

LESSON TWENTY- THREE – The Eastern Church from the 7th – 11th Centuries

Introduction

- This lesson will cover several decisive and defining developments in Eastern Christianity. Doctrinally, there was the final definition of Christological dogma, the continuing rejection of dualist heresy, and – after a great struggle – the rejection of iconoclasm.
- The aftermath of the Iconoclastic controversy saw a great blossoming of Middle Byzantine architecture and art.
- Significant developments also occurred in monasticism, the life of piety and literary production.
- Relations with the Western church were disrupted not only by the Christological controversy, iconoclasm and competition for the allegiance of converts in central Europe, but also by the Photian schism.
- That schism identified some of the points of estrangement between the Western and Eastern forms of Christianity that were to climax in the great schism of 1054.
- No doubt the principal development with the most consequences for the Eastern church was the emergence of Islam (Lesson Twenty-Four)

The Age of Heraclius and the Monothelite Controversy

- The years 600-800 were the time of barbarian invasions and settlement in the East. The Indo-European Slavs, the Mongol Avars and Bulgars overran the Balkans. Moreover, the Persians invaded Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor.
- To face this crisis, a great emperor, Heraclius, who ruled the Byzantine Empire from 610-641, emerged. He brought military victories over the Persians in 628 and 629 but soon a more serious threat was to come from the Arabs.
- On the theological front, Emperor Heraclius undertook again the task of reconciling the separated Christians of the East to the Byzantine version of orthodoxy.
- Heraclius wanted to preserve the doctrine of the two natures but to also find the oneness of Jesus Christ in some other aspect than person.
- Sergius, bishop or patriarch of Constantinople from 610-638, advocated the formula “one-energy” (meaning one operation or activity) to represent the unity of the two natures in Jesus Christ.
- Sophronius, a Palestinian monk who became bishop or patriarch of Jerusalem in 634, opposed the formula, saying that monenergism (“one-energy”) was a covert revival of Monophysitism. He explained that there was one working agent who performed two operations according to the appropriate nature.
- Both Sergius and Sophronius wrote to Pope Honorius, who advised against the use of “one-energy” but in his own exposition said Jesus had “one will.” Honorius presumably was speaking concretely of the act of willing, not theoretically of how many “wills” there were in Jesus, but his suggestion was taken up by Sergius in the theoretical sense.

- Heraclius spread the *Ekthesis* written by Sergius, in 638, forbidding discussion of “one-energy” but affirming “one-will” or Monothelitism, the last in a series of compromises aimed at reconciling the Chalcedonians and Monophysites.
- It failed to pacify the Monophysites though and only succeeded in dividing the Chalcedonians.
- Pope John IV condemned Honorius and the Monothelite controversy caused a schism between Rome and Constantinople between 646 and 681.
- Emperor Constans II in 648 forbid discussion of the “wills” in Jesus. The ambitious Pope Martin I in a synod at Rome in 649 proclaimed the doctrine of two wills in Jesus and condemned Honorius and Sergius.
- Maximus the Confessor, one of the great theologians and spiritual masters of the Greek church, was the leading advocate of the two wills in Jesus.
- Maximus’s position was that there is one who wills and He cannot perform two contrary volitions.
- The Monothelite theologians were the bishops or patriarchs Cyrus of Alexandria, Pyrrhus of Constantinople and Macarius of Antioch.
- They declared that will is a matter of person, not nature. Since the Chalcedon Definition of Faith had said Jesus Christ is “one person,” the will of that person is the will of the Logos. The result is a theological psychology.
- The human nature of Christ became a passive instrument that the divine activity and will employs, devoid of any initiative of its own. The Monothelite view placed the principle of the Savior’s human activity in the divine Word.
- Cyrus of Alexandria instituted a persecution in Egypt against the Coptic church which was Monophysite in its theology on behalf of the imperial cause that supported the “one will” position.
- Emperor Constantine IV tried to ease the strained relations between Rome and Constantinople.
- Islam had overwhelmed the eastern provinces, so it seemed more important to appease Rome than the Monophysites.
- He convened the sixth ecumenical council, Constantinople III. Pope Agatho was the new Leo behind the decisions of the council and Maximus provided the theological basis.
- The Monothelites were willing to say, instead of one will or energy, one hypostatic will and one theandric (divine-human) energy. That would have been good theology under Justinian but it was not accepted by those committed to the language of “two-wills.” The theology of Constantinople III was another Roman victory.
- The council condemned Sergius, Cyrus, Pyrrhus, Macarius and Honorius. It preserved the oneness in Jesus Christ by saying that the human will submitted to the will of the Logos.

The four Christological councils may be interpreted as representing a pendulum swing between the emphasis of Alexandria (the oneness of Christ) and Antioch (the twoness of Christ): an Alexandrian emphasis at Ephesus in 431, Antiochian at

Chalcedon in 451, Alexandrian again at Constantinople II in 553, and Antiochian again at Constantinople III in 681.¹

- Roman Catholics have defended Honorius's orthodoxy and so his papal infallibility, by various explanations.
- He used "one will" in a moral and not a physical sense; his was a private view not expressed *ex cathedra*; the council was wrong in attributing to him the same view as the other condemned, and because of his careless use of language he was condemned along with the others; his name was substituted for another's in falsified acts of the council.
- No matter what the explanation, even if infallibility is technically saved, Honorius proved not to be a safe theological -guide in the controversies of his time.
- The Syrian Christians of Lebanon maintained the Monothelete viewpoint and pulled away. In the 8th century the Lebanese Christians began electing their own bishop or patriarch.
- Justinian II called another council known as the Quinisext Council in respect to canonical legislation.
- This entirely Eastern gathering, not recognized in Rome, approved 102 canons.
- They renewed the 28th canon of Chalcedon that gave Constantinople equal privileges to old Rome.
- In establishing the disciplinary code for the Byzantine church, this council confirmed the practices that were to form a barrier to unity with the Western church.

Paulicians

- Byzantine sources say the founder of the Paulicians was a certain Constantine from Armenia in the 7th century who adopted the name of Silvanus.
- Those sources attribute a dualistic, Manichaean doctrine and a docetic Christology to the Paulicians, who actually took their name from either the apostle Paul or more likely, Paul of Samosata (from the 3rd century).
- Armenian sources are not so explicit on historical details but indicate the movement was active in Armenia a century before it was known to Byzantine writers.
- The Paulicians joined with the Muslims against the empire, but they were favored by the Iconoclastic emperors.
- The *Key to Truth*, of medieval origin (perhaps 7th to 9th century) but known from an Armenian manuscript dated 1782, appears to be an authentic Paulician source and gives a different perspective on the group's beliefs.
- The doctrines presented include the unity of God; the humanity and adoption of Jesus; the importance of baptism for Jesus and the believer (no infant baptism); the rejection of the sacraments and hierarchy of other churches; the rejection of asceticism, cult of saints, and image worship (including even the symbolic use of the cross); and the claim that Mary did not remain a virgin. They affirmed that they were true Christians, alone possessing apostolic faith.
- It seems that by the 9th century there was a split in the Paulicians. One group in Byzantium adopted a dualist-docetic position. This Western group was the one

known to the Byzantine polemicists and influenced the Bogomils in the Balkans, who followed the Manichaean dualist viewpoint.

- The charge of Manicheism against the Paulicians as a whole may have had special reference to Iconoclasm, because dualism was perceived to give a theoretical basis for the rejection of images.
- The *Key of Truth* preserved the position of another group in Armenia that stayed nearer to the earlier doctrines.

The Iconoclastic Controversy

- The Iconoclastic (image breaking or picture destroying) controversy was sparked, in part, by response to Islam's opposition to images.
- The debate concerned the pictoriality of Jesus Christ, especially the divine in Christ, so the Christological arguments that were employed made the whole question an epilogue to the Christological controversies.
- The first phase of the Iconoclasm lasted from 726 to 787; the effort was revived from 815 to 843.
- The controversy touched the nerve of popular piety, for the most significant form of Eastern devotion had become the cult of holy images or icons (the Greek word means "pictures" not "statues") depicting Jesus Christ, Mary, saints and angels.
- The earliest distinctive Christian art represented scenes from the Bible. It was decorative but some claimed that it helped to teach.
- The funerary art may have further served to enhance the sacred character of the monuments.
- Marks of devotion to pictures seemingly evolved from the marks of respect paid to official portraits of reigning emperors during the late empire.
- The first Christian images known to have been surrounded with these marks of cult were portraits of persons venerated as holy while they were still alive.
- A cult of images is first attested during the 5th century and suddenly became popular during the last half of the 6th century and the 7th century.
- The reserve that church leaders such as Augustine had shown toward the first images at the end of the 4th century had all but disappeared.
- The pictures provided a more concrete and direct representation of the presence of spiritual powers.
- Leo III, emperor from 717-741, was a soldier emperor who gave himself to holding the boundaries against the military and ideological threat from Islam.
- He is reported to have said, "I am both priest and king,"² a view with a long precedent in the East.
- In 721-722 emperor Leo III decreed the forced conversion of Jews, a decree repeated by later emperors, all unsuccessful. In 726 he issued a law code that made both parties to adultery equally culpable, made betrothal binding, and imposed mutilation as a symbolic punishment for certain crimes.

The bases of Leo's opposition to pictures in churches are very much disputed and the initiative may actually have come from bishops in Asia Minor. Possible influences include:

- 1. Those who attributed the success of Islam to the idolatry of Christians.**
- 2. Those who hoped that a purified Christianity would convert Muslims and Jews.**
- 3. Paulician associations in his background or,**
- 4. Leo's desire to control the church by weakening powerful monasteries, where monks made icons and sold them for a great price to pilgrims.³**
 - After declaring his opposition to images in 726, Leo issued an edict against them in 730 and deposed the bishop or patriarch Germanus for resisting his policy.
 - Pope Gregory III opposed the emperor in two synods held in Rome in 731, and Leo responded by relieving papal jurisdiction from Illyricum, south Italy and Sicily.
 - Emperor Constantine V, emperor from 741-775, was an opponent of the cult of saints as well as of religious pictures.
 - He called and took an active part in a council convened in 754 at Hieria, an imperial palace across the Bosphorus from Constantinople.
 - Both iconoclasts and iconodulists (those who venerated icons) agreed that the divine in Jesus Christ could not be represented in pictures, but Jesus Christ has two natures.
 - The iconoclasts argued that to represent the human nature was to lapse into the Nestorian heresy by dividing Christ, but to represent both natures was to go against their distinction which was Monophysite and was to make an image of a deity.
 - The iconodulists replied that not to represent Jesus Christ was Monophysite. The arguments used illustrate the practice of debating new issues in terms of already condemned errors.
 - The supporters of the pictures used arguments that were most effectively articulated by John of Damascus, an Arab Christian who wrote in Greek.
 - John of Damascus was the most systematic and comprehensive theologian in the Greek church since Origen.
 - His most important work is the *Fountain of Knowledge*, part three of which gives an excellent summary of the teaching of the Greek Fathers on the principal Christian doctrines. He also produced homilies, hymns and a commentary on Paul.

John of Damascus's *Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images* took a fourfold approach to the issue:

- 1. It is impossible and impious to picture God, who is pure spirit, but Jesus Christ, the virgin, saints and angels who have appeared in human beings may be depicted. The Bible forbids idols alone.**
- 2. It is permissible to make images. The Old Testament prohibition of images was not absolute, for some images are commanded there (cherubim over the mercy seat and other adornments of the temple). Moreover, we are not under the Old Testament now; by the incarnation God has prompted us to make the image visible. (John set the incarnation at the center of the defense of images,**

elevating the debate from a question only of practices of piety to a matter of doctrinal orthodoxy.) Since humans are created as body and soul, the physical senses are important in human knowledge of the divine. There are images everywhere – human beings are images of God. The tradition of the church allows images, and this suffices without the Bible.

- 3. It is lawful to venerate images. Matter is not evil. There are different kinds of worship: true worship belongs to God, but honor may be given to others.**
- 4. Finally, there are advantages to images and their veneration. They teach and recall the divine gifts, nourish piety, and become channels of grace.⁴**
 - Despite John's arguments, the emperors drove the iconodulists from their positions of power and began a vigorous persecution. Many works of art in church building from the 8th century were destroyed. Constantine V took strenuous measures against monks, the chief spokes-men for the pictures, secularizing their property and forcing them to marry nuns.
 - The reaction against iconoclasm finally set in after Constantine V. Leo IV had been milder in his policies and his widow Irene brought a complete reversal.
 - Irene was deposed in 802, but before that she held the 7th ecumenical council, Nicaea II, presided over by the patriarch Tarasius, which supported the iconodulist position and was confirmed by papal legates sent by Pope Hadrian I. This council declared the council of 754 heretical.
 - The key decree of the Second Council of Nicaea made a distinction between "honorable reverence," which could be given to pictures, and "true devotion," which belongs to God alone.
 - Moreover, there was a distinction made between the image and what was worshipped.
 - The theological defense of images, however, still left them more pregnant with the divine essence than was true for some of the idols of paganism.

The Second Council of Nicaea argued that this is true because an image partakes of the nature of that which it represents:

"For the honor that is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented."⁵

- In other words, the pictures become "God with us" in visible form. The popular imaginations of the people, however, does not always observe theological distinction between true worship and lawful veneration.
- The council's rejection of the church's aniconic (meaning without images or idols) past included the exclusion of the option of being a Messianic Jew with its requirement that Jewish converts give up Jewish customs.

Later Phase of the Iconoclastic Controversy

- A later phase of the iconoclastic controversy opened in 814 when Leo V again implemented an iconoclastic policy.

- Opposition to him came from Nicephorus, patriarch from 806-828, and Theodore, head of the monastery of Studium in Constantinople.
- The second phase of the controversy brought greater knowledge and philosophical depth to the debate.
- A council in 842 reaffirmed that decisions of Nicaea II, and this victory for images is celebrated by the Orthodox churches on the first Sunday of Lent as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy."
- The pictures had come a long way from their earlier use in decoration, instruction and aids in piety to become objects of veneration.
- The veneration of images occupied a somewhat lesser place in the Western church, for there the image was an intermediary and a modality of worship to the object depicted and so received a relative veneration, whereas in the East the image received a direct veneration as infused with the nature of the object represented.
- As a result of the iconoclastic controversy, art became in the East an ecclesiastical competence and subject to dogmatic definition.
- The decisions of Nicaea II surrounded icons with an aura given previously to relics of saints. Relics, however, were not neglected, for Nicaea II required relics of saints be placed in the altar at the consecration of a church.
- In later history art had a freer development in the West than it did in the East, where it was surrounded with theological restrictions. The victory for the icons was also a victory for the monks in the Greek church.
- Nevertheless, the union of church and state continued to give the emperor – as theocratic representative – tremendous influence in the church. Church-state arrangements in practice characteristically give the state preeminence over the church and promote traditionalism in society. The Orthodox Church considers as ecumenical only 7 councils and so the official statements of its doctrine closed.

The Photian Schism

- Photius was a learned scholar, skilled politician and captivating person, who served twice as patriarch of Constantinople from 858-867 and 878-886.
- The patriarch Ignatius either resigned or was deposed in 858, and Photius, a layman and first secretary to the emperor Michael III, was elected to succeed him.
- The details of the situation illustrate the practical realities faced by the Byzantine church. Ignatius had refused communion to Caesar Barda, uncle of the emperor, for his immoral life and was removed from office.
- Photius was ordained by a bishop who had been suspended by Ignatius, whose followers declared Photius deprived of office and excommunicated.
- The supporters of Photius responded in kind. Pope Nicholas the Great sent legates to investigate. Exceeding their powers and passing a judgement the pope had reserved for himself, the legates confirmed the deposition of Ignatius, who refused to recognize their competence. The pope deposed his legates and declared Photius deprived of office.

- A letter of Photius in 867 complained of the intrusion of Roman missionaries into Bulgaria and of certain practices of the Western church: fasting on Saturday in Lent, clerical celibacy, and refusal to recognize the validity of confirmation by Greek priests (in the West confirmation was restricted to bishops).
- Photius also objected to the Western teaching on the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son as well as from the Father, thereby exposing a difference in the Latin and Greek understanding of the Trinity, for the Latins saw the principle of unity in the one divine nature common to the three persons and the Greeks saw the unity in the one God the Father.
- A synod in 867 declared the pope deposed and excommunicated. Basil I seized sole power in Constantinople later in 867 and reinstated Ignatius as patriarch.
- A synod in Constantinople in 869-870 (counted by Latins as the 8th ecumenical council) excommunicated Photius and over the protest of the papal legates received the Bulgarians under the jurisdiction of Constantinople.
- When Ignatius died in 877, Photius again became patriarch. Pope John VIII was willing to accept him if he would repent of his previous conduct.
- In 886 the new Emperor Leo VI, for political reasons and out of dislike for his former teacher, deposed Photius and placed him in a monastery.
- The schism between Rome and Constantinople connected with Photius was temporary and only one of several through the early centuries, but it did bring out issues that made certain a final break in communion.
- Photius stated the arguments against the Western teaching on the procession of the Holy Spirit that would be repeated in later theological discussions and he highlighted some of the differences in customs between the Latin and Greek churches.
- The Greek theory of pentarchy (rule by the five patriarchs) did not imply equality of the patriarchs and was not placed in opposition to a primacy by Rome until the 12th and 13th centuries.
- The so-called Photian schism was more of an internal struggle in the Byzantine church, into which Rome was drawn, than a controversy between Rome and Constantinople.
- Photius drew up a law code that gave a comprehensive guide to relations between the emperor and the patriarch.

The Flowering of the Middle Byzantine Church

- Byzantine culture had its second golden age (after the age of Justinian in the 6th century) in the late 9th through the 11th centuries, associated with the Macedonian dynasty (867-1056), a time when the West was culturally still struggling in comparative darkness.
- This period was highlighted by the reign of Emperor Basil II (976-1025), who revived the military power of the Byzantine empire.

- The Sunday eucharistic liturgy remained the focal point of church life and spirituality.
- In addition, three moveable feasts highlighted the church year: Palm Sunday, Easter and Ascension (Pentecost). Nine fixed feasts structured the rest of the church calendar: Annunciation to Mary, Nativity of Christ, Epiphany of Christ (His baptism), Hypapante (the meeting of Simeon and Anna with Mary and infant Jesus in the Temple), Transfiguration of Christ, Birth of the Virgin, Presentation of the Virgin, the Dormition of the Virgin, and the Exaltation of the Cross. The commemorations of the martyrs filled the remainder of the church year.
- During the 8th century the type of hymn known as the Kontakion was replaced by the Kanon.
- Marian piety flourished. In the 4th century Mary became a symbol of virginal life, in the 6th century the protectress of cities, but in the 9th century she became more than human, as in the prominence in literature and art of the theme of the “Lament of the Mother of God” at the foot of the cross.
- Theodore of Studios developed this theme, and the sermon on the “Lament of the Virgin” by George of Nicomedia on Good Friday was influential. He was the first to develop salvation from a Mariological point of view.
- The essential elements in the cult of the saints developed in the 4th and 5th centuries and so were parallel in the Eastern and Western churches.

There were three principal types of monasticism practiced in the Byzantine world:

- 1. Large cenobite monasteries located close to cities. These were involved in the life of the city, serving as centers of worship and pilgrimage, providing hospitality for travelers and care for the sick and aged, and producing items of everyday use as well as objects of religious art.**
 - 2. Hermits or solitaries, who withdrew far from towns for a life of prayer and asceticism.**
 - 3. A small community of “hermits” living away from towns under the spiritual direction of an old man.⁶**
- Two strands of influence were present in Byzantine civilization – the ascetic/monastic element from Christianity and the humanistic element from classical Greece.
 - The most creative theologian of the period and greatest of the Byzantine mystics was Simeon the New Theologian. Lacking much acquaintance with traditional literature, Simeon gave priority to directly revealed inner experience. The characteristic form of his mysticism was the experience of light.

Missionary Expansion

Bulgaria

- Of great significance for the future of the Eastern church were the missions to central Europe that converted the Slavs and Bulgars to Orthodox Christianity.
- In 864 Emperor Michael III, in response to a request from the king of the Slavs in Moravia, Rastislav, sent two brother – Cyril and Methodius – as missionaries to Moravia. Cyril, born in Thessalonica, grew up speaking Greek and the Slavic language, learned the Semitic languages and was a student of Photius.
- The work of Cyril and Methodius is an example of what came to be the policy of the Eastern church, that is to organize churches on racial and national lines, leading to a federation of autonomous churches with different customs but one doctrine and spirit.
- The Roman practice in missions was different, insisting on the same liturgical language (Latin, which persisted in all Roman Catholic churches until Vatican II's Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, 1963) and customs.
- There were Christians among the Bulgars since the 7th century, but Christianity was established in Bulgaria under King Boris in the late 9th century.
- His grandson, Czar Symeon, created a culture that was Slavonic in language but Byzantine in spirit.

Russia

- The Vikings of Northmen who migrated east in the 8th to 10th centuries became known as the Rus.
- They penetrated modern Russia by following the Dnieper and Volga rivers south, opening trade routes with Baghdad and Constantinople.
- Although there was earlier missionary activity, the first convert from the nobility of the Rus was Queen Olga at their capital of Kiev.
- The real founder of Russian Christianity, however, was her grandson, Vladimir, himself a ruthless libertine, yet he formally embraced Orthodox Christianity.
- Vladimir was baptized on January 6th, 988, followed by a mass baptism of the people of Kiev a few months later.
- Although adopting the Greek form of Christianity, Russia did not appropriate the Greek intellectual heritage. The ties with Constantinople were also maintained on the administrative level: The Russian church administered mostly by Greeks and the bishop was appointed by Constantinople until 1299.
- The Hungarians and Western Slavs (Bohemians, Poles, Croats and Slovenes) came under Frankish and Roman influence.

India

- Varying reports place the introduction of Christianity into India as early as the 1st and 2nd centuries, other evidence increases the probability of Christianity there in the 4th century and a strong presence is certain in the 6th.
- Large numbers of Christians existed on the southwest coast of India and smaller numbers in the northwest.

Asia

- From as early as the 4th century there were Christians around the Caspian Sea and Bactria. By the end of the 5th century East Syrian missionaries were working among the Huns.
- A long inscription in Chinese set up in 781 at Xi'an, tells the arrival there in 635 of an East Syrian missionary monk.
- Persecution in the mid-9th century brought suppression of Christianity in China and in 980 a Syrian Christian priest and five others who had been sent to aid the mission of China returned to Baghdad reporting that Christianity was extinct there.
- The Korean Chronicles speak of East Syrian Christians in the country during the Silla dynasty (661-932), perhaps as a result of Korean contact with Xi'an during the time of Christian favor there.
- Japanese sources report that in 737 an envoy to Xi'an returned with a Persian representative of the "Church of the Luminous Religion" and there is evidence of a Christian building in Kyoto dating apparently to the 7th century.

The Coptic Church

- The Coptic church in Egypt experienced a time of revival under the Fatimid caliphs (969-1171), its members achieving artistic excellence and filling high government positions under their Muslim masters.
- The 11th century saw the first composition in Arabic of a grammar for the Coptic language.
- Coptic scholars saw a need to resist the overwhelming influence of Arabic and renewed the production of grammars and dictionaries in the 13th century, but this late burst of literary activity was unsuccessful in preserving Coptic as a living language outside the liturgy, where it is still used.

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- ¹ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 331
 - ² Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 338
 - ³ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 338
 - ⁴ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 340
 - ⁵ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 341
 - ⁶ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 346