

There are many books by leading Orthodox theologians and scholars on all aspects of the Orthodox Church and this leaflet series provides some basic information in the hope that it might prompt further enquiry.

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All text in these leaflets is mine except where indicated, therefore any errors of fact or in grammar are mine. I should be grateful to have those errors pointed out so that corrections can be made.

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**"The Orthodox Church.....**has preserved unadulterated the first and most ancient ecclesiastical tradition and teaching, has avoided innovations and personal interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and dogmas of the faith, and is administered according to the ancient synodical system under local bishops in collaboration with the faithful and successive groups of both local and broader episcopal synods, of which the highest is the Ecumenical Synod, that of the Orthodox worldwide. The basic administrative canons, the details of which are regulated according to local needs, have been determined by the seven ecumenical synods. The Church is not managed by regional states in which it resides, although it collaborates in good works when asked to do so.

Within the entire Orthodox Church there is absolute cooperation in goodwill and mutual respect. Perchance minor human problems are addressed successfully through the application of the evangelical spirit."

*Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, from  
"Encountering the Mystery."  
ISBN 978-0-385-51813-0*

Orthodox Community of Archangel Michael  
and Holy Piran, Cornwall.  
[www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk](http://www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk)

In the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain.  
Exarchate of Western Europe and Ireland.  
[www.thyateira.org.uk](http://www.thyateira.org.uk)

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Agia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Constantinople.

Fr.N.07.16

# Introduction to Orthodox Christianity: "It's all Greek to me!"



The double headed eagle, ancient symbol of Byzantium and Orthodoxy is used in many places and recently, after the fall of the Soviet Union, its presence was restored in the Russian Federation although in a modified form from the earlier imperial standard first adopted in 1472 by Ivan III after his marriage to the Byzantine princess Sophia Palaiologina and following the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453.

## **“IT’S ALL GREEK TO ME!”**

**is a term come into English use expressing an inability to understand or being confused by something.**

When talking about the Orthodox Church it is not unusual to be asked: “Are you Greek Orthodox or Russian?” probably the two most well known Orthodox Churches in the U.K. In fact **Greek** Orthodoxy is a generic term for all Orthodox, from the days when the One Church was generally referred to as the Latin *West* and Greek **East**. Anyone reading Russian history will frequently find writers referring to the Church in Russia following the ways or being part of the Greek Church which she received on conversion to Christianity in the year 988. The ancient and present Antiochian Church is called the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East. Similarly the ancient and present Church of Alexandria is known as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa.

There is in our country still, a lack of knowledge regarding the 2000 years history of the Church, its ancient, recent and continuing presence in Great Britain, Ireland and other countries around the world (Orthodoxy is the second largest body of Christians after Roman Catholicism).

Many who have become Orthodox are also often asked if they have Greek, Russian, Romanian, etc., parentage or antecedents. For this reason and as intimated above it has to be emphasised that being Orthodox should not be thought of along ethnic, language or national lines although these do or may have an influence. Some who have become Orthodox from other traditions, religions, agnosticism or atheism have done so in the nearest community to where they live regardless of jurisdiction but others may have a preference. However, we do not become “wanderers” in our membership but for good reasons have a sense of belonging and being under discipline within our receiving jurisdiction and Bishop yet without becoming merely congregational or parochial in outlook. The “national” headings can then be confusing and perpetuate a misunderstanding.

Canonical Orthodox Churches are those in full eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople and therefore each other, sharing the same faith, doctrine and worship, whilst having differences perhaps in administrative practices within their independent – autocephalous – status.

The five ancient Patriarchates known as the Pentarchy are Antioch, Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Rome (the senior See) but Rome separated in what is known as the Great Schism in 1054 and the Church thereafter in the *Greek East* and *Latin West* continued in different ways and with different consequences especially evident in the west with its turbulent history and fragmentation into many denominations and sects.

Violent and political upheavals particularly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most recently the Turkish invasion, occupation and desecration of northern Cyprus in 1974 and the continuing problems in the Middle East, have resulted in many Orthodox fleeing from persecution and discrimination to Great Britain and establishing communities of their own peoples and Church. Not all Orthodox jurisdictions are present, some merely have representatives here.

Although there is a large number of Greeks and Cypriots here they are in the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, the latter caring for all Orthodox separated from their homes and Church of origin – *the diaspora*. The Church of Greece and the Church of Cyprus do not have established communities in the UK or Ireland. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church in this country is also under the Patriarchate of Constantinople as are a number of Russian tradition communities.

For many Orthodox in this country there is a desire to see a jurisdiction which might have a title such as the *Orthodox Church of the United Kingdom* or of *Great Britain*, uniting all Orthodox of whatever nationality or Orthodox origin. If this is to happen it will take a long time and a great commitment on the part of the communities present and the agreement of all the canonical churches of Orthodoxy. Second and third generation ‘ethnic’ Orthodox plus British converts help to make this more desirable and possible, at the same time to be enriched by diverse cultures and customs.

The most recent additional patriarchates to establish a presence in the UK are Antioch when in the early 1990s under influence from the USA communities were set up. That influence soon however gave way to a direct connection to the Patriarchate. More recently, communities of Romanians have become firmly in place, sadly in some places affecting communities where different nationalities had been worshipping and working well together. The establishment of more jurisdictions in the UK is regrettable whatever the motives for bringing together those of one particular nation and language.

*The following is a brief and précis passage from an address given in London, November 1994, by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople.*

**“The genesis of nationalism involves selective memory; and in the case of the Orthodox countries nationalism has favoured past periods of ethnic glory over the combined splendour of Orthodox civilization. We lament this imbalance. The emphasis on national or ethnic heritage has had the effect of fragmenting the family of our ecumenical civilizations. The Holy Orthodox Church searched long for a language with which to address nationalism, amid the strife and havoc this new ideology created in the Orthodox lands of eastern Europe and for much of the nineteenth century. In 1872 the Holy Synod issued a definitive condemnation of the sin of phyletism, saying, ‘We renounce, censure and condemn racism, that is, racial discrimination, ethnic feuds, hatreds and dissensions within the Church of Christ’. Today, more than a century later, nationalism remains the bane of our ecumenical Church. It is time for us to begin to reconcile nationalism and \*ecumenism. And in this the Orthodox *diaspora* can lead the way – for the *diaspora* lives constantly on the borderline of civilizations, and is forced to reconsider questions of identity all the time.”**

\*Ecumenism in its strict use is Orthodoxy united in its worldwide presence and mission.