

Divisions East and West

*The Separation between
Occidental and Oriental Christianity*

Early Diversity

From its beginnings Christianity was never monolithic. Later it was understood by certain communities to be a completely formed “faith once for all delivered to the saints” for whom there was advantage to “read it back into” history as a fact rather than a fiction. From the start, (and springing up everywhere), there were multiple streams of interpretation around the teachings of Jesus. Even in discrete communities there was diversity. For example, within the community of the Jewish followers of Jesus there were those who were more traditionalists and those who expressed Hellenistic leanings. So multiple streams of interpretation flourished until eventually these became codified through authority or through textual support in written scripture, and were made authoritative or privileged as “orthodoxy.”

The State Church

Because communities in each region expressed their faith differently from the

others depending upon the cultures and societies reflecting local beliefs, mythologies, and practices in which the Church took root, there were inevitable differences. Separate communities of Christians with their own unique perspectives, forms of worship, and collections of sacred texts acted autonomously but were related through commitment to the teachings and life of Jesus.



Gradually, versions of the story of Jesus coalesced into a commonly accepted narrative which shaped Christian understanding and teaching. There was no single, ruling authority from which all took direction. It was not until 312 A.D. and the conversion of Constantine that the phenomenon of the “State Church” came into being in the West, under the rule of the Roman Empire.

The ideal of the “One True Church” was a historical creation of the fourth and fifth centuries, promoted primarily by the Empire’s need for unity and the western Church’s desire for conformity of teaching uniformity of practice. This movement

toward compliance with authority was matched by a particular understanding of orthodoxy that had come to believe Jesus was the only Son of God, descended to earth from heaven and sent by the Father to become incarnate as both a human and divine being. His true origin was not earth, but heaven, from among the “persons” of the Trinity—though he left that station to become man. At his death on the cross a sacrifice was made of his Son by God that not only appeased God’s sense of justice and outrage at sin, but created a new covenant with humanity so that through Christ fallen humans could by right belief be saved if and when they placed their faith in its efficacy and belief in the sacrifice for sin. The Resurrection was seen as a further vindication of the truth of Jesus after being rejected and also proof of his divinity. The Church which he founded was, then, the proper vehicle for salvation, which possessed the correct and authoritative teaching (orthodoxy) and became, therefore, the sole dispenser of his gifts through the official sacraments of the Church.

When the Roman Empire accepted Christianity as the “state religion” there was a strong attempt to bring different churches with their diverse interpretations which had existed alongside one another into conformity with a single institution known as “The One True and Universal Church” (Catholic, meaning universal) to mirror the single State of the Empire. Yet that very concept—The One True Church—was the outcome of the conversion of the State to Christianity. Churches outside the lands and control of the Roman Empire saw little or no need to form a spiritual version of the State, nor did they feel any particular loyalty to the State Church of the Roman Empire.

Division at Chalcedon

The calling of the first ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325 A. D.—a formal gathering of all the bishops from across the Christian world—was motivated in large part by this impetus for imperial unity. Following the Council, a process began that sought to draw all of the churches together into that Church. Eventually those Christian communities and churches that failed to adhere to the official views of the ecumenical Councils or accede compliance with its dogma or practice were expelled from the fellowship of the official State Church. However, the Church that these Councils defined was largely confined to the major lands of the Roman Empire, which eventually the other expressions of Christianity in places to the East and outside the Roman Empire had little or nothing to do with.

The conclusions of the first three Councils appeared to achieve a balance with which most Christians—East and West—could live. (The Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. defined the divinity of Jesus. The following Council at Constantinople in 381 A.D. defined the humanity of Jesus. The Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. gave formal approval for the use of the term *Theotokos* (God-bearer—meaning bearer of God-incarnate) to honor the Blessed Virgin. This theological consensus, however, was broken after the fourth Council at Chalcedon with the Nestorian controversy when the churches of the East in the lands of Armenia, Syria, Persia and Egypt withdrew from the Greek-speaking Church of the West.

The particular issue over which the various churches divided had to do with the nature of Jesus and the two realities, human and divine: were these held together in one nature or two? Though this seems to us now, perhaps, a small point, at the time there were

furious arguments and committed loyalties to one viewpoint or the other, and so the division occurred. In fact the West “anathematized” the eastern churches, considering them now heretical, as they had earlier done to the communities of Jewish followers.

Oriental Evolution

The Oriental branches of the Church (Oriental Orthodoxy) are, therefore, “pre-Chalcedon” in that they accept the decisions of the first three councils, but do not conform to the later. Historically, they have continued to differ from the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches of the Roman Empire (Greek, Russian) over the precise nature of the divine-humanity of Christ.

Through the centuries, however, those original doctrinal distinctions have narrowed and largely faded from view, though other cultural differences have remained. In language, form and thought the Oriental Orthodox churches have continued to be much closer to their Middle Eastern roots, and in many respects preserve a way of being and seeing that is distinct from the western branches of Orthodoxy and Catholicity (Greek, Latin, and Russian).

Over the course of the centuries, Oriental Christianity developed a full theology of its own as well as many rich texts unknown to the West. It maintained a rich liturgical and spiritual life, as well as strong monastic practices that continue to this day. Oriental monastics were sometimes known for their extreme forms of asceticism which became known as **enkratism** because many eventually came to see them as excessive.

For example, there is the “stylite tradition” of monks inhabiting the top of pillars in isolation (but in plain view) for years.

The many ethnicities and regional differences in the various communities continued to be expressed. Because there was never a final or formal authoritative center of dogmatic thought which imposed itself or demanded uniformity, theological differences were lived out in interesting ways.

The oriental churches evolved and cross-pollinated with each other through the centuries and new “hybrids” formed. Oriental Christians also came face to face with men and women of other faiths—and in some respects their faiths grew in parallel or were even entwined, maintaining very lively dialogue. After the rise of Islam the Oriental churches were shaped even more directly by their interactions with the new Abrahamic faith, and continued in ecumenical dialogue not only with Muslims through the centuries (with which is shared much, sometimes in fraternity and sometimes in tension) as well as with the Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists. This history has proven to be extremely rich, challenging, strengthening and even changing the nature of each of these faiths through their mutual encounter.

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