

# BYZANTINE RELIGION

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

**Overview** In 330 C.E. the Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Byzantium, a thriving Greek colony out of range of the disastrous break downs impending in the Latin West, was to be chosen as the seat of Eastern Christianity, a position it retained until the Fall of the Byzantine Empire--the secular power in which Byzantine Christianity was embedded--to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

**Getting started** Like the Christian Church in the Latin West, the Byzantine Church needed first to come to an agreement about beliefs. On the official level this agreement was achieved through Councils, at which the leading figures in the Church convened to hammer out doctrine. There were seven such councils in the Byzantine East, dating from 325 C.E. (The Council of Nicaea, in Asia Minor) to 787 C.E., by which time it was felt that Byzantine theology had consolidated, for the time being. (The fact is that Byzantine theology continues to evolve, having been enriched in several dimensions within the past century.)

**The character of the Byzantine Orthodox religion** The fundamental tenets of the Orthodox Church are close to those of the Roman Catholic Church. For the Orthodox believer God the creator is presumed to have acted prior to time to create a world in which human beings occupy a central value-giving position. Jesus Christ is recognized as the God-sent Savior of Mankind, who through his death on the cross vicariously reprieved mankind from its sins. The supreme act of Reconciliation, between God and man, is the communion mass, in which the worshipper obeys Jesus' command to eat his body (wafer) and drink his blood (wine) 'in remembrance of Me.'

## The points of conflict between Byzantine and Western Christianity.

**Governance** From the 'Western Christian' view point the chief conflictual element concerns the primacy of the Roman Papacy. The legal mind which has always dominated in the Roman Church, descended as it is from the organized legal structures of the Roman Empire, has never been happy with the pluralistic, multi structural format of the Byzantine Church--which is in fact the Eastern Churches, for in fact there are many widely separate Churches gathered under the Eastern Orthodox heading--Greek, Russian, Polish, Syrian, etc. To the papacy in Rome centrality and unique governance, over all the Roman Catholic domain, has been and remains essential, while to the Byzantine Church this insistence on primacy has been of less importance.

**A basic issue** It will illustrate the (so it may seem to us) fustily theological character, of the issues separating Byzantine Orthodox from Roman Christianity, if we mention the long-broiling conflict over the *filioque clause*. That Latin formula--first allowed to harden in the Nicene Creed, where early Christianity set down its essential doctrines--refers to an addition which the Byzantine Church wanted to make to the Latin formula which declares that the Holy Spirit is born of the Father (excluding the Son, the Christ), which addition states that the Holy Spirit is also born of the Son, The Christ, *filioque (and from the Son.)* The gist of this consequence laden dispute--internal struggles of every sort were at stake--was that the Eastern Church wanted to affirm the full and equal personhood/presence of each of the three members of the trinity, while the Latin Church was (often) less insistent on the equality between Father and Son, and frequently privileged the importance of the Holy Spirit, the bearer of intelligibility, within the Trinity.

## Reading

Binns, John, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Church*, Cambridge, 2014.

Fitzgerald, Thomas, *The Orthodox Church*, Westport, 2014.

### **Discussion questions**

We mentioned one basic issue, between Byzantine Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity. That issue overlays a wider rift between the two branches of Christianity. For the Eastern Church mystical apprehension of God is widely admired, while for The Western Catholic Church much more stress (as in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas) is placed on rational analysis and logical conclusions. Review the Byzantine text, *The Philokalia*, composed of devotional materials written between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, C.E., to see how the Byzantine Church oversees the direct experience of God.

Constantine, who set up the Christian Empire in Byzantium, was of course a Roman and a Latin speaker. How did Greek become the working language of the Byzantine Orthodox Church?

The development of Byzantine Orthodox Christianity is studded with heresies. One of the most powerful was Arianism, which involved a highly contentious view of the nature of Jesus Christ. What was that heresy and how was it resolved?