



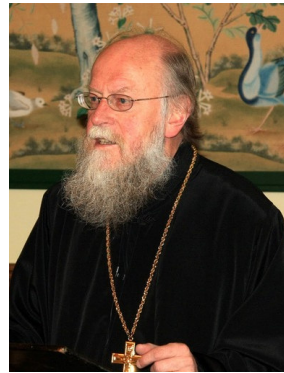
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Orthodoxy and its Discontents: 843–1438

Abstract

In this article Archpriest Prof. Dr. Andrew Louth deals with the historical roots of the concept “orthodox” as well as with its contextual and political implications.

“The use of the term ὀρθόδοξος has a long history; already in the second century ὀρθόδοξος was used to describe the belief of the Church, that called itself ‘Catholic’: in contrast to the heretical beliefs of groups that had broken away from the Church, the Catholic Church which proclaimed and defended the Orthodox Faith, meaning true belief or opinion, ὀρθὴ δόξα. From the fifth century on,



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ὀρθοδοξία acquires a certain dignity: Cyril of Alexandria calls ‘Mary *Theotokos*’ τὸ σκῆπτρον τῆς ὀρθοδοξίας, ‘the sceptre of Orthodoxy’; the first canon of the Council of Ephesos speaks of ‘those who think τὰ τῆς ὀρθοδοξίας’, those who think the thoughts of Orthodoxy; Evagrius in his Church History refers to Leo’s tome as ὀρθοδοξίας ὄρος, ‘definition of Orthodoxy’. It seems to me, however, that the first time the Byzantine Church *identified* itself as Orthodox was at the end of the Iconoclast controversy, and the promulgation of a document called the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*”.

Keywords

Orthodoxy, Byzantine Church, Synodikon of Orthodoxy, Byzantine Empire, Mission

1 Introduction

The terms ‘Orthodox’, ‘Orthodoxy’ have come to be used in a denominational sense, as, for instance, in the petitions added to the Litany of Fervent Supplication by the Russian Orthodox Church in connexion with the crisis in Ukraine: we are bidden to ask the Lord ‘preserve the Orthodox Church throughout the world in unity and true faith’ and that he might ‘look with goodwill and mercy on the Holy Orthodox Church and keep her from divisions and schisms, from enmity and disorders, that her unity might not be diminished or shaken’ - in these petitions ‘Orthodox’ distinguishes the Orthodox from other Christians who call themselves ‘Catholic’, protestant, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, or even others who call themselves ‘Orthodox’: the non-Chalcedonian Churches of the East.

Such a use is an aspect of the denominalization that is a product, in historical terms, of the Reformation. It is striking that one of the terms, used in the Creed recited or sung at the Divine Liturgy - 'Catholic' -, though never thoroughly conceded by other Christians, came to be claimed by one of these 'denominations', and that claim has largely been accepted, in practice if not in theory, with the Slavs and the Romanians removing from the Creed their version of καθολικός - кафолическая, *catolicească* - and replacing it with соборная, *sobornicească*, thereby ceding the term 'catholic' to those in communion with Rome.

How all this came about is not really our business here, though one might note that Augustine, in his defence of the Catholic Church against the Donatists, uses the term *Catholica* of the Church in communion with Rome so frequently as to lend it a distinctive quality, which was picked up by Roman controversialists in Reformation debates¹. For our part, we are concerned with this denominational use of 'orthodox'.

How is it that we come to regard ourselves as 'orthodox', as in the petitions introduced last year in the Russian Orthodox Church? In some respects the reason is simple: it is because, already in the Middle Ages, the Byzantine Empire and Church had come to embrace ὀρθόδοξος as its self-designation. But though simple, that simplicity is deceptive.

2 The concept of ὀρθόδοξος. Historical roots and political aspects

The use of the term ὀρθόδοξος has a long history; already in the second century ὀρθόδοξος was used to describe the belief of the

¹ See Y. M.-J. Congar, *Catholicisme: hier, aujourd'hui, demain* 2 (1949), 720-5, s.v. 'catholicité', p. 723.

Church, that called itself ‘Catholic’: in contrast to the heretical beliefs of groups that had broken away from the Church, the Catholic Church which proclaimed and defended the Orthodox Faith, meaning true belief or opinion, ὀρθὴ δόξα. From the fifth century on, ὀρθοδοξία acquires a certain dignity: Cyril of Alexandria calls ‘Mary *Theotokos*’ τὸ σκῆπτρον τῆς ὀρθοδοξίας, ‘the sceptre of Orthodoxy’; the first canon of the Council of Ephesos speaks of ‘those who think τὰ τῆς ὀρθοδοξίας’, those who think the thoughts of Orthodoxy; Evagrius in his Church History refers to Leo’s tome as ὀρθοδοξίας ὄρος, ‘definition of Orthodoxy’². It seems to me, however, that the first time the Byzantine Church *identified* itself as Orthodox was at the end of the Iconoclast controversy, and the promulgation of a document called the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*³. This was issued in 843, by the new Patriarch Methodios, who had been appointed by Theodora, regent for her infant son, who wished to put the whole business of iconoclasm into the past. The document was agreed, not at a newly-called council or synod of the whole Church, but by the so-called ‘home synod’, an *ad hoc* gathering of hierarchs in Constantinople, called by the patriarch, to deal with urgent affairs of the Church. It was a document, probably composed by Patriarch Methodios, though in language drawn from the seventh œcumenical synod, called at Nicaea in 787, to end the first phase of the iconoclast controversy. I have called it a document, and so it is, but it is much more than that. It was proclaimed by one of the deacons of Hagia Sophia on 11 March, 843, the First Sunday of Lent, as the culmination of a long procession that had taken place,

² *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 971–2, s.v., «ὀρθοδοξία, ὀρθοδόξος».

³ Critical edition by J. Gouillard, «Le Synodikon d’Orthodoxie», *Travaux et Mémoires* 2 (1967), pp. 1–316.

starting at the Blachernae Palace in the north of Constantinople, just inside the city walls close to the Golden Horn, the normal residence of the Emperor and his family, and leading to the church of Hagia Sophia: a distance of about a couple of miles. On the way there was sung a canon composed, probably, by Methodios himself (though ascribed to St Theodore the Studite in the Triodion). Arriving at Hagia Sophia, the procession led by the Patriarch was greeted by the Emperor (who had made his own way there), and they entered the Great Church through the Royal Doors, 'hand in hand' (κρατήσαντες ἀλλήλων τὰς χεῖρας). There in the body of the Church the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* was proclaimed by the deacon.

It was not just a declaration; it begins with a homiletic preface, which I have very considerably shortened:

A yearly thanksgiving is due to God on account of that day when we recovered the Church of God, with the demonstration of the dogmas of true religion and the overthrowing of the blasphemies of wickedness... For there was a winter with us - a long hard winter, and not just a fleeting season - one of great wickedness, spewing out savagery, but now there has blossomed forth for us the first of seasons, the spring of the graces of God, in which we have gathered together to make a thank-offering to God, a harvest of good works... For the enemies who reproach the Lord and utterly dishonour the holy veneration of him in holy icons, raising and puffing themselves up through their blasphemies: the Lord of wonders will tear them to shreds, and dash to the earth the insolence of their apostasy... For in the icons we see the Master's sufferings for our sake, the cross, the tomb, Hades slain and despoiled, the martyrs' combats, their crowns, salvation itself, which the judge of the combat and giver of the prize and the crowns has accomplished in the midst of the earth. Today we make festival on this holy day, and

making merry together and rejoicing in prayers and litanies, we cry out in psalms and songs.⁴

Then follows the Great Prokeimenon, ‘Who is a great God like our God?’ And the *Synodikon* continues with affirmation of the Orthodox faith in a series of paragraphs expressing the belief of Orthodox Christians, each of which is greeted by the acclamation: ‘May their memory be eternal!’, closing with the affirmation:

This is the faith of the Apostles; this is the faith of the Fathers; this is the faith of the Orthodox; this faith makes fast the inhabited world. These preachers of true religion, we praise as brothers and as those we long to have as our fathers, to the glory and honour of the true religion for which they struggled.⁵

And there follows the acclamation of these holy fathers, the patriarchs Germanos, Tarasios, Nikephoros, and the denunciation of those who have attacked them. Then come brief statements of the error of the iconoclasts, to be denounced with the acclamation ‘Anathema!’, and the iconoclasts themselves, by name, similarly anathematized. The *Synodikon* closes with the Φήμη of the reigning emperors, and the proclamation of ‘Eternal Memory’ to deceased emperors and patriarchs, concluding with:

The Holy Trinity has glorified them. By their contests and struggles and teachings for the sake of true religion to the point of death, we entreat God that we may be guided and strengthened and beg that we may be shown to be imitators of their inspired way of life until the end, by the pities and grace of the great and first high-priest Christ, our true God; at the intercessions of our most-glorious

⁴ *Synodikon*, ed. Goulliard, pp. 45–6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Lady, Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary, of the god-like Angels and all the Saints. Amen.⁶

What is important to notice is the acclamations: 'May their memory be eternal!' (Αἰωνία ἡ μνημὴ αὐτῶν!) for the defenders of Orthodoxy, and Ἀνάθεμα for the heretics and their beliefs. These acclamations would have been shouted by all present, creating a sense of complicity as Orthodox. A liturgical act certainly (think of the acclamation of Ἄξιος! at ordinations), but also a political act, binding all those present in a common sense of being Orthodox: the kind of complicity found, I imagine, at football matches. It was not a once-for-all event. It was repeated every year on the first Sunday of Lent, the Sunday of Orthodoxy, as it still is, though in a somewhat diminished form: at first in Hagia Sophia, though it soon spread, in a modified form, to other cities of the Byzantine Empire, and we can well imagine to the newly converted Slavs: the mission of SS Cyril and Methodios to the Moravian Slavs took place barely twenty years after this proclamation of Orthodoxy.

It is at the very time as Cyril and Methodios were in Moravia, that we come across another example of this identification of Orthodoxy with the Byzantine Empire. Latin missionaries were already at that time at work in Bulgaria, provoking Patriarch Photios to write a letter to his fellow Eastern patriarchs, protesting at this Latin missionary activity intended to convert the Bulgarians to Western Christianity. The letter (*ep.2*)⁷ is important for the picture it gives of Photios' attitude to Latin Christianity. It begins by depicting the way in which the world is prone to falling into error, listing heretics and other heterodox who pollute the world. Before going on to list the

⁶ Ibid., p. 107.

⁷ Photius, *Epistulae et Amphilochia*, ed. B. Laourdas and L. G. Westerink, I (Leipzig: Teubner, 1983), pp. 39–53.

errors of ‘these men who have arisen from darkness’, Photios paints a picture of the Emperor as presiding over the pure faith of his Queen City and ‘just as from some high and lofty place’ releasing ‘the fountains of orthodoxy, making the pure streams of piety flow to the ends of the world and like rivers water with dogmas the souls there’ (*ep.2.* 31–4)⁸. It is the emperor who is the source of ὀρθοδοξία, which characterizes the true religion of the queen city of Constantinople – in contrast to all the errors of the heretics, amongst whom Photios includes the Latin Christianity of the Pope. There is nothing anti-Latin about the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* itself, but for Photios Orthodoxy flows from the Byzantine Emperor himself and is muddied and polluted by the Latin missionaries who have ‘arisen from darkness’.

Photios’ presages many aspects of the history of the *Synodikon*. For more than a couple of centuries, the *Synodikon* remained unchanged (though there may have been local additions), but with the Komnene dynasty, the *Synodikon* itself becomes an instrument of imperial policy. Alexios I had seized the throne in 1081 ten years after the disastrous defeat of the Empire at the hands of the Seljuk Turks - an event that in retrospect was a turning point in the decline of the Byzantine Empire - and found his empire impoverished. He remedied this by pillaging the church of its treasures (especially found in the wealthier monasteries), and needed to do something restore his standing with the Church. The *Synodikon* was his weapon, and his aim was to present himself, as Photios had seen the emperor, as the source of Orthodoxy. He allowed the trial of John Italos, the philosopher, who had succeeded Michael Psellos as ‘Consul of the Philosophers’, for heresy. Eustratios, Bishop of Nicaea, was also tried for heresy, in this case concerning the exact status of

⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

icons. Further evidence for Alexios' promotion of himself as guardian of Orthodoxy can be found in the condemnation to death by burning of Basil the Bogomil. In the case of John Italos and Eustratios, their condemnation led to further anathemas being added to the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*, so that it became not just a record and celebration of the end of iconoclasm, but a continuing witness to Orthodoxy. The terms in which Italos was condemned crudely attacked the tradition of learning, still preserved among the learned in Byzantium:

On those who pursue Hellenic learning and are formed by it not simply as an educational discipline, but follow their empty opinions, and believe them to be true, and thus become involved in them, as possessing certainty, so that they introduce others to them, whether secretly or openly, and teach them as indubitable: *Anathema!*⁹

Further additions to the *Synodikon* often take the same tack, reaching a climax in the last major addition to the *Synodikon*, the condemnation of the opponents of hesychasm in the fourteenth century.

I have little time left, save to say this: that this politically malleable promotion of Orthodoxy did no good for the notion of Orthodoxy itself. As a self-definition, it crippled or at least alienated scholarship, and led to an attitude at the Council of Ferrara-Florence of what can only be called complacency about Orthodoxy on the part of the Byzantines. In a recent article, Richard Price quotes Patriarch Joseph's assurance to the Byzantine delegation: "We shall display our faith ... We shall return as victors bearing trophies"¹⁰. That confidence was

⁹ *Synodikon*, ed. Gouillard, p. 59.

¹⁰ R. Price, 'The Citation of Latin Authorities at the Council of Florence', in: *Acts of the Institute of Classical Studies/International Byzantine Colloquium, When East met West: The Reception of Latin Theological and Philosophical Thought in Late Byzantium*, ed. J. A. Demetracopoulos

based on the belief that they possessed Orthodoxy, and did not need to prepare themselves for the debates with the Latin theologians, and so, as Price demonstrates, they were woefully unprepared. The encountered Latin theologians fluent in Greek and able to argue through the texts brought forward by the Greeks, but they themselves had all too little knowledge of Latin, though they, perforce, accepted the authority of the Latin Fathers. They were no match for the Latins, and simply lost the debate.

Our situation is, I hope, very different, but I do not think I need to spell out, and indeed have no time to do so, how many features of such a defensive notion of Orthodoxy, bound up with the political history of the term among the Byzantines, still have an insidious presence among us Orthodox.

and Ch. Dendrinou (Esstrato da *nicolaus: Rivista de Teologia ecumenico-patristica*, fasc. 1 – 2013), pp. 125–36, at pp. 126–7.