

How Orthodox is the Eastern Orthodox Church?

Introduction

As a result of some questions I thought it wise to give a simple evaluation of the Eastern Orthodox Church (EOC).¹ This is even more relevant since recent decades have seen hordes of evangelicals (especially disaffected Charismatics) relocate into the EOC under the presumption that it has more fundamental historic prestige than modern churches.

While in some doctrines the EOC has been a safeguard of apostolic and early church patriarchal teaching (such as the Trinity), and while they hold to good Greek NT manuscripts, we should not accept a multitude of other teachings and practices which are unbiblical. You should also be aware that this church has formally condemned Calvinism in church statutes.

The answer to the question, '*How Orthodox is the Eastern Orthodox Church?*' is simply, '*Not very; in fact it is downright heretical in doctrine and practice*'. Here are the reasons why; but first I will give a potted history of the Orthodox Church.

History

What is the EOC?

The Orthodox Church, or the Eastern Orthodox Church,² is a federation of Churches originating in the Greek-speaking Church of the Byzantine Empire, which reject the authority of the Roman Pope. It has the Patriarch of Constantinople³ as its head and uses elaborate and archaic rituals. It calls itself, 'The Holy Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church'.

I will try to make this very complicated history as simple as I can. The history is also hindered by different sources contradicting each other and making mistakes of fact.

Pre Chalcedon (to 451)

The initial foundations of Greek theology were laid down by the Greek Fathers, such as Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and the Cappadocian Fathers (the 'Three Hierarchs') i.e. 'Basil the Great' of Caesarea, 'Gregory the Theologian' of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa (Basil's brother). With the exception of Cyril, I admire these theologians; though they were not always correct.

These leaders chiefly expounded the Nicene formula (325) and the main early influence came from the Alexandrine school. The theological constructs of these Fathers continued into the 2nd council (Constantinople, 381) and 3rd council (Ephesus, 431) and beyond.

¹ 'Orthodox' means, 'right believing'.

² They used to be called 'The Greek Church'. The EOC used to mainly speak Greek but today the majority of churches speak Slavic.

³ Constantinople is the former name for Istanbul from 330 (when it was given its name by Constantine the Great) to the capture of the city by the Turks in 1453. Its former name was Byzantium.

The beginnings of the separation from Rome

The EOC began to informally separate from the western church (which became the Roman Catholic Church) after the 4th century, originally through a slow culmination of cultural and political factors.

When the empire was divided (285)⁴ the patriarch of Constantinople gradually assumed superiority over the other three patriarchs of the east, assuming the title, 'Ecumenical Patriarch'.

After the establishment of the imperial residence at Constantinople,⁵ the see⁶ of Constantinople gradually assumed more power and influence. In 381 the 2nd ecumenical council at Constantinople gave special honour to the see since it was, '*the new Rome*' making Constantinople second only to Rome.

The early Byzantine period

The 5th and 6th century controversies

After the 5th century the separation worsened through increasing differences of doctrine and ritual as well as political intrigue. In 451 the Council of Chalcedon confirmed the precedence of the bishop of the imperial residence and placed under his authority the dioceses of Thrace, Asia and Pontus. The Roman legates⁷ protested this and Pope Leo the Great rejected it.

After Chalcedon condemned Nestorianism and offended the Alexandrians (who favoured one nature in Christ), the Eastern churches fragmented between the 5th and 6th centuries. The Nestorian community left to form its own church, the Nestorian Church of Persia.

The Monophysite Church (Coptic in Egypt and Jacobite in Syria) also began. Five Monophysite churches of Armenia, Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia (Coptic) and India (Jacobite) divided from the main part of the Greek Church. Both the Nestorian and Monophysite churches continue today.

Further antagonism with Rome arose when the patriarch of Constantinople, Acacius, supported the *Henoticon*⁸ between 471-489. So in 484 Pope Felix III excommunicated him, along with the emperor and the patriarch of Alexandria. For 35 years (484-519) the East and West aspects of the church were separated ('The Acacian Schism').

After 519 the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch still embraced Miaphysitism⁹ and the congregations came to be known as the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

In 519 new negotiations between Pope Hormisdas (d. 523) and Emperor Justin I finalised a dogmatic statement which acknowledged the supremacy of the Roman pontiff, who

⁴ By 285 the Roman Empire was so vast that it was no longer feasible to govern from Rome. Emperor Diocletian divided the empire into two, with the eastern half ruled from Byzantium.

⁵ Constantinople became the capital city of the Roman Empire between 330-1204, having been dedicated to the Emperor Constantine the Great.

⁶ 'See' = the place in which a cathedral church stands, identified as the seat of authority of a bishop or archbishop.

⁷ A member of the Roman clergy, especially a cardinal, representing the Pope. A sort of papal ambassador.

⁸ A theological document regarding the doctrine of Christ written by Acacius and issued by the Byzantine emperor Zeno in 482 which tried to reconcile the differences between the supporters of the Council of Chalcedon and its opponents.

⁹ This holds that Jesus Christ has a divine and human nature united in one single nature ('mia' = one, 'physis' = nature). Monophysitism holds that there is only one divine nature.

withdrew the excommunication; but the antagonism between Rome and Constantinople increased.

The 5th ecumenical council of Constantinople in 553 tried to reconcile the secessionist churches of Syria and Egypt, to no avail. This process was abandoned at the 6th council (Constantinople, 680).

The iconoclast controversy

The iconoclasts were supporters of the 8th and 9th century movement in the Byzantine Church that sought to abolish the veneration of icons and other religious images. The 7th ecumenical council (Nicaea, 787), which was the last according to the EOC, condemned the iconoclasts.

The theologians of this period included: Leontius of Byzantium, Leontius of Jerusalem, Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus. At this time Orthodox spirituality deepened (became more mystical) as well as being focused upon venerating icons and developing the great liturgies.

Regulations that governed the church's life were codified at the Quinisext Council (Synod in Trullo) held in Constantinople in 691-692. These regulated such items as: clerical marriage, leavened bread in the Eucharist¹⁰ and other matters that formalised differences from the western church.

The late Byzantine period

This period is notable for the increasing animosity between the east and west churches with much of the problem centring in papal supremacy. It also saw the conversion of the Slavs (850-1000). The great theologians of this time include: Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) and Gregory Palamas (1296-1359).

The 9th century splits

In the middle of the ninth century the Emperor Michael engineered the removal of Ignatius and Photius quickly became patriarch of Constantinople in 858.¹¹ In 863 Pope Nicholas deposed Photius and excommunicated him, re-appointing Ignatius and triggering a schism. Four years later, in a council, Photius excommunicated the pope and condemned the western church for heresy: 1) the twofold procession of the Holy Spirit and the 'filioque' clause;¹² 2) clerical celibacy; 3) denying to priests the power of administering confirmation. The Greek emperor supported Photius, resenting the pope's involvement, while nearly 1,000 bishops and other clergy also supported Photius. Thus there was a deep chasm opening up between the East and West churches.

After the murder of Emperor Michael III in 867, Photius was deposed and banished by Emperor Basil the Macedonian and his rival Ignatius was restored to the see (Basil sought an alliance with the pope). In 869 Ignatius led the Council of Constantinople (accepted by Rome as the 8th ecumenical council) under the Emperor Basil, condemned Photius and unified the East and West churches as two distinct branches of the same church under the supremacy of Pope Adrian.

¹⁰ From the Greek for 'thanksgiving' which became a formal early church term for the Lord's Supper.

¹¹ He was ordained successively as lector, sub-deacon, deacon and priest over four days.

¹² This argument began in the 6th century when the filioque clause was added to the Nicene Creed at the Council of Toledo (589). It was officially adopted by Rome in c.1014. *'The addition marks the codification of anti-Arian theology in the West by announcing the co-equality of Father and Son in the fact of the Spirit's procession from both, rather than from the Father alone as in the Eastern model. This doctrine of double procession represents the basic thrust of Western trinitarianism from Augustine onward.'* RA Muller.

However, eastern complaints against Rome included:

- Matters previously stated.
- Submission to the definition of a council according to Roman forms, prescribed by the pope, which made the church of Constantinople dependent on Rome and set the pope above an ecumenical council.
- The pride and arrogance of the Roman court angered the Greeks; and insulted the honour of the emperor, alienating the emperor Basil.
- The use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist.
- The Roman observation of the Sabbath and fasting on Saturday, affirming that this united them with Jews.

After the death of Ignatius in 877, Photius became patriarch again, having been accepted by Basil. A council led by him in Constantinople in 879 repealed the decisions of 869, and rejected Rome's demand for the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the newly converted Bulgaria, which had returned to the Byzantine rite in 870. Photius also refused to apologise to the pope and rejected the filioque clause.

Pope John rejected Photius and excommunicated him again. In 886 Photius was exiled by Emperor Leo IV, whom Photius had tutored. His successor, Stephen (the emperor's brother), accepted the supremacy of the pope and there was peace until the 11th century.

Today Photius is accepted as a saint by the EOC while many historians laud him as a great man and a brilliant theologian and scholar; one even calls him, '*the most wonderful man of all the Middle Ages*'.¹³

11th century stirrings

In the 11th century the complaints came to a head with Michael Cerularius, patriarch of Constantinople, formally bringing the historic complaints up with the pope. Pope Leo IX charged the Greeks with false doctrine and imposed his supremacy. He also excommunicated the patriarch in the church of Santa Sophia. The schism reached boiling point as both sides vented their hatred for each other.

The Great Schism

The final breach ('the Great Schism') came in 1054 when the Roman Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated each other, chiefly over the 'Filioque' clause¹⁴ and the growing authority of the Roman Pope, who sought to be the supreme head, plus a number of minor details. Thus between the Eastern Semitic churches and the Western Latin churches there were the Greek-speaking Orthodox churches.

Despite this split, there were still friendly relations between the East and West churches. There were also several attempts at reunification. This continued until 1204 when the Crusaders (4th Crusade) captured Constantinople and sacked it. The shocked Greeks made a final separation from the west; though further attempts at unity occurred until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks.

¹³ Adrian Fortescue; a Roman Catholic priest and Byzantine scholar.

¹⁴ The 'filioque' clause (meaning 'and from the Son') is found in Western versions of the Nicene Creed dealing with the procession of the Holy Spirit; i.e. the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This was not in the original formulation of the creed but was added in 1054. The Greek Church vehemently opposed this addition. The chief reason was political; the addition had been made without the consent of any ecumenical council.

In this period Gregory Palamas synthesised the mystical spiritual movement known as Hesychasm (see later) which, though hated by westernising influences in Constantinople, were formally accepted as orthodox in 1351.

After the Fall of Constantinople

After the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, termination of imperial patronage increased the autonomy of the episcopacy and raised the importance of the Russian contribution to the church, following the creation of the patriarchy of Moscow in 1589.

The EOC did not have a Reformation or a Counter Reformation, but was influenced by both these movements. Many EOC students were sent to Europe to study theology under Reformed tutors and this influenced the development of Orthodox method.

After about 1850 the most creative developments in the EOC came from Russian writers, such as Valdimir Solovyev, Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov etc. Russian Orthodoxy originally tended towards mysticism with the monk Rasputin being an extreme example, which also demonstrates the submission of even the monarchy to priests.

This increasing mysticism eventually led to a reaction of Neo-Byzantinism in the 20th century. Today the EOC is in tension between liberal and conservative tendencies.

In modern times the EOC has suffered terrible persecution from both Islam and Communism. The Jewish-led communist persecution was one of the most barbarous and extensive programs in all history, scores of millions died and thousands of churches were burned, and yet is rarely considered by the west.¹⁵

From 1961 the EOC participated in the World Council of Churches ecumenical movement.

The seven councils

The EOC often calls itself the 'Church of the Seven Councils', which organised and clarified Christian doctrine. These are

- The Council of Nicea (325).
- The Council of Constantinople (381).
- The Council of Ephesus (431).
- The Council of Chalcedon (451).
- The Council of Constantinople (553).
- The Council of Constantinople (680-681).
- The Council of Nicea (787).

These councils largely dealt with issues regarding the doctrines of God, the Trinity and the person of Christ, excepting Nicea (787), which dealt with iconoclasts.

Denominations

The key Orthodox Churches are the national Churches of Greece, Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia. The term is also used by other ancient Churches, mainly of African or Asian origin, e.g. the Coptic, Syrian, and Ethiopian Churches (see next). In the latter part of the 20th century the Orthodox Churches have taken an active part in the ecumenical movement; the mutual excommunication of 1054 was abolished in 1965.

¹⁵ Pogrom (Russian, 'riot' or 'devastation') is a mob attack approved or condoned by authority, frequently against religious, racial, or national minorities.

There are about 225 million Orthodox worldwide with 3-5 million in the USA. The American branch of the EOC was formed in 1922.

Divergences

It is often thought that the EOC is a single doctrinal and ecclesiastical unit, but this is not the case. 'Eastern Orthodoxy', while often used as a term for all Orthodox, actually refers specifically to the dominant churches of Eastern Europe that developed from the ancient patriarchies of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople. Three divisions can be observed:

- *The Middle East Orthodox churches*: the most ancient branches which include the Patriarchies of Constantinople, Alexandria (Egypt), Antioch (Syria and Lebanon), Jerusalem (Jordan) the Armenian Catholicossates of Etchmiadzin (Russia) and Cilicia (Lebanon), the Coptic Orthodox (Egypt) and the Syrian Orthodox Church (Syria, Beirut and India).
- *The Orthodox Churches in Central and Eastern Europe*: which follow the Byzantine tradition, usually called 'Eastern Orthodoxy'. They include the autonomous churches of Russia, Romania, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Albania and Sinai.
- *The Orthodox Diaspora*: organised outside the traditional Orthodox churches in western Europe, America, Africa, Japan, China and Australia.

These branches have doctrinal, ecclesiastical and cultural differences. Disagreements include being for or against Monophysitism,¹⁶ the date for Easter, church hierarchy and the sacraments. Sometimes different Orthodox churches have differences in the same country or even a city. Despite claims of faithfully holding apostolic teaching, there are multiple conflicting traditions, doctrines and church structures.

Authority

Apostolic tradition

The EOC adds other sources of authority in addition to the Bible. It claims that church tradition (i.e. for example, bishops, the life of the church historically and particularly the seven ecumenical councils 325-787) interpret Scripture infallibly.

The EOC claims to be faithful to the teaching of the apostles left as a 'deposit' in their church. However, the variations of teaching and practice in Orthodox churches prove that this cannot be true.

Some Orthodox theologians get round this by saying that while the church has the Apostolic Tradition, the church is large enough to contain other forms of tradition as well, which are not directly apostolic. This raises the question as to what is apostolic and what is mere church tradition? Theologians also disagree about the mode of transmission of apostolic tradition as well as the content.

¹⁶ A Monophysite is a person who holds that there is only one inseparable nature (partly divine, partly and subordinately human) in the person of Christ. It denies the two natures of Christ.

One source or two sources?

Up to the Middle Ages the 'two-source' theory¹⁷ (Bible and church tradition received orally¹⁸) was dominant. Theologians in this stream aver that there is information in church tradition which is not in Scripture but which is indispensable for salvation.¹⁹

However, modern ecumenical theologians aver a 'one-source' theory.²⁰ Scripture is but a part of the 'Holy Tradition'. The comparison is merely splitting hairs. In reality even theologians within the same grouping disagree about the content of Tradition.

What is the 'Tradition'?

Different theologians accept some or all of these:

- The authentic interpretation of the Bible.
- The formulations and creeds of the Ecumenical Councils.
- The official formulations and confessions of faith.
- The forms, acts and liturgies of the early church.
- The works of the major Church Fathers (but the names are not listed).
- The ten local synods of the church (not listed as to which local councils are meant).
- Canon law (formal church rules).
- Icons.

Differences between apostolic and merely ecclesiastic dogma is not clarified. This is a messy situation regarding such an important matter.²¹

In reality, the EOC has only a few dogmatic definitions regarding the faith that are obligatory. The minimum consists of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, and the definitions of the seven ecumenical councils.

The church has the final say

Despite this, all Orthodox theologians agree that the church has absolute authority to interpret God's revelation. This, in reality, makes the church the final arbiter of truth and not the word of God itself. This puts bishops ('the episcopate') and church councils in the place of God. Like Roman Catholicism, the church is infallible.

¹⁷ *'Eternal truths are expressed in the Holy Scripture and the Sacred Tradition, both of which are equal and are represented pure and unadulterated by the true Church established by Christ'*. 1962 Almanac of the Greek Archdiocese of North and South America (1962), p195. *'Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition [are] two sources of revelation of equal weight and authority'*, C. Kostantinidis; 'The significance of the Eastern and Western Traditions within Christendom', in 'The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Mvt.', C Patalos (ed.), WCC (1978), p222.

¹⁸ The oral tradition was received first, then the Canon was completed, then the oral tradition was written down in the church.

¹⁹ Archbishop Michael (Greek Archdiocese of North and South America), *'There exists in Tradition elements which, although not mentioned in the New Testament as they are in the Church today, are indispensable to the salvation of our souls'*. Orthodox Theology, 'The Greek Theological review', 3 (Summer 1957), 13.

²⁰ *'Any disjunction between Scripture and Tradition such as would treat them as two separate "sources of revelation" must be rejected. The two are correlative ... Holy Tradition completes Holy Scripture ... By the term Holy Tradition we understand the entire life of the Church in the Holy Spirit.'* The Agreed Statement adopted by the Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission at Moscow, 26 July-2 August 1976, in 'Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue', K Ware and C Davey (eds.) SPCK (1977), 84.

²¹ *'The Orthodox, when asked positively about the sources of their faith, answer in such concepts as the whole of Scripture, seen in the light of the tradition of the ancient Councils, the Fathers, and the faith of the entire people of God, expressed particularly in the liturgy. This appears to the outsiders as nebulous.'* John Meyendorff; 'Catholicity and the Church', St Vladimir's Press (1983), 100.

Doctrine

The seven ecumenical councils

The first two councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) laid the foundations of Orthodox theology, especially the Nicene Creed. Thus the basis of EOC dogma is a strong Trinitarian emphasis. The 3rd council at Ephesus (431) affirmed the two natures of Christ as the Word made flesh; this was also foundational. The next three councils dealt with the evolving forms of Monophysitism, further defining the two complete natures of Christ, including possessing two wills. The 7th council in 787, during the iconoclasm crisis, defined the doctrine of images of Christ and the saints, requiring that members venerate but not worship them. Thus in 843 icons were restored in Byzantine churches.

The EOC does not recognise the other councils affirmed by the West.

General drift ('paradigm') of theology

The Western theological pattern is: Creation-Fall-Redemption. The Eastern paradigm is: Creation-Deification (theosis).

Following Augustine, Western theology developed through the forensic (legal) relationship between God and man through covenant, which underlies the doctrine of justification by faith and sovereign grace (weakened by Roman Semi-Pelagianism over time).

Reformed theology affirmed and strengthened this forensic approach. This was codified as: the Fall; sin as the transgression of God's law; redemption of sinners through Christ obtaining justification (fulfilling the law for sinners, taking on himself the penalty of guilt as a substitute, transferring his own righteousness). Salvation is by grace alone, not works.

The East developed a mystical approach to theology since God is an unknowable mystery. God cannot be known intellectually but only by experience (see 'negative / apophatic theology' later). God is above reason and human language and can only be described by negatives (e.g. God is not material; God is invisible). This is sometimes described as progressively eliminating all positive attributes in order to apprehend through supreme ignorance! This negative theological approach was developed by Pseudo-Dionysius (early 6th century). Man's perceptive and rational faculties are barriers to deification and must be abandoned.

This approach downplayed rational or forensic theology and emphasised mystical union; knowing God through illuminating experiences (such as looking at icons). The church sacraments help the believer attain mystical union with God, which is called deification (see 'Theosis', later).

Scripture

Three additional apocryphal books are added to Scripture than the Roman Church has so that the OT has 49 books instead of 39.

God

They are orthodox regarding the doctrines that God is sovereign, creator and subsists as a Trinity of Persons.

The EOC emphasises the transcendence of God and puts great emphasis upon God the Father, which is why they reject the filioque clause. They also have a concept of 'energies' in God, which is odd to the west. Thus the Spirit proceeds from the Father and rests upon the Son, whose energy he becomes.

To safeguard God's transcendence, the Orthodox distinguish three aspects to the being of God:

- *Ousia* (nature, essence, substance): The indescribable divine essence.
- *Hypostases* (persons as an individual instance of a given essence, Latin '*subsistentia*'): the three divine Persons.
- *Energeiai*: the uncreated energies inseparable from God's essence in which he manifests and communicates himself as the rays of light come from the sun.

The distinction between God's essence and energies is Platonic and Neo-Platonic thinking.

So the Orthodox are orthodox regarding the fact that God exists in three Persons and that Christ is the incarnate Son of God; but the distinction between God's essence and energies have serious implications on the doctrines of creation, sin and salvation.

Jesus Christ

They affirm the divinity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and teach that he died for sin on the cross.

They deny the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son.

Creation

The EOC believe in *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing). God alone has existence in himself; everything else owes its existence to him.

Generally, the EOC follows Athanasius here distinguishing between the will of God and the nature of God. Creation is an act of God's will, thus God is free to create or not create and he remains transcendent from the universe. By nature the Father generates the Son, who is not a creature but shares the same nature (*ousia*) with the Father. Thus divine nature and created nature are very different. Creatures receive their form and diversity from God, but also their own energy.

All this is relatively orthodox. The teaching on energy is somewhat odd (see next).

Man

In brief, total depravity is denied; free will is asserted. This corresponds to Arminianism and Semi-Pelagianism.

The doctrine of the creation of man is confused. John of Damascus taught that there was a difference between 'likeness' and 'image'.

'Image' indicates rationality and freedom; thus image is that which separates man from the animal creation (free will, reason, morality) which makes him a person; that which God placed in man in the beginning.

'Likeness' indicates assimilation into God through virtue, a goal to which man should aim. This lays the foundation for the doctrine of deification.

Timothy Ware says, '*However sinful a man may be, he never loses the image; but the likeness depends upon our moral choice, upon our virtue, and so it is destroyed by sin*'.²²

²² Ware, 'The Orthodox Church', Penguin (1963), 224.

Thus EOC theologians often emphasise that man is God's offspring, his kin, that there is a point of contact and a similarity. All this fails to take into account the severity of the Fall, which the EOC downplays.

Reformed theology (though there are variations and debates) would tend to emphasise that the image of God was holiness and this was lost at the Fall. [Admittedly some Reformed centre upon rationality that was not lost – but this is wrong.] Good Reformed theologians, along with Luther, would say that the image was lost after sin ruined the race. The EOC fails to do justice to texts like Eph 2:1-2 or Jn 8:44.

The EOC also follows Irenaeus who taught that Adam was a child with imperfect understanding who awaited perfection. This denies that man was created 'very good', exemplified by Adam naming all the animals.

Thus the Orthodox teach that Adam was imperfect but endowed with the potential for perfection. This also downplays the doctrine of the Fall and the fact of sin in man.

The Orthodox distinguish between nature and person in man. Man's participation in God is always in accord with his nature. Man thus has the freedom of moral choice and can do good works. Sin does not radically corrupt nature and natural will, but there is a sort of corruption of will, which could only do good before the Fall.

They deny the imputation of Adam's sin. Adam's sin was personal and resulted in no inherited guilt for his descendants. Thus total depravity is utterly denied.

Salvation

The EOC teaches that the seven sacraments (as in Roman Catholicism) are necessary to be saved through the administration of priests. These are channels of grace, which must be observed (sacerdotalism). Thus salvation is both by faith and works of merit. Justification by faith alone is denied. Thus the Orthodox are Semi-Pelagian in their understanding of salvation.

Though some EOC members play down this sacerdotalism and affirm that works are merely the evidence of faith.²³ But this does not change the fact that human works and the material church practices are necessary for salvation.

Regarding justification by faith alone, in the early 1600s the Patriarch of Constantinople, Cyril Lucaris (or Lukaris), was deposed for his Calvinist type beliefs and a council was convened at Jerusalem. The creeds that emerged (the Confession of Dositheus, and the later Confession of Peter Mogila) rejected the teaching of justification by faith alone.²⁴ Decree XIII says, '*We believe a man to be not simply justified through faith alone, but through faith which works through love, that is to say, through faith and works*'. [Some Reformed theologians have been wrong and affirmed that the EOC never taught this; e.g. RC Sproul.²⁵]

The EOC has a weak doctrine of atonement (or of man in sin). Sin is seen as the effect of death and mortality, not the cause of it. Salvation is seen as freedom from death, not a remission of guilt.

²³ 'The Orthodox Church teaches that the sacraments are efficacious because of the Holy Spirit's presence and because the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts bringing forth a faith response. God initiates and we respond to God's mercy by faith.' Robert Arakaki; 'Ligonier Ministries on Eastern orthodoxy', (2011).

²⁴ John Leith (ed.); *Creeds of the Churches*, p485-517.

²⁵ 'A Portrait of God', Ligonier National Conference (2004); Message 10, Questions and Answers No. 2.

Theosis

This is the teaching that man shares in the glory of God, becoming like God in a manner of deification. This is an integral teaching of the EOC and not something held by a few.

2 Pt 1:4 and 1 Jn 3:3 are held up as proof for this teaching, but that is stretching what they say. Our participating in the divine nature does not make us God. God is always transcendent from his creatures, even glorified ones.²⁶

Some Reformed teachers aver that this doctrine arose when 14th century Orthodox theologians misread 5th-8th century church fathers on sanctification; this is untrue since it has always been a core teaching. In fact, the EOC points out that even the great 3rd century Athanasius taught theosis;²⁷ they also claim that Basil the Great taught this.

Whether or not any Church Father taught theosis is irrelevant for Calvinists. We are moulded only by what Scripture actually says and it does not teach that Christians become God; they become like God but are always creatures and not part of the divinity – to which nothing can ever be added since it is complete and perfect.

For the Orthodox, the driving force of salvation (deification) is the Incarnation not the Atonement. Christ becoming man was God coming to man to enable salvation, opening up a path to God. Following Athanasius' statement, '*God became man that we might be made god*', the Orthodox see salvation as a mystical union with God rather than legal justification.

Since God is transcendent, union with God's essence (ousia) is impossible (it would destroy the Trinity) but man shares in the energies of God. Mystical union is sharing in the divine energies. This posits a view of God's energies representing God's existence outside his inaccessible essence. Thus God has two modes of being, in his essence and outside his essence.

The teaching on energies is a fudge to enable human deification not affect God, which approaches a modalistic view of God. Either human deification is false because God cannot be added to, or the idea of energies is a form of modalism, which is heretical. This contradiction can only be maintained because the EOC does not formulate forensic, scholastic doctrines.

The human means of this participation are the sacraments and human effort to do good. This also means that salvation is impossible outside the church (cf. the salvation of the thief on the cross).

In practical terms, the path to deification thus includes: asceticism, prayer, contemplation, and good works. Aids to these are: icons, relics, saints and Mary.

Perseverance

The EOC does not teach the final perseverance of the saints (eternal security); neither does it teach that believers can have assurance of salvation.

The church

The EOC considers that it is the one true church that goes back to the apostles. They adhere to apostolic succession but deny that this applies to the Roman Church.

²⁶ If Cleopatra bathes in milk, she is participating in milk and that has an effect on her, but she does not become milk.

²⁷ '*He, indeed assumed humanity that we might become God*'. Athanasius; On the Incarnation, 54.

They claim that the corporate church is infallible, even though composed of members that sin.

Sacraments

It holds to seven: baptism, chrismation (i.e. confirmation), the Eucharist, repentance or confession, holy orders, marriage and anointing of the sick.

The EOC believes in baptismal regeneration.

The EOC believe that the Holy Spirit descends upon the bread and wine by liturgical invocation (consubstantiation). Note: '*He [Christ] who was visible as our Redeemer has now passed into the Sacraments*'.²⁸

The EOC emphasises that the sacraments are a mystery and thus does not have to explain them. They also ignore the fact that in history many of their greatest theologians contradicted each other as to how many sacraments there were and what their role was. Palamas observed only two. The seven sacraments did not appear until the Middle Ages.

Saints

They teach that the dead pray for those on earth.

They pray to the dead and for the dead.

They believe that God's grace is present in relics of the saints.

Angels

The EOC prays to angels.

Icons

These are sacred images, such as paintings of saints. The EOC teaches that icons are a meeting point between the living and the dead; icons channel the presence of Christ or the saint depicted. They have no images in relief or embossed work, but use paintings and sculptures in copper or silver.

Mary

They teach that Mary is the *Theotikos*, God-bearer. As the virgin 'mother of God' they teach Mary's perpetual virginity and sinless life, but fall short of the Roman concept of immaculate conception and heavenly assumption.

Sanctification

This is very different from Reformed theology and hard to quantify.

The believer is called to a life of deification, which is transfiguration into the image of God. The supreme manifestation of this is in the ecstasy of contemplative life, a mysticism that is even more important than in Roman mysticism.

Church structure

Divisions

The four ancient patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem are the most ancient and therefore the most senior in honour. The heads of these churches are given the rank of 'patriarch'.

²⁸ Leo the Great in A Coniaris; 'Introducing the Orthodox Church, Light & Life (1982), 123.

The other autonomous (or 'autocephalous') churches are:

- Russian, head = a patriarch.
- Romanian, head = a patriarch.
- Serbian, head = a patriarch.
- Greek, head = 'archbishop' or 'metropolitan'.
- Bulgarian, head = a patriarch.
- Georgian, head = a 'catholicos-patriarch'.
- Cypriot, head = 'archbishop' or 'metropolitan'.
- Czech, head = 'archbishop' or 'metropolitan'.
- Polish, head = 'archbishop' or 'metropolitan'.
- Albanian, head = 'archbishop' or 'metropolitan'.
- Sinaian, head = 'archbishop' or 'metropolitan'.

Other churches have a measure of self-governance but are not fully independent. These are called 'autonomous' but not 'autocephalous'. They include Finland, China, Japan and others and three administrations of Russian that live outside Russia.

There are also ecclesiastical provinces, which depend on one of the 'autocephalous' churches or on one of the Russian emigrant jurisdictions: Western Europe, North and South America and Australia.

Numerically, Orthodoxy comprises about a 6th of Christian churches, or about 150 million members. Most of the churches are in states that are either Greek or Slavonic.

Note: The Russian Church

The Russian Church conforms to the doctrine and ceremonies of the Orthodox Church, though they are now independent of the patriarch of Constantinople. The Roskolniki, or the Starovertzi, was a sect that separated from the church of Russia in about 1666. They showed extraordinary piety and devotion, veneration for the letter of the Bible, and would not allow a priest to administer baptism who had that day tasted brandy. They harboured many follies and superstitions, and were greatly persecuted.

For comparison, in 1869 the Orthodox consisted of eleven church denominations that were independent of each other; as follows:

- Patriarchate of Jerusalem with 13 sees (metropolitan and one archiepiscopal).
- Patriarchate of Antioch (six metropolitan sees).
- Patriarchate of Alexandria (four metropolitan sees).
- Patriarchate of Constantinople (135 sees, 90 metropolitan and 4 archiepiscopal).
- Patriarchate of Russia (65 sees, 5 metropolitan, 25 archiepiscopal).
- Cyprus (4 sees, one is archiepiscopal).
- Austria (11 sees, 2 metropolitan).
- Mount Sinai (one see).
- Montefiegro (one metropolitan see).
- Greece (31 sees).
- Romania (four bishops in Wallachia and three in Moldovia). Serbia and Bulgaria were then seeking independence from Constantinople.

Clergy

Unlike Roman Catholicism there is no supreme head of the church. The Patriarch of Constantinople is known as the Ecumenical or Universal Patriarch and has a position of special honour, but has no authority to intervene in other churches.

Higher clergy (Archiereis) are the patriarchs, archbishops and bishops who are celibate. The lower clergy are the regular clergy (monks are called the 'black clergy' from the colour of their vestments), and the secular clergy (the white clergy', though their vestment colours vary).

The next person to a bishop is an archimandrite, who is the director of one or more convents, which are called mandren. Then comes the abbot, the arch-priest, the priest, the deacon, the under-deacon, the chanter, and the lecturer.

The secular clergy are subject to no rules, and never rise higher than high-priest.

The Orthodox have some nunneries but many convents of monks who are all priests obligated to follow some handicraft employment and lead a very austere life. Monasticism and a hermit life have been important in Orthodoxy from the beginning. There are hermits that lead a solitary life. There are communities where hermits live in a monastery under a common rule. Then there are those who live the semi-eremitic life (middle way) where a loosely knit group lives in a settlement under an elder ('starets' in Russian).

Church practice

Orthodoxy has many similar prayers, litanies and Eucharistic forms of worship in common with the Roman Church.

Baptism

Baptism is a sacrament necessary to salvation as it initiates a person into the church where salvation is found and this usually occurs in infancy. This baptism is a threefold immersion; sprinkling is rejected.

Confirmation is in immediate connection with baptism, even in the case of infants. Priests as well as bishops can confirm.

The Lord's Supper

The EOC teaches consubstantiation (the bread and wine are united with Jesus' body and blood).

Church leaders

Church leaders are priests who can only be male. Priests dispense grace in the sacraments that is necessary for salvation.

The organisation of the church is episcopal.

They do have monks and nuns.

See 'Clergy'.

Church meetings

These are highly elaborate rituals, full of colour, smells and chanting along with processing priests. Instrumental music is not used. People stand in the meetings, or kneel for prayers at Pentecost, facing east.

They usually use the liturgy of Chrysostom, plus that of Basil on certain occasions.

There is little, if any, teaching in church services and no formal sermon. However, it is affirmed that while Calvinism does theology in prose, Orthodoxy does theology in prose and song (litanies and chants); but this is not enough to fulfil the church's ministry to instruct the saints. In fact, the main NT purpose for gathering is edification.

Liturgy of the Russian Church is in the Old Slavic language. The Greek Church uses Modern Greek, The Georgian Church uses the Old Georgian language.

The church year

The central event is Easter but there are 12 great feasts plus other festivals and fasts.

Church relationships

The EOC is ecumenical and a member of the World Council of Churches.

Differences from Roman Catholicism

- They reject papal infallibility.
- They reject papal authority as supreme head of the church.
- They have two sources of authority (Bible and church tradition) not three as in Catholicism (Bible, apostolic tradition,²⁹ the magisterium³⁰).
- Priests can marry before ordination but bishops must be celibate.
- Priests can confirm.
- Reject sprinkling.
- Consubstantiation not transubstantiation.
- Practice infant communion.
- They reject purgatory.
- They reject image and relic worship.
- They reject the idea of indulgences.
- Mass is not performed in Latin.
- They administer communion in both kinds, even to children.
- They do not believe in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, or the assumption of Mary and do not worship Mary in the way that Catholics do.
- The EOC does permit divorce (but they reject fourth marriages).

Historic distinction from Reformed Churches

There had been negotiations between Lutheran / Reformed churches and the Orthodox since the days of Melancthon,³¹ who wrote to the patriarch Joseph of Constantinople. Nothing much resulted.

²⁹ Oral teaching of Christ and the apostles.

³⁰ The teaching office of the church that formally defines what Christ taught.

³¹ Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560), German Protestant reformer; born Philipp Schwarzerd. He succeeded Luther as leader of the Reformation movement in Germany in 1521 and drew up the Augsburg Confession (1530).

However, the patriarch Cyril Lukaris issued a Calvinist-type of confession of faith in 1629 (which was printed in Geneva) and opened negotiations with Reformed churches. Unfortunately he could not reform his own church but was deposed and imprisoned for his efforts.

There followed a declaration signed by the patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch, plus many other leaders, to separate the Orthodox from Reformed theology. This declaration was adopted by the churches and formalised as a creed in a Synod at Jerusalem in 1672.

Thus the Orthodox officially set themselves up as opponents of Calvinism. All the five doctrines of grace are denied in some form or another.

We can list some key differences between Orthodox theology and Reformed dogma as follows:

- Denial of the Bible as the sole authority of the knowledge of God and salvation.
- The EOC avoids dogmatic assertions and relies on mysticism. Thus there is a lack of coherent theology.
- The division of God's essence and energies is Platonic and Neo-Platonic.
- Knowledge as illumination rather than instruction; arising from the Inner Light. This led to hesychasm, or 'stillness', 'rest', 'silence'; this is an EOC mystical tradition of meditative prayer. Hesychasm was originally a monastic movement (led by Gregory Palamas) with spiritual exercises similar to yoga. The visions of mystics became theologically important.³² Chanting, icons, liturgy, singing and art are all seen as forms of illumination. Orthodox theology is thus also termed, 'Orthodox Spirituality' since it is so subjective.³³
- Apophatic theology ('negative theology'): that is, attempts to describe God by negation, stating what God is not in contrast to cataphatic theology which describes what God is. Apophatic theology is often connected with mysticism since it elevates spiritual experience above rationality. While the EOC accepts cataphatic theology, it is considered inferior to apophatic theology.³⁴ Note Maximus Confessor (important 12th century theologian) '*A perfect mind is one which, by true faith, in supreme ignorance knows the supremely unknowable one*'.³⁵
- Denial of the full impact of Adam's Fall; thus a denial of total depravity and total inability as well as a denial of the imputation of Adam's sin and irresistible grace for the elect.
- Salvation as deification; the sons of God become created gods. This undergirded the emphasis upon mysticism (hesychasm) and contemplative methodology in the process of illumination. Only the pure of heart see God. Coupled with the emphasis on good works, the work of the Son's atonement and the Spirit's work of sanctification fade into obscurity. Mystical union with God is realised through impersonal energies. Forensic justification is denied. Thus limited atonement for the elect chosen in eternity is denied.

³² Notice how much of this is now creeping into Charismatic practice.

³³ This was synthesised by Gregory Palamas in the 14th century.

³⁴ Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (6th century) was a key authority here. Since God's nature is beyond human understanding, man can know nothing about the being of God; therefore, all theological statements must be negative. Even seemingly positive statements, such as 'God is Spirit', is actually negative – affirming that he is immaterial.

³⁵ Quoted in WA Elwell.

- Semi-Pelagian conversion. Denial of total depravity, affirmation of free will and meritorious works, and denial of perseverance of the saints. Election and predestination is accepted but in a confused way based upon divine foreknowledge (similar to Arminianism).
- Denial of the role of sovereign particular grace in conversion since it supposedly infringes man's free will and good works.
- Denial of Reformed sanctification based upon the work of the Holy Spirit, which is replaced by good works and deification.
- Consubstantiation.
- Infallibility of the institutional church.
- Baptismal regeneration (even of infants). Denial of repentance and faith.
- Multiple false church structures / offices and aberrant practices.
- Seven sacraments instead of two (baptism and the Lord's Supper).
- Prayer to angels and dead saints.
- Veneration of icons.

Recent growth

As the Charismatic Movement continues to fail its early promise and becomes more and more pagan, many members have become completely disaffected and have left. A proportion of these have joined the EOC.³⁶ Often they cite that they were looking for something that had more historical veracity. The most notable UK church leader to do this is Michael Harper, the original leader of the Anglican Renewal Movt.

At times, the numbers of those who translocate have been very significant. In 1987, 2,000 people from 17 American denominations joined the EOC.³⁷ These people claimed to have found the true church of Christ. The Orthodox have been encouraged to, '*win America for Christ*' and have never previously seen such successful proselytising.

In reading some of the testimonies of former Protestants that have become Eastern Orthodox one notes a romantic and idealised notion of what Orthodoxy is; indeed many writers betray a complete ignorance of the serious defects of Orthodox theology and its detrimental view of the atonement of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Spirit in particular.

Conclusion

While it is possible to have some sympathy for the EOC (its love of Greek texts, its honouring of the Church Fathers, its continuation from the days of the apostles [not as apostolic succession], its strong affirmation of cardinal doctrines such as the Trinity, the clarity with which certain Orthodox priests have stood up for God's truth against modern political wickedness, its sharp observation of the times and so on), the fact remains that Orthodoxy is Biblically unorthodox.

The EOC cannot escape the fact that it is Semi-Pelagian at root and hosts a number of clear heresies (such as praying to angels) as well as false church practices.

³⁶ Quite a few have also rejoined the Anglican or Roman Catholic churches.

³⁷ Peter E Gillquist; *Becoming Orthodox: A journey to the Ancient Christian Faith*, Conciliar Press (1992), p175.

Christians, while loving our Orthodox neighbours, cannot be part of this religious system.

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