religious traditions, including Orthodoxy, to reassess their self-understandings and public roles in the world.

Notes

- 1 Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff, trans. Nicholas Gendle (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 34–5.
- 2 John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NJ: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 106.
- 3 George Tsetsis, "Ethnicity, Nationalism and Religion," in Emmanuel Clapsis (ed.), *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World: An Ecumenical Conversation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), pp. 148–58; quote from p. 156.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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