Who are the Orthodox Christians? A historical introduction

MARY B. CUNNINGHAM
and ELIZABETH THEOKRITOFF

The Orthodox Church consists historically of the local Churches of the Eastern Roman empire, including Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, as well as the Churches that came into being as a result of their missions. During the first millennium of Christianity, this communion included the Church of Rome. It is important to remember that the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, as well as Rome's Protestant offshoots, all share a common ancestry in the one, universal Christian communion of the early centuries.

The Christian mission, as it is described by Luke in Acts and in Paul's Epistles, spread rapidly through the territories of the Roman empire. Orthodox tradition holds that it spread beyond the Roman world even in the apostolic period, with St Thomas travelling as far as southern India, converting many people along the way. Most of the more distant missions, such as Georgia, Armenia and Ethiopia, however, were probably achieved in the fourth or fifth centuries after the Roman empire had finally adopted Christianity as its state religion, following the conversion of Constantine I. By this time, the Church, which had earlier been an illegal, minority organisation within a predominantly pagan society, was slowly becoming the dominant force in shaping government laws and social traditions. The Roman empire, consisting of its Eastern and Western halves, became a fully Christian state: it was believed to be sanctioned by God, with its emperors or kings fulfilling special duties as God's representatives in the secular realm.

It is important at the beginning of any discussion of the Christian Church to ask what in fact this body represents. Was Jesus Christ's vision of the Church, when he told his disciples to go forth and baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19), the same as that of a believer of later centuries? The Eastern Orthodox response would be that the Church was then, and remains now, above all a eucharistic community. Because all participate in the one bread of the Eucharist, the Church is one

body (cf. 1 Cor 10:16–17): it is not simply a collection of individuals united to Jesus. A body needs a structure, and this is provided by a threefold hierarchy of bishops, presbyters or priests, and deacons. Such a structure appears to have been in place by the beginning of the second century.

In the Orthodox understanding, the Church has always existed as 'Churches' in the plural, as in the Christian East today. This is a source of confusion to many Western Christians for whom 'a Church' means a denomination, confessionally defined. In ancient and Orthodox usage, a Church is defined by geography, referring originally to a community gathered around a bishop. In the third to fourth centuries, dioceses were grouped into metropolitan areas; the metropolitan bishop was first among equals, charged with preserving unity. In the fifth century, these areas in turn were organised into the five Churches of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem – the so-called pentarchy – and their bishops later came to be known as patriarchs. Rome enjoyed a recognised primacy among the local Churches, although the understanding of this primacy varied over the centuries and developed very differently in Rome and in the East.

DEFINING CHRISTIAN FAITH

Controversies concerning fundamental issues of faith and doctrine arose at a very early period. Orthodox Christianity developed its apologetic and dogmatic defence of the faith in response to an atmosphere of sophisticated intellectual debate, especially in the first eight centuries after Christ. In the late first and second centuries, diverse views concerning God's relationship with creation, cosmology and authority within the Church prompted a more formal definition of 'orthodoxy', led by bishops such as St Irenaeus of Lyons. The affirmations of this period on creation, scripture and the Church provide the foundations for all later discussions of doctrine and discipline within the Christian Church.

The first three centuries of Christianity were dominated not only by internal intellectual challenges, but also by persecution at the hands of a pagan, largely hostile, state. Persecution was in fact sporadic and varied in its force region by region, but this did not prevent it from having a profound effect on the Christian community. Martyrs, venerated for their steadfast faith, remain important members of the 'communion of saints' until the present day. In the early fourth century, the persecution of Christians ended after the Edict of Milan in AD 313. Although Constantine's personal conversion to the new religion may have been slow, the effects on the position of the Church were dramatic. The court

historian Eusebius chronicled these developments, also articulating the role of the Christian emperor as one who 'by bringing those whom he rules on earth to the only begotten and saving Word, renders them fit subjects for his Kingdom'.[1]

The Christianisation of the Roman empire took place slowly. Nevertheless, the process, once started, was unstoppable; it was characterised by the gradual introduction of laws such as the ban on commerce and official business on Sundays, the building of churches and other Christian monuments, imperial supervision of ecclesiastical councils to settle doctrinal disputes and, on occasion, state enforcement of doctrinal decisions, whether orthodox or heterodox. By the reign of Justinian (AD 527–65), the Church had become fully integrated into imperial life. Court ceremonial included elaborate liturgical celebrations based in the Great Church of Hagia Sophia with the emperor playing a prominent, although always non-clerical, role. This nicely illustrates the Byzantine doctrine of 'symphony': Church and state were seen as aspects of one organism, the Christian empire, each with its own proper sphere. Many in East and West today would have reservations about this way of thinking. We should recognise, however, that it builds on the belief that the incarnation of God has saved *all* that is human: culture and polity too can be 'baptised'.[2]

Trinitarian and christological doctrine was defined in the universal Church with the help of the ecumenical councils, which are recognised in the East as beginning with the first council of Nicaea in AD 325 and finishing with the seventh in 787. The councils were called in response to continuing controversy concerning the nature of the Trinity and, from the beginning of the fifth century, the manner in which two natures come together in the person of Christ. As the term 'ecumenical' or 'universal' indicates, these councils included representatives from both Eastern and Western Churches. Tragically, substantial parts of the Church were unable to agree with the decisions of various ecumenical councils. Thus, the Church of the East (now known as 'Assyrian'), based in Mesopotamia, refused to accept the decisions of the third ecumenical council at Ephesus (431) and has thus remained out of communion with mainstream Christianity ever since. A substantial part of the Alexandrian and Syrian Churches could not accept the formula 'in two natures' adopted at the fourth council at Chalcedon (451), and broke away to form the 'monophysite' or 'miaphysite' Churches, now usually called 'Oriental Orthodox'. This group is represented today by the Coptic, Ethiopian and Armenian Churches, the Syrian or 'Jacobite' Church of Antioch, and the Syrian Church of India. The Eastern (i.e. Chalcedonian) and Oriental

Orthodox Churches have actually remained remarkably close in theology and ethos, and today there is widespread recognition that their differences are terminological rather than substantive.

The schism over Chalcedon greatly diminished the Churches of Alexandria and Antioch. After the Arab conquests in the first half of the seventh century, these territories were lost to the empire; for most of the ancient Christian world, the brief interlude of Christian empire was over. Antioch continued to show theological vitality, mainly in the form of Christian apologetics countering Islamic teachings, but Constantinople was now the undisputed centre of Eastern Christianity.

DIVISION BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

The estrangement between the Eastern and Western Churches culminated in the mutual excommunications of AD 1054, but it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when this process began. As early as the third and fourth centuries of Christian history, a cultural divide is perceptible between the Latin-speaking territories of Italy and points west, and the largely Greek-speaking Eastern Mediterranean. Later Roman emperors, beginning with Diocletian, in fact divided the empire into two halves for more effective governance. In AD 476, the Ostragothic general Odoacer deposed the last Western Roman emperor and the resulting power vacuum gave the Roman Church a political prestige which it retains to the present day. But the 'fall' of the West was not mirrored in the East, where the Roman empire continued until 1453.

Although tensions between East and West were developing in the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, it is in the middle of the seventh century that a real rupture between the Roman pope and the ecumenical patriarch in Constantinople took place. The arrest of Pope Martin in 653 by the Byzantine emperor, followed by his trial and condemnation ostensibly for treason but in reality for his opposition to Monothelite doctrine, represents a low point in East–West Church relations. Tension increased in the ninth and tenth centuries with the dispute between East and West over the *filioque*, the controversial addition to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed which has implications for the status of both Son and Spirit in the Trinity. The excommunications of 1054 thus represent a stage in a process of growing distrust between the Eastern and Western Churches; at the time it was probably believed that the schism would soon be healed. But then came the Crusades. The indigenous Christian population found themselves second-class citizens in the Crusader states of Antioch and Jerusalem, and the establishment of

Latin patriarchs in those cities sent an unambiguous message: Rome no longer recognised the local Churches. Many historians in fact view the sack of Constantinople by the Latins in 1204, in the course of the Fourth Crusade, as the seal of division between Rome and Constantinople. This invasion, followed by over sixty years of Latin occupation, inspired a continuing distrust of the West on the part of Orthodox Christians. Two major attempts at reunion with Rome (the Council of Lyons in 1274 and that of Florence–Ferrara in 1438–9) ultimately failed because of this tension, along with diverging views not only on the *filioque*, but also on Western doctrine concerning purgatory and disciplinary matters such as the use of leavened or unleavened bread in the Eucharist.

BYZANTINE MISSIONS

Another aspect of Byzantine religious policy with far-reaching implications was the missionary activity that took place in Slavic and Balkan territories from about the middle of the ninth century onwards. Photius, patriarch of Constantinople (AD 858–67, 878–86), was responsible for initiating these missions and for deciding to translate scripture and liturgical books into Slavonic with the help of two brothers, Sts Cyril (Constantine) and Methodius. Although the first mission to Moravia failed, subsequent efforts among the Bulgars, Serbs, and finally the Rus', who were in this period based in the region around Kiev, succeeded in converting these Slavic nations to Christianity within the Byzantine sphere of influence. Tensions between Latin and Greek missionaries working in the same areas added to the growing distrust between Eastern and Western Christendom. The results of these missions can still be observed in the configuration of Orthodox and Roman Catholic populations today: Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia remain largely Orthodox, whereas Poland and Hungary possess a majority of Roman Catholics. In the thirteenth century, Constantinople recognised the Churches of both Serbia and Bulgaria as self-governing – an acknowledgement of the new reality of dealing with territories outside the administrative framework of the empire. While the West moved increasingly towards a centralised structure, in the East a new community of local Churches began to counterbalance the dominance of the imperial city.

THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF MONASTICISM

Theological developments between approximately the seventh and the fifteenth centuries were complex and cannot be treated in detail

here.[3] It is important to note that the seventh council of Nicaea (AD 787), which defended the theology of images against Iconoclasm, was the last episcopal gathering to be universally recognised as an ecumenical council. Further local councils did of course take place. However, the definition of Orthodox doctrine was in its essentials complete by the end of the eighth century, with further statements offering refinements rather than addressing fundamental doctrinal issues.

This does not mean that theology stagnated, but it was principally in the monastic milieu that its vitality was preserved. Notable is the figure of St Symeon the New Theologian, who flourished in a Constantinopolitan monastery in the early eleventh century and left an indelible mark on Orthodox Christianity with his experience of the divine light. Personal spiritual experience is fundamental to this theology, and to the elaborate science of spiritual life developed by monastic writers. A resurgence of monastic life, evidenced in the foundation of new houses throughout the Byzantine empire, helped to drive the Orthodox vision of theology as a living encounter with God. Of particular significance was the foundation in the tenth century of the first monasteries on Mt Athos: the Holy Mountain brought together monks from various parts of the Christian world, including, at least at the beginning, Latins.

The monastic revival culminated in the theological contributions of St Gregory Palamas (*c.* 1296–1359). While on Mount Athos, Gregory became immersed in the Hesychast tradition of contemplative prayer. His experience of divine light through prayer led him to develop the ancient distinction between the essence and energies of God: whereas the divine essence remains unknowable, the uncreated energies permeate all things. This affirmation of a holistic theology, which maintains the presence of God throughout creation and the ability of human beings to experience him, has its foundation in Chalcedonian theology.

Hesychasm inspired a spiritual and cultural renewal whose influence spread far beyond the walls of the monasteries. The 'Hesychast International', as it has been called, centred on Paroria in Bulgaria, where St Gregory of Sinai had settled, and on Mount Athos. St Sava, founder of Hilandar monastery and founding archbishop of the Serbian Church, is emblematic of this movement in his international vision and his rootedness in spiritual values even while skilfully managing affairs of Church and state. Something of the spirit of this revival can be glimpsed in the churches and monasteries of Peć (in modern Kosovo) – although some of these monuments have tragically been destroyed since the Kosovo Force (KFOR) occupation of the region. Bulgarians and Serbs were responsible for the dissemination of this spiritual revival through Romania and

Russia, where the same spirit inspired the monastic founder St Sergius of Radonezh and the missionary St Stephen of Perm.

THE CHURCH IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The last flowering of Byzantine culture and spiritual life was short-lived. Most of Serbia was reduced to vassalage after defeat by the Turks at the battle of Kosovo in 1389. Bulgaria fell to the Turks in 1396, and the fall of the imperial capital in 1453 completed the loss to Muslim rule of the ancient heartlands of Christianity. As had been true in the Middle East for some centuries, so now in Asia Minor and the Balkans the Church's main focus became survival.

The conquering Turks recognised no distinction between religion and nation: the Christians were therefore treated as a subject people with the Patriarch of Constantinople as its 'ethnarch'. This enabled Constantinople to claim an authority over all the other Churches within the empire, which in practice entrenched Greek domination of other local Churches, including the other ancient patriarchates.

Five centuries of Turkish domination have left a mark on the Greek and Balkan peoples that is still evident today. The subject Christians enjoyed freedom of worship and a measure of tolerance most of the time, but at the price of being second-class citizens. The poll-tax, the child levy and humiliating social restrictions kept up a relentless pressure, resulting in a steady haemorrhage of conversions; public attempts to revitalise and strengthen the faith of the Christian population were liable to end in death. Yet the demoralised state of hierarchy and the general low level of education did not prevent the appearance of many who would be revered as 'new martyrs' – often people who had converted to Islam, in some cases as children, and then recanted.

THE CHURCH IN RUSSIA

The Russian Church alone remained free of the Turkish yoke, a circumstance which led some Russian churchmen to see it as the 'Third Rome'. The fall of Constantinople was widely viewed as divine retribution for the compromise of Orthodox faith at the council of Florence–Ferrara (1438–9), in a futile attempt to gain Western assistance against the Turks. When the head of the Russian Church, the Greek Metropolitan Isidore of Kiev, returned home after signing the act of union, he was summarily arrested. In due course, the Russians elected their own Metropolitan of Moscow to lead the Church, without the assent of

Constantinople. So began Russia's de facto autonomy from Constantinople, although a patriarchate was established, with the blessing of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, only in 1589. It should be made clear that this was a matter of order, not a split in the Church. Russia would go on to play an important role as protector of the Christians in the Ottoman empire.

Russia at this time was beginning to emerge from its own period of servitude to the Tartars. A key figure in the resurgence of ecclesial and cultural life was St Sergius of Radonezh, a Hesychast monk who also gave advice and moral support to the Prince of Moscow. Sergius's dedication of his monastery to the Holy Trinity (Sergiev Posad or Zagorsk) would be seen as a sermon in action, a call to unity in love.[4]

The controversies in the Russian Church generally concerned church life and ritual rather than theology; but one fifteenth-century controversy had important implications for the place of the Church in society. The 'Possessors', whose protagonist was Joseph of Volokolamsk, stood for a Church with influence in society, deferential to the Tsar's authority and possessing the means to organise practical works of charity. Nil Sorsky and the 'Non-Possessors' stood for simplicity, prayer and inner freedom. Given the climate of the times throughout Europe, Joseph's enthusiasm for the coercion of heretics is less remarkable than Nil's advocacy of religious toleration. The party of the 'Possessors' achieved dominance, but both men were canonised.

By contrast, Patriarch Nikon's reforms, begun in 1652, led to a schism that persists to this day, the tragic consequence of a preoccupation with ritual (on both sides) and an obsession with uniformity. Nikon's heavy-handed attempts to bring liturgical practice into line with contemporary Greek usage provoked a violent backlash. The 'Old Believer' schism exemplifies a recurring pattern: schisms in Orthodox Christianity typically reflect conservative rather than reforming tendencies.

Nikon was also a vehement proponent of the superiority of spiritual power over secular authority, but the tide of history was against him. Inspired by Protestant models of Church–state relations in Western Europe, Peter the Great abolished the patriarchate (1721), ignoring the protests of the other Orthodox patriarchs; it was replaced with a 'holy synod'. The Church effectively became a department of state. Despite repeated attempts on the part of the Church to extricate itself, this anomalous arrangement, with its stultifying effect on the hierarchy and church structures, was to continue until 1917. This synodal period was also characterised by a marked Westernisation in approaches to theology, iconography and church singing. Nevertheless, the body of the Church was

able to show some remarkable signs of life, especially in the nineteenth century – a subject to which we will return.

ORTHODOXY AND THE WEST

The fall of Constantinople put an end to plans for union with Rome in exchange for Western support against the Turks, but it did not end contact with the West. Christians from the Ottoman empire seeking higher education had little alternative but to turn to the Roman Catholic (or later Protestant) schools of the West. In 1581, Pope Gregory XIII obliged by founding the College of St Athanasius in Rome, with the purpose of converting Orthodox young men and sending them home to promote union with Rome. Lacking the resources and education to give adequate pastoral care, hierarchs and clergy in Greece and the Levant frequently welcomed Jesuit missionaries as preachers and confessors; presumably they were unaware that the Jesuits were making many secret converts.[5] The success of Jesuit tactics became apparent in 1724, when one such convert became Patriarch of Antioch and led a section of his Church into union with Rome (the group now known as 'Melkites'). As a result, Christians in the Ottoman empire came to regard Rome with much the same suspicion as did the Orthodox in other parts of Europe, where 'unions' had been established among Orthodox who found themselves under Roman Catholic rulers (Unions of Brest-Litovsk (1596) in Ukraine and Alba Iulia (1698) in Transylvania). In the former case especially, the Union accepted by the hierarchy met with vigorous opposition from a substantial group of laity.

The turmoil of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the West affected the Orthodox world indirectly but drastically. In their argument with Rome, the Reformers had an understandable interest in trying to enlist the support of the rest of the ancient Churches for their interpretation of authentic Christianity. In 1573 a group of Lutheran scholars from Tübingen sent Patriarch Jeremias II a copy of the Augsburg Confession, to which he responded with a detailed critique affirming the Orthodox understanding; amicable correspondence continued for some years until it became clear that there would be no meeting of minds. Later hierarchs, however, would find themselves swept into the vortex of Western arguments. The most famous instance is Patriarch Cyril Loukaris of Constantinople. Cyril's work in Poland in the immediate aftermath of the Union of Brest-Litovsk had left him with considerable sympathy with the Protestants; his 1629 'Confession' was strongly influenced by Calvinism. With the aid of the Catholic powers of France

and Austria, Loukaris was deposed and murdered. The 'Confession' was subsequently condemned by six councils in succession. But this was not the last attempt to adapt for the defence of Orthodoxy the ill-assorted toolbox of Western theology. Peter Mogila, Metropolitan of Kiev (1632–47), took the opposite approach from Loukaris; hoping to use Rome's own weapons to counteract Rome's influence, he drew directly and uncritically on Roman Catholic manuals. After judicious removal of some of the most egregious Latinisms, Mogila's *Confession* was approved by the council of Jassy in 1642. Mogila's Latinising theology and adoption of Jesuit educational models proved tremendously influential, and came to dominate theological education also in Russia. The rash of 'Orthodox confessions' culminated in that of Patriarch Dositheus, approved by the council of Jerusalem in 1672; Dositheus too resorts to a Latin framework, despite his mistrust of Roman influence.

RETURN TO THE SOURCES

Characteristic of these 'Confessions' is 'a marked inferiority complex towards the formularies of the Counter-Reformation',[6] a complex that has bedevilled Orthodox theology into the twentieth century. The history of modern Orthodox theology is the story of a prolonged and erratic progress towards rediscovering an authentic voice: a process of learning to use Western thought and research as a tool, not a straitjacket, and acquiring the confidence to draw on Eastern resources to avoid Western impasses.

Despite the apparently parlous state of the entire Church, a spiritual and theological revival began in the eighteenth century. It came from the traditional source, the monastic tradition, in creative engagement with the spirit of the age. The intellectual and political ferment of eighteenth-century Western Europe had reverberations in Ottoman territory too, in the so-called 'Greek Enlightenment'. For some, this meant adopting the ideas and rehearsing the arguments of the Western 'Enlightenment', as their predecessors had done with the Western Reformation. For others, however, the new ideas coming from the West provided an impetus to look more deeply into their own tradition. Churchmen were prominent in both parties: but none can match the lasting influence of a representative of the latter tendency, St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain,[7] best known today for his collection of spiritual and ascetic writings entitled the *Philokalia*. This was soon translated into Slavonic by Paisius Velichkovsky, who had fled from the sterile scholasticism of the Kiev Academy to learn the spiritual life on the