

The Eastern Churches - a Historical Overview

Abbot Paul Stonham

Sir Steven Runciman, the great historian and defender of all things Byzantine, said that at the end of the 21st century the only Christian Church left in Britain would be the Orthodox Church. You might think that an extraordinary thing to say but ask any Orthodox believer and he or she would probably agree with Sir Steven. Why this incredible confidence, given the rapid decline of both Protestantism and Catholicism in the western Europe and the practical disappearance of Christianity in many parts of the Middle East and Africa in the face of Islam and the State of Israel. For most Catholics, and indeed for most westerners, the Eastern Churches are an unknown quantity, a great and impenetrable mystery. This is hardly surprising for historical, cultural and linguistic reasons. We are simply worlds apart.

It was at Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians and Antioch rather than Jerusalem became the centre of the missionary activity of the early Church. However, it was the Pax Romana that enabled Christianity to spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity and empires always seem to go together. The lingua franca of evangelisation was Greek, the language of the New Testament. In his fascinating book 'The Churches the Apostles left behind', Raymond Brown says that study of New Testament texts and of the developing Christologies found there should lead one to conclude that the early Church was anything but an organised and united institution in which all shared the same faith and practice. A fundamental misunderstanding most people have about the early Church is that it was one and undivided and that Christ founded it that way. In fact there were many churches, each with its own origin, history and experience of faith. Above all each had its own understanding of Jesus, its own Christology. Add Christology to nationalism and you have dynamite, but that's a later story.

It was with the conversion of Constantine, political expediency you might say, and the transformation of Christianity into the official imperial religion that local Churches began to move towards a more organic union, dependent, however, on the state. Ecumenical councils were summoned by the emperor to solve theological questions, above all differences in Christological and Trinitarian doctrine. Antioch and Alexandria had different ways of approaching Christological questions, but it was Constantinople, under the Emperor, that coordinated decisions on these matters with only limited intervention from Rome.

With the division of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century Greek east and Latin west began to drift apart even further, though Southern Italy and Sicily remained Greek and Byzantine into recent centuries. The Middle East and North Africa eventually became isolated by Islam. Now the relationship between Christianity and Islam from the 7th Century onwards is a fascinating study in itself. Everyone has read William Dalrymple's interesting travelogue 'From the Holy Mountain' which deals in part with this phenomenon.

With the establishment of the new strategically placed imperial capital of Constantinople and the eventual fall of Rome and disintegration of the Western Empire, the centre of gravity of shifted east to what we now call the Byzantine Empire,

Constantinople became the new Rome. The Byzantines considered themselves to be the true Romans and that is what they called themselves. To be called Byzantine was an insult. The Emperor was the head of Christendom, while the Patriarch was chosen and often deposed by him, or his wife. Greek was the language of the court and we soon find the Byzantine liturgical rites being imposed throughout the Empire, just as in the West the Roman rite gradually replaced local rites, e.g. in the Iberian Peninsula and Celtic Britain. In the west the Bishop of Rome became the focus of unity not only for the Latin Church but also for Western Europe which in spite of Charlemagne's efforts did not become a political whole but was united only in faith and in its communion with the Pope. This general cohesion was also brought about by the influence of monastic life and the almost universal observance of the Rule of St Benedict. History we know is written not by the conquered but by the conquerors, so it is hardly surprising that we look on the past differently from our Orthodox brethren.

Although East and West were now going their separate ways the Church was still to remain united for some centuries to come but it was a loose, uneasy union, chaotic too at times. The unseemly quarrels and political posturing surrounding the Filioque controversy and the mutual anathemas served to strengthen a trend that was ultimately cemented by two events of far reaching importance that shattered whatever hopes there might have been for reunion. After the Council of Florence a Byzantine nobleman remarked, "I would rather see the Muslim turban in the midst of the city than the Latin mitre". Speaking in Athens in 2001 Pope John Paul II, "In 1965 Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI by a mutual act removed and cancelled from the Church's memory and life the sentence of excommunication between Rome and Constantinople." The first event was the Crusades especially the Fourth Crusade, which in 1204 saw Latin Catholics sacking and looting Constantinople and savagely murdering their Orthodox brothers. The second was the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, during which no help was forth coming from the West. Eventually the world saw the expansion of Ottoman rule over most of eastern Christendom except for Russia and India. This gave rise to the idea that Russia was now the rightful successor to the Roman and Byzantine Empire and Moscow came to be regarded by some as the new and third Rome.

Fresh in the minds of Orthodox Christians today are these two catastrophic events and both reflect badly on the Latin Church and old Rome. Constantinople, the holy city, was sacked by Latin soldiers, monks and opportunists who had been blessed by the Pope albeit for another venture and no help came from the West to fight the Ottomans as the City fell, the darkest hour in the history of Orthodoxy. John Paul said, "Clearly there is need for a liberating process of purification of memory. For the occasions past and present, when sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have sinned by action or omission against their orthodox brothers and sisters, may the Lord grant us the forgiveness we beg of Him. (He must have been thinking here of Mussolini and Croatia.) Some memories are especially painful, and some events of the distant past have left deep wounds in the hearts and minds of people to this day. I am thinking of the disastrous sack of the city of Constantinople, which was for so long the bastion of Christianity in the east. It is tragic that the assailants, who had set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land, turned against their own brothers in the faith. The fact that they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret. How can we fail to see here the *mysterium iniquitatis* at work in the human heart? To God alone belongs judgement, and therefore we entrust the heavy burden of the past to his endless

mercy, imploring him to heal the wounds which still cause suffering to the spirit of the Greek people. Together we must work for this healing if the Europe now emerging is to be true to its identity, which is inseparable from the Christian humanism shared by east and west”.

In any ways the fall of Byzantium and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire put into place a further division in Christianity, and indeed in the heart of Europe, that was to last for over five hundred years until the fall and disintegration of the Ottoman empire and the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the fall of Constantinople both Europe and the Church ceased to breathe with both lungs and the marriage between sister Churches was put asunder.

The Catholic Church, unshackled from its links with the Orthodox and other Eastern Churches and now cut off from her very roots, continued to develop in reaction to events taking place in the Western World. The Papacy became, for better or for worse, what it is today, the focus of unity of a highly organised and powerful international institution, the modern Catholic Church. This unity within the Roman Church became more cohesive as a result of the Council of Trent, itself a belated reaction to the Protestant Reformation. Modern Catholic theology, spirituality and ecclesiology developed in relation to Protestantism, the enlightenment, colonialism and materialism. Spain and Portugal divided the New World between them with the British, French and Dutch hot on the trail. Evangelisation and missionary activity went hand in hand with colonialism.

The Eastern Churches knew none of this except for contact with proselytising missionaries, mostly Jesuits, sent from Rome. The Orthodox Church languished in the shadow of Islam. This is not to say that the Eastern Churches stagnated but time stood still in many ways. Monks and clergy kept alive the flame of Christianity, a flame that ultimately became indistinguishable from that of national identity, language and culture. The clergy became the champions not only of orthodoxy but of nationalism in the struggle, often armed, for political independence. This accounts for the Greek cry of independence being raised by Archbishop Germanos from a monastery in the Peloponnese in 1821, the life and work of Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus, and Archbishop Christodoulos’ fight today with the Greek government, the Ecumenical Patriarch and everyone else on such questions as the FYROM, the EEC and many other topics. The majority of Greeks still maintain that to be Greek means to be Orthodox and that to be anything else means not being Greek, Hellenism and Orthodoxy being inseparable.

As each nation gained independence from the Ottoman Empire, and more recently from the Soviet Union, national and autocephalous churches and new patriarchates came into existence in Bulgaria, Rumania, Serbia, Greece, Cyprus, Albania and elsewhere. This has led to a weakening of the influence and importance of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. This is particularly true as regards the independence of the Church of Greece. Athens has been fighting for some time for patriarchal status. The Patriarchate of Constantinople has been dramatically reduced to a few thousand souls in Turkey while, in theory, it is also responsible for the Greek Diaspora throughout the world. After the great disaster of 1922 Greece and Turkey exchanged populations, one of the many forms of ethnic cleansing. This effectively wiped out the Christian presence in Asia Minor that dated back to the missionary activity of St Paul.

Now all these national Churches have jurisdictions in the Diaspora. This accounts for the proliferation of Orthodox churches and cathedrals in London and other cities of the western world. The situation is much more complicated in the United States. Add to these the uniate and old calendar Churches as well as other oriental Churches. It is hardly surprising that these Churches are an unknown and indeed unknowable quantity for most westerners and a veritable minefield when it comes to ecumenical dialogue. There are more Eastern Churches than protestant sects.

Now the Church of Rome never forgot about the East and from the 16th to 19th Century many attempts were made at reunion, often at a local level and with some success. This activity, which some call proselytism, gave rise to the so called uniate Churches, i.e. Byzantine, Armenian, Coptic, Chaldean, Ethiopian and other oriental Churches in communion with Rome. These Churches are now relatively autonomous, with their rites, traditions and canon law respected by Rome and the election of their bishops and patriarchs free from Roman intervention, but this has not always been the case. Some have been influenced by Roman liturgical and canonical practice. In recent times, for example, the Ukrainian Church had to fight to keep its tradition of married priests. When studying in Rome, I often visited the Ukrainian Basilian monks on the Aventine and was surprised by their Latin practices. The existence of these Churches is undoubtedly a serious difficulty in ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox in particular. In Athens John Paul said, "If certain models of reunion of the past no longer correspond to the impulse towards unity which the Holy Spirit has awakened in Christians everywhere in recent times, we must all the more be open and attentive to what the Spirit is saying to the churches".

I mentioned nationalism and it must be said that all the Orthodox churches are fiercely nationalistic. A fascinating book on the subject is the rather scandalous 'Why Angels Fall' by Victoria Clarke. Nationalism is not only a problem in ecumenical dialogue but also where inter-church relationships are concerned, e.g. the difficulty in organising a pan-orthodox council. Compare this with the efficient organisation of the Roman Church. There are tensions, rivalries, and national agendas. It is all quite nuanced and mostly incomprehensible, impenetrable and unpredictable to the inexperienced, un-devilish westerner. Just take a look at poor Macedonia and the struggle to have its national Church recognised and the positions taken by the interested parties: Constantinople, Athens, Sophia, Belgrade and Moscow. An exceptionally interesting book on the Macedonian question is 'Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood', by Anastasia Karakatsidou. Standing before the bema of the Areopagus on 4th May 2001, Pope John Paul and his Beatitude Christodoulos made a common declaration which included the words, "We condemn all recourse to violence, proselytism and fanaticism in the name of religion. We especially maintain that relations between Christians, in all their manifestations, should be characterised by honesty, prudence and knowledge of the matters in question".

Anyone who reads the *Osservatore Romano* will have noticed how many visits to the Vatican are made by high ranking representatives of the eastern churches and how many joint statements, some of them including important matters of dogma, have been signed and solemnly proclaimed during the pontificate of John Paul II. Following the lead given by Blessed John XXIII and Paul VI, and under the impulse of the Second Vatican Council, John Paul II has spared no effort in the dialogue for reconciliation

and reunion with the Orthodox and other Eastern Churches. He has visited Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Armenia, Lebanon, Greece, Rumania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and the Ukraine. His heart was set on visiting Iraq and Russia, for although there is but one Catholic Church there are as many Eastern Churches as there are nations and ethnic groups.

In May 2001 John Paul II visited Syria as well as Greece. The contrast was striking. Although visits to Orthodox countries can be quite thorny propositions and are often marred by offensive and even violent anti-catholic and anti-papal protests, the Pope is invited and received as a head of state by the local government, rather than as the pastor of a small Catholic minority. These visits have invariably been successful and the personal intervention of John Paul, particularly in old age, has broken the ice of centuries, as the visit to Athens testifies. He comes with a profound knowledge of and respect for the history and theological traditions of the east. He knows and loves the fathers of the Church and emphasises the shared patrimony of an undivided Christendom. At the same time he is at ease with modern social and political events and is rapidly able to establish a rapport with statesmen, religious leaders and ordinary people alike.

In Greece he made a profound impact by asking forgiveness for the sins committed by Catholics against their Orthodox brethren in the past. "In the saints we see the ecumenism of holiness, which with God's help will eventually draw us into full communion, which is neither absorption nor fusion but a meeting in love and truth. The Catholic Church is irrevocably committed to the path of unity with all the churches". It is sad to note that Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens did not accept the Pope's invitation to take part in the day of prayer for peace in Assisi in January 2002. Nor has he accepted the recent invitation to go to Rome to receive part of the sacred chains with which the Apostle of the Nations, St Paul, founder of the Church of Athens and co-founder of the Church of Rome, was bound in prison while awaiting martyrdom. In fact it took him fifteen months to reply to the invitation stating this month that, "We shall be most pleased and honoured to visit your Holiness and renew our dialogue and collaboration. At the present time, however, it is difficult, because of open and pressing ecclesial matters, to specify a date for the realisation of this visit which we plan to make in the future." Even so he ends his brief letter to the Pope "with sentiments of deep esteem and fraternal love in Christ", which, to say the least, is a great step forward.

In Syria, on the other hand, the Holy Father asked respect for and acceptance off the uniate Churches, which he sees as instruments for dialogue between Rome and the East. Here, too, there was no suggestion that we should return to former ways: "Unfortunately the unity of the illustrious Patriarchate of Antioch was lost through the centuries, and we must hope that the different patriarchates existing now will once again find the path that will lead to full communion. Between the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Greek Catholic Patriarchate a process of ecumenical rapprochement has begun, and for this I thank the Lord with all my heart. In the same spirit of gratitude and hope, I would like to mention the deepening relations between the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate and the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate." In Damascus John Paul also mentioned the Armenian, Chaldean and Assyrian Churches, forced by violence to leave their homelands. He said "By conviction and necessity the Christians of Syria have learnt the art of hospitality and friendship. Transcending all ecclesial

divisions, such hospitality became the pledge of an ecumenical rapprochement. In the person of the persecuted brother, the Christ of Good Friday was recognised and welcomed.” In Syria he also spoke about fraternal relations between Christians and Muslims, the most important ecumenical dialogue there is.

To go back to Runciman, it must be said that the Orthodox Church appears to be flourishing again in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. The same is true in Greece where a real renaissance is occurring especially in monastic life as witness by the resurrection of Mount Athos and the many new monasteries of nuns. In the West there are many converts, attracted by the liturgy and the rich mystical traditions of patristic lands. The Pope himself recognised this inestimable treasure whilst in Greece and Syria. In Athens he insisted on the “supernatural bond of brotherhood between the Church of Rome and the Church of Greece that is strong and abiding”. In Damascus he said, “By virtue of the apostolic succession the priesthood and Eucharist unite in very close bonds our particular Churches who call each other, and love to call each other, sister Churches”. The reunion between the Catholic Church and her sister Churches of the east, in spite of all the difficulties involved, is not impossible. Surely this must be the will of God and within the capabilities of the Holy Spirit. After all, the theological differences are neither many nor insurmountable.

As we know Pope John Paul II is very keen on a united Europe, but for him this means the whole of Europe, a Europe that breathes with both lungs, a Christian Europe capable of accepting and respecting men and women of other religion and of none. Can you remember when we considered Switzerland to be the heart of Europe? That heart is moving east. Today it is Poland or Hungary; tomorrow it will be the Ukraine or Turkey as Europe extends to Georgia, Armenia and beyond. Perhaps, once again Constantinople will become the centre of the Christian world and the crossroads of religious dialogue, union and culture not only for Christians but for Jews and Muslims too.