

THE CHURCH OF THE EAST AND THE CHURCH OF THE WEST

The Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, and other Eastern Orthodox Churches, are separate from the Roman Catholic Church, even though today there is much more dialogue and cooperation than there has been for many centuries.

Christianity began in the Middle East and early on there was a unity of Eastern and Western Christians. The division between the Church of the East and the Church of the West had a long and complex history. This unit of work examines some of the cultural, political and religious factors that brought about the division.

INTRODUCTION

In 330 C.E., the Emperor Constantine transferred the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople. There were various reasons for the move, the main one being his desire to shift the capital so that it would be a safer distance from the barbarian tribes which had been threatening the borders of the Empire for years.

In 395, the Emperor Theodosius divided the Roman Empire into the Empire of the West – the capital of which was Rome – and the Empire of the East – the capital of which was Constantinople.

This formal separation reflected differences that had already existed between the two halves of the Empire and that would eventually lead to a complete separation of the two.

Even before Christianity was made the official religion of the Empire by Theodosius, differences in approaches and attitudes had already appeared in Christian communities in the East and West. Western Christianity tended to be practical, like the Roman approach to life. The Romans, or Latins, were

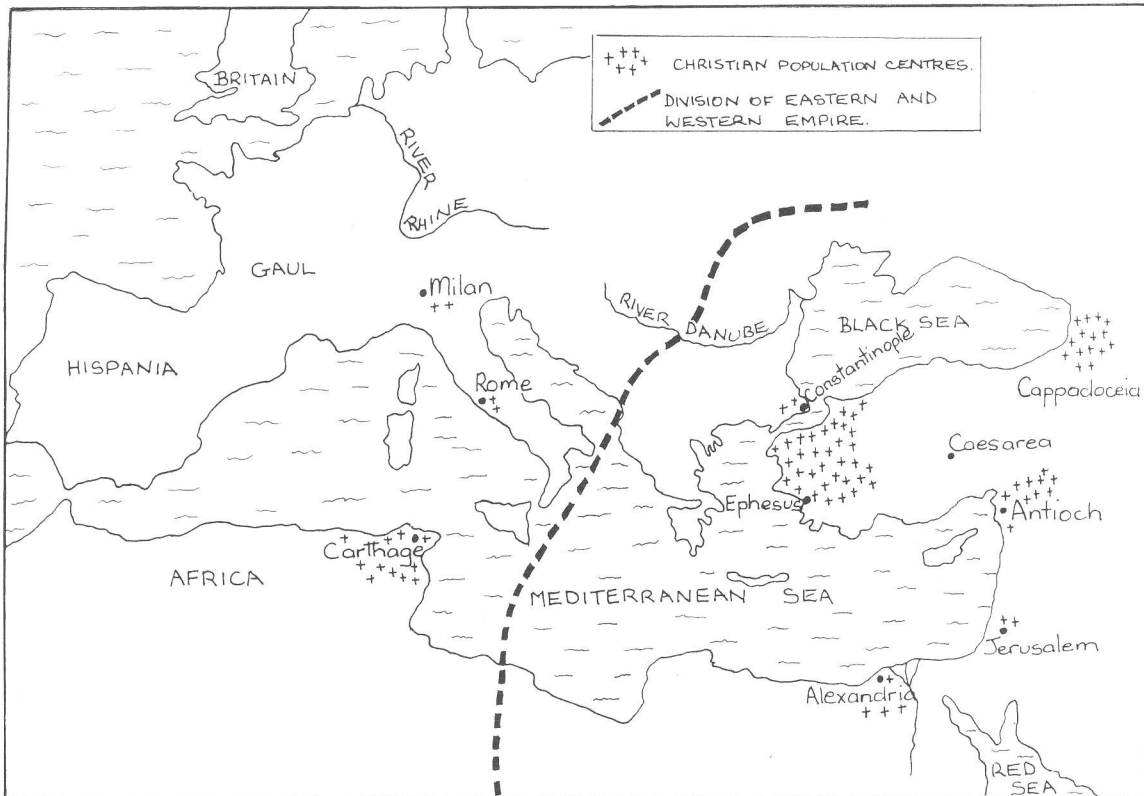
concerned with 'concrete' things like duty, law and organisation. Unlike the Greeks, they tended not to get into prolonged arguments and debates about the basic truths of the Christian faith, like the nature of Christ.

THE EMPIRE AND THE CHURCH

The Eastern or Greek part of the Roman Empire, although conquered and governed by Roman administrators and subject to Roman law, maintained its own culture and method of learning. This method of learning put a great emphasis on thinking about and debating questions of culture and religion.

The Romans, though they admired Greek learning, thought the Greeks were a little too clever, and spent too much time in needless debate. The Greeks, on the other hand, thought the Romans were uncivilised and simplistic. Both views were unfair generalisations. Nevertheless, there was some truth in each description.

There were great teachers and scholars both in the West and in the East, and both schools of learning



WESTERN EMPIRE - MAINLY LATIN SPEAKING:

EASTERN EMPIRE - MAINLY GREEK SPEAKING:

The Roman Empire about the end of the fourth century, showing the Eastern and Western divisions of the Empire

did much to clarify the teachings of Christianity and establish its theology and understanding of life.

THE SEPARATION BECOMES MORE OBVIOUS

When Constantine established his new capital in Constantinople on the Bosphorous Strait, he unwittingly set in motion events which would further separate the two parts of the Empire. As noted earlier, the change in relationship was carried further when the Empire was officially split into two halves with the election of two separate rulers. This happened in 395 C.E., and though the two ruler system lasted less than a hundred years, it had important effects.

First of all, it made the separation definite. But most importantly, after 476 C.E., when no other emperor was elected in the West, the Church in

Rome more or less took over the running of the affairs of state. The Church had not set out to do this but, because the barbarian invasions had damaged the political and social orders so extensively, the Roman Church was the only organisation with the resources and the personnel that could manage the administration of the Western part of the Empire. After a century, the whole of the Empire was once again under the control of one emperor who lived in the East, in Constantinople and not in the West in Rome.

Like all other emperors before him, he believed that his word was law and that all the cities in the Empire had to obey him, and just as important, had to pay taxes.

In time, as the West saw less and less money spent on the upkeep of its cities and protection from

invaders, the Latins grew increasingly reluctant to see the Eastern emperor as their ruler and became even more reluctant to pay him taxes.

WHICH CHURCH SHOULD HAVE PRIMACY?

In keeping with the tradition of the pagan Roman emperors before him, Constantine saw himself as leader of the Empire and he believed he should also have a leadership role in religious affairs. The Church in his new capital was therefore worthy of having very high status in the Empire.

A high status for the Church in Constantinople was something that the other important Christian centres like Antioch, Alexandria, Rome and Carthage could not accept as they had been established long before Constantinople. The Roman Church, in particular, felt it had a special place in the Christian world because both St Peter and St Paul had been martyred there. None of the older Christian centres was willing to accept that Constantinople had any special religious authority over them.

THE EASTERN EMPEROR'S POWER AND INFLUENCE OVER RELIGIOUS MATTERS

The Western church was suspicious of the influence the emperor had on church affairs. During the reign of Constantine and his successors, it became evident that the emperor interfered too easily in the running of the Church. Also, the Patriarch of Constantinople (the chief bishop for the whole Eastern region) was often not able to make decisions on purely religious grounds but had to make sure that his decisions pleased the Emperor and/or the Empress. The Latins felt strongly that this should never be allowed.

What happened to St John Chrysostom was a good example of the problem.

John Chrysostom was born in Antioch around 344 C.E. in a wealthy and influential family. Like all wealthy young men, he studied *rhetoric* — that is, the art of using language either written or spoken, so as to persuade and influence others. As a young man he thought seriously about his life and his future and came to the decision that he should dedicate his life to God.

In 375, he withdrew to the hills near Antioch to study the Bible and pray under the direction of a spiritual guide. Some years later he was ordained a priest and he began his ministry. John soon became famous for his power as a preacher. Whenever he spoke, crowds would gather to listen to his moving and forceful sermons.

In 397, the Eastern Emperor, Arcadius, chose John to be Bishop of Constantinople. The work John did for the people of his diocese was highly respected and his own life was exemplary, but his criticisms of the immoral behaviour of those in the Emperor's court, especially the Empress, made him many enemies.

Under the leadership of Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria, who was jealous of John's position, a Synod of thirty-five Bishops was assembled to assess John's orthodoxy (orthodoxy referred to whether his teachings were in accord with the Christian faith). As most of the bishops were chosen by Theophilus, the result was a foregone conclusion. John was found guilty of heresy and other crimes and was exiled.

A year later, John was recalled because of pressure from the ordinary people of Constantinople. But again he angered the Empress because of his strong stand on morality. He was once more banished from the city. After three years of exile and hardship John died. It was thirty years after his death before his remains were allowed to be brought back to Constantinople and buried with honour.

THE EFFECTS OF THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS ON THE EASTERN AND WESTERN EMPIRES

From the fourth to the tenth centuries, the Western Empire was under severe attack by successive waves of barbarian invaders. Also, important centres of Christianity were conquered by the soldiers of the new religion, Islam. Antioch and Alexandria were overrun by the Muslims. Rome, although attacked several times by barbarian hordes, survived and slowly it emerged as the leading Christian city in the West.

Increasingly, people in the West looked towards the Bishop of Rome for guidance in times of peril and upheaval. As the civil authorities lost control, much of the day-to-day running of Rome and other towns and cities was taken over by Church leaders.

The Pope's leadership in both civil and religious matters was to cause further conflict between the Emperor in Constantinople and the Pope in Rome.

Increasingly, the Pope resented any interference from Constantinople especially as the Eastern Empire did not feel it should help the West in times of need, for example during the years of the barbarian invasions. The Eastern Empire remained safe and well protected by its large and efficient army.

It was commonly believed by Westerners that the Eastern emperor and his officials bribed the barbarians to refrain from attacking the East while suggesting that they might see what was to their liking in the West.

Even though the Eastern Emperor did not help the West in time of need, it did not stop him from trying to interfere with the running of the Western part of the Empire. This did not help the situation.

THE DIFFERENCES INCREASE

By the tenth century, the gap between the two halves of the Empire was more than apparent. The West had been ravaged by successive barbarian invasions. It could boast of little culture. The Greeks' opinion of the Latins was never high, but now it was at rock bottom. They described the Latins as "wild and uncultured savages with huge appetites". To the Latins, the Greeks were "soft-living, degenerate, un-masculine, hair-splitters".

DIFFERENCES IN BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Most of the early Church Councils were dominated by Eastern bishops. For example, only two priests from Rome attended the great Council of Nicaea, though there were nearly two hundred bishops from the East. (Five bishops came from the West and one of them, Bishop Hosius, was appointed by the Emperor.) The same thing happened in 431 C.E. at

the third General Council at Ephesus, and again at the fourth General Council at Chalcedon in 451 C.E. Of the six hundred or more participants at Chalcedon, only five came from the West – two Africans and three Papal representatives or legates. What happened at these Councils showed the concerns of the Eastern Church – an interest in exploring and developing questions of doctrine.

Differences in Christian doctrines developed between the Eastern and Western Churches. For example, the Greek clergy and scholars saw the performance of rituals such as the Eucharist, as "faith in action", that means the doctrine was lived out. In the West, a ritual or rite, such as penance, was regarded as separate from but related to the doctrine of forgiveness; hence, if a change in the ritual was thought to be necessary, it was not regarded as a change in faith or doctrine. This was not the case in the East. This was why questions about matters such as fasting, unleavened or leavened bread, and whether priests who celebrated the Eucharist should have beards, became important issues for debate in the East. That there were debates on these issues surprised the Western scholars, not to mention the amount of time taken up with these debates.

The two Churches were also divided on the question of clerical celibacy. In the East, bishops and monks were celibate, but priests were permitted to marry. This was not generally the case in the West.

ICONOCLASTS: THE DESTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS IMAGES

From the fifth to the eleventh century there was a series of arguments between the Eastern and Western Churches followed by reconciliations. One of the disputes was about icons, paintings of God, Jesus, Mary and the saints.

The first generations of Christians did not have any religious paintings or statues. As in religious matters generally, they were influenced by their Jewish heritage and they believed it was not right to create images of God. There was also a fear that the making of religious images might lead to the pagan

practice of idolatry – the worshipping of statues as if they were gods.

But as time went on and Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, this fear seemed to fade. By the seventh century the use of paintings, mosaics and statues as ways of showing aspects of the Christian story or as an aid to prayer, was widespread.

However, some Christians were concerned about the growing use of religious images. Soon the issue became a concern for all Christians. The people who were against the use of images were called *iconoclasts* (image-breakers); those in favour, *iconodules*.

The situation was made worse by Emperor Leo III who was an iconoclast. In 726 he ordered that all images were to be destroyed. In the West in particular, people reacted angrily against this order (there were some parts of Italy still under the direct rule of the Emperor).

After sixty years of iconoclasm in the East, a Church Council was called at Nicaea to resolve the issue. The place of images in the life and worship of the Church was never as controversial an issue in the West, and the decisions taken by the Council of Nicaea may never have affected the West except for an unfortunate incident.

As Western church leaders were meeting in Frankfurt under the patronage of Charlemagne, (who by that time had been elected as the Western Emperor), a translation of the Nicaean statement from Greek to Latin was received. The Latin translation was so poor that it read as if the iconoclasts were in the right. In fact, the Nicaean Council condemned image-breakers. The bishops meeting at Frankfurt refused to accept the statement and were angered that the Church in Constantinople would presume to instruct them. The gulf between the two churches widened – now they saw they could not even communicate with each other.

THE FINAL BREAK

By the eleventh century the Pope was generally accepted as the leader of the Christian Church in the

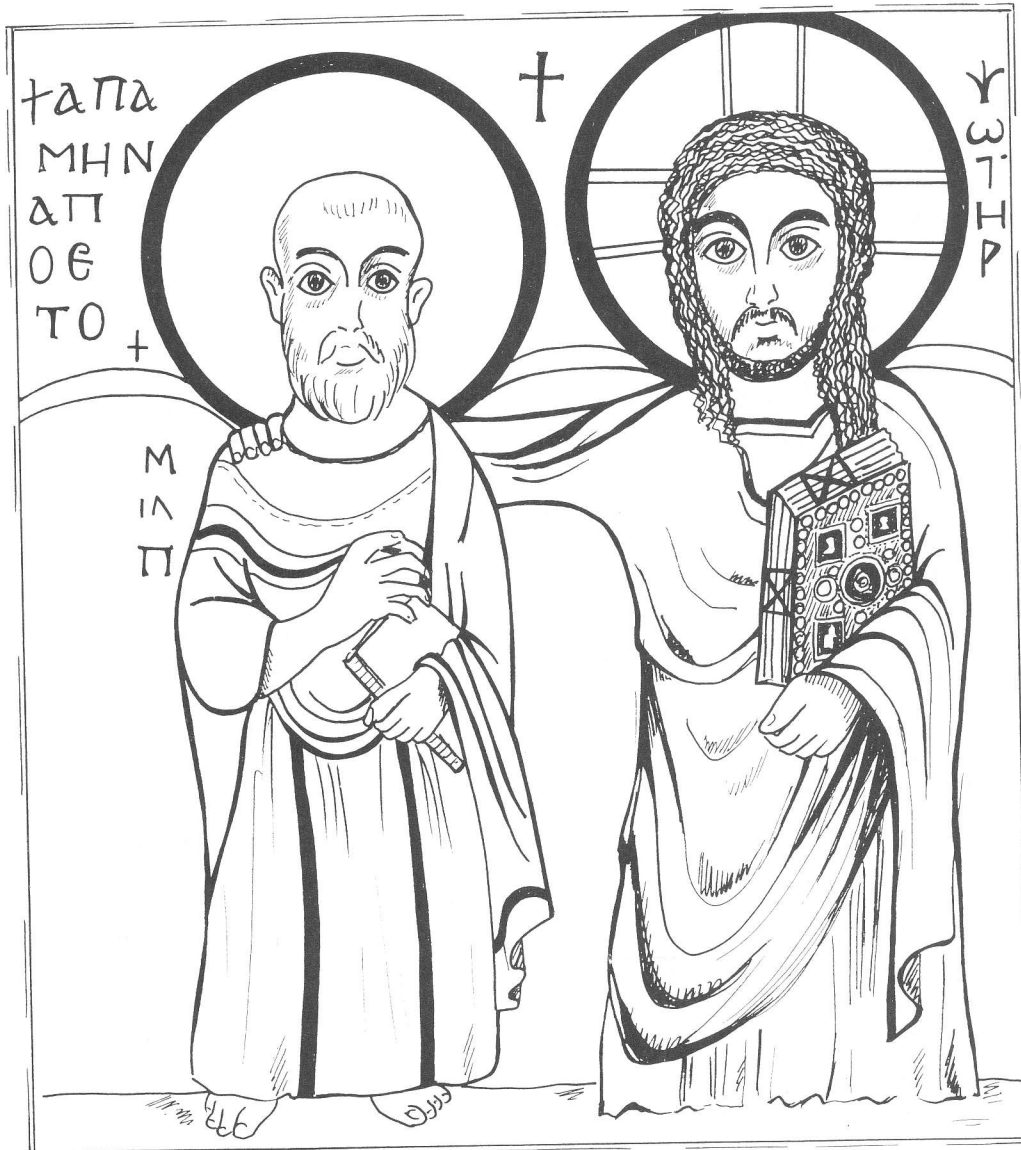
West. But in the Eastern part of Christendom, it was the Patriarch of Constantinople who was most important.

At first, the reigning pope, Leo IX, attempted a reconciliation with the Eastern Empire, mainly because the Pope wanted the Emperor's help to drive invaders out of Italy. However, the Emperor had not forgiven the Pope for allowing the Normans to take over lands in Italy which belonged to him. It was a difficult situation. But, before political differences could be settled, religious differences were seen as a major obstacle. Unfortunately the main people involved in these negotiations were quick-tempered and very stubborn – hardly suitable persons to carry out delicate negotiations.

In 1054, the Eastern Patriarch, Michael Cerularius, sent a letter to the Pope criticising some practices in the Western Church, such as the use of unleavened bread for communion. Some historians say that this was in response to the Pope's ruling that Greek-speaking Christians in the West could no longer use Greek in their liturgies; they had to use Latin. There followed an angry exchange of letters between Pope Leo and his delegate Cardinal Humbert on one side and Patriarch Michael Cerularius and the Emperor on the other. As had been shown during the time of iconoclasm, the problems with language were an added source of irritation.

A Papal legation, headed by Cardinal Humbert, travelled to Constantinople to resolve the differences. Instead of discussing how to resolve the present difficulties, both sides used the meetings to bring up the differences they had in the past.

Finally, after a lot of verbal abuse and backstabbing, the quarrels came to a high point in July 1054. During an afternoon church service in the cathedral of Sancta Sophia, Cardinal Humbert, in full uniform and in a rage, marched to the altar and before an astonished congregation placed on it a decree from the Pope, excommunicating the Emperor, the Patriarch and his followers. (Excommunication means officially excluding someone from the Church, banning them from church attendance and from receiving the Sacraments.)



An Icon of Christ and St Menus

The decree meant that the Emperor and his followers could not receive the Sacraments and that all good Christians should have nothing to do with them. In reality it was hardly effective. The Greeks were not going to take notice of a decree from Rome.

In turn the Patriarch and his followers excommunicated the Pope and the legates from Rome.

Apart from the insult – the Greeks expected this sort of behaviour from the Latins, and the Latins expected the Greeks to retaliate in kind – the incident

was not seen as significant. It just gave each side a bit more ammunition in the war of words.

THE CRUSADERS ATTACK CONSTANTINOPLE

In 1204, the Western Christian knights of the Fourth Crusade, in need of extra funds, detoured on their way to liberate Jerusalem and the Holy Places and attacked, looted and pillaged Constantinople.

They had been offered a great deal of money by

**A TRANSLATION OF AN OLD
CURSE PLACED ON PEOPLE WHO
HAD BEEN EXCOMMUNICATED**

We curse them from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head . . . when sleeping or waking, sitting or standing, lying above the earth or under the earth. . . May their days be few and many others take their jobs; may their children become orphans. . . and may their souls go to hell unless they repent and change their ways. . . So be it! So be it! Amen.



*An ancient Greek Cross. The Museum,
St Peter's Basilica Rome.*

Alexius IV, the son of a deposed Eastern emperor, to help get back his father's throne. With only a concern for the financial rewards of their actions, the Christian knights broke into churches, destroyed shrines and stole precious objects. Even the Hagia Sophia, the cathedral, was not spared. When Pope Innocent III found out about the attack on Constantinople he was outraged, but by then the damage had been done.

The crusaders set up a Latin kingdom which included Constantinople and other parts of the Eastern Empire. A Latin Patriarch was appointed and Latin priests were brought in from the West. Understandably, the Eastern Christians became even more alienated from the Latin Christians and from their leaders.

In the years that followed, any attempt at reconciliation seemed incapable of overcoming the memory of the many differences or the brutality of the attack on Constantinople. The separation of the Church of the East and the West became fixed.

**OTHER BREAKAWAY CHRISTIAN
CHURCHES**

This was not the only rift in the Christian world. In 451 C.E., more than 500 bishops met in Chalcedon to discuss yet another false teaching (heresy) about the nature of Jesus, which was being taught by a monk called Eutychees (pronounced Utikees).

Eutychees and his followers taught that Jesus had a divine nature but not a real human nature, and that as he grew to manhood his human nature was absorbed by his Divine Nature. This was contrary to the whole teaching tradition of the Christian Church. But, like other heresies before and since, it attracted some supporters.

As in earlier Councils, the bishops met to clarify the situation and to re-assert what was laid down at the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. — that Jesus had two natures; that he was fully human and fully divine; truly the Son of God yet human in every way.

All the bishops who attended (the overwhelming majority being from the Eastern part of the Empire) did not agree with the official Church teaching. Some bishops and community leaders, mainly from Syria



A Coptic Cross. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, U.K.

and Ethiopia, broke away from the mainstream of Christianity to form separate churches – namely the Jacobite Church and the Coptic Church.

ENDNOTE

In 1965, Pope Paul VI met with Patriarch Athenagoras to discuss areas of agreement and exchange views. In a joint statement, the misunderstandings of the past centuries were regretted and there was an expression of optimism for future reconciliation. There have been further meetings between the Eastern Patriarch and Pope John Paul II since that time.

THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXTRACT FROM THE RECORD OF THE MEETING BETWEEN POPE PAUL VI AND PATRIARCH ATHENAGORAS I IN 1965

In 1054 the Papal Legate in Constantinople announced a sentence of excommunication against the Patriarch of the Eastern Church. The Patriarch and his Synod, in turn, pronounced a similar sentence against the legates from Rome. And for over 900 years these two Churches went separate ways.

On December 7, 1965, this painful separation came to a formal end when Pope Paul VI in Rome and Patriarch Athenagoras I in Istanbul issued a common announcement. Part of this document declared that both Pope Paul and Patriarch Athenagoras

a) "regret the offensive words, the reproaches and the reprehensible gestures which, on both sides, have marked or accompanied the sad events of this period."

b) "likewise regret and remove both from memory and the midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication which followed these events; and they commit these excommunications to oblivion."⁸

Both men knew that this declaration was but the beginning of the real process of reconciliation of these Churches. But they had made the first step. they both prayed that the people of both Churches would continue in the same spirit of forgiveness and understanding and determination to work towards greater unity and peace.