

YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL

HELLENISTIC CHRISTIANITY

SUBMITTED TO JOHN AZUMAH, PH.D.
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
REL 916 WORLD CHRISTIANITY

BY
GARRETT HAM
DECEMBER 13, 2019

Hellenistic Christianity represents one of the most ancient expressions of the Christian faith still in practice today. Despite its heritage, however, Hellenistic Christianity is not limited to the territories of the former Greek Byzantine Empire. It has expanded over the centuries into other lands and encompasses all churches in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. These churches together make up the modern Eastern Orthodox Church.¹ While maintaining its Hellenistic foundations, Eastern Orthodoxy is an ethnically diverse group of independently governed churches.² Their unity comes not through a united ecclesiastical structure but liturgical and sacramental communion.³ Through its preservation of ancient Christian beliefs and practices, the Eastern Orthodox Church stands as a living statement of the heritage all Christians share.

Structure

Independence and autonomy are key features of the Orthodox churches. Once a church achieves “autocephalous” status, it operates entirely independently of any other church’s interference. (Current notable autocephalous churches include those of Constantinople, Russia, Antioch, and Greece, among others.) While the Patriarch of Constantinople holds a place of special honor, like the Archbishop of Canterbury within the Anglican Communion, he is the “first among equals” and “does not have the right to interfere in the internal affairs of other

¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: New Edition* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 4. Hellenistic Christianity could also arguably include some of the Uniate Churches, which are churches with heritages in the old Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem that are today in communion with the Pope. Some of these churches remained in communion with Rome at the time of the Great Schism, while others entered back into communion at a later date. They generally, however, maintain similar practices and emphases in doctrine as the Eastern Orthodox Church. Adrian Fortescue, *The Uniate Eastern Churches*, ed. George D. Smith, The Eastern Churches Trilogy (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2001), 1, 3-4, 7-8.

² Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 7.

³ Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 25-26.

Churches.”⁴ While, as in Catholicism, bishops are essential to the Church’s ecclesiastical structure, there is no Eastern Orthodox pope.⁵ While some bishops may hold special honor, all bishops are nonetheless equal.⁶

Consequently, the Orthodox Church places great emphasis on the authority of councils of bishops, which the Church believes to be “the chief organ whereby God has chosen to guide his people...”⁷ While all councils possess some level of authority, only ecumenical councils are considered infallible. What makes a council ecumenical, however, is not any particular trappings or procedures—though broad participation from across the entire Orthodox Church is generally a prerequisite—but whether the whole Church accepts its decrees. Therefore, the ecumenical nature of a council can only be determined after the fact.⁸

Orthodox Theology

The source of Orthodox authority is “Tradition”—to be distinguished from “traditions,” which are simply customary ways of doing things. By Tradition, the Church means “the faith and practice which Jesus Christ imparted to the Apostles, and which since the Apostles’ time has

⁴ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 7; Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 1-2. Churches that have not achieved autocephalous or autonomous status, however, generally fall under the Ecumenical Patriarch’s jurisdiction. *Ibid.*, 15. Interestingly, the Orthodox Church holds that this “first among equals” position rightly belongs to the Pope. The Ecumenical Patriarch, therefore, occupies a position the Pope would hold in a reunited Church. *Ibid.*, 27; see also Fortescue, *The Orthodox Eastern Church*, 10-11.

⁵ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 7. As in Roman Catholicism, a celibate episcopate leads the Eastern Orthodox Church. Unlike Catholicism, however, men married before ordination may enter the priesthood. Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 2, 13, 51, 291; John Garvey, “Eastern Orthodoxy,” *The Atlantic*, May 1989, 34; Bartholomew, 3, 57.

⁶ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 14; Fairbairn, 31.

⁷ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 15; see also Garvey, 32.

⁸ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 250-52; Fairbairn, 12, 39; Bartholomew, 37.

been handed down from generation to generation in the Church.”⁹ Tradition includes particularly the Bible, the Nicene Creed, and the seven ecumenical councils.¹⁰

At the heart of Orthodox theology is deification, or *theosis*, the process by which God saves humanity. In Orthodox teaching, people cannot be united with God unless they become like God themselves.¹¹ As Saint Athanasius wrote, “For, [Christ] was made man, that we might be made gods.”¹² As a result, the Church’s anthropology differs from prevailing Western views. The Orthodox Church, for example, denies the Augustinian idea of inherited guilt and the related Calvinist tenant of total depravity.¹³ This more positive view of humanity extends into the Church’s view of the Incarnation. Orthodox theologians have argued, for example, that God, in His love for humanity, would have become man even if humanity had not fallen. The Incarnation was “part of the eternal purpose of God, and not simply...an answer to the fall.”¹⁴

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Orthodox Church presents the crucifixion in a unique light as well. The Orthodox see in the crucifixion a great triumph for Christ, rejecting the emphasis on the cross “as an act of satisfaction or substitution to propitiate the wrath of an angry Father” that became predominant in the West after Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh

⁹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 196.

¹⁰ Ibid., 197; James R. Payton, *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 199. The Nicene Creed lacks the *filioque* generally present in the West. Fortescue, *Orthodox Church*, 152-54; Fairbairn, 15-16.

¹¹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 21; Payton, 132, 37-38; Fairbairn, 68-73.

¹² Athanasius, *A Discourse of Saint Athanasius on the Incarnation of the Word of God*, trans. James Ridgway (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1880), 54.

¹³ Payton, 111, 13; Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 223-24; Garvey, 34; Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Way: Revised Edition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 61.

¹⁴ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 225; see also Payton, 122-24.

century.¹⁵ Instead, “Christ is the victor over death.”¹⁶ Therefore, in Orthodox theology, there is no salvation apart from the resurrection. The cross and the empty tomb are intrinsically linked.¹⁷

Liturgy as Theology

It seems strange that a Church that places so much emphasis on the authority of councils has not called an ecumenical council since 787, particularly considering that the Roman Church has called many in the intervening years—one as recent as the 1960s.¹⁸ However, the “Orthodox Church is not as much given to making formal dogmatic definitions as the Roman Catholic Church.”¹⁹ Consequently, expressions of its beliefs on such diverse matters as the Eucharist, the Sacraments, the afterlife, Mary, and a variety of other topics are found not primarily in confessions of faith but “in the prayers and hymns used at service.”²⁰ Indeed, “[t]hose who wish to know about Orthodoxy should not so much read books as...attend the Liturgy.”²¹

Orthodox worship centers around communal expressions of faith. Icons and fasting periods are unique aspects of such communal worship. Icons hold a prominent place in the life and worship of the Orthodox Church. Icons are not merely decorative art. Rather, according to Orthodox belief, the icons in the sanctuary remind the congregants, through the divine liturgy,

¹⁵ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 229; see also Payton, 98-99, 121-22; Fairbairn, 79-81.

¹⁶ Payton, 126; Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 80-81.

¹⁷ Payton, 128-29.

¹⁸ In recent years, however, the Church has discussed the possibility of calling a new council to address contemporary issues it faces. Elaine Ruth Fletcher, “Orthodox Leaders Closer to Unity,” *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000, 30; see also Bartholomew, 6.

¹⁹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 204.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

that they are with Christ and the saints worshipping together in God's presence.²² This is an example of how Orthodox liturgy cannot rightly be separated from Orthodox theology.

Fasting also occupies an integral part of the Church's communal liturgical cycle with a degree of rigor and asceticism generally lacking in the West. While Lent is the West's great time of fasting and prayer, there are four significant fasting periods in Orthodoxy (in addition to most Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year): (1) Lent; (2) the Fast of the Apostles from eight days after Pentecost until 28 June; (3) the Dormition Fast from 1 to 14 August; and (4) the Christmas Fast from 15 November to 24 December. All animal products, oil, and wine are forbidden during these times.²³

Sacraments

The Orthodox Church emphasizes sacraments (or mysteries) as "the means whereby God's grace is appropriated to every Christian *individually*."²⁴ It recognizes seven: "(i) Baptism; (ii) Chrismation (equivalent to Confirmation in the west); (iii) The Eucharist; (iv) Repentance or Confession; (v) Holy Orders; (vi) Marriage or Holy Matrimony; (vii) the Anointing of the Sick."²⁵

While these are the same sacraments as those found in the Catholic Church, the Orthodox administer them in unique manners. Baptism, for example, is always performed by immersion, even on infants. In addition, infants receive both confirmation and the Eucharist. Concerning the Eucharist, while the Orthodox Church affirms the real presence of Christ in the elements, it

²² Bartholomew, 6, 20-21, 25; Payton, 175, 78-79; Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 33; Fortescue, *Orthodox Church*, 105; Fairbairn, 39.

²³ Fairbairn, 43; Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 300; Fortescue, *Orthodox Church*, 426; see Bartholomew, 81-84.

²⁴ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 276.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 275; see also Bartholomew, 86.

eschews attempts to explain exactly how this happens. There is an emphasis on mystery within Orthodoxy that is often lacking in the West.²⁶

Nationalism and Culture

Eastern Orthodoxy claims to possess a history free of “Reformations or Counter-Reformations.”²⁷ However, this history obscures reality. Much of the Church’s uniformity stems from early Greek cultural hegemony resulting from two early schisms: the separation from the Church of the East in 431 and the separation from the Oriental Orthodox Church in 451.²⁸

Indeed, the Eastern Orthodox Church is Hellenistic because of its schisms.²⁹ The early separation from the Church of the East (in the old Assyrian lands) and the Oriental Orthodox Churches (in Egypt and much of Syria) restricted Orthodox territory on the east to mostly the Greek-speaking world. Orthodox territory then became officially isolated—after centuries of deteriorating relations—from the Latin West in 1054 with the Great Schism that separated the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.³⁰

When the Church later moved into new lands, it often maintained this lack of cultural diversity in a translated form. Because church lines have generally been synonymous with state lines, church membership was often as much a cultural marker as an expression of religious belief. This is seen today in the labeling of the various Orthodox Churches by their national

²⁶ Fortescue, *Orthodox Church*, 420; Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 275, 277, 283.

²⁷ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 1; Garvey, 37.

²⁸ See Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 3-4; Bartholomew, 2-3. In contrast, the West was able to maintain relative unity for fifteen hundred years before Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. James Atkinson, “Reform,” in *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 366-68; see also Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 65.

²⁹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4; Bartholomew, 8; Payton, 33.

designations—the Russian Orthodox Church, for example. Consequently, “[n]ationalism has been the bane of Orthodoxy for the last ten centuries.”³¹ As a result, for those living outside such nations, “Orthodoxy often seems a badge of ethnicity, something alien and exotic.”³²

Such nationalism was strengthened after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453.³³ Identification with the Church within the new Muslim empire allowed citizens of the former Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire to maintain a sense of cultural unity.³⁴ Nonetheless, the nationalism persisted beyond its usefulness, and Orthodoxy has struggled to expand beyond its early strongholds in Eastern Europe. As a result, the Orthodox Church is particularly susceptible to losses caused by demographic changes in Europe where both population and religious participation are declining. While other churches with a strong global presence—notably the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches—can make up for losses in Europe with gains elsewhere, the Orthodox Church lacks such a firewall.³⁵

Such nationalistic missteps are rooted deep in its early history as an established church of empire. Contacts between the Orthodox Church and their Arab neighbors in the centuries preceding the rise of Islam, for example, demonstrate a failure to translate the Christian faith into a form palatable to Arab culture. Indeed, the Church “was too absorbed in bouts of theological hair-splitting to spare a thought for its neighbors.”³⁶ A Greek-centric worldview and insistence

³¹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 77; Fairbairn, 145.

³² Garvey, 30.

³³ Fortescue, *Orthodox Church*, 229-32; Fairbairn, 146.

³⁴ See Bartholomew, 13; Payton, 38; Fortescue, *Orthodox Church*, 240; Fairbairn, 146.

³⁵ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 95-96.

³⁶ Sanneh, *Disciples*, 65.

on “complete agreement in belief as a rule for Christian unity” poisoned any potential deep permeation into a pragmatic nomadic Arab population more concerned with the practical implementation of faith than distinctly Greek philosophizing.³⁷ One Catholic scholar criticized the Orthodox Church’s missionary apathy toward the Arabs, arguing that Orthodox leaders “allowed [the Arabs] to remain pagan, while they quarreled over abstruse points of theology, and intrigued for the Emperor’s favor at the court.”³⁸ A successful mission among the Arab peoples would have required an “adaptive response to the message,” which the elites of the Imperial Church could not abide.³⁹

Such nationalistic tendencies have played out in particularly obvious ways in the United States. Ethnic divisions have made the establishment of a uniquely American Orthodox Church difficult. Different hierarchies from different national churches exist side by side in contradiction to the Orthodox requirement of “one bishop in one city.”⁴⁰ A Russian-led effort to unify the various factions into one American Orthodox Church fell apart at the onset of the Russian Revolution, leaving the current situation—which a previous Ecumenical Patriarch labeled a “scandal”—intact.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid., 63, 65.

³⁸ Fortescue, *Uniate Churches*, 5.

³⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 75.

⁴⁰ Garvey, 34; see also Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 174-75.

⁴¹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 174-75; Garvey, 34.

Major Contributions to Global Christianity

The Orthodox Church, with its resistance to both doctrinal and liturgical change, has subjected itself to the charge of being “an ossified relic of the Christian past.”⁴² Far from being a dead institution, however, the Church has preserved a very early form of Christianity and stands as an ever-present witness to continuously modernizing Western churches.⁴³ As a result, the Orthodox Church, particularly its “approaches to prayer and worship,” has begun to attract the attention of other Christian denominations.⁴⁴ In addition, Western theologians dissatisfied with the penal substitution theory of the atonement have begun to give the Orthodox view a fresh look.⁴⁵

The Orthodox Church possesses a rich cultural history and nearly unrivaled theological depth that attracts converts, even where the Church has fallen into evangelistic passivity.⁴⁶ Orthodoxy offers heritage, a link to the past. For all its faults, it has persevered in the faith of its ancestors, both as an established church—as in Greece today—and as a persecuted church—as in the Soviet Union. Indeed, Orthodox missions in Africa began when Anglican converts came to

⁴² Payton, 47.

⁴³ See *ibid.*, 47-48. Nonetheless, the definition of “ancient” is relative. As a previous Roman Catholic critic has pointed out, “Their sumptuous ritual, gorgeous vestments, and exact rubrics all represent, not the first age, but the palmy days of the Byzantine Roman Empire.” Fortescue, *Orthodox Church*, 392-93. This would be roughly equivalent of a civilization two thousand years from now looking at twenty-first-century America to determine what America was like in the colonial era.

⁴⁴ Garvey, 30.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (Eugen, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1931); Gregory A. Boyd, “Christus Victor View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 36.

⁴⁶ Garvey, 34.

the Church, not as a result of contacts with Orthodox believers, but through personal study.⁴⁷ The Church has likewise attracted converts in the United States from a variety of backgrounds who found the Church on their own.⁴⁸ Indeed, one American convert summed up Orthodoxy's attraction nicely. "We did not set out to discover Orthodoxy. We set out to find out what the ancient Church was really like, and in doing so we discovered Orthodoxy."⁴⁹

Orthodoxy reflects an early Christianity with all its beauty and with all its faults. While it has at times emphasized too heavily the Greek over the Orthodox aspect of its identity, it still has not neglected the latter. Through stumblings, shortcomings, and adversities, the Orthodox Church has persisted, safeguarding the traditions handed down to it and persevering as an ever-shining light from the too often forgotten Christian East.

⁴⁷ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 189.

⁴⁸ Garvey, 34.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

- Athanasius. *A Discourse of Saint Athanasius on the Incarnation of the Word of God*. Translated by James Ridgway. Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1880.
- Atkinson, James. "Reform." In *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, edited by Tim Dowley, 366-409. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.
- Aulén, Gustaf. *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*. Translated by A. G. Hebert. Eugen, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1931.
- Bartholomew. *Encountering the Mystery*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.
- Boyd, Gregory A. "Christus Victor View." In *The Nature of the Atonement*, edited by James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, 23-49. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
- . *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011.
- Fairbairn, Donald. *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Fletcher, Elaine Ruth. "Orthodox Leaders Closer to Unity." *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000, 30.
- Fortescue, Adrian. *The Orthodox Eastern Church*. The Eastern Churches Trilogy. 3rd ed. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2001.
- . *The Uniate Eastern Churches*. The Eastern Churches Trilogy. Edited by George D. Smith. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2001.
- Garvey, John. "Eastern Orthodoxy." *The Atlantic*, May 1989, 30-37.
- Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Payton, James R. *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. 2nd ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009. 1989.
- Ware, Timothy. *The Orthodox Church: New Edition*. London: Penguin Books, 1997.
- . *The Orthodox Way: Revised Edition*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995.