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**Forum 2015**

**Monday 28 September to Wednesday 30 September 2015**

**at The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire.**

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**The Orthodox Churches in England: a background paper**

**Who are the Orthodox?**

The ‘Orthodox’ Churches to-day are ancient churches with roots in the near and middle East, but before the Great Schism of 1054 (at least in Orthodox understanding) there was one undifferentiated church of east and west. Their name epitomises their identity, suggesting as it does both the importance of correct doctrine (orthodoxy with a small ‘o’) and also the ‘right glory’ of worship (from the Greek *doxa*). The celebration of the Divine Liturgy is at the heart of Orthodox life, and its theology is an expression of its prayer and worship. It does not share the distinction between theology and spirituality which developed in the West.

We know these Churches in England largely as diaspora Churches, although their histories here are longer than we sometimes realise – the first Greek church in London (which had but a brief existence) was founded in 1677, and Orthodoxy’s permanent presence grew from the Russian Embassy chapel which was established in 1716. However, it was successive waves of twentieth century immigration, beginning with those who fled Russia post 1917 that brought a substantial Orthodox presence to England.

**What is Orthodoxy?**

Orthodoxy is the largest part of Eastern Christianity and its experience is profoundly different to Churches of the West, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. The ‘Middle Ages’, the reformations of the sixteenth century and ‘the Enlightenment’ were essentially Western phenomena, and those experiences were not shared by the Orthodox. They live within a different intellectual and spiritual tradition, in continuity with the Tradition of the Apostles and Fathers, and as such offer different and enriching perspectives to theology and spirituality – the use of icons (for the Orthodox a *visual* consequence of incarnation, just as the gospels are a *written* consequence) is just one example.

The preservation of that Tradition has been of overwhelming importance for the Orthodox, often accomplished under the bleakest of conditions. For nearly half a millennium after Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, the Orthodox church protected the faith under a non-Christian foreign power and across its empire. Then as Constantinople waned, Moscow waxed as a centre of Orthodoxy, but from the time of Peter the Great in the 1720s and on into the devastating years of Soviet Russia, the church was subject first to rigid control and then to consistent and debilitating persecution. Since the collapse of communism Russian Orthodoxy has been shaped in part by a dialogue with growing nationalism. That is a very different history from the Churches of the West where the Papacy emerged as a serious political power in the early middle ages and the reformations of the sixteenth century resulted in (generally) harmonious relations between Church and state. Such different histories and experience inevitably shape attitudes and cultures within churches, so it is unsurprising that the churches of the East have been wary of the West and what they sometimes perceive as its accommodations to secular culture. One of the triumphs of ecumenism, therefore, has been the establishing of good relations and dialogues between the churches of East and West.

There are two main ‘families’ of Orthodox Churches in England, the Chalcedonian and the Oriental. The diaspora communities of both these families are in England. The Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches trace their histories back to the Eastern Roman Empire, and particularly to the Emperor Constantine’s capital, Constantinople (founded 325). The Oriental Churches (Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Syriac, Malankara Syrian (Indian) and Armenian), belong to lands with their own distinctive languages and cultures, some of them beyond the boundaries of the Eastern Empire. The Chalcedonians and the Orientals were in full communion prior to the Council of Chalcedon in 451, when they parted company as a result of disagreements about the theological terminology used to describe the union of Christ’s divine and human natures. One of the achievements of modern ecumenical dialogue has been the recognition by the two Orthodox traditions that the differences between them were indeed just of terminology, not of underlying doctrine.

**Why did East and West separate?**

The tragic separation of the Churches of East and West is best understood as a long process in which secular politics played as significant a role as theological concerns. In the broadest sense Christianity spread across the world as the Roman Empire declined and fell. The first Christian Emperor, Constantine, established the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire at Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in 325. Although the Eastern Empire fluctuated in size over the next eight centuries, it remained a potent political force. The Western empire, conversely, collapsed. Rome fell to the Goths in 410, and very slowly imperial power disintegrated across the West, passing to secular rulers, and the church almost by default, became the sole unifying institution, which in turn increased the authority of the bishop of Rome. Then, on Christmas Day 800, Charlemagne was crowned ‘Holy Roman Emperor’, and there were two empires, East and West. The empires and the churches (although technically one until 1054) simply grew apart. They spoke different languages, Greek and Latin respectively, and were shaped by separate political and cultural histories.

Given that framework, two issues, which might otherwise have been amicably solved, led to division. The first was the claim of universal authority by the Bishop of Rome. Whilst the East regarded the Pope as having a primacy of honour, their understanding of episcopal authority was regional and conciliar rather than imperial: unless asked to confirm or adjudicate, the Pope was to govern his own sphere: so, in 858 when Pope Nicholas tried to impose his authority in a succession dispute in the Patriarchate of Constantinople, he was rebuffed. The second matter was doctrinal. From the late sixth century onwards, the Western Church started to change the Creed to state that that the Holy Spirit proceeded ‘from the Father and the Son’ rather than simply ‘from the Father’ (which had been re-affirmed at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381.) The Orthodox took the view that the Creed could only be altered by a council of the whole Church, not just by one part of it. Despite deteriorating relations, including a Papal excommunication of the Patriarch of Constantinople in 1054, friendly relations between East and West were fostered, until during the Fourth Crusade in 1204 the Crusaders laid waste Constantinople in an orgy of blood and violence. From this sad point onwards Rome and Constantinople were truly sundered.

**How did the churches of the East grow?**

The missionary impulse has been part of Eastern experience from the earliest days of the Church. Many of the Churches of the East claim to have been founded by the apostles – Peter, James and Thomas – and the evangelist Mark. Such traditions are hard to assess, but they cannot simply be written off as legendary – they are at least evidence of considerable antiquity.

In the early 300s (the precise date is disputed), a Parthian, Gregory the Illuminator, brought the gospel to Armenia, the first Christian nation. Syrian missionaries were also active in Ethiopia in the fourth century (tradition suggests that Christianity may have taken root before this – Acts 8:26f) Monasteries became centres of expansion in Arab cultures – James bar-Addai, appointed as a Bishop to the Arabs by Emperor Theodosios is said to have ordained twenty-seven metropolitan bishops and one hundred thousand clergy in his thirty-five year ministry across the Empire. However, the great missionaries in Europe’s Christian East were the brothers Cyril and Methodius who in the ninth century were responsible for the expansion of the Church into the Slav regions of east and north east Europe. Their work eventually led to the conversion of Bulgaria, Serbia, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. There was a church in Kiev in 945, and in 988 Prince Vladimir established Byzantine Christianity with its Orthodox faith as the state religion. Centuries later, as the power of Constantinople waned, the power of these newer churches waxed. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the significance of Moscow grew as the centre of the Russian nation, and increasingly assumed the role of protector of the Orthodox world. Moscow sometimes refers to itself as the ‘Third Rome’ (after Rome itself and Constantinople). The Russian Church continued the missionary tradition, not only within its own growing and huge hinterland, but into Siberia and eventually to Alaska and thence North America. Orthodox churches have also been at the forefront of the re-evangelisation and establishment of the Church in Eastern Europe following the collapse of communism.

The upheavals of twentieth century history created movements of peoples on a scale previously unknown, and churches moved with them as diaspora congregations were established, and enriching their host countries with a new diversity. One thinks in England of Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh’s remarkable ministry in the Russian church, the vibrant monastic community in Tolleshunt Knights (Ecumenical Patriarchate) and the contribution of theologians like Metropolitan Kallistos.

**What are some of the distinguishing features of Orthodoxy?**

* Importance of Tradition
* The Divine Liturgy (the Eucharist) and liturgical music
* Icons, especially venerated in Byzantine churches
* Monastic bishops and (usually) a married clergy
* The Jesus Prayer
* Veneration of the saints and the Mother of God
* A family of self-governing, independent, autocephalous churches
* A profound sense of God’s mystery and of the Trinity (without the filioque clause)
* A deep sense of Christ’s glory, and a consequent stress on the Transfiguration and Resurrection (as opposed to the Western stress on the passion and the cross)
* A deep understanding and awareness of the Holy Spirit, not only in the life of each person but in the life of the Church.
* A stress on the value of each person, body and soul (both good), as made in the image and likeness of God, with the potential of being caught up into the very life of the Trinity (John 17:21; 1 Peter 1:4) (theosis)

**Which Orthodox churches are in membership of Churches Together in England?**

The 2015 edition of *The Orthodox Directory* (authorised by the Assembly of Orthodox Bishops) gives the following statistics. There is one Episcopal Assembly, 10 Jurisdictions, 7 resident Bishops, 237 parishes and 298 priests. There are no figures for the laity, but a generally accepted figure in Orthodox circles is a community of c. 300,000.

There are seven Orthodox Churches in membership of CTE in their own right. In addition, the Council of Oriental Orthodox Churches is in membership. They are listed alphabetically:

1. Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of the British Isles and Ireland (Byzantine)

* Archbishop: His Eminence Metropolitan Silouan (to be enthroned November 28th 2015)
* 15 parishes and 4 missions

1. Armenian Orthodox Church (Oriental)

* HG Bishop Hovakim Manukyan
* 3 parishes and 4 mission parishes

1. Coptic Orthodox Church (Oriental)

* His Grace Bishop Angaelos OBE, General Bishop, and four other bishops, including HE Metropolitan Seraphim of the British Orthodox Church, a non-geographical diocese of the Coptic Orthodox Church
* 32 parishes, serving c. 20,000 faithful.

1. Ecumenical Patriarchate (Byzantine)

* Archbishop: His Eminence Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira and Great Britain
* 95 places of worship (including 7 designated cathedrals and other places of worship (eg. University chaplaincies), one monastery and a hermitage

1. Exarchate of the Orthodox parishes of the Russian tradition (Ecumenical Patriarchate) (Byzantine)

* Dean: Archpriest Patrick Hodson
* The Deanery of Great Britain and Ireland is part of the Archdiocese of Orthodox Parishes in Western Europe based in Paris, within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate
* 28 parishes in Great Britain

1. Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church (Indian Orthodox) (Oriental)

* Part of the diocese of UK, Europe and Africa
* 22 parishes meeting in England

1. Russian Orthodox, Diocese of Sourozh, Moscow Patriarchate (Byzantine)

* Archbishop: His Eminence Archbishop Elisey
* 30 parishes in Great Britain and Ireland

**Further reading**

* John Binns *An introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches* (Cambridge, CUP 2002)
* Gillian Crow *Orthodoxy for to-day* (London, SPCK 2008)
* John McGuckin *The Orthodox Church: an introduction to its history, doctrine and spiritual culture* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2011)
* V.C. Samuel *The Council of Chalcedon re-examined* (Xlibris 2001)
* Timothy (Kallistos) Ware *The Orthodox Church: an introduction to Eastern Christianity* (London, Penguin, rev edn 2015)
* Kallistos Ware *The Orthodox Way* (New York, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979)