Was Eastern Christianity Always Orthodox?

Cyril Hovorun

Why is the identity of eastern Christianity defined, in large part, by *Orthodoxy*? This is a little like asking: why am I who I am? The question seems rhetorical—and yet not easy to answer. This article offers clues to answering this question.

The English word *orthodox* comes from two Greek words, *ὀρθός* and *δοκέω*. Together they mean "I think correctly." Orthodoxy thus refers to a way of thinking about or perceiving God. Orthodoxy is also commonly understood as derived from the words *ὀρθός* and *δόξα*, "right" and "glory." It is often said that Orthodoxy is about the correct way of glorifying God—that it has to do with rite and prayer more than with thinking and perception. This is also a possible interpretation of the term. There is no contradiction between the two interpretations, as we Orthodox like to connect our manner of thinking with our way of praying and glorifying. Recognition of this connection dates to the fourth century, when Evagrius of Pontus, the great systematizer of spiritual and monastic life, coined the famous phrase: "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian" (*Treatise on Prayer*). More recently, and mostly in the North American context, the word *orthodox* has come to connote "conservative," standing for certain moral issues. This notion is more limited than what was originally meant by "Orthodoxy" in the Eastern Christian tradition.

Orthodoxy was never the only term used to designate the Eastern Christian tradition; it was always used along with others, such as *catholic* (*καθολικός*). The Orthodox continue to use this term, which occurs in the Nicene Creed, with the reservation that it does not designate us as Roman Catholics. Another term the Orthodox have applied to ourselves historically is *Roman*. This name became especially significant on the soil of the Ottoman Empire, where all the Orthodox, regardless of their national identity, were called "Rum"—Romans. Even today, the Orthodox in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and other countries that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire often call themselves "Rum."

Eventually the Orthodox began to adopt other terms, such as "Greek" and "Russian." In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the churches were becoming increasingly connected with national identity, and the

famous 1823 Catechism of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow identified the Orthodox Church in the Russian Empire of his time as the "Orthodox Catholic Eastern Greek Russian Church." As before, these changes in Orthodox self-identification denoted shifting perceptions of what a local church was.

Una Sancta

A principal feature of Orthodox self-understanding is that Orthodoxy is self-sufficient. Its self-sufficiency is conditioned by the ecclesiology it professes, sometimes called an *Una Sancta* ecclesiology. This term implies that there is one Church, which exists visibly here and now and has existed without disruption or deficiency since apostolic times. We believe in the continuity of our Church and its tradition from the day of the Pentecost.

One of the key points of Orthodox ecclesiology is that the gates of Hades will not overcome the Church of Christ (cf. Matt. 16:18). The Orthodox believe that our Church is the one established by Christ. This Church is constituted by communities of faithful that share the same faith, ministry, mysteries, and prayers. Those communities that are different in faith (heretical) or do not share communion (schismatic) do not belong to the one Church but remain outside it. There are fervent debates among the Orthodox as to whether either heretics or schismatics somehow participate in the Church. While a strict approach excludes them, there are also those who believe that some non-Orthodox Christian communities have a certain participation in the Body of Christ, though the details of that participation are unclear. They find this approach especially applicable to the Roman Catholics.

Orthodox and Roman Catholics argue about the borders of the Church, but notwithstanding these disagreements, we hold in common a belief that the Church is one. We both reject the theory that the Church exists in branches, which, though not visibly sharing communion, invisibly constitute the same Church. The Orthodox insist that visible communion between local communities is essential for their participation in the life of the Church. Breaking this communion means falling out of the Church.

The *Una Sancta* ecclesiology contrasts with another kind of ecclesiology, which is shared mostly by the Protestant churches. This other ecclesiology considers the unity of the Church something to be achieved in its fullness only in the eschatological perspective, while in our own time the various churches have only partial communion and their unity is invisible. This is the point where Orthodox and Protestant ecclesiologies seem irreconcilable.

Principles of Unity

What makes the Church one, from the Orthodox perspective? Over the course of history, several different factors have ensured the unity of the Church. For a long time, it was guaranteed by the unity of the Roman empire. Unity of Church and unity of Empire became closely interrelated categories. The former was considered an important precondition for the integrity of the state, and the emperors considered it their duty to see to the unity of Christians within their dominion. This does not neces-

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Council of Ephesus (Third Ecumenical Council). The council, which settled christological questions of central importance to the faith, was convened in AD 431 by a political authority, Roman Emperor Theodosius II. Fresco by Symeon Axenti, St. Sozomenos Church, Galata, Cyprus, 1513.

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sarily mean that, in pursuing church unity, the emperors had in mind only the protection of the state. They considered this unity to be valuable in itself, and regarded themselves as having the sacred duty to preserve and, when needed, restore it.

The emperors had to balance the purity of the faith against protecting the unity of church and state. In the Roman empire, the former was often compromised in favor of the latter. The history of such compromises began with Constantine himself, when he persecuted Athanasius (293–373) and his followers—who fought for the teaching of the council of Nicea (325)—in order to preserve unity on the basis of the faith of majority, Arianism. After the council of Chalcedon (451) and the resulting splits among the Christians of the East, many emperors undertook steps toward reconciliation that were considered by church leaders and theologians to compromise the faith. For example, the *Henotikon* of the Emperor Zeno (482) caused a major split between West and East, the so-called Acacian schism. Of the same nature was an attempt undertaken by emperor Heraclius (575–641), who, together with Sergius, the Patriarch of Constantinople (610–638), invented Monenergism, which later grew into Monothelitism. These doctrines were proposed in attempts at compromise in order to heal the splits among the Christians caused by the council of Chalcedon, but the undertakings of both Zeno and Heraclius were rejected by the Church as compromises too far-reaching to be acceptable. More successful was the Neo-Chalcedonianism formulated by the Emperor Justinian (483–565) and contemporary theologians, an attempt to interpret Chalcedon in terms of Cyril of Alexandria (376–444). There were no theological reasons to develop Neo-Chalcedonianism—only political ones—but it appeared to be theologically fruitful, despite prompting some reservations in the West.

In all these examples, the ideal of true faith was compromised by the idea of the one Church and correct balances were not found. When the unity of the empire started to decline at the beginning of the second millennium, other features of the unity of the Church reemerged.

Pivotal among these was unity of faith. We may understand faith differently in a modern context. Nowadays, we often perceive faith as the acceptance of God's existence and as a personal relationship of an individual with God. In the early Christian period, however, starting approximately from the third century, the category of faith was understood mostly as a set of ideas about God. Faith became identified with doctrine. To many modern Christians, this concept may appear reductionist, but Roman Christians believed that the way they thought about God affected their relationship with him. They

were convinced that if they understood the mechanisms of salvation wrongly, those mechanisms would not work for them and they would be deprived of salvation. Modern Orthodoxy maintains the same belief.

The idea of Orthodoxy as correct doctrine about God and his incarnation thus became a key feature of Eastern Christian identity, regardless of the fact that it was in the East that most heresies had been born and had been supported by church leaders and civil authorities.

Orthodoxy was proclaimed and propagated as the most important feature of Christianity, overshadowing all its other characteristics. The feast of Triumph of Orthodoxy, which had been introduced at the end of the iconoclast controversies (843), now became especially popular. Initially, it had been intended to celebrate the victory over iconoclasm, but gradually it developed into celebration of Orthodoxy as such, a kind of cult of Orthodoxy. A special genre of literature was developed to celebrate the triumph of Orthodoxy, the so-called *Synodika of Orthodoxy*. These are the catalogues of all known heresies and apostasies from the true faith, and they became extremely popular from the eleventh century onward.

The new focus on issues of faith was one reason that the Eastern Church accepted the split with the West in 1054. This occurred not only because of the universalist claims of the Roman Popes—which had begun much earlier and had been more or less tolerated by the East—but also in response to their deviations from the true faith, which the Easterners saw expressed primarily in the Filioque. It was thus

Sultan Mehmed II receiving Gennadios II Scholarios, whom he had appointed as Ecumenical Patriarch in 1454. Under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, the sultans played a role in defining what it meant to be Orthodox.

a doctrinal issue that triggered the Great Schism, which continues to our day. In the fourteenth century, the issue of the nature of divine grace and whether it is created or uncreated was added to the Filioque controversy, further complicating matters. The so-called Hesychast Controversy that evolved around this issue made the notion of reconciliation between East and West even more difficult.

With the fall of Constantinople, issues of faith became less important for Eastern Christians. Scholars of this period are astonished at how many doctrinal inaccuracies are found among theologians of the post-Byzantine period: judged by the criteria of late Byzantium, many of them would be condemned as heretics. It appears that doctrinal purity became less important for the Orthodox under Ottoman rule, though this does not mean that the criterion of church unity based on orthodoxy of faith disappeared altogether. Other mechanisms of securing unity appear to have arisen during the period when the Church operated within the Ottoman state. It seems that unity was seen as a mechanism of the *millet*, a group of people sharing the same faith, under a leader both spiritual and civil, the Patriarch of Constantinople. The fact

of survival as one people—Orthodox Christians—under the conditions of Muslim dominance became a powerful factor of consolidation of the Orthodox, replacing other factors: it is from this period that Roman or Rum identity became crucial for Orthodox self-understanding.

National and Orthodox

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The *millet* became something of a proto-nation and, as such, fostered national revolutions in the Balkans, leading to other independent states and national churches. In the period after the French revolution and emergence of the national states, the unity of *ethnos*, the nation, became important for securing the unity of the local churches. Ecclesial unity came to be safeguarded by autocephaly, an ancient principle that, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, had become neglected, but which was now revived as a church analogue to the independence of national states. As it reflected political situations, autocephaly itself turned into a phenomenon with a strong national—if not even nationalistic—and political character. In this sense, it became quite different from autocephaly as it was known in the ancient Church. In Byzantium, autocephaly functioned within the confines of a single state, helping to maintain its unity, but in the modern era it furthered the independence of Orthodox states from one another.

The process of local Orthodox churches becoming national churches, independent from each other according to the political model of national states, has been criticized in recent years. In its initial stage, however, this process was probably helpful in consolidating local churches after the fall of the Ottoman empire. It helped the Church preserve its visible unity through a system of independent churches that nevertheless maintained mutual communion. It was not long before this process showed its dark side, however. Identification of the local church with the nation led to the phenomenon of *ethnophyletism*. This term describes a situation in which a church attempts to structure itself along national and political lines, especially when it violates the principle of "one city, one bishop" and when parallel jurisdictions are established in a single location. Ethnophyletism was condemned at the local Council of Constantinople in 1872—a condemnation now unanimously supported by all the Orthodox churches—but survived its condemnation in various forms and can be seen in the life of local churches even in our days.

The beginning of the twentieth century brought a challenge to global Orthodoxy, when, with the collapse of the Russian Empire, many of its habitants had to emigrate to escape the Bolshevik regime. There was no longer a single state or ideology they could rely upon to preserve a sense of unity as members of one Church—something they had enjoyed under the protection of the Russian Empire. Seeking other bases for ecclesial unity, theologians among these Russian emigrants developed a number of concepts, among the most fruitful of which is the so-called Eucharistic ecclesiology. According to this concept, the core of the Church is the Eucharistic community, a group of faithful who partake from one chalice. Our participation in one Eucharist makes us a local church, which has all the fullness of the Body of Christ. Eucha-

ristic communities can form various ecclesial structures, starting from dioceses up to the level of autocephalous churches, but the main criterion of their belonging to the Church of Christ is the true Eucharist they have and share with other communities.

In our days, theologians have begun to think beyond Eucharistic ecclesiology. For instance, in looking for signs of the unity of the Church, they recognize such aspects of its life as Baptism, community, forms of prayer, principles of monastic and spiritual life, and other aspects of church life that not only make people feel as though they belong to one Church but that actually make us one Church. In other words, many other aspects of church life apart from the Eucharist are factors of unity of the Church. Theology still has much work to do in exploring these aspects of unity.

Orthodoxy and Ecumenism

Since we started by exploring the factors that ensure the unity of the Church, it is worthwhile at this point to say a few words about the key factors of unity in other Christian traditions. In the Roman Catholic Church, it is obvious that the bishop of Rome is an important source of church unity. Ironically, the papacy has contributed to unity among the Eastern Churches too, but in a negative sense. However significant the disagreements between the Eastern Churches might have been, they joined in rejecting papal primacy as it was understood in the West. In the first millennium, the Eastern bishops held the role of Rome in high regard when it came to ecclesial and theological matters, but never considered it essential for keeping the Church together. A unified Church did not necessarily have to be unified around or under the *primus inter pares*. Therefore, when they felt that Rome at the turn of the millennium had abused its primacy, they broke with it. In doing so, they did not believe the Church had ceased to be one: they believed that they remained the Church, while Rome had fallen out of it. The same understanding is preserved in the Orthodox tradition up to our own day.

Does the concept of church unity from the Eastern perspective, as it was expounded earlier, presuppose the exclusivism of Orthodoxy and an unwillingness for ecumenical dialogue? To some extent, it does. There is a popular feeling among the Orthodox that there is no need to have any kind of dialogue with non-Orthodox. Moreover, many people believe that such dialogue can be dangerous because it can compromise the faith. This belief engenders suspicion among the Orthodox faithful about the ecumenical activities of our hierarchy, sometimes leading to outbursts in actions of protest and even church divisions.

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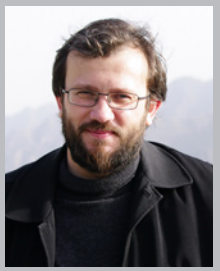
The fixation of the Orthodox on issues of faith in the context of ecumenical activities is sometimes paradoxical. Quite often, people who object to ecumenical dialogue on the grounds of protecting the faith appear to be quite ignorant about the faith they protect. This does not mean that only the ignorant are opposed to dialogue. Well-educated people and theologians with much knowledge also sometimes object to ecumenical activities. Their objections can be explained by the idea of self-sufficiency that results from the belief that there is only one Church

of Christ, and that this Church is Orthodox. Secure in the belief that they belong to the one Church, such people do not regard splits among Christians as a tragedy. But many educated members of the Orthodox churches, especially those who have intensive personal contacts with non-Orthodox Christians, believe that splits among Christians are abnormal. In thinking this way, they do not betray the concept of one Church and the exclusivity of Orthodoxy, but they struggle to bring Christians closer to each other and they consider it a deficiency in Christianity as long as divisions exist. They seek to overcome existing divisions by supporting dialogue and providing through it a witness to the Christian tradition as preserved in the Eastern Church.

The identity of Orthodoxy underwent dramatic evolution even in the early centuries of Christianity. In recent times, the speed of its evolution has increased, as the disestablishment of traditional Orthodox churches and their encounter with other Christian traditions has prompted the development of modern Orthodox identity. Once again, Orthodox Christians are challenged to redefine what it means to be Orthodox, in accordance with the Gospel we confess and without ignoring the reality of the world we face. ❋



The V. Rev. Dr. Cyril Hovorun is Associate Dean of St. Ignatios Theological Academy (Sweden), Director of Research at the Institute of Theological Studies at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Ukraine), and a research fellow at Yale University (USA). From 2007 to 2009, he chaired the Department of External Relations of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. From 2009 to 2011, he was the first Deputy Chairman of the Educational Committee of the Russian Orthodox Church.

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