

Distinctive Features of Oriental Orthodoxy

Ancient and Modern

Another Kind of Orthodoxy

Through its unique historical development, the Christian Orient evolved in a very different way from the Christian Occident. Certainly the most influencing aspect of that evolution was that the eastern churches were never a single monolithic entity (or a State Church) in the manner Christianity expressed itself in the Occident. Also, from 489 C.E. onwards, the churches east and south of Antioch in Syria had no serious ties to (nor need for) the Imperial Church of the West. This autonomy gave rise to a particular understanding the story and teachings of Jesus and of emergent Christianity relevant to eastern cultures.

This development can, perhaps then, provide us today with a fresh perspective on how Christianity can to be transmitted outside of the traditional Occidental worldview. It can also give us an alternative way of seeing and expressing Christian teaching differently from the more familiar forms associated with the West (namely the Latin Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox traditions). In its original mission to the eastern cultures, we are able to see how we might more responsibly address our own contemporary world, especially to those who are particularly estranged from western Christian

institutions. In summery, then these are the following features that highlight important characteristics of Oriental Orthodoxy:

Independence from the political state and its power structure.

Because Oriental Orthodoxy never became an arm of the political state, nor was it a State church or a single monolithic entity, (nor did it seek for temporal power over the lands and cultures in which it thrived), it could express a very different version of Christianity. Christianity in the Orient refrained from coercion and conformity as the price for maintaining its ecclesiastical position. Throughout its history the churches of the East remained a confederation of autonomous bodies in fraternity with one another in much the same way that the Celtic churches did in the far West. After the Council of Chalcedon (489 C.E.), the churches of the East had no serious ties any longer to the Church in the West—though there were always influences brought to bear from the western tradition impacting the East. This independence, however, allowed them greater freedom to develop and communicate a more sapiential vision of Jesus' teachings and of later Christianity relevant to eastern cultures.



Doctrinal pluralism and formal diversity.

Openness and diversity were important characteristics of early Oriental Orthodoxy. These meant that the Oriental churches did not seek for doctrinal conformity or ecclesiastical uniformity. They continued to exist in parallel as a plurality of compatible forms and perspectives which reflected their more generous understanding of the Christian revelation. In contrast, having won the battle to convert the Roman Empire, such theologians as St. Augustine sought to define western Christianity as “the City of God” the center of temporal power from which all other authority must either be sanctioned or excluded. The churches of the East never adopted such an approach nor developed a single theological standard or system of belief. Also, they did not attempt to create any form of political theocracy. As a result, diverse expressions developed in response to the growing needs of their mission to the peoples of Asia, which gave a unique expression to the original vision of Jesus and the Christian revelation.

An anthropology of hope and a soteriology of confidence.

Again, in contrast to the Latin West, Oriental Orthodoxy continued to develop a theological perspective which reflected hope and confidence. In direct response to the religions traditions of Asia (Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism), their understanding shaped a unique response designed to speak directly to these other traditional faiths. For example, the Oriental branches of Christianity developed a theology almost completely free from St. Augustine’s doctrine of original sin (in which humanity is eventually described as hopelessly lost, depraved and deserving of God’s eternal wrath). Instead it emphasized a powerful doctrine of the original nature of humanity grounded in divine goodness. The Image of God (*imageo dei*) had indeed been lost, but God, who longs for us and has searched us out, has restored it to us by divine grace, mercy and compassion. Christian theology was therefore a celebration of hope and not a form of moral penance stressing condemnation, guilt or shame.

A theological dialectic through religious dialogue with other faith traditions.

True to their own unique spirit, the churches of the East never sought to exclude and suppress other faiths by dominating their cultural worlds. Oriental Orthodoxy did not perceive other faith traditions as enemies, but as worthy partners in an on-going exploration of the sacred. They engaged in meaningful dialogue instead of dispute, working out a way to function side-by-side, while continuing an active witness to the revelation of Jesus. Respectful engagement with Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism allowed the churches of the East to develop a theology in which the religious concerns of the peoples of Asia were addressed without denying their truth. For example, the offer of salvation through Jesus was expressed as a new form of liberation from karma, reincarnation, suffering and the power of death, which eastern traditions had diagnosed as basic to the human condition.

As we see, early Oriental Orthodoxy responded to the dynamic cultures of the ancient East with an alternative vision of the Christian message. That such responses existed and flourished early on is a hopeful sign that today it can do so once again. Perhaps these original understandings can assist us in finding new ways of being orthodox (remaining committed to the original vision and wisdom of Jesus) by which we can engage the dynamic cultures and diverse needs of the modern West more responsively.

Renewing Oriental Orthodoxy in the West

Oriental Christian tradition which had originally found its way to the West at first only in immigrant communities, is now present in lines of transmission which attempt a new engagement with the West. Once again it has leaped cultural barriers while retaining fundamental aspects of its original features. Today, Oriental Orthodoxy in the West once again confronts a world of pluralism, multiple faiths, and diverse cultures, and is engaged with the powerful (and sometimes corrosive) forces of the contemporary world and modernity. For these reasons it endeavors not

only to honor and value the clarity of its ancient roots and original vision, but also to employ a new means by which it can make the encounter with modernity effective and life-giving for all people either East or West.

At this important juncture, it seeks first to interact fully with the contemporary world without erecting cultural barriers between itself and its message. It endeavors to bring the unique gifts and insights from its traditional past into the contemporary world in such a way that it becomes more transparent to the modern world while remaining true to its origins and roots. It is, therefore, not an orthodoxy that is oriented only to the past, but one which, while building upon those foundations, engages the needs of contemporary humanity, remaining open to organic growth and change in anticipation of the future.

Second, its focus is upon the inner dimensions of Christianity—the esoteric reality and contemplative wisdom that lie at the heart of the teachings of Jesus and early Christianity. It endeavors to balance *theoria* and *praxis* (contemplative insight and practice) in such a way that nothing is excluded from the domain of the sacred. It strives to be far more intentional in this regard than many current forms of western Christianity which center on the exoteric dimensions and external configurations of Christianity. Inevitably, as new exoteric forms are created these must not only reflect the central value of interiority but be responsive to its present mission toward both external human needs and inner spiritual requirements for the people of the West.

As a third dimension, the form of Oriental Orthodoxy which has entered the third millennium, is creating an ecumenical network of men and women, communities, and congregations in a renewed confederation (either within or outside the institutional Church) among those who share similar values of contemplative life. Its purpose is to enrich and strengthen all who have found their way into this growing network of human beings and to reach out beyond it to the many who feel lost, or who find

themselves alone or estranged from conventional religious institutions. True to its original spirit, it also allows those who have loved and valued other forms of the western Christian tradition (or even other faith traditions) to maintain their loyalties to those associations, while making space for new possibilities and relationships within the Order.

Finally, the basis of Oriental Orthodoxy in the West is founded upon a principle traditionally expressed as the union of Scripture, Reason, Tradition (to which some have added, Experience). These four are being developed in a new ways that not only honor the richness of the Christian revelation but all seek to honor the revelations and scriptures made known to humanity through other of the great sacred traditions. It seeks for a reasonable openness to the full historical development of humanity in the contemporary world and the West, but also to the global community that is clearly in formation. It expresses and honors not only the singular tradition of Christianity (and by extension all sacred traditions), but Tradition as such, known as the perennial philosophy (*sophia perennis*) which is its metaphysical and philosophical foundation. Finally it is necessarily grounded in contemplative experience (primarily through Christian *theoria* and *praxis*) as they have been transmitted into the modern world and used as a sacred means for the transformation of humanity into *theomorphic* being.

*For this paper I am indebted to Martin Palmer and his, **The Jesus Sutras** (NY: Ballantine Wellspring, 2001). In it he examines a new body of evidence concerning the origins, history, and growth of Oriental Orthodoxy as it spread East into China. His volume focuses primarily upon newly discovered ruins and recovered documents, which illuminate the character and role of this early branch of Christianity in its mission to the East. In addition he speaks in passing of the history of this movement in relationship to western Christianity which is the focus of this presentation.*

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