

**A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE
ORTHODOX CHURCH IN ASIA
Historical Development and
Theological Features**

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Historical Development

The beautiful spectrum of Christianity can only be complete if all the parts are present. There may be nothing lacking. If it is so then, there is only a partial representation or, if the expression might be allowed, a serious misrepresentation of the universal Church of Christ. It is with this in mind that one can understand the presence, mission and purpose of the Orthodox Church in the Asian lands.

As is proper and necessary, one needs to study history only to see that Orthodoxy is not a new-comer to the Asian continent. In fact, the Orthodox Church is the Church of the East and her roots are in the soil of the Asian lands. Being responsible individuals and students of ecclesiastical history, the faithful of the Church are called to an awareness of the history of Christianity in the various lands, including the Middle Kingdom.

The first Orthodox Christians came to China in the year 1685, as a result of the conquering of the area of Albazin. There a number of Cossacks and Orthodox Albazinians were taken captive. Historical sources state that forty-five of these captives entered the service of the Chinese Emperor and they were taken to Peking, accompanied by their priest, Father Maximus Leontiev. In Peking, Emperor K'ang-hsi graciously received them and granted the priest an old Buddhist temple to convert into a chapel for the spiritual needs of the Orthodox faithful. In this brief account, one notes a most important and critical moment in the ecclesiastical life of China – the arrival of Orthodox Christianity.

In the years that followed, the small community would grow and develop. While the mission in China would retain Orthodox roots, there were serious attempts to drink from the richness of Chinese culture. In the Orthodox publication *The Vine*, one reads the following:

The missions of the first half of the nineteenth century had little more success in converting the native Chinese, but they laid the foundation for this by beginning to study Chinese language and culture more diligently than their predecessors had done. By the end of the nineteenth century the Holy Scriptures and Orthodox Church books had been translated into Chinese, the Russian clergy of the mission spoke the language fluently and were not separated from the flock by a linguistic barrier. Archimandrite Innocent summarizes this period from 1712 to 1860 by saying:

"On the whole the hard-working people of the first period did much in the way of bringing China and Europe closer with each other and into better mutual understanding. They introduced into Europe a knowledge of the Chinese language and literature, Chinese customs and manners of living, Chinese flora and fauna, Chinese ethnography and medicine. There were 155 Russian missionaries all told during this period. Each tried to contribute something to the treasury of knowledge on China."¹

In later times, the Church in China was to see continued progress and growth, as witnessed in the account provided about Archimandrite Pallady Kaffarov. Archimandrite Innocent, in his writings, calls him:

... a tireless student of the Chinese language, which he knew better than all his predecessors. Among the Holy Books translated by Father Pallady into Chinese were the book of Psalms and the Book of Services.²

¹ *The Vine* 8 (Winter 1991), 18.

² *The Vine*, 22.

Historical accounts tell the reader that with the help of his assistant, Father Pallady continued to push forward. Father Flavian, the assistant and successor of Father Pallady, successfully conducted services in Chinese. These important moments in the history of the Chinese Church bear witness to the fact that China had an indigenous Orthodox community.

Regretfully, the small community of Orthodox Christians was to see a series of events that would deliver crushing blows to the Church. In 1900, the results of the Boxer Rebellion would offer Christ His first Asian Martyrs. Two hundred twenty two members of the Orthodox Mission were martyred by the Boxers. Father Mitrophan (Tsi Chung), Kliment Kui Kin, Matfei Hai Tsan, Anna Chui and many others gave their lives for Christ.

On March 23, 1901, in the Official Journal of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, the following text appeared, concerning the Martyrs of China.

The blood of martyrs has always been the seed from which flourishing Christian communities have sprung up in pagan lands. Let us then pray that this terrible persecution, far from bringing discouragement to the Orthodox missionaries and the little Orthodox flock in China, may on the contrary become therein a source of greater zeal and the wider extension of the Kingdom of God, to the glory of Him that said, "This Gospel shall be preached in the whole world" (Matt. 26:13). And again, "Many shall come from the east and west and shall recline with Abraham and Isaac in the kingdom of the Heavens!"³

The persecution against truth was not limited to the outbreaks of the Boxer Rebellion. In the years to come, the Orthodox faithful were to suffer other blows. Atheistic rule and the persecutions during the Cultural Revolution were to also leave their marks. Over the years, clergy and laity would face long prison terms, some even unto death. Churches, monasteries, chapels, and other ecclesiastical edifices would vanish not only from sight but also from the minds of the people, as efforts were made to change the face of history.

God, Who desires that all people should be saved and come to the knowledge of His truth, would not allow the soil of China to remain without an Orthodox heritage. As the Second Christian Millennium would come to a close and in anticipation of the Third Millennium, the

³ *The Vine*, 51.

Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople would establish a new Metropolitanate on Chinese soil. In November 1996, by decision of the Holy and Great Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia would be born. The action by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Mother Church of Orthodoxy Christianity, would take into its bosom the treasury of the efforts of the early Orthodox missionaries, as well as allow for new efforts in Asia.

By establishing a new see in Hong Kong, the Ecumenical Patriarchate not only desired to share the Orthodox understanding of Christianity with those not yet members of the Church, but also to work with the other Christian communions in the true ecumenical spirit. It is with these thoughts in mind that the Orthodox take up the challenge that God has offered.

Theological Features

As one cannot speak of the world without China, one cannot understand the spectrum of Christianity without Eastern Orthodoxy. In order for Christians and non-Christians alike to be exposed to the fullness of the Christian traditions, it is necessary that Orthodoxy be encountered.

The vast majority of Chinese Christians are recipients of Western Christianity, as they are the inheritors of the traditions of Rome and the Protestant Reformation. This leads one to understand that the many eastern converts are western in their approach and understanding of God, while Orthodox Christians are eastern in their philosophical approach to the divine. This is clearly understood in the two different theological approaches – the cataphatic and the apophatic.

Western Christianity tells a person what God is. The cataphatic approach affirms the attributes which are given to God. While it is, indeed, proper and true, the East uses another approach, often referred to as the "negative" way. The noted Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky writes the following:

The negative (apophatic) way attempts to know God not in what He is (that is to say, in relation to our experience as creatures) but in what He is not. It proceeds by a series of negations. The Neo-Platonists and Indian philosophers use this way too, as it is imposed on all thought which turns to God, raising itself towards Him. It culminates, with Plotinus, in the suicide of philosophy, in the metamorphosis

of the philosopher into the mystic. But outside Christianity, it only ends in the depersonalization of God, and of man who seeks him. Thus an abyss separates this quest from Christian theology, even when the latter appears to follow the way of Plotinus. Indeed, a Gregory of Nyssa or a Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (in his treatise, *On Mystical Theology*) does not see, in apophaticism, revelation but the receptacle of revelation: they arrive at the personal presence of a hidden God. For them the negative way is not resolved in a void where the subject and object will be reabsorbed; the human person is not dissolved but has access to a face to face encounter with God, a union without confusion.⁴

In Chapter Five of *About Mystic Theology*, St. Dionysios says that God is neither spirit, neither logos, neither power, neither light, neither life, neither substance, neither time, neither science, neither truth, neither Kingdom, neither wisdom, neither benevolence. These words show that God is above every human notion.⁵

Apophaticism consists in negating that which God is not; one eliminates firstly all creation, even the cosmic glory of the starry heavens and the intelligible light of the angels in the sky. Then one excludes the most lofty attributes: goodness, love and wisdom. One finally excludes being itself God is none of all this; in His own nature He is the unknowable. He "is not." Side by side, the cataphatic and apophatic approaches compliment one another. God Who is the hidden God, beyond all that reveals Him, is also He that reveals Himself He is wisdom, love, goodness. But His nature remains unknowable in its depths, and that is exactly why He reveals Himself the permanent memory of apophaticism must rectify the cataphatic way, All of this was preached and taught by Saint Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, as he labored to distinguish between the essence and the energies of God. Just as one feels the warmth and receives the light of the sun and does not come into contact with the actual source, so a person receives the energies (the grace, mercies, love, etc. of God) and does not come into contact with His essence.

This theological approach has one purpose and goal – the union with God. In the eastern approach to theology, it is understood that Adam did not fulfill his calling. He was unable to attain to union with God and the deification of the created order. That which he failed to

⁴ Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 32.

⁵ See Holy Monastery of St. Gregorios, *The Deification as the Purpose of Man's Life* (Mt. Athos, 1997).

realize when he used the fullness of his liberty became impossible to him from the moment at which he willingly became the slave of an external power. From the fall until the day of Pentecost, the divine energy, deifying and uncreated grace, was foreign to human nature, acting on it from the outside and producing created effects in the soul. Deification, union with God by grace, had become impossible. But the plan of God was not destroyed by the sin of man; the vocation of the first Adam was fulfilled by Christ, the second Adam. God became man in order that man might become god, to use the words of Irenaeus and Athanasius, echoed by the Fathers of the Church and theologians throughout the ages. However, this work, finished by the Incarnate Word (the *Logos*), is seen primarily by fallen humanity in its most immediate aspect, as the work of salvation, the redemption of a world captive to sin and death. The work of Christ calls out to the work of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Father spoke of the Son, so Christ introduces and invites the Holy Spirit to come and complete the work He began. Humanity is not left alone to struggle in the darkness of a world of sin.

Saint John of Damascus, the great theologian of the Eastern Church, theologizes that with the Incarnation of the Word, a second communion between God and an individual is realized. The first communion, the one in Paradise, broke up and people were separated from God. The all compassionate God provided for another, a second communion, that is to say, a union between God and humans that can no longer be broken up because it is realized in the person of Christ. Through the saving grace of Christ and belief in His message – of truth, the fallen image may be corrected and restored.

Eastern Orthodox theology is lived in a liturgical life of experience, usually within the Church and the greater ecclesiastical community. The Church, even as a physical structure, is understood as a reflection of heaven on earth. The faith reaches all the senses and has as its purpose the transfiguration of the total person. The old man dies and the new person lives in Christ, as St. Paul directs the believers.⁶ Worldly time and space are changed by grace, and they become the reality of the future kingdom. Sinners become the "body of Christ", in and through the Divine Liturgy. In the Church, the different and diverse become the one, holy people of God. In the Church, all things lead toward deification–

⁶ See Galatians, 2:20.

the Divine Liturgy, the sacraments, divine Worship, the preaching, fasting, everything. The Church is the sole place of deification. The following story can best describe what the Church, even as an edifice, is meant to be – heaven on earth.

There is a story in the Russian Primary Chronicle of how Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, while still a pagan, desired to know which was the true religion, and therefore sent his followers to visit the various countries of the world in turn. They went first to the Muslim Bulgars of the Volga, but observing that these when they prayed gazed around them like men possessed, the Russians continued on their way dissatisfied. "There is no joy among them," they reported to Vladimir, "but mournfulness and a great smell; there is nothing good in their system." Traveling next to Germany and Rome, they found the worship more satisfactory, but complained that here too it was without beauty. Finally, they journeyed to Constantinople, and here at last, as they attended the Divine Liturgy in the great Church of the Holy Wisdom, they discovered what they desired. "We know not whether we were in heaven or on earth, We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. We cannot forget that beauty."⁷

One might notice that the Russians did not search for a faith community that was described by the rules. Their search for the true faith was a journey of observing the worship life of a faith community. The Orthodox approach to religion is fundamentally a liturgical approach. In and through the liturgy of life, one comes to union with God. Theology is not a science and a discipline in the true Orthodox sense. It is a life style and path to the kingdom of God. That is why Saint Paul writes: "if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."⁸

It is difficult for many people to understand the unity and diversity that can be experienced in the richness of Orthodoxy. While there is unity of faith in doctrine and dogma, there is a diversity of expression through language, culture, liturgical traditions and other expressions.

⁷ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 2nd ed. (Harmondworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 264.

⁸ See Col. 3:1-2.

Although the structure of the services has been set according to the Ordo (the set guidelines for worship – a type of rubrics) of the Church, the life of the Church is not limited by human barriers, as some might claim. As time passes, the Church moves and grows, while keeping the basic tenets of faith that were entrusted to her. The Eastern Patriarchs best defined this in their Letter of 1718 to the Non-Jurors:

We preserve the Doctrine of the Lord uncorrupted, and firmly adhere to the Faith He delivered to us, and keep it free from blemish and diminution, as a Royal treasure, and a monument of great price, neither adding anything, nor taking anything from it.⁹

In order to better understand the Orthodox Church, it is necessary for the average person to reflect on several of the theological features that characterize the Church.

"All profess that there are seven holy and Ecumenical Councils, and these are the seven pillars of the faith of the Divine Word on which He erected His holy mansion, the Universal and Ecumenical Church."¹⁰ These words of Metropolitan John of Russia (1086-89) are a sound basis for one's initial understanding of the theology of the Councils of the Eastern Church.

It has always been the Orthodox understanding that Truth cannot be defined, except in the person of Jesus Christ, Who said: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is for this reason that the Orthodox Church has never tried to define truth, according to limited human resources. Rather, by divine guidance, she has attempted to defend truth from heresy. This she did by means of the Great Councils, which verbalized what the universal Church believed in harmony. It is in this way that the Orthodox Church is a conciliar Church. Bishop Kallistos Ware correctly writes: "In the Church there is neither dictatorship nor individualism, but harmony and unanimity; its members remain free but not isolated, for they are united in love, in faith, and in sacramental communion. In a true council no single member arbitrarily imposes his will upon the rest, but each consults with others, and in this way they all freely achieve a 'common mind'. A council is a living embodiment of the essential nature of the Church."¹¹

⁹ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 196.

¹⁰ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 18.

¹¹ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 15.

While there may have been Seven Great Councils (often referred to as Ecumenical Councils or Synods), all of them had one underlying theme, one issue – the person of Christ. Christ Godman (the Greek term used is θεάνθρωπος), the Son and Word of God the Father, has two perfect natures: the divine and the human. These two perfect natures are unified "unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably" in the one person of God the Word, of Christ, according to the famous definition of the Holy Fourth Ecumenical Synod of Chalcedon, which in summary constitutes under the Holy Spirit, the theological armor of the Orthodox Church against all kinds of Christological heresies of all times. The human nature, through the hypostatic union of the two natures in the person of Christ, is irrevocably unified with the divine one because Christ is eternally Godman. As Godman, he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the world in the Second and Glorious Coming. Therefore, human nature is now enthroned in the bosom of the Trinity, and nothing can separate human nature from God. That is why now, after the Incarnation of the Lord, no matter what the sin, if there is true repentance, one may be united with God and become god by grace.

In the Synods the Trinitarian theology of the Church was developed and this she still holds and keeps as a sacred treasure. This she sings and pronounces her theology in her ancient hymns, such as the *Doxastikon* which is chanted on the great feast of Pentecost:

Come, all peoples, and let us worship the one Godhead in three persons. The Son in the Father with the Holy Spirit. For the Father gave birth outside time to the Son, Coeternal and enthroned with him; And the Holy Spirit is glorified in the Father together with the Son: One power, one essence, one Godhead, whom we all worship, and to whom we say: Holy God, who hast created all things through the Son, by the cooperation of the Holy Spirit; Holy and Mighty, through whom we know the Father, and through whom the Holy Spirit came to dwell within the world, Holy and Immortal, Paraclete Spirit, proceeding from the Father and resting on the Son. Holy Trinity, glory to you.¹²

While this hymn may be acceptable to all Christians, it is not like the hymns of the western traditions and communions, as they speak in a more personal, friendly type of way. The Orthodox Church has always seen her theology as a type of sermon which is delivered to the faithful

¹² Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 39.

through her hymnology. The Orthodox tradition also has a complex theology, unlike the contemporary, simple western expressions of belief that have arisen, especially in recent times. It is for this reason that the Church also speaks of the "continued Pentecost", since the continued experience of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church allows the living truth to define and express its dogma through the various chants and hymns.

An Orthodox Christian might say that he/she accepts Christ: When with a spirit of obedience he trust his Mother, the Church. He believes in what She believes and he receives all that She attempts to offer and teach. The eyes of the soul are opened and he understands the mysteries of God. The vision of the mind widened and refined. The heart is purified and one enjoys the purge of his passions. In and through the Church, one is purged, cleansed and enlightened. Progressively, beginning with Holy Baptism, a person struggles to become a Christian.

The core of Orthodox life and worship is the Divine Liturgy, the Eucharist, as it binds and joins the faithful into the Body of Christ. The Eucharist is understood with the theological understanding of the real presence of Christ. It is not a symbolic expression, as some western communions hold. While the Orthodox insist on the reality of the change of the elements into the sacred Body and Blood of Christ, they have never tried to scholastically define this in a legal or systematic manner. Saint Nicholas Kavalas, the great liturgist, writes the following:

First, the sacrifice is not a mere figure or symbol but a true sacrifice; secondly, it is not the bread that is sacrificed, but the very Body of Christ; thirdly, the Lamb of God was sacrificed once only, for all time... The sacrifice at the Eucharist consists, not in the real and bloody immolation of the Lamb, but in the transformation into the sacrificed Lamb.¹³

Not all Christians maintain this belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, as we learn from ecumenical dialogues. Because this is a crucial and serious matter in Orthodox theology, the Orthodox Church practices a closed communion. This means that only Orthodox Christians may partake of holy communion at an Orthodox Liturgy. The Eucharist is not seen or understood in the Orthodox tradition as a means to union. Rather, it is the visible expression and sign that union

¹³ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 286.

exists. It shows that those who partake of the Sacrament accept and agree with the doctrines of the Church.

A contemporary noted theologian writes the following statements, concerning the Eucharist. His words give a proper Orthodox understanding of the matter:

The eucharist is the center of the spiritual life in Christ and its source. Here the union with Christ is complete and full. The whole person in all its dimensions, with all its psychosomatic senses and functions, is joined in a deep union with Christ, is transformed and christified. "This is the celebrated marriage by which the most holy bridegroom takes the Church as His virgin bride... by this we become 'flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones' (cf. Gen. 2:21)." The divine eucharist makes "Christ our supreme good, superior to everything in us that is naturally good." "O the greatness of sacraments!... What is our mind when dominated by His divine mind! What is our will when overcome by His blessed will! What is our dust when utterly conquered by His fire!"

This christification of man is not just an impression which the believer creates for himself in his own mind. A person does not become a member of Christ merely in a manner of speaking; he becomes in reality. As an example Kavalas appeals to Paul, in whom all the human functions were transformed into functions of Christ: "'We have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16), [says the Apostle]; and, 'You desire proof that Christ is speaking in me' (2 Cor. 13:3); and, 'I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus' (Phil. 1:8) ... To sum it up: 'It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20)."¹⁴

Along with the Eucharist, the Orthodox Church has a number of "Mysteries" (often referred to as Sacraments), although there has never been a set number in the true tradition of the Church. While the number of Seven Mysteries is the usual understanding, it is a western concept that has drifted into the eastern tradition. Without these life-giving Mysteries, one is isolated from the source of true life and there is only spiritual death. Through the Mysteries both time and space are consecrated and become God's. They are no longer human, worldly and mundane. Through them a person reaches "theosis" (deification) and becomes one with God.

In order to fulfill the command of Christ to preach the good news to all nations, the Orthodox Church has returned to Asia to share with Asians the Sacred and Holy Tradition of the East, especially since she is the Church of the East.

¹⁴ Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 127.

In Asia, the Orthodox Church follows the practices which have characterized her efforts through the centuries. Her sermons are preached by local, indigenous clergy, in their respective languages. The Orthodox Church has not tried to change culture and local traditions. Rather, she has attempted to Christianize them and to place them within the life of the Church.

The Orthodox faith seems to fit well and comfortably into the spirit and life of the Asian cultures, as Orthodoxy has a more philosophical approach to God than the traditions of the West. The freedom of the spirit within a system that does not follow a strict and rigid path is a style that is easily embraced by a person, especially within the hearts of the people of the ancient Middle Kingdom. This is extremely important, since the work of salvation is not accomplished by God alone. Each person participates and shares in the process of synergy (the human working along with the divine). The human labors to climb the sacred mountain and come to the experience of Mount Tabor, when the glory of the uncreated light will change him. Through grace, he is transfigured and the fallen nature is restored to the correct expression of human nature, so that perfection is achieved in Christ.

ABSTRACT

After a general introduction of the Orthodox Church which came to China, during the Qing dynasty, the writer emphasizes "that union with God" is the goal of the Orthodox apophatic theological approach. Though the Orthodox Church has its own distinctive perspective on liturgy and sacrament, the writer points out that the Orthodox faith fits well and comfortably into the spirit and life of Asian cultures.

撮 要

本文指出，東正教徒早在1685年，便來華建立教會及佈道。在晚清期間，已有不少華人信徒。庚子拳亂間，北京便有二百二十名東正教徒被殺。後來由於大陸解放，東正教在華傳播中輟。1996年，東正教會普世宗主教重新在香港建立東正教會香港及東南亞都主教區。東正教會神學秉承「否定神學」之取向，強調信仰的目標在於「與上帝聯合」；另外，東正教對崇拜、聖餐及聖禮，皆有獨到的見解。然而，這些在神學上的承傳，並未影響他們與本土文化的會通。