

# What Should non-Orthodox Christians Know About Orthodox Spirituality?

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*Orthodoxy works within a conceptual framework different from that of the Western tradition... With Eastern Orthodoxy, we are in another world, even when the words we use appear to be similar... – Gerald Bray*

Orthodoxy is in no way a homogenous world. There is in it a lot of diversity in rites, theological emphases, and local traditions. There is also variation in preferences and styles of spirituality. Unfortunately, the conciseness of this paper does not allow us to do justice to this reality. Nevertheless, there is enough communality between the different expressions of Orthodoxy to be for us to be able to present a unified picture of it, even if a very sketchy one. Moreover, the fact that the author of this document is a Protestant, even if one that is very sympathetic to Orthodoxy, has its own limitations, but at the same time, we hope it is, a worthy exercise in empathy. I pray that the reading of this paper will be as much of a blessing to you, as it has been for me in writing it. *Soli Deo Gloria!* (Glory be to God only!)

## 1. Differences between the Christian East & West

Criteria	West	East
Linguistic framework	Latin	Greek
Separate historical/ political/religious/cultural developments	Papacy & Holy Roman Empire Reformation & Counter- Reformation Enlightenment & Capitalism	Byzantine & Turkish rule Iconoclastic <sup>1</sup> & Hesychastic <sup>2</sup> controversies Communism & Post-communism
Approach to life & reality	Juridical & Practical	Relational and Contemplative
Institutional structures of the church	Universal & Hierarchical	National & Conciliar

## 2. Orthodox Distinctives

- a. **Orthodoxy is a world of theology** – it aims to protect the impenetrable mystery of God (apophaticism<sup>3</sup>), rather than to systematize our understanding of God (kataphaticism<sup>4</sup>, scholasticism<sup>5</sup>). Nevertheless, Orthodoxy is very concerned about theological terminology, particularly in the area of the doctrine of the Church. Therefore, loose definitions, imprecise words, or unfounded casual statements will be very problematic for the Orthodox. Orthodox theology aims to manifest in a balanced manner four essential dimensions: 1) *epistemic* –

<sup>1</sup> *Iconoclastic controversy* – a dispute in 8<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium between the iconoclasts (those hating icons) and the iconoduls (those who revere icons).

<sup>2</sup> *Hesychastic controversy* – a 14<sup>th</sup> century dispute in Byzantium, between Varlaam, a crypto-Catholic and St. Gregory Palamas, who defended *hesychasm* (silence), a specifically Orthodox form of spirituality centered at Mount Athos in Greece, characterized, among others, by the silent repetition of the ‘Jesus prayer’.

<sup>3</sup> *Apophaticism* – negative theology – a specifically Orthodox theological emphasis, which stresses that God cannot be known in terms of human categories. It suggests that it is easier that state what God is not, rather than using positive statements in this respect.

<sup>4</sup> *Kataphaticism* – positive theology – the specifically Western, rational approach of theology.

<sup>5</sup> *Scholasticism* – a particularly Western approach to theology, which lays emphasis on the Rational justification and systematic presentation of Christian theology.

theology as science; 2) *kerigmatic*<sup>6</sup> – theology as proclamation; 3) *diaconal* – theology as service; 4) *contemplative* – theology as mystical endeavor.

- b. **Orthodoxy is sacramental and liturgical** – It emphasizes sacraments (called ‘mysteries’ by the Orthodox) and worship (liturgy). Emphasis on sacraments (similar to Catholics) tends sometimes to become sacramentalism. Worship precedes theological reflection (*lex orandi, lex credendi* – the rule of worship is the rule of faith).
- c. **Orthodoxy holds a specific ecclesiological perspective** – Orthodoxy perceives the Church as a spiritual community, as the mystical Body of Christ, rather than as an institution (like in pre-Vatican II Catholicism), or as a predominantly sociological reality (like in much Protestantism). The Orthodox emphasize patristic sayings like *unus christianus, nullus christianus* – a Christian alone is no Christian at all or *sine ecclesia, nulla salus* – outside the Church there is no salvation.
- d. **Orthodox is before anything else a Christian spirituality** – Orthodoxy conceives of spirituality as a balance of negative/ascetic disciplines (the voluntary opposition to passions, the mortification of sin and the renunciation to the "world") and positive actions (prayer, contemplation, service). The first specific feature of Orthodox spirituality is *hesychasm* – a spiritual movement that majors on a very elaborated technique of prayer involving a certain breathing style, a specific bodily position in prayer, the rhythm of prayer, with the purpose of facilitating concentration on the meaning of the hesychastic prayer – ‘Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner’. A second important aspect of Orthodox spirituality is the doctrine of *theosis* (divinization – the progressive human participation in the divine life, which is the goal of salvation). This does not mean an obliteration of the distinction between Creator and creation, but rather reflects Peter’s statement that by the Spirit we are becoming ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4).

### 3. Main Sources of Orthodox Spirituality

- a. **Revelation: Tradition and the Bible** – Revelation is the primary source of Orthodox spirituality. It includes: 1) *the Holy Scripture* – the written record of the revelation given by God through the Holy Spirit, to the prophets and apostles; and 2) *the Holy Tradition* – the revelation kept on oral form, both holding, like in Catholicism, and unlike Protestantism, an equal status of authority.
- b. **The Early Church** – The main traits of Orthodox spirituality coming from this source are: 1) *the heroism of martyrdom* – the result of over two centuries of bloody anti-Christian persecutions; 2) *asceticism* – an extension of the spirit of martyrdom in the sphere of fighting the sinful inclinations of the flesh; 3) *enthusiasm* – coming from the joy of Christ’s spiritual presence with the believers; 4) *eschatological hope* – the joyful expectation of Christ’s imminent return.
- c. **Greek Thought** – Greek neo-Platonic thought, with its *spirit-mater dualism* had a major influence on most Eastern Orthodox Fathers. Nevertheless, most Orthodox would say they were Platonizers (users of Platonism for the benefit of Christianity) rather than proper Platonists. From the same source came in Orthodoxy *an emphasis on mystical and allegorical speculation*.
- d. **Early monasticism** – Traits coming from this source through the Desert Fathers: 1) *the radical separation from the world*; 2) *prayer* – the only work monks were called to do for the world, 3) *the development of demonology* – as a result of personal experiences of spiritual warfare; 4) *contemplation* – wordless meditation on the beauty and holiness of God; 5) *apatheia* – a burning love for God and humans that leaves no place for human selfish desires,

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<sup>6</sup> From the Greek word *kerigma*, ‘message that is preached’.

- 6) *spiritual parenthood* – the central role played by spiritual fathers –*pater pneumatikos*, called *starets* in the Russian tradition or spiritual directors in Western Christianity.
- e. **Liturgy** – Traits coming from this source: 1) *the centrality of the sacraments* (called ‘holy mysteries’ in Orthodoxy); 2) *the priority of the rule of worship over the rule of faith*; 3) *the influence of Hellenistic mystery rituals*; 4) *the influence of the ceremonial at the Byzantine court on the structure of the Orthodox liturgy*; 5) *the veneration of ikons and relics*; 6) *the cult of the saints*; 7) *cult of Holy Virgin Mary*. NOTE: according to Orthodox theology, believers should manifest veneration (Gr. *doulia*) to ikons, saints, relics of the Holy Virgin Mary, but not worship (Gr. *latreia*) which should be reserved exclusively to God. This important distinction is rather nebulous in popular theology.
- f. **Hesychasm** (from *hesichia* – quietness) – a particular Orthodox mystical tradition.

#### 4. Hesychasm

- a. **Characteristics of hesychasm**: 1) *striving for total quietness*; 2) *the continuous use of ‘Jesus prayer’*; 3) *posture and breathing*; 4) *vision of the inner ‘uncreated’ light*. These traits characterize monastic hesychasm. There is also a softer version of it, more apt for lay people.
- b. **Roots of hesychasm**: 1) St. John of the Ladder, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*; 2) St Simeon the New Theologian, *Hymns of Divine Light*; 3) *the monastic community of Mt. Athos*, in Greece; 4) *the mystical theology of St. Gregory Palamas*.
- c. **Renewal of the Orthodox mystical tradition** – the steps of the process: 1) *Cyril Lukaris and the Reformed influence* – effect of Protestant missionary activity; 2) *Peter Mogila and the Iasi Synod (1642)* – adoption of an anti-Protestant Orthodox catechism of scholastic Catholic origin, leading to the ‘Babylonian captivity of the Orthodox theology’ (G. Florovski); 3) *renewal of Orthodoxy through neo-Palamite spirituality* (Russian Orthodox diaspora – Lossky, Florovski, Evdokimov, Meyendorff; but also Kallistos, Staniloae, Yannaras).

#### 5. Important Observations on Orthodox Spirituality

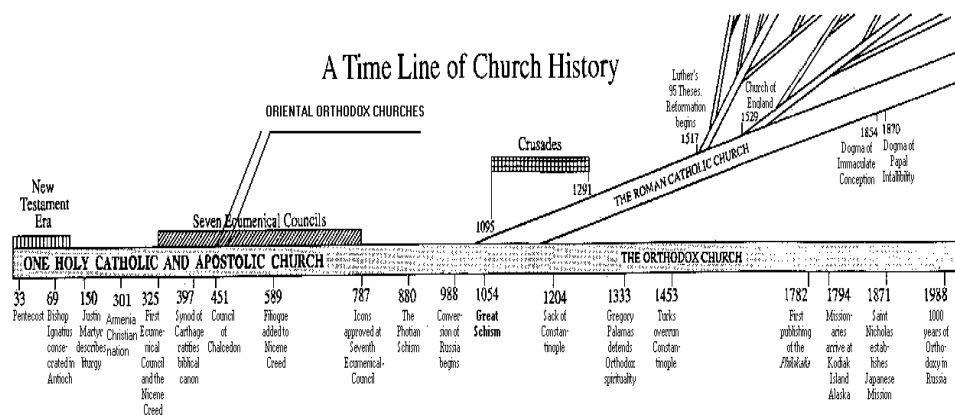
- a. **Theosis (deification)** – participation into God, through the ‘uncreated divine energies’, supreme goal of the Christian life, that flows ‘from the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit’.
- b. **Asceticism and mysticism** – Asceticism – mortification of human will and sinful passions; Mysticism – personal union with God through the grace of the Holy Spirit.
- **Orthodoxia, in Greek, means both right belief and right worship**. Thus, at least ideally, Orthodoxy is not just adherence to a set of doctrines, but a form of worship and a way of life.
- **Orthodoxy exists in two separate branches**: a. **Eastern** (churches accepting the Christological formulations of the Council at Chalcedon), including Russian, Greek, Romanian, and other Orthodox Churches), and b. **Oriental** (churches rejecting the Chalcedonian teachings), like the Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian and other such Churches). The two branches are in theological dialogue, but their differences, that some regard as mostly terminological, have not yet been resolved.
- **Salvation in Orthodoxy is conceived of not as an event, but as a life-long process**. It is understood in ontological terms (in the sense of a change of the inner being), rather than in juridical terms (in the sense of appeasing God’s righteous wrath because of sin), as in the West. Although Orthodoxy reacts negatively to the *sola fide* emphasis of the Reformation, this does not mean that it teaches ‘works-righteousness’. Rather, it strives for balance or synergy between faith and the deeds of faith. In fact, Orthodoxy has not known any of the controversies on the human will and predestination that were manifested in the Christian

West. Rather, Orthodoxy aims to attain a balance, a ‘divine-human synergy’, or cooperation of two unequal but equally necessary forces: divine grace and human will.

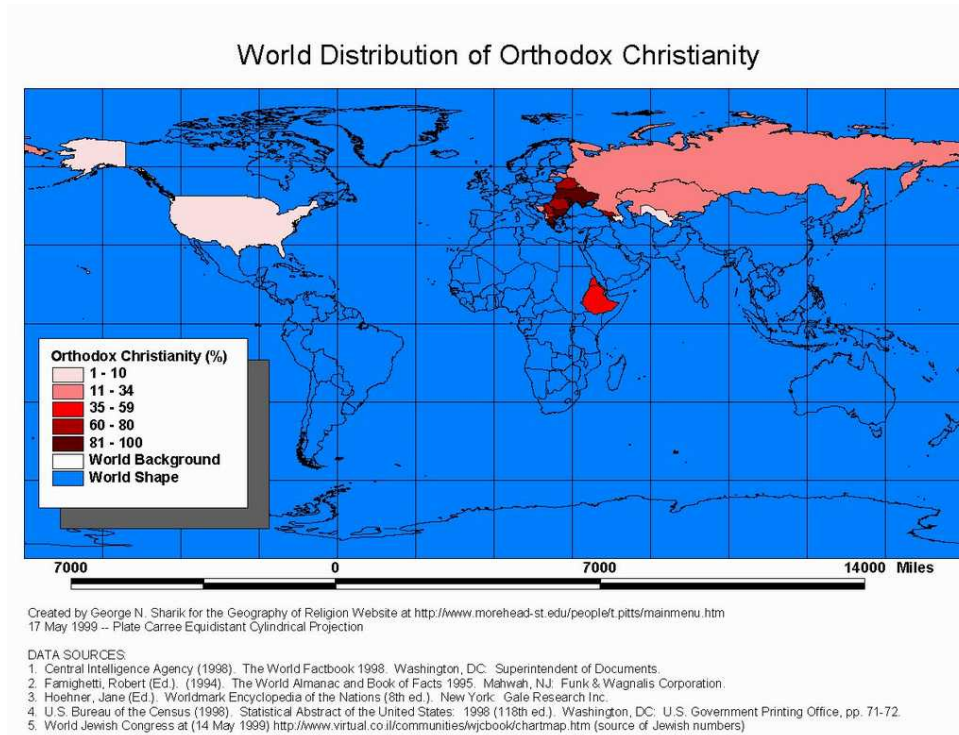
- ***Assurance of salvation.*** From the description above we can understand that there is an essential difference between the way the issue of the assurance of salvation is perceived in Orthodoxy, on one side, and in Protestantism and particularly in Evangelicalism, on the other side. In the context of the Orthodox understanding of salvation as a life-long process, someone cannot lose what he or she does not yet have, at least in the full sense of that word. Alternatively, for the Evangelicals, whether they favor or not the ‘once saved, always saved’ conviction, the feeling of assurance of one’s personal salvation is an essential sign of that person’s personal commitment. To most Orthodox this seems an unwarranted religious pride. At the same time, the reluctance of the Orthodox to talk about this subject is for many Protestants a sign of their lack of personal faith.
- ***Conversion and being born again.*** A similar difference between Orthodox and Evangelical believers, rooted in the different perspectives on salvation, we can find in the area of the new birth. The Orthodox, like Catholics and some mainline Protestants (Lutherans and high Anglicans), believe in ‘baptismal regeneration’, a doctrine that claims that the human person is ‘born again’ and becomes a member of the church at the time of (infant) baptism. Then, normally and ideally, the baptized person grows spiritually in the community of faith under the spiritual guidance of his/her God-parents. In this context, the possibility or the need of conversion is not necessarily negated, but its importance is seen as quite secondary. In Evangelicalism, on the contrary, a person is converted first, at an age when he/she can make a conscious decision, and as a result of the personal commitment, that person is born again through the Holy Spirit, and is the baptized and becomes a member of the church.
- ***Orthodoxy stresses the legitimacy and importance of the ‘veneration of icons’*** (that is different from worship, which only God can receive). *Icons, for the Orthodox, are first and foremost Christological statements*, being an ‘esthetic implication of the Incarnation’ (J. Pelikan) – the whole iconoclastic controversy revolved around Christological issues. In Orthodoxy, ikons are not simply graphic explanations of the gospel, for the sake of the illiterate, as some uninformed people believe, but means of grace, through which the ‘uncreated divine energies’ – the manifestation of God towards created beings – is exercised in order to help believers in their walk of faith. This is why they are consecrated in a special ceremony, through they are endowed with a special grace.
- ***The veneration of ikons in Orthodoxy is closely connected with the veneration of the saints, as well as the veneration of the Virgin Mary.*** Similarly, the Orthodox attitude to the saints or the Holy Virgin should be one of veneration, not worship.
- **The Orthodox prayers addressed to the saints do not contradict the unique mediatory work of Christ. It is rather rooted in the concept of the ‘communion of the saints’**, according to which, asking help is prayer from a saint, who is alive, even if not visible to us, is somewhat like asking a brother or sister in Christ to pray for you on a specific problem. As a Protestant believer would ask a more mature Christian to pray for his or her problems, in a similar manner, and Orthodox, or a Catholic would ask the saints to pray for them. The difference between the Catholic and the Orthodox perspective on this matter is that Catholic theology brings in this discussion the concept of ‘merits’ that the saints have gathered through their holy life, which grants them a special favor in the eyes of God, and, as a result, more effectiveness in their supplications for the believers praying through them on earth.
- **The missionary spirit of the Orthodox Church has been manifested more in the past, rather than in actuality** (e.g. Orthodox missionary efforts in California coming down from Russia/Alaska). At the same time, there is much interest particularly in the diaspora, for reinvigorating Orthodox missions. One significant example of this renewal of missionary spirit is the important growth of Orthodoxy in Africa. Although the need is obvious, there is

no discussion yet of re-evangelization in Orthodox circles. On the other side, there is sensitivity, perhaps over-sensitivity to proselytism. For most Orthodox leaders, any baptized Orthodox person who joins another church is by definition a proof of proselytism. To be fair, many times this suspicion is justified by the insensitivity of some Evangelical and Catholic agencies working in Orthodox countries.

- For over three hundred years, **a series of church canons have forbidden for the Orthodox believers the private reading of the Bible**, for fear of them being influenced by the teaching of the Protestant missionaries working then in the Orthodox countries. Even today, in spite of protests coming from prominent voices from within Orthodoxy, the Orthodox lay believers rarely use Bible outside the liturgical context. Nevertheless, the situation started to change for the better and it is very positive among the Orthodox in the Diaspora.
- **Orthodoxy has a venerable tradition of social involvement** (that included health care, orphanages, etc.) initiated by St. Basil the Great, in the fifth century. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons – like the centuries-long Turkish rule and the communist domination in many of the Orthodox countries – **Orthodoxy does not really have at present a social theology**, like Catholicism and Protestantism.
- **Similarly, the dominant political model in Orthodoxy is that of symphony** – the harmonious cooperation of the Patriarch and the King (or President), which made the Church in many occasions prone to being used by the State in its own interests, rather than the Church using the State to promote the interests of the Kingdom. In practice, this leads to a certain gap between worship and what happens after worship (what is sometimes called ‘liturgy after liturgy’). The liturgical community is not always translated into *koinonia*.
- **Philetism is a constant temptation for most Orthodox societies**. This is an early Christian heresy, which illegitimately confuses Christian faith and ethnic identity. It creates major difficulties both in Orthodox countries, in relationships with Christians from other traditions, as well in the Diaspora, in relationships between Orthodox communities with different ethnic backgrounds.
- **Orthodoxy conceives of ecumenism as unity in diversity without dogmatic compromise**. According to most Orthodox authors, the institutional and spiritual unity of the Church cannot be reestablished unless all Christian denominations return to the teaching of the first seven ecumenical councils. This would automatically discard Catholic emphases like *filioque* (the understanding of the Spirit as proceeding from the Father *and the Son*), the papal primacy, etc, as well as some new Protestant doctrines.
- **Timeline of Church History – from an Eastern Orthodox perspective**



## ➤ Map of Orthodoxy



## Conclusions

Because of its spiritual excellencies and in spite of its weaknesses, Orthodoxy is

- *a fascinating universe that attracts many Christians.*

Its rootedness in history and its attempts to be thoroughly incarnated in the various cultures where it is manifested makes Orthodoxy

- *a valuable alternative for many postmodern people,*

who are disenchanted both with the rationalism of the Enlightenment and with the materialism of the modern lifestyle, together with the spiritual dryness it has produced.

Because of its spiritual richness, Orthodoxy can be

- *a source of spiritual renewal for the holistic spirituality that we seek as Christians.*

## 6. Annotated Bibliography on Orthodoxy

Alevisopoulos, Antonios, *The Orthodox Church. Its Faith, Worship and Life* (Athens: Dialogue Publications, No. 7, 1994) – an excellent introduction to Orthodoxy by a leading spiritual mentor in the Greek Orthodox Church; although slightly polemical, it is still irenic (peaceful) in the approach

Bloom, Anthony, *School of Prayer* (London: DLT, 1970) – one of the most helpful short books ever written on prayer; by Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (Russian Orthodox Church in Western Europe)

Clendenin, Daniel B., *Eastern Orthodox Christianity. A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) – a somewhat simplistic presentation of Orthodoxy by an American Evangelical, for Evangelicals in the West (he also produced a collection of texts from Orthodox Theology – *Eastern Orthodox Theology. A Contemporary Reader*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003<sup>2</sup>)

- Coniaris, A. M., *Introducing the Orthodox Church. Its Faith and Life* (Minneapolis: Light & Life, 1982) – a concise introduction into the specific teachings and faith practices of Orthodoxy, written by a Greek Orthodox theologian acquainted with the west, for Western non-Orthodox readers
- Fairbairn, Donald, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Eastern Eyes*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) – a through introduction to eastern Orthodoxy written by an American Protestant theologian with great sympathy for the Eastern tradition; described as ‘the finest assessment of Eastern Orthodoxy from a Western perspective’ (Mark Elliott) and ‘the most helpful and authoritative guide available today’ (Bradley Nassif)
- Orthodox Spirituality*, (London: SPCK, 1978) – a concise introduction to the specific spirituality of Orthodoxy, written in 1945 by ‘a monk of the Eastern Church’ (Fr. Andrei Scrima), a Romanian who had to hide his identity, for fear of the communist authorities
- Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1993) – the first study Bible produced by Orthodox scholars (contains only the New Testament, for the time being)
- Pelikan, Jaroslav, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974) – a thoroughly academic treatment of the history of Orthodoxy, possibly the best available (vol. 2 of the monumental opus *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine*) by one of the best church and dogma historians alive, a Lutheran converted to Orthodoxy
- Roberson, Ronald, *The Eastern Christian Churches. A Brief Survey*, (7<sup>th</sup> ed.), Rome: Editioni Orientalia Christiana, 2010 – a very well informed survey of the present situation in all branches of the Orthodox Church, by a sympathetic Roman-Catholic specialist in Orthodoxy
- Schmemmann, Alexander, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992 – ‘a stimulating survey and interpretation of the history of the Orthodox Church’ from the beginning of the Christian era until the Communist revolution, by a famous theologian from the Russian Diaspora
- Stamoolis, James J., *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986 – until recently the most important presentation of Orthodox missions theology; written by an American Evangelical
- Ugolnik, Anthony, *The Illuminating Icon*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 – a standard presentation of the Orthodox theology of icons
- Ware, Timothy, *The Orthodox Church*, London: Penguin, 1993 – a short presentation of Orthodoxy for Westerners by a British Anglican who became an Orthodox Bishop (now Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia)
- Way of the Pilgrim. Annotated and Explained*, Gleb Pokrovsky, transl. & annot., (London: DLT, 2003) – a classic work of Orthodox spirituality; it centers around the hesichastic practice of the ‘prayer of the heart’