

Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism

Purpose statement: To inform the audience about three key theological differences that distinguish the Eastern Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic Church.

Thesis: Three key theological distinctions between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church are the ways the church leadership is organized, their views on the Holy Spirit's position in the trinity, and doctrine concerning the afterlife.

Introduction

- I. Many of us come from a community that has been greatly influenced by Christianity and if we didn't come from one, we are at Calvin now. I'm guessing for most of us this Christian background happens to be a Protestant background, while as a whole, the Christian body contains three main distinctions: Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. Now since the majority of us come from a Protestant background, I thought it would be beneficial to examine the distinctions between the theology of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. While these two traditions may have a lot in common, they also vary on some important theological issues.
- II. Three key theological distinctions between Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholicism are the organization of church leadership, their understandings on the Holy Spirit's position in the Christian trinity, and doctrine concerning life after death.

Body

- I. The first of these major theological distinctions between these two Christian traditions are the differences in church leadership.

- A. There are multiple ways church leadership differs between these traditions, but I'd like to focus on the theological supremes of each tradition: the pope in Catholicism and the bishops in Orthodoxy.
- B. A major difference regarding church leadership or structure is the primacy of the papacy. Roman Catholicism has a pope, who is the head of the entire church, while in Orthodoxy there is no equivalent pope figure. Some might point out that in Orthodoxy, the Archbishop of Constantinople seems to hold more power than the other bishops. According to Bill Wunner from CNN, this comes from his title as "first among equals." But unlike the pope, the Archbishop of Constantinople has no real theological power over the other bishops. He remains more of a spiritual leader than a power like the pope who could dictate doctrine. The real theological supreme of Orthodoxy is the Synod of Bishops, or council of Bishops. This is a body of bishops, who are naturally equal to each other, vote together and decides on church policy and doctrine.

(transition: While the difference in church leadership is important, it is not the only distinction)

- II. The next major theological distinction lies with how each tradition views the Holy Spirit's position within the trinity.
 - A. By "position," I mean how the Spirit relates to the other trinity members. Which in order to find out each tradition's view we have to go back to the Council of Nicea.
 - B. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church are credal churches. This means that they both value and practice the recitation of many of

the early church creeds in their worship, one of which being the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed was first formulated in a dispute about each member of the trinity's role within it. However, both traditions recite a slightly different version of the creed. According to David Bell, biblical scholar from the University of Newfoundland, the Eastern Orthodox version does not contain what is called the "filioque clause" which was added two centuries after the creed was finalized.

However, the Catholic version of the creed contains the filioque clause.

- C. Now what exactly is the "filioque clause?" (show picture of the clause). The filioque clause reads:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father **<and the Son>**.
Who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified.

This means the Orthodox church believes that the Holy Spirit only proceeds from the Father, whereas the Catholic tradition, believes that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. The Orthodox standpoint tends to illustrate a higher position for the Father within the trinity, while the Catholic church has the Father and the Son playing a similar role within the trinity.

(transition: While the leadership and trinitarian theology differ, there is one more key distinction between the Orthodox and Catholic traditions that I would like to make).

- III. Finally, the third major theological difference between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church is their doctrine concerning life after death, or more specifically, the intermediate state between death and eternal destination.

- A. While both traditions believe in a permanent state in heaven, the Roman Catholic Church formally believes in an intermediate state between death and heaven in which those who go there must work for sanctification, or cleansing, before they arrive in heaven. This stage they call purgatory. Catholics traditionally believe three things about purgatory, according to Catholic Father Mike Schmitz: “there exists a place for final purification, the process is painful or involves some discomfort, and the prayers of those on earth can assist those going through this final purification process.”
- B. This is in opposition to the Orthodox belief. According to theologian and Archbishop Kallistos Ware, “most if not all Orthodox theologians reject the idea of Purgatory, at least in [Roman Catholic] form.” Many Orthodox theologians believe in an intermediate state, like purgatory, but they do not believe it entails suffering like the Catholic tradition. The Catholic belief presumes a purgatorial cleansing, while the Orthodox faith does not.

Conclusion

- I. In conclusion, three of the key theological distinctions between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism are the differences in church leadership, theologies concerning the Holy Spirit’s position within the trinity, and theology concerning life after death.

Sources

Bell, David N. *A cloud of witnesses: an introduction to the development of Christian doctrine to AD 500*. Cistercian Publications, 2007.

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