

RELIGIONFACTS

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Eastern Orthodoxy

What is Orthodox Christianity?

The denomination now known as **Orthodox Christianity**, **Eastern Orthodoxy**, or the **Orthodox Church** began as the eastern half of Christendom, the site of the former Byzantine Empire.

Today, the highest concentration of Orthodox Christians remains in the former Byzantine Empire (Greece, Turkey, and nearby countries) and in Russia. But Orthodoxy is found throughout the world, and approximately **225 million** people are Orthodox Christians.



Greek Orthodox priest and companion in Athens. Photo: [Rob Wallace](#).



Orthodox cathedral in Khabarovsk, Russia. Photo: [Boris Bartels](#).

History of Orthodoxy

Eastern Orthodoxy arose as a distinct branch of Christianity after the 11th-century "Great Schism" between Eastern and Western Christendom. For centuries there had been significant religious, cultural, and political differences between the Eastern and Western churches.

Religiously, they had different views on topics such as the use of images (icons), the nature of the Holy Spirit, and the date on which Easter should be celebrated.

Culturally, the Greek East has always tended to be more philosophical, abstract and mystical in its thinking, whereas the Latin West tends toward a more pragmatic and legal-minded

approach. (According to an old saying, "the Greeks built metaphysical systems; the Romans built roads.")

The **political aspects of the split** date back to the Emperor Constantine, who moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople. Upon his death, the empire was divided between his two sons, one of whom ruled the western half of the empire from Rome while the other ruled the eastern region from Constantinople.

These various factors **finally came to a head in 1054 AD**, when Pope Leo IX excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople (the leader of the Eastern church). In response, the patriarch anathematized (condemned) the Pope, and the Christian church has been divided into West ("Roman Catholic") and East ("Greek Orthodox") ever since.

A glimmer of hope for reconciliation came at the onset of the Crusades later that century, when the West came to the aid of the East against the Turks. But especially after the Fourth Crusade (1200-1204), in which crusaders sacked and occupied Constantinople, the only result was an increase in hostility between the two churches.

However, attempts at reconciliation have been renewed in recent years. In 1964, the Second Vatican Council issued this statement praising its Eastern counterparts:

The Catholic Church values highly the institutions of the Eastern Churches, their liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions, and their ordering of Christian life. For in those churches, which are distinguished by their venerable antiquity, there is clearly evident the tradition which has come from the Apostles through the Fathers and which is part of the divinely revealed, undivided heritage of the Universal Church.

On December 7, 1965, the mutual excommunication of 1054 was officially removed by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras.

Organization and Religious Authority



The Orthodox **Patriarch of Constantinople** has the honor of primacy, but does not carry the same authority as the Pope does in Catholicism. Major Orthodox churches include the **Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Church of Alexandria, the Church of Jerusalem, and the Orthodox Church in America.**

The religious authority for Orthodox Christianity is not the Pope as in Catholicism, nor the individual Christian with his Bible as in Protestantism, but **the scriptures as interpreted by the seven ecumenical councils** of the church.

Orthodoxy also relies heavily on the writings of early Greek fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great. Although some Orthodox confessions of faith were produced in the 17th century as counterparts to those of the Reformation, these are regarded as having only historical significance.

Orthodox Worship and Religious Practices

Orthodox worship is highly liturgical and is central to the history and life of the church:

By its theological richness, spiritual significance, and variety, the worship of the Orthodox Church represents one of the most significant factors in this church's continuity and identity. It helps to account for the survival of Christianity during the many centuries of Muslim rule in the Middle East and the Balkans when the liturgy was the only source of religious knowledge or experience.

<http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations/orthodoxy.htm>