

Introduction to the Oriental Orthodox Churches

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Outline

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Who are the Oriental Churches?

The Oriental Orthodox churches are ancient churches which were founded in apostolic times, by apostles or by the apostles' earliest disciples. They are heirs to some of the richest and most ancient traditions in the Christian world. The majority of the members of these churches live in Ethiopia, Egypt, Eritrea, Armenia, India, Syria and Lebanon. There are also large diaspora communities in parts of the Middle East, Europe, Asia, North and South America, and Australia.



Who are the Oriental Churches?

The Oriental Orthodox Churches were united with Rome and Byzantium in a common profession of faith until the fifth century Council of Chalcedon (451). While the Roman and Byzantine Churches came to accept Chalcedon as the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the Oriental Orthodox Churches acknowledge only the first three.



Who are the Oriental Churches?

The history of the Oriental Orthodox churches has been marked by ceaseless persecutions under the Byzantine, Persian, Muslim and Ottoman powers. The sufferings have had a profound impact on their life, witness, theology and spirituality. In spite of their continuous suffering, these churches have sustained themselves through constant efforts of renewal.



"While ancient traditions still dominate, a fresh vitality and creativity are blowing in these churches, both in their motherlands and in the diaspora. They have significantly revived monastic life as a rich source of spirituality, evangelism and diakonia for clergy as well as laity, men and women. They have reorganized theological education. Sunday schools have become centres of intense activities. Youth movements and student associations have been created. Bible study seminars, courses for the Christian formation of laity, fasting and daily celebrations of saints are vivid expressions of deep spirituality and of evangelistic inreach and outreach, which nurture and build these communities of faith. They are churches of the people, without the dichotomy between institution and community. The whole people of God participate actively in the life and witness of the church."

(World Council of Churches: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/church-families/orthodox-churches-oriental>)

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria

- The term “Coptic” is derived from the Greek word *aigyptios*, meaning Egyptian. Today it is used to distinguish the Christian inhabitants of Egypt from the majority Arab Muslim population.
- The Coptic Orthodox Church traces its history back to St Mark the Evangelist, who founded the church in Egypt. The ancient Egyptian patriarchate of Alexandria represented one of the chief sees of the early church within the Roman empire.
- One of the greatest legacies of the Coptic Church is the monastic tradition, described by Coptic scholar Aziz Atiya as “the gift of Egypt to Christendom.” Notably St. Antony and St. Pachomius.
- Many of the early church fathers flourished in Christian Egypt. Notable among them were Clement of Alexandria and his successor Origen, who headed the Catechetical School at Alexandria, one of the most famous institutions of learning in antiquity. Other towering figures were St. Athanasius the Great, a defender of orthodoxy at the First Ecumenical Council (325), and St. Cyril of Alexandria, the most influential voice at the Third Ecumenical Council (431).

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria

- In the centuries-long history of Arab rule in Egypt since the seventh century, the treatment of Coptic Christians has varied widely. At times there were persecutions, and in other periods, however, the Copts enjoyed a degree of tolerance and respect. In recent times, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt has heightened tensions between the Christian and Muslim communities, and Copts have faced discrimination and attacks at the hands of extremists.
- With the elevation of the saintly Pope Kyrillos VI to the patriarchate in 1959, "there began a renaissance in all aspects of church life that continued strongly under Pope Shenouda III and through today under Pope Tawadros II. Ancient monasteries have once again begun to flourish, interest in Coptic studies has grown, Sunday School programs are strong, and churches have been established in North America, Europe, and Australia. Today the membership of the Coptic Church worldwide is estimated at roughly fifteen million.

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch

- The Syriac Orthodox Church, one of the oldest churches in the world, had its origins in the city of Antioch in the Roman province of Syria.
- Church tradition records that St. Peter served as the first bishop of the city, before his journey to Rome; the famous martyr Ignatius of Antioch, also known as St. Ignatius the Illuminator, is said to have been Peter's second successor. Together with the patriarchates of Jerusalem, Constantinople, Rome, and Alexandria, Antioch became one of the five great centers of early Christendom.
- The Syriac language itself originated as an Edessene dialect of Aramaic. In English the church was formerly known as the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, but in 2000 the Holy Synod decided to adopt the term "Syriac" instead, to avoid confusion with the modern nation of Syria.

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch

- Antioch was an important center of theology, and its students and teachers were deeply involved in the christological debates of the early Ecumenical Councils.
- The third of these councils, held in Ephesus in 431, led to a schism within the Syriac-speaking community, with followers of the condemned theologian Nestorius eventually establishing a separate church in Persia, known today as the Assyrian Church of the East.
- The next major council was held at Chalcedon in 451, and its decision, too, proved divisive. The Syriac Church rejected the proclamation of the council. The schism between the opponents and supporters of Chalcedon eventually led to the emergence of separate patriarchates in Antioch, which continue to this day: the Syriac Orthodox patriarchate belongs to the communion of churches known as Oriental Orthodox, while the other patriarchate is a member of the Eastern Orthodox communion.

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch

- At the time of the council, Antioch was part of the Byzantine Empire, and the Syriac Orthodox Church was frequently persecuted by Chalcedonian-leaning emperors. Many of its bishops were exiled, and by the mid sixth century the church was in great decline.
- But revival was soon to follow, through the labors of Jacob Baradaeus, who in around 544 was ordained bishop of Edessa. Jacob, who is commemorated as one of the greatest saints of the church, traveled extensively in an effort to renew the faith, ordaining twenty-seven bishops and hundreds of priests and deacons.
- So successful was his undertaking that outsiders sometimes refer to the Syriac Church as "Jacobite," though the church itself rejects the appellation.

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch

- Some of the most important theologians include St. Ephrem (373), Jacob of Sarugh (521), Philoxenos of Mabbug (523), Severos of Antioch (538), and Jacob of Edessa (708).
- Mar Severos (538) was the last Syrian Orthodox Patriarch who presided in Antioch. After him, the Syrian Patriarchate was transferred from Antioch to the region of Aleppo, and then to different places until finally in Damascus in 1959.
- Over the past several decades, the church has enjoyed a period of revival—sometimes referred to as a modern renaissance—much of it taking place in the new diaspora. Today Syriac churches exist throughout the Middle East, as well as in Turkey, North America, Europe, Australia, and especially in India, where the church has long had an important presence. Approx. 2 million worldwide.

The Armenian Apostolic Church

- According to church tradition, Christianity was introduced to Armenia by Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew, two of the twelve disciples of Christ. The early kings of Armenia were largely hostile to the new religion: the martyrdom of Thaddeus and then Bartholomew in the years 66 and 68 marked the first of several state-sponsored persecutions. Around the beginning of the fourth century, however, a young nobleman named Gregory ("the Illuminator" or "the Enlightener") succeeded in converting the king, and Armenia became a Christian country--the first Christian state in history.
- Hagiography records that St. Gregory, henceforth known as "the Illuminator" or "the Enlightener," was instructed by Christ in a dream to build a great cathedral in the capital city of Vagharshapat, not far from Mount Ararat. In commemoration of this vision, the cathedral and the city both became known as Etchmiadzin, or the place where the "Only-Begotten" (Christ) "descended." The Holy See of Etchmiadzin remains to this day the spiritual center of the Armenian Church.

The Armenian Apostolic Church

- Armenia has endured an unsettled and often violent history, with periods of foreign domination at the hands of Persian, Arab, Greek, Turkish, and Soviet invaders.
- Following Arab and Byzantine invasions in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the traditional kingdom of Armenia was more or less abandoned, and a new Armenian kingdom, known as Cilician Armenia, was established further west, at the eastern edge of Asia Minor.
- The Catholicosate, or central authority of the church, was likewise transferred from Etchmiadzin to Cilicia. The Cilician kingdom fell about three hundred years later, and the See of Etchmiadzin was restored in 1441; nonetheless, there remain to this day two Catholicosates within the Armenian Church: Etchmiadzin retains a primacy of honor, but the Catholicosate of Cilicia (presently centered in Antelias, Lebanon) is fully independent in administration.
- There are also two Patriarchates, one in Jerusalem and the other in Constantinople, both of which are under the authority of Etchmiadzin.

The Armenian Apostolic Church

- The darkest period in the history of the Armenian church and people was that of the Turkish massacres of 1915-1920, sometimes referred to as "the Armenian Genocide."
- According to some estimates, around 1.5 million Armenians were killed and many more exiled; the clergy of the Armenian church were not spared, dropping in number from approximately 5,000 in 1915 to around 400 just eight years later.
- In 1920 Armenia was invaded by the Soviets and soon after incorporated into the Soviet Union. In 1991 the Republic of Armenia declared its independence from the U.S.S.R., opening the door to a revival of Armenian Orthodoxy in its traditional homeland.
- For centuries the Armenian Apostolic Church has had a large diaspora population. Today its faithful are spread throughout the world, including Turkey, the Middle East, Europe, Australia, and America. Approx. 6-8 million worldwide members.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

- The earliest contacts of Ethiopia with the Christian faith may have been in the first century: the New Testament records that an Ethiopian eunuch returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem met the apostle Philip on the road, receiving baptism at his hands (Acts 8:26-39). The eunuch was said to be an official in the court of the queen of Ethiopia, and tradition holds that upon his return he became the first to preach Christianity there.
- A separate tradition also records that the apostle Matthew himself visited Ethiopia in the course of his missionary travels.
- The great turning point in Ethiopian religious history, however, was not until the fourth century, when the king of Axum proclaimed Christianity the state religion.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

- The fourth-century conversion of the Axumite king to Christianity is credited to St. Frumentius, a Phoenician-born bishop ordained by St. Athanasius of Alexandria to minister to the faithful in Axum. Since that time, the Ethiopian Church has been closely tied to the Coptic Church, with the Patriarch of Alexandria overseeing the appointment of bishops until recent times; only in 1959 did the church receive full independence.
- The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia also refers to itself as the Tewahedo, or "Made One / Unity," Church referring to its Christological use of St. Cyril's "one incarnate nature of God the Word."
- Non-Chalcedonian Christianity in Ethiopia was further strengthened in the late fifth century, when a group of exiles fleeing persecution under the Chalcedonian-leaning Byzantine Empire came to Ethiopia. These men, known as the "Nine Saints," translated the Bible and important works of theology into Ge'ez (the language of Ethiopia at the time), established monasteries, and worked to convert the remaining pagans in the land.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

- In the twentieth century, with political support from Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian Church began pushing for greater independence from the Coptic Church. In 1948, the Coptic Church agreed to consecrate an Ethiopian rather than a Copt as the next metropolitan of Ethiopia. The Egyptian-born metropolitan died in 1950, and the Ethiopian-born Archbishop Basilios succeeded him the following year. In 1959, the move was made complete, as Basilios was elevated to the rank of patriarch of the Ethiopian Church.
- Henceforth, Ethiopia was fully independent from the Coptic Church, although it continued to accord to Alexandria a primacy of honor.
- In 1993, after the political independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Church was in turn to recognize the autocephaly of the Eritrean Church, which had previously been a province under the jurisdiction of the Ethiopian patriarch.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

- A Marxist revolution in 1974 led to the overthrow of Haile Selassie and the official separation of church and state. The years following the coup were marked by severe persecution of Christians: church properties were seized by the state, and as many as tens of thousands of Ethiopians were killed during a period known as the "Red Terror."
- The communist government of Ethiopia fell in 1991, and this in turn led to a schism within the church, with Patriarch Merkorios being accused of collaboration with the communists and forced to resign. In 1992 Patriarch Paulos was consecrated in his place, but Merkorios refused to recognize the election. Merkorios, taking refuge first in Kenya and then the United States, established the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Exile; the division between the followers of the Patriarchal church in Ethiopia and the Synod in Exile remains unhealed.
- Together, members of the two groups number approximately 40-50 million believers throughout the world.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church

- The history of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church is closely tied to that of its neighbor, the Ethiopian Church. Until the twentieth century, both churches were under the jurisdiction of the Coptic patriarch in Egypt: the Ethiopian Church received full independence only in 1959, the Eritrean Church in 1993.
- Relations between the two churches have often been tense, owing to war and subsequent border disputes between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Nonetheless, they remain in full communion with one another and indeed share a common heritage of liturgy and art stretching back at least fifteen hundred years.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church

- Prior to political independence, the church in Eritrea was administered as a diocese within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In 1993, however, the local church, led by Archbishop Philipos of Asmara and supported by the Eritrean government, petitioned the Coptic Church for ecclesiastical independence. The request was granted on 28 September 1993; the following year, the Ethiopian and Eritrean churches signed an agreement in Addis Ababa that reaffirmed the autocephalous status of both churches, and recognized a primacy of honor of the Coptic Church among the Oriental Orthodox churches in Africa.
- In 1998, Abuna Philipos was elevated to the rank of patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. As of 2004, the church is led by Patriarch Antonios, who was elected following the death of Philipos's successor, Yacob.

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church

- Patriarch Antonios protested increasing interference by the Eritrean government, resulting in tensions.
- In a letter dated 13 January 2006, Patriarch Abouna Antonios was informed that following several sessions of the church's Holy Synod, he had been formally deposed, supposedly under pressure from the Eritrean government; as of 2006 he is under house arrest.
- A church delegation traveled to Egypt on 25 July 2005 to seek the support of Pope Shenouda, in deposing and replacing him as Patriarch. Shenouda III refused to recognize this as a canonical act and urged the faithful to pray for Patriarch Antonios who "is passing through a great tribulation. We hope that the Lord will rescue him".

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church

- On 20 January 2007, two priests accompanied by government security agents entered the Patriarch's residence and confiscated his personal pontifical insignia. On 27 May 2007 he was replaced as Patriarch by Abouna Dioskorus with the support of the Eritrean government.
- Patriarch Antonios remains under house arrest and strict surveillance and held without charge. He reportedly seldom receives visitors, including relatives, and has no telephone service. His removal at the behest of the Eritrean government was denounced by the other Oriental Orthodox Churches, who have refused to recognize Abune Dioskoros as Patriarch of Eritrea.
- Approx. 2.5 million worldwide.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of India

- In India, the history of the Malankara Oriental Orthodox Church of the Syriac tradition is complex. The ancient church traces its foundation to the Apostle Thomas whose place of martyrdom is still venerated in Madras.
- The name “Malankara” refers to an old name for the region where the church is centered, roughly equivalent to the modern state of Kerala.
- Since the early twentieth century, the church has been divided into two communities, both with historical ties to the Syriac tradition: the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is a fully independent church, recognizing as its head the Catholicos of the East, whose office is in Kottayam, Kerala; the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church remains under the jurisdiction of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, although it is administered locally by a Catholicos.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of India

- St. Thomas is said to have reached India in 52 A.D. According to tradition, he established several churches in Malankara.
- Sea trade routes existed between the Near East and the Malankara coast, and Syrian and Persian merchants had contact with South India in the early centuries of the Christian era.
- Beginning in the fifth century, the Syriac community in the Near East came to be divided between the Assyrian Church of the East, which accepted the doctrines of the theologian Nestorius, and the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, which regarded Nestorianism as a heresy.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of India

- The Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama had reached India in 1498, and the following century marked the beginning of European colonization and missionary work there. Indian and European Christians seem to have enjoyed cordial relations at first, but by the end of the sixteenth century the situation had completely deteriorated: while the Malankara Christians were content to acknowledge separate apostolic traditions, stemming respectively from St. Thomas and St. Peter, Catholic missionaries sought to bring the Indian Church under the administration of Rome.
- The culmination of their efforts was the Synod of Diamper (1599), which proclaimed the Malankara Church a part of the Roman Catholic Church. Although canonical irregularities meant that Rome never accepted the synod, its conveners nonetheless enrolled the support of the local government and began enforcing use of a Latinized rite.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of India

- On 3 January 1653, Malankara Christians finally rebelled: thousands taking an oath no longer to submit to the Roman Church. They attempted to re-establish communion with the Assyrian Church of the East but were unsuccessful; finally, they reached an agreement with the Syriac Patriarch of Antioch. The restored church thus became an autonomous part of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch.
- The most significant schism for the Orthodox community of Malankara took place in the early twentieth century, when a large group of the faithful, pointing to the founding of the church by the apostle Thomas, urged the formation of an independent Indian Orthodox Church. Although the Malankara Church was already an autonomous, or self-governed, part of the Syriac Orthodox Church, the new faction desired autocephaly, or its own head rather than reliance on the patriarch of Antioch. The autocephalous church, established in 1912, became known as the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, while the church that remained under the patriarchate became known as the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church. Despite repeated efforts at reconciliation, relations between the two groups remain tense. Approx. 2 million members combined.

Oriental Orthodox Christology

- Two Schools of Christology
 - The Alexandrian School - a tendency to see the incarnation as a 'taking on of flesh' by the Logos: a 'Logos/sarx Christology'.
 - The Antiochian School - preferring a 'Logos/anthropos Christology'; namely, one in which the Logos is united to man, or even 'a man'.
- The major conflicts after Nicea:
 - Council of Ephesus (Cyril of Alexandria vs. Nestorius) and Council of Chalcedon (Dioscorus vs. Leo of Rome)
- Four Critical Terms – Ousia, Physis, Hypostasis, and Prosopon

Oriental Orthodox Christology

- **Ousia** - essence, nature, being, or substance. It is purely abstract. Every chair has an ousia, the nature of a chair, yet every individual component of the chair has an ousia...metal, wood and glue.
- **Physis** – the word which was perhaps most controversial during the 4-6th centuries. It could mean either hypostasis or ousia. Its emphasis is the complete being of the thing in question. It referred to a concrete reality. Before Chalcedon, many people felt that "to be anything more than a mental abstraction a physis must be realized in a concrete, independent entity, a hypostasis" (Lampe, A Patristic Greek Lexicon, p. 1500). Thus, to many people, speaking of two physis necessarily implied the existence of two hypostases.

Oriental Orthodox Christology

- **Hypostasis** - An individually existing substance, an individual subsistence. It is the integrated essence of the whole of any individual creature. The substantive existence of a being, or also the one who has this substantive existence (approximating the meaning of person); a concrete instance of an abstract essence, that is, nature realized in a particular individual.
- **Prosopon** - It can be synonymous with hypostasis, it is an individually existing substance that has COME INTO BEING. In a sense, it is an hypostasis that has had its FACE Put on it. Thus, it was also used to mean a character (in a play), mask, outward appearance or expression, or role. It is more like the Finished product.

OO/EO Comparison

Jesus Christ	Oriental Orthodox	Eastern Orthodox
Ousia	2	2
Physis	1	2
Hypostasis	1	1
Prospon	1	1

Oriental Orthodox Christology

- The Hypostatic Union - The essential teaching of St. Cyril in his Christological writings is that of his insistence on the "Hypostatic Union." Simply stated:
 - The Divine (Eternal) Hypostasis of the Son (Word) + Full and Perfect Human Nature = The Hypostatic Union (The Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ)
- There is no separate or distinct Human Hypostasis, but the Divine Hypostasis makes the Human Nature (flesh with a rational soul) He takes from the Virgin His own.
- The union eliminates any change or separation of natures.
- The union does not allow for the confusion of natures.
- See St. Cyril's Third Letter to Nestorius with the "Twelve Anathemas."
- "one (mia) nature (physis) of the Word of God incarnate" (μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη mia physis tou theou logou sesarkōmenē).

Eastern/Oriental Orthodox Dialog

- The first unofficial meeting between clergy and theologians of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches took place in Aarhus, Denmark in 1964. There were 4 unofficial meetings:
 - Aarhus - 1964
 - Bristol - 1967
 - Geneva - 1970
 - Addis Ababa - 1971
- These were followed by a series of official dialogues between the Churches. These took place at:
 - Geneva - 1985
 - Egypt - 1989
 - Geneva - 1990
 - Geneva - 1993
- A number of statements have been issued by the Joint Commission, as well as agreements relating to Pastoral matters. The main agreement is that 'We have inherited from our fathers in Christ the one apostolic faith and tradition.'

Official "Agreed Statements"

- Both Orthodox families have inherited from their fathers in Christ the one apostolic faith and tradition, though as churches, they have separated from each other for more than 1500 years.
- The common ground of their agreement was based on the teaching of their common father and teacher, St Cyril's "the one nature of God's Word Incarnate:" *mia physis (hypostasis) tou Theou Logou sesarxomene*.
- Both families agreed that the term "Theotokos" is used for Our Lady the Virgin Mary.

Official "Agreed Statements"

- Both families agreed that the Logos, the only begotten of the Father before all ages, became man through His second birth in the fullness of time from the Virgin Mary. Therefore, the Word has two real births that which is eternal from the Father and the other, which is at the fullness of time from the Virgin Mary.
- Both families agreed that both Human and Divine natures were united into one Divine-Human being. Also, He who wills and acts is always the one Hypostasis of the Logos Incarnate (ie the one will and act of Jesus Christ).

Official "Agreed Statements"

- Both families will reject the teachings of Nestorius and Theodoret, as well as totally renounce the Eutychian heresy.
- Both families agree that the churches should lift all the anathemas and condemnations of the past, which now divide us, in order that the last obstacle to the full unity and communion of our two families can be removed. Both families agree that the lifting of anathemas and condemnations will be consummated on the basis that the Councils and the fathers previously anathematized or condemned are not heretical.

Discussion
