

Beyond Bells and Smells: The Gap between Eastern and Western Christianity

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This past week, as America commemorated the tragedy of 9/11, much was said about the gap between the Western world and the Muslim world. One important aspect that was overlooked in this discussion is the gap between the Western and Eastern church. I would like to share some of my experiences and observations in this area.

I regularly teach American Christian students on short-term study trips in the Holy Land. I often notice a weakness in their curriculum, as much time is spent studying biblical history, particularly the first and second temple periods, and the apostolic period. But when we begin to discuss the ecumenical councils and their resulting doctrinal schisms, I find that my students have spent little time studying the historical and political contexts in which church history took some of its most significant turns. Instead, their curriculum fast forwards hundreds of years to the sixteenth century, into the time of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, and the subsequent politics and history of this period.

Such a selective reading of church history tends to focus on the contribution of the Western Church which is understood as the normative framework of Christian theology and church tradition. Consequently, the development of the Eastern Church, in which the Arabic speaking community plays and has played a large role, is often completely ignored. Furthermore, a new branch of study in post-holocaust theology has created willingness and attached importance to understanding contemporary Jewish faith and practice. This is rarely matched with inquiry into the Eastern Church. This has led me to believe that there are far too many passionate evangelical Christians in the West who are unaware of the history, theology, and contemporary situation of the Eastern Church.

This is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, this means that the role of the Eastern Church in developing and shaping both Western and Eastern Church doctrine is not properly understood or appreciated. Secondly, a wealth of theological tradition has been ignored by many in the evangelical and wider Protestant community to the detriment of their theological appreciation and understanding. Thirdly, the precarious positions of the Arabic speaking church around the world, and particularly in the Middle East, means that we are in great need of acknowledgement, encouragement and support from our western evangelical brothers and sisters. This short article will therefore attempt to explore some of the reasons why the western evangelical church is unfamiliar with Arabic speaking Christianity as a preliminary attempt to remove some of these barriers and encourage mutual understanding between the traditions, as well as to further us along the path of reconciliation in the Holy Land.

The Early Church Schisms

Contrary to popular belief, the early church schisms in the fourth and fifth centuries were not exclusively, or even primarily, a result of doctrinal differences, but occurred to some extent as a consequence of political struggles for territory, governance and authority. These political struggles were then couched in theological language at a time when the early church was attempting to combat heresy and articulate a basic statement of core beliefs for the faithful. Imperial and ecclesiastical agendas became somewhat intertwined.

In the early fourth century, Christianity had five main centres throughout the Roman Empire: Rome, Alexandria, Carthage, Constantinople and Antioch. Each territory was presided over by a Bishop with authority over the churches in his district and into its hinterland. The Roman Emperor Constantine wanted to unify these disparate territories as a way of asserting political control. Consequently, he invited Bishops from all over the Empire to attend a council in Nicaea near Constantinople in 325 AD in order to obtain this theological and political unification. The ecclesial framework of these churches' relationship and interaction was established at early councils such as this one. Subsequent church conflicts were not only theological, but political.^[1]

Linguistic, Cultural and Ethnic Separation

Much later, the Pope in Rome excommunicated the Patriarch in Constantinople and the latter responded in kind. It is important for us to view the doctrinal controversies in this wider political context and not as exclusively theological issues. Doing so will hopefully remove some of the religious and theological objections that western evangelical Christians may have toward the Eastern Church. The primary consequences of these splits for us today are the ethnic and cultural barriers that were erected as the churches spread to different parts of the world – the Western Church into Europe, the Orthodox Church into the Arabic speaking world, and the non-Chalcedonian churches into Asia and Africa. Bringing us into the present, it is the cultural and ethnic barriers resulting from these ancient political decisions which I believe are currently the main source of estrangement between western evangelicals and Catholic or Greek Orthodox Arab Christians, not the theological differences between the churches. As such, these can be overcome through increased contact between the cultures which will increase understanding and address mutual alienation and misunderstanding.

There have of course been far-reaching theological consequences as a result of the linguistic and cultural barriers which now exist. Arabic and Syriac are not widely read in the evangelical church in the way that Greek and Latin are. This has meant that the theology and church teachings of the Eastern Church have not been available to most Western Christians. This wealth of theological tradition has therefore played little role in developing and shaping the theology of the West, to the detriment of the Western Church.

Perceived Theological Differences and Difference in Church Practice

Although there are clearly many differences between Eastern and Western Christianity, these differences do not need to be viewed, as they often are, as a source of conflict or disagreement, but should instead be understood as an attempt to contextualize the Christian faith within the social context of each church community. In the West, more emphasis is placed on individual autonomy in theology and church practice. For example, the doctrine of justification is one which deals with individuals and one's particular relationship with God.^[2] While worshipping as a collective body, we often simply sing side by side. In the Eastern Church, the emphasis on liturgy and sacraments is driven by communal identification. It is understood that these traditions tie Christians to the global church body, and to the saints in heaven. All too often the evangelical church criticizes these historical practices as indicating a stagnant church, in contrast to the lively worship style of the Western Church, and in so doing, misunderstands the deep theology and religious commitment behind these rituals.

Similarly, the Western Evangelical Church places a strong emphasis on the immediacy of revelation and understanding through personal experiences with the Holy Spirit in the charismatic church, and through Scripture in more conservative evangelical traditions. In contrast, the Eastern Church places a strong emphasis on the historical nature of revelation. Revelation is viewed as a more collective endeavour over centuries of church teaching, study and theology by numerous clergy and laity, and this revelation is intrinsically tied to church tradition as implemented in church practice. The Eastern Church emphasizes that Scripture is never immediately applicable but that the text today has a history which is intimately related to the history of the church as the church has sought to relate the revelation of Jesus to contemporary discourse over the centuries. ^[3] While one attains to truth therefore through rigorous engagement with scripture - and our biblical criticism must always concede to the need for such an acceptance of the canon - we must nevertheless recognize that the text we receive is already interpreted for us by church tradition, and that this interpretation has a measure of authority.

While it would be naive to disregard these important theological and ecclesial differences, they do not need to be a source of estrangement. However there is a tendency in the Western Church to understand itself as normative, having developed within a majority culture, meaning that anything which deviates from this normative theological or ecclesial framework is in some sense heretical. Through embracing our ecclesial diversity however, we enter a richer faith community.

Political Barriers

The Arab conquests in the seventh century coupled with the spread of Islam and the subsequent wars between Christians and Muslim political powers such as the Arab invasions, the Crusades, the Ottoman invasions of Europe, World War I, the creation of the State of Israel and now two Gulf Wars have also disrupted the relationship between the Eastern and Western Church.

By the early nineteenth century, western travellers in the Muslim world became more common and painted a vivid Orientalist picture of this ill-understood other. This was perhaps an improvement to the very limited contact between East and West that preceded it, however this began a rather skewed relationship between those with the power to narrate and those whose lives were ostensibly narrated in such discourses. Even our contemporary understanding of Arabic speaking Christians, and Eastern Christianity more generally, comes largely through western media which is influenced by geo-political interests which often ignore the situation of the church. We know little about the recent history of the Assyrian church in Iraq, or the Armenian Church in Ottoman Turkey for example, because reporting on these situations of persecution and genocide would harm international relationships and alliances.

Conclusion

It is clear from the brief overview given above that there are many things which have historically contributed to the current state of estrangement between the western evangelical church and the wider Protestant community and the Eastern Churches. Cultural and linguistic barriers pose the most significant challenges which are often couched in unnecessary theological language. While there are clearly theological differences between the two communities, these are often a result of their interaction with secularism in the West, and Islam in the East as opposed to significant doctrinal variations. The possibility for increased mutual understanding and interaction is, therefore, significant.

It is incredibly important that these current barriers are explored and overcome, not only as engagement with the other would enhance the richness of each side's respective theological resources, but in a climate of political instability (particularly in the Middle East), Arabic speaking Christians are in desperate need of recognition and support from their western brothers and sisters. Additionally, understanding the differences between the two ecclesial traditions will allow us to bridge some of the gaps between the Messianic Jewish community and the Palestinian Christian community, as the Messianic community is influenced more by Western theology than Eastern theology, and the opposite is true of the Palestinian community. Furthermore, engagement could help lessen the existing prejudices between the Eastern and Western Church. A global church seeking increased unity and understanding would surely be a testimony to Jesus' reconciling activity in the world today, as well as a source of strength to the universal church itself.

Further Reading

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