An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2002
Reprinted 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Sabon 10/13.5 pt *System* LaTeX 2$_\varepsilon$ [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 66140 4 hardback
ISBN 0 521 66738 0 paperback

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A WALK DOWN STRAIGHT STREET

Straight Street in Damascus is the only road to be named in the Bible (Acts of the Apostles 9.11). We are told how the zealous Jew, Saul, was taken here after his experience on the road to Damascus, led by the hand, temporarily blinded by the light of God's presence and bewildered by the voice which spoke to him. A disciple called Ananias healed him of his blindness and baptised him. After a few days in Damascus, Paul left to begin his extraordinary career of preaching the gospel of Christ and sharing in setting up the infant Christian Church. Straight Street, the main street of the city, then a broad thoroughfare lined by columns, could be reckoned to be the cradle of the Church.

You can still walk down Straight Street. It is not as wide – nor as straight – as it was in Paul's day, but it is still one of the main streets of the old walled city of Damascus. It is lined with shops, bends a little, and is noisy and crowded. Today you are likely to approach it from the side of the modern city centre, and, about halfway down, you find an alleyway which leads to the marbled church and mansion that is the residence of His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatios IV, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East; then a little further along is another smaller sideturning which leads to the less imposing church and residence of His Holiness Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch, also of Antioch and All the East. On the other side of the road is the church of the Greek Catholic, or Melkite, Patriarch Maximos V Hakim, and he too is Patriarch of Antioch.

The three Patriarchs of Antioch who reside in the Street called Straight are not the only bishops to hold this title. Some thirty miles to the west is the Lebanese capital, Beirut, and here are a further two occupants of this see: the leaders of the Antiochian Syrian Maronite Church (usually known simply as the Maronites), and of the Syrian Catholic Church. There used to be a sixth Patriarch of Antioch, of the Latin Catholic Church, but this title is no longer used.

This variety becomes even more evident in the life of the parishes of the interior of Syria. To the east of the country is the Syrian diocese of the Gezirah, and here I once spent a day visiting homes in the Syrian Orthodox parish of Nasra'a with Fr Louis, the parish priest. He told me that there were in the parish 300 Syrian Orthodox families, 130 Armenian Catholic, sixty Syrian Catholic, five Syrian Protestant, four Armenian, three Assyrian Church of the East, and two Chaldaean. The Syrian Orthodox priest knows them well and many of them attend his church.

The life of the Christian communities in Syria shows clearly that there is not one single Eastern Orthodox Church, nor one doctrinal tradition which can be called Orthodoxy. The varied composition of the ecclesiastical life of modern Syria provides clear demonstration of the division, complexity, richness and turbulence of the history of the Christianity of the East. The Christians of Syria are conscious both of the diversity of Church life and also of their shared culture and history. Since they form a minority within a predominantly Muslim state, they are more conscious than some other Christians of the tradition which binds them together. So here we are vividly aware of both the unity and diversity that is a marked feature of the Christian life of the East.

This diversity is less apparent in other areas. Both Russia and Greece, for example, are self-consciously Orthodox and, what is more, Byzantine Orthodox countries. From this perspective, the history of Orthodoxy is identical with the history of one Church tradition. Since the West is usually more aware of Church life in these countries, it is easy to understand Orthodoxy mainly in these terms.

This book takes the Syrian experience as a starting-point. It recognises that the Orthodox Churches originate from a common background which has shaped the nature of the life of the Churches. It also seeks to show the differing forms of Christian living which have developed through a turbulent history. The turbulence is suggested by the fact that

none of the five Patriarchs of Antioch has been able to remain in his episcopal see, since the ancient city of Antioch is now called Antakya and falls within the boundaries of modern Turkey, a city with numerous mosques but no living churches.

Damascus is the place where Paul's change of life began; and Antioch, about 200 miles to the north, is the place where the name 'Christian' was first used (Acts 11.26). From here the Church spread east, west, south and north. From the perspective of this book, these two ancient cities have a central place in the Eastern Christian world. To the north and south lie the two largest Orthodox Churches. To the east extends the greatest – but finally temporary – missionary expansion of the Church. To the west is the cultural and theological source of Orthodoxy. These Churches of Russia, Ethiopia, the East and Constantinople will all be discussed in the course of this book.

BYZANTINE ORTHODOX CULTURE

Although the city of Constantinople lies at the western side of the territory of the Christian East, it has had a decisive influence on the history of all the Orthodox Churches. The evolution of Eastern Christianity is bound up with the life of the Byzantine Empire. It developed either within the structures of the Empire or else just outside and in reaction against it. In modern usage the word Byzantine conjures up images of either an evocative and exotic oriental civilisation, or a labyrinthine and impenetrable bureaucracy. In any case Byzantium is, for most Westerners, remote both geographically (as lying beyond the territories of Europe) and historically (as a part of pre-modern medieval times). It requires an effort of imagination to grasp the importance and the attractiveness of the idea of the universal Christian Empire or to comprehend the formative influence of Byzantine civilisation on the life of the Church.

Any grasp of the nature of Orthodox Christianity has to begin with a recognition that it was nurtured and shaped in the Eastern Roman Empire, often called Byzantine, with its capital in the great city of Constantinople. This Empire understood itself to be continuous with the classical Roman Empire, and in the Middle East today Greek Orthodox are usually referred to as Rum (or Roman) Orthodox. It also saw itself as universal, appointed by God to govern the Christian world, and so those unfortunate enough to be outside this great society had to live awaiting the civilising benefits of Roman and Christian rule. Among

the events that led to the formation of the Eastern Empire was the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity. The significance of this event may be exaggerated since the Church was widespread before the Emperor's conversion and paganism continued to be influential after it. The Emperor's new faith nonetheless gave the Christian Church a new status within the Empire, and inaugurated a new stage in the history of the Church. As a result, the Christian Church was set on-course to become the official state religion, a far cry from the revival movement within Judaism initiated in rural Palestine by the prophet Jesus of Nazareth. The conversion of Constantine had an impact nobody could have guessed at the time. As a result, this book begins its account of the life of the Eastern Churches at this point in history, three centuries after the life, death and resurrection of the founder, and refers to the events and personalities of the first centuries of the history of the Church only in passing.

Byzantium – named after its mythological founder, Byzas the son of the sea-god Neptune – was a Greek settlement founded in the seventh century BC at the place where the Bosphorus opens into the Sea of Marmara, between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, where there is a natural and easily defended harbour. It caught the attention of the Emperor Constantine, who selected it as the site of the new capital city of the eastern part of the Roman Empire. The Emperor began to build here in 325, and five years later the new capital was dedicated with the name of Constantinople – the City of Constantine. It remained as the imperial capital for more than a thousand years, a city of unparalleled wealth, prestige and piety. The Empire over which it presided fluctuated in size. It reached its largest extent under the Emperor Justinian (527–65), when it included most of Italy, the Balkans as far north as modern Hungary, Egypt, Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine, the North African coast, and even parts of Spain. This massive tract of territory was reduced in size, at first gradually and then drastically, when in the seventh century the Arab armies overwhelmed the Eastern provinces of Syria, Egypt and Palestine, then swept on towards Constantinople. But although Syria and Egypt were not reconquered, the Byzantine Empire regained the ascendancy in Asia Minor and remained a formidable power at least until the Crusades in the eleventh century. In 1204 disaster struck, when the capital city of Constantinople itself was conquered by the Western armies of the Fourth Crusade. The Crusaders had unfortunately decided that the

intrigues and rivalries of a Byzantine imperial succession dispute and the tempting prospect of booty made the Christian city of Constantinople a more attractive and attainable objective than the (then) Muslim city of Jerusalem (el Quds, as it was known to the Arabs). This was a decisive moment, starting a process of retrievable decline in both the power of the Byzantine Empire and also in the relations between the Eastern and Western parts of the Church. In 1261 the city was recaptured by Michael VIII Palaeologus (1259–82) but, in spite of a cultural resurgence under the Palaeologan dynasty, the Empire never regained its former glory and seemed to limp on painfully until 1453, when, on one of the catastrophic days of Christian history, the great city of Constantinople fell to the Turkish army of the Sultan Mehmet II.

Constantinople was bigger, more populous and richer than any other city in the early Christian world. It was dominated by three huge centres of public life. The hippodrome was nominally a stadium for chariot races, but in practice was far more than that. It was the place of assembly for the people of the city, and housed demonstrations of military might, triumphal processions welcoming returning victorious armies, public meetings and demonstrations, festivities and games, and all kinds of civic celebration. Next to it stood the Sacred Palace, entered through the *Chalke* (or 'Brazen') vestibule decorated with statues and frescoes, leading to the reception hall or Tribunal of Nineteen Couches, in which banquets were held, and then on to a mass of chambers, churches and palaces. Within this maze of magnificence the Empress Theodora, the wife of Justinian, was able to maintain a monastery of dissident Monophysites, including the former Patriarch Anthimus, who disappeared into the safety of the Palace for twelve years – everyone assuming he was dead – until he emerged after the death of the Empress, and this at a time when the Empire was officially Chalcedonian. The third great centre was the Great Church of the 'Immortal Wisdom of Christ', or *Haghia Sophia*. Originally built in 360 by Constantius, the son of Constantine, it was destroyed in 404, rebuilt, then destroyed again in a popular revolt called the Nike rebellion in 532, then immediately rebuilt and dedicated in 537. This is the building which stands today.

It was the Great Church of the Empire, in which the Patriarch and Emperor celebrated the liturgical feasts together. The liturgy of the Chalcedonian Orthodox Church evolved in this building and was exported to other Church centres, displacing local forms of worship. The

scale of the liturgical life is hinted at by the reforms of Patriarch Sergius, who, in 612, decided that things were getting out of control, and reduced the number of clergy who served at the Haghia Sophia to a mere 80 priests, 150 deacons, 40 deaconesses, 70 subdeacons, 160 readers, 25 cantors and 100 doorkeepers. 'Harun ibn Yahya, an Arab visiting the city in the ninth century, was amazed at the lavish magnificence of the liturgy on feast days, and described processions from the Palace of over 50,000 sumptuously dressed attendants preceding the Emperor.[1] There were numerous churches and monasteries as well.

Little wonder that the representatives of the Prince Vladimir of Kiev reported their impressions of attending the liturgy at the Great Church in the tenth century with open-mouthed amazement. 'We knew not whether we were in heaven or earth for surely there is no such splendour or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you. We cannot forget that beauty.' The worship of the church of Haghia Sophia demonstrated the wealth, the artistic and architectural brilliance, the size and scale of the Empire, and the centrality of faith and worship.

Although there was a flourishing intellectual life based on the University, which was founded in 425 and at its height was staffed by over thirty professors, Constantinople evolved into a city of monks, with the extraordinary claim made by the eleventh-century Patriarch John of Antioch that, during the iconoclast controversy which had taken place a couple of centuries before he was writing, the population of the city was divided equally between monks and laity.

The city was a combination of a New Rome, succeeding to the old as capital of the Empire; a New Jerusalem, appropriating relics from around the Empire, such as the Virgin Mary's robe and belt, to enhance its monopoly of sacred fullness; and a New Athens, as a centre of Greek learning and culture. Its rise coincided with the decline of the Western Roman Empire, which fell in 410 – just ninety years after the founding of Constantinople. Its decline and fall, beginning with the conquest by the Crusaders in 1204 and being prolonged painfully over the next two centuries, coincided with the rise of the Universities of Western Europe and the growth of new Western European nations. Then its final – and from a Christian point of view, tragic – loss to the Ottomans in 1453 took

[1] From A.Vasiliev, *Seminarium Kondrakovianum* v, cited in P. Sherrard, *Constantinople, Iconography of a Sacred City* (London 1965), p. 73.

place as the Renaissance and Reformation were transforming Western Europe. So the most creative periods of Western Christianity succeeded those of Eastern Christianity. As a result, from an Eastern viewpoint, Western Church life tends to have a novel, changing and impermanent character, since it largely evolved after Constantinople fell. From an Eastern point of view, Protestantism followed on inexorably from Papacy, since both share in the error of having diverged from the authentic tradition of the East, and as a result both share a restless, intellectual, individualistic form of the Christian faith. Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are sad examples of heretical divergence from the universal truth of the apostolic faith developed, articulated and faithfully preserved in Constantinople and those Churches in communion with it. By contrast, a Western observer tends to think that Orthodoxy froze in 1453, and has failed to adjust to the post-medieval world.

During the period of the Byzantine Empire, the Orthodox Church was formed, with its doctrine defined at Councils convened by the Emperor, its liturgy that of the city of Constantinople which came to be used throughout the Empire, its ecclesiastical art being the iconography of the Byzantine Empire, and its culture shaped by the monastic tradition which was nurtured in the capital and on Mount Athos. This is not to suggest that Orthodoxy is a Byzantine invention. Like all Churches its roots lie in the events described in the New Testament. Indeed, it can be argued convincingly that the culture of the Eastern Churches is far closer to the world of the New Testament than that of the West, and, further, that Western civilisation appropriated and adapted a faith which is Eastern in origin and character. But the life of the Orthodox Church evolved and developed in distinctive ways during the millennium of Byzantine rule, so that it can be seen as the Byzantine form of Christianity.

The impact of the Byzantine Empire lived on long after the once impregnable walls of Theodosius protecting the city had been breached. It has been said that the Orthodox Church is the Church of Byzantium which has survived the Empire by five hundred years.[2] Certainly it is the institutions of the Byzantine Church that continue to provide cohesion and community among the scattered Churches of the Orthodox East.

The vastly greater numbers of adherents of Byzantine Orthodoxy, the developed formulation of its theological traditions, and the accessibility

[2] A. Schmemann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* (London 1963), p. 199.

of its music, art and liturgy should not lead us to ignore the Eastern and Orthodox Churches which fell outside the Empire and spoke different languages – Coptic, Syriac, Armenian and others. Byzantium had an influence on these too, however. This happened partly through shared linguistic and cultural traditions that flourished both within and beyond the boundaries of the Empire, and partly through the negative influence of being a dominant political power, which smaller groups reacted against and seceded from. So in the chapters that follow we will explore both common patterns shared by the Eastern Churches, and also recognise points of divergence.

Evaluations of the contribution of the Byzantine Empire to Christianity vary. For many, it was a creative and life-giving cultural synthesis of a Hebrew religious awe and a Greek search for philosophical truth. For these, the task facing the Church today is to leave behind the centuries of political subjection to Ottoman or Communist rule and of intellectual dependence on Western theology and philosophy, and to recover the vitality and creativity of the Byzantine centuries. A modern Greek theologian, Christos Yannaras, has said that the way to health of the Church is to recognise the cultural greatness of Byzantium and to present a Hellenistic corrective to Western individualism. Others fear that a desire to recreate the spirit of Byzantium will result in a rigid conservatism and an identification of the Church with a specific cultural form, while the task of the Church is to present the apostolic faith to modern generations, in the West as well as the East. Alexander Schmemann, the former dean of St Vladimir's Seminary in New York, admitted in his posthumously published journals to a deep distaste for all things Byzantine.[3] Whether the Byzantine Empire is seen as a highpoint of Christian civilisation or as merely one relative cultural form of a universal faith, the significance of the millennium of Byzantine civilisation in shaping the Orthodox Church must be acknowledged.

[3] See C. Yannaras, *Philosophie sans rupture* (Geneva 1986), p. 7. A. Schmemann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann 1978–1983* (New York 2000), is an example of an unusually frank criticism of a Byzantinist approach.