Eastern Orthodoxy:
Mirror Image of Pagan Romanism

Often referred to as a single entity, the Eastern Orthodox Church is a collective group of churches with 150 to 200 million members. The Orthodox body consists of the former patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, plus the national churches of Russia, Georgia, Serbia (Yugoslavia), Romania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Sinai, Greece, Albania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Each of these church groups is presided over by a leader variously known as a patriarch, archbishop, or metropolitan. Under him are the local bishops of individual congregations. From these are selected the members of an episcopal council or synod. New bishops are appointed or “consecrated” by the synod. All groups look to Constantinople as the historical origin of the movement and the patriarch of Constantinople is honoured as “first among equals” by the heads of the other groups. However, he does not rule over them as a “supreme pontiff” with the unquestioned supreme authority which the pope carries in Roman Catholicism. The jurisdiction of the individual Orthodox groups is generally limited to the national boundaries of the countries in which they operate. When we read in the newspaper about the “Eastern Church”, this may or may not mean one of the Eastern Orthodox groups.

Branches of Roman Catholicism located in the east are often referred to as “Eastern Rite” churches. These are usually groups formerly Orthodox, but who have returned to full communion with the pope in Rome. Currently one of these groups in the Ukraine, called the Uniates because they are officially united with Rome, are the centre of a controversy between the pope and the new leaders of the Soviet Commonwealth. The pope is pressuring the leaders to restore buildings and privileges to the Uniates which they owned before the Communist domination. Most of the new leaders are Orthodox, however, and resent the existence of a competing spiritual force loyal to a foreign leader.

Eastern Orthodox worship is heavy with ancient rituals and traditions. Like Roman Catholicism, its doctrine includes sacraments, prayers for the dead and acceptance of the Apocryphal books as part of the Bible. Orthodoxy rejects the worship of statues as too close to pagan idolatry, yet “venerates” icons (two-dimensional pictures) in much the same way. According to the “Evangelical Dictionary of Theology”, “the image channels the presence of the person depicted to the one contemplating it...” (page 805).

Additional doctrines are partially the same as Romanism. For example, the Orthodox believe in...
Mary's perpetual virginity and sinless life, but question her immaculate conception and bodily assumption into heaven.

Orthodoxy also agrees with Catholicism's central idolatry: worship of the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist. However, they disagree somewhat on how this "transubstantiation" occurs.

Another point of contention between Orthodoxy and Romanism is that each sees herself as the only, true, catholic and apostolic church. Each views the other as heretical.

Both groups place church tradition on equal footing with the Bible as the ultimate spiritual authority.

While mainline Protestants are buzzing more and more closely to the Vatican's ecumenical web, Eastern Orthodoxy is stiffly resisting the pope's overtures.

At Billy Graham's recent ecumenical conference in Moscow, the Orthodox were noticeably absent.

Clearly, Eastern Orthodoxy and Rome may have separated, but the divorce isn't final by any means.

But as long as each stoutly claims exclusive ownership of truth and that the other is in error, full reconciliation seems unlikely.

However, it will be interesting to watch the new patriarch, Bartholomeos, who was enthroned in Constantinople (Istanbul) last November 2nd. Bartholomeos is a familiar face in Rome, having graduated from the Vatican university and served as a patriarchate liaison with the Vatican.

by D. Guide

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CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLIES INTERNATIONAL, P.O. BOX 888, COFFS HARBOUR N.S.W. 2450, AUSTRALIA