Eastern Orthodox Christianity



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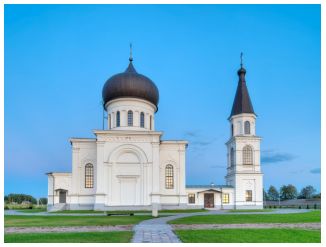
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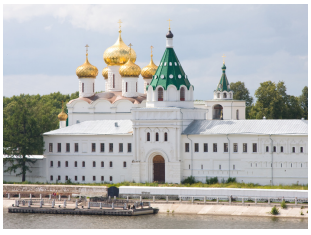
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Lesson from a Greek Orthodox Priest

We were standing inside a small yet stunning chapel in the ancient *agora* of Athens. Called Church of the Holy Apostles, this chapel is one of the best-preserved churches in all of Greece, and it has stood intact for more than a thousand years. It is known for its beautiful frescoes and Athenian style, and while we were marveling at the interior, we felt the presence of the apostles whose frescoes lined the walls.



It was at this moment that a Greek Orthodox priest, who was accompanying us, stated directly: "You Protestants come to our country and act as if you discovered Christianity. But the truth is that we Greeks have safeguarded the Christian faith for 2,000 years. And if it wasn't for us, you would have never heard of Christianity. Don't you know, after all, that Paul's letter of 1 Thessalonians was the first Christian letter ever written—and it was written in Greek to Christians in Greece."



Greece: Christian Since the First Century

Most travelers to Greece from Protestant countries are unaware of the rich history of Greek Christianity. For instance, not only did the apostle Paul evangelize the country in the first century, but there has not been a moment since when there were not Greeks who practiced Christianity. And, over time, Christianity came to be the state religion in Greece, a status it has enjoyed for 1,700 years. This is a staggering fact, but it also requires elaboration since many Protestants do not have any familiarity with Eastern Orthodoxy, the form of Christianity practiced in historic places like Greece.



Overview

In this booklet, I will briefly discuss some of the history and practices of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the most historic of Christian traditions in the world. But before that, I will first give some context to the four major traditions within Christianity.

Four Major Christian Traditions

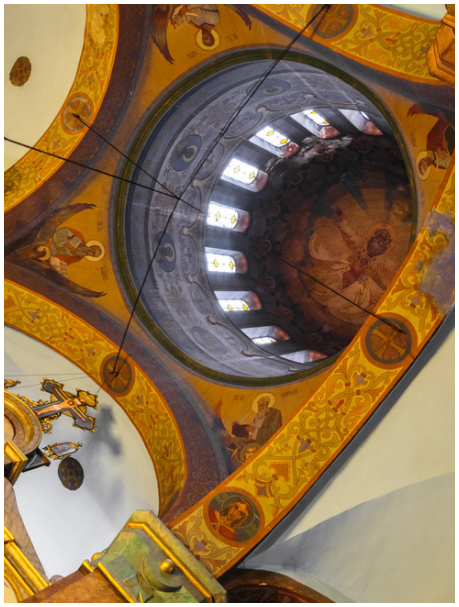
In general, there are four major traditions within Christianity: (1) Orthodoxy, (2) Catholicism, (3), Protestantism, and (4) Progressivism.

Orthodoxy, which comes from a Greek word meaning "correct worship" or "correct belief," is the oldest of the four Christian traditions. There are actually several subdivisions within Orthodoxy, such as (i) Eastern

Orthodoxy, (ii) Oriental Orthodoxy, and (iii) and Church of the East. Why so many?

The divisions within Orthodoxy are the result of different understandings of the nature of Christ as well as linguistic and political differences. (And if you really want to know more about these differences, you can always read one of my books, such as: *Introduction to World Christian History*, *Twenty Questions That Shaped World Christian History*, or *Exploring Church History*.)

For our purposes when it comes to Greece, Eastern Orthodoxy is the form most important since the Greek Orthodox Church falls under Eastern Orthodoxy.



Catholicism, which comes from a Greek word meaning "according to the whole," is also a tradition within Christianity dating to the first century. In fact, put simplistically, Catholicism and Orthodoxy were originally united but later divided over theological, political, geographic, and linguistic differences. In short, Catholicism came to be the dominant Christian tradition in the West, while Orthodoxy came to be the dominant Christian tradition in the East. That is why you will not find Catholic Churches in Greece. The Catholic Church separated from the Eastern Orthodox Church in the year 1054, an event known as the Great Schism.



Protestantism, which comes from a Latin word meaning "protesters," emerged out of Catholicism 500 years ago. In a word, Protestants protested the practices and beliefs of Catholicism and left the Church. Unlike Orthodoxy or Catholicism, there is no unity among Protestants. Over time, Protestants kept dividing amongst themselves, which is why there are now 60,000 Protestant denominations. And none of these denominations has any authority over any other. In Greece, you will rarely see a Protestant church since the Greeks consider Protestantism to be an inferior, if not heretical, form of Christianity.



Progressivism, which comes from a Latin word meaning "advancing," is not an agreed-upon tradition within Christianity. However, I am using it to refer to the hundreds of Christian-based traditions that have emerged out of Protestantism, such as Mormonism, Jehovah's Witness, Scientology, and so on. These Protestant-inspired traditions have become religions in their own rights, which are today called "New Religious Movements." As with Protestantism, Greeks are opposed to New Religious Movements and generally consider them to be cults.



The Greek Church Is Part of Eastern Orthodoxy

I recognize that it can be confusing thinking about all the major traditions within Christianity, but we need to take things one step further in order to understand Christianity in Greece. In the four divisions I just offered, Christianity in Greece descends from Orthodoxy. And, in particular, it descends from what is called Eastern Orthodoxy. In brief, Eastern Orthodoxy is the part of Orthodoxy that became the state religion of the Byzantine Empire, which was the most powerful and unified Christian empire in the East.

The Religion of the Byzantine Empire

Eastern Orthodoxy became the state religion of much of Eastern Europe and the Middle East after Constantine made Constantinople (now Istanbul) the capital of the Roman Empire in 330. From there, the Roman Empire, which eventually came to be known as the Byzantine Empire, expanded its borders across Europe and the Middle East. And, naturally, wherever it came to exercise power, it took its state religion: Orthodox Christianity.

Orthodox Christianity, unlike Catholicism, which insisted on using Latin as its liturgical language, always allowed nations to conduct church services in their own languages. This is how Eastern Orthodoxy came to have national church subdivisions, such as the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and so on. The distinctions within Eastern Orthodox Christianity are minimal. Other than the fact that their languages and ethnicities are different, their theological beliefs and worship practices are shared and so there is unity among them.

Core Beliefs and Practices of Eastern Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodoxy represents the oldest form of Christianity, and it has retained many practices and traditions that newer form of Christianity have modified. For the sake of simplicity, I will list and briefly describe some of the most distinct beliefs and practices of Eastern Orthodoxy.

- **Bible**: Orthodoxy has the largest "canon," or grouping of books in the Bible. Eastern Orthodox Christians accept all the books in the Protestant Bible, as well as a dozen more, as divinely inspired. (This usually totals to around 78 books.) It should be remembered that the Bible used by the authors of the New Testament (such as Paul and Peter) was the Bible used by Eastern Orthodox Christians. The concept of *sola scriptura*, "by Scripture alone," a hallmark of Protestantism, which teaches that the Bible is the arbiter of all doctrine and practice, is rejected in Eastern Orthodoxy.





- **Iconostasis**: This means “icon stand,” and it is oftentimes a wall of icons. There are usually doors where priests (and those assisting) go back and forth. The Eucharistic meal (Christ’s body and blood) as well as icons, holy books, vestments, and religious utensils are found behind the iconostasis as a representative of the holy of holies.

- **Icons**: Eastern Orthodoxy uses icons, or images, in its worship practices. Note that Orthodox Christians do not worship images, but only “venerate,” or highly respect, them. It is believed that icons represent real believers in Heaven, and it is a sign of respect to kiss icons during worship. Icons are a product of the belief in Orthodoxy that God only and always uses material things—such as water, oil, bread, and earth—to engage people spiritually. Just like Christ took a body in the incarnation to save people, so icons imitate how God uses physical things for spiritual transactions.

- **Leadership**: Eastern Orthodoxy is governed by bishops, none of whom have any authority over another bishop. (This is unlike Catholicism, where the Roman bishop, that is, “the pope,” has authority over other bishops.) Bishops are chosen from monasteries, which are composed of ordained celibate monks. Next come priests, then deacons, then other minor orders. Only men are allowed to be ordained, meaning that all Orthodox bishops, priests, and deacons are male. Priests and deacons are allowed to be married (unlike in Catholicism). However, monks and bishops cannot be married.

- **Liturgy**: All Orthodox Churches use a liturgy, or uniform set of worship practices. And so-called liturgical churches are ones that follow the most ancient of practices when worshiping. These liturgical practices slightly vary depending on the time of year based on the church calendar and specific tradition, but they mostly contain the same features: public reading of Scripture, saying set prayers, standing and making gestures, priests offering the sacraments (most notably the Eucharist), and clergy wearing vestments and using utensils such as incense, crosses, oil, icons, and relics. The liturgy requires officiation by a member of the clergy.

- **Rituals**: Eastern Orthodoxy believes that rituals, inasmuch as they have been handed down by the Church, are good things. This includes making the sign of the cross, kissing icons, giving each other a holy kiss, or prostrating one's body in prayer.









- **Sacraments**: Eastern Orthodoxy affirms seven "sacraments," or instruments of divine grace. Although these graces are given by God, they can only be transmitted by a lawfully ordained priest. These are baptism, chrismation, communion (or Eucharist), repentance (or confession), matrimony (or marriage), holy orders, and unction (or anointing). Salvation is not possible outside of the sacramental system. In particular, salvation begins with baptism, the Holy Spirit is conferred at chrismation, Christ's real body and blood is consumed at communion, and God's forgiveness of sin through Christ is received at repentance. It is important to note that the sacraments are believed to come from the authority of God, not humans.

- **Sacred Space**: Eastern Orthodoxy affirms holy space, namely, the space that has been blessed and set aside as sacred for worship. Orthodox Churches are typically divided into three areas: (i) the narthex or entrance, (ii) the nave or main space, and (iii) the sanctuary, which is believed to be holy and only reserved for clergy and those assisting them. The heart and focal point of the sanctuary is the altar, upon which the gift of Christ's body and blood (formerly bread and wine) is offered by means of the clergy.

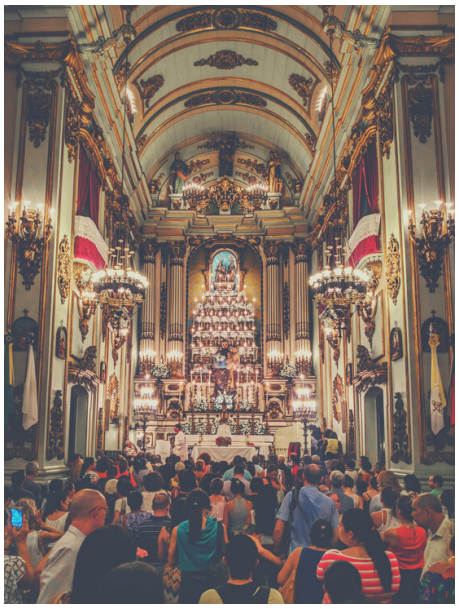
- **Saints**: Eastern Orthodoxy believes that all who are "in Christ" are alive (though the holy departed are not reunited with their bodies until their resurrection). Among the holy departed, there are some who are universally recognized as exemplifying exception Christian character and are venerated, or honored, on saints' days. These saints are able to be invoked in prayer to assist people on earth. Preeminent among the saints is the Virgin Mary, called the *Theotokos* or "Mother of God" in Orthodoxy, due to her unique role as the human vessel God used to bring forth Christ. In Orthodox Churches, the saints are represented in icons, and it is believed that they are mystically present during church services.

- **Standing**: Seats or pews in churches only became popular after Protestantism emerged in the 1500s. Before that, all Christians either stood or kneeled in services. That is still the practice of Orthodox Christians. Most of the service is a combination of standing and prostrating, but not much sitting.

- **Tradition**: Eastern Orthodoxy places a very high value on tradition. In fact, everything else, including the Bible, is subsumed under tradition. No beliefs or practices can be contrary to what was decreed in the Bible and the Seven Ecumenical Councils, which were a series of councils overseen by Greek-speaking Christians in the Byzantine Empire from 325 (the first council) to 787 (the last council). These councils made important decrees affirming the Nicene Creed and certain historic practices.

- **Worship**: Worship in Eastern Orthodoxy is described as "heaven on earth." It is believed that those in worship are taken up into Heaven, where the church universal—the saints, the Virgin Mary, Christ, and fellow believers—reside. That is why worship services include all the communion of the saints.





These core beliefs and practices within Eastern Orthodoxy have offered unity among a variety of regional bodies for 2,000 years. Although the Byzantine Empire officially fell the Ottoman Turks in 1453, meaning that the Christian empire whose state religion was Eastern Orthodoxy was no more, the Eastern Orthodox Church is alive and well across all continents, with the Greek Orthodox Church still being the official religion of Greece.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Eastern Orthodox Church is the most ancient of traditions within Christianity. It is traced back to the first century and is represented across various regional bodies such as the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and so on. Each of these regional bodies is administered independently, but they are classified under Eastern Orthodoxy, just as, for instance, Presbyterians or Baptists are classified under Protestantism.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Of the four major Christian traditions, which are you most familiar with? Which do you want to learn more about?

2. Why do you think there are so many different kinds of Protestant denominations compared to Catholicism or Orthodoxy?

3. What do you think might be most difficult for you when visiting an Eastern Orthodox Church?

4. What do you think you can learn from a Christian tradition that is 2,000 years old?

5. What are the most interesting beliefs and practices of the Eastern Orthodox Church?





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