

THE LIGHT OF THE EAST – TEACHING ABOUT EASTERN CHURCHES

Introduction: Why Study the Eastern Churches?

Study of world religions is an important part of contemporary religious education. Part of this study can involve a variety of Christian traditions. For this reason alone it seems an examination of Eastern expressions of Christian belief and practice is well justified given their historical and theological importance. The study of Eastern Churches for Catholics is, however, more than just acquiring new knowledge. In 1995 Pope John Paul II issued an Apostolic Letter, *Oriente Lumen*, which addressed, amongst other things, the importance of studying Eastern Churches.

The light of the East has illumined the universal Church, from the moment when “a rising sun” appeared above us (Lk 1:78). ... Since, in fact, we believe that the venerable and ancient tradition of the Eastern Churches is an integral part of the heritage of Christ's Church, the first need for Catholics is to be familiar with that tradition, so as to be nourished by it and to encourage the process of unity in the best way possible for each. Our Eastern Catholic brothers and sisters are very conscious of being the living bearers of this tradition, together with our Orthodox brothers and sisters. The members of the Catholic Church of the Latin tradition must also be fully acquainted with this treasure (p. 1).

www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_a

To flourish, the church must be aware of eastern heritage. In the oft-quoted words of Pope John Paul II, the church needs to learn to breathe again with its two lungs, Eastern and Western.¹ This is powerful language and underlines the importance of studying Eastern Churches not as an option but as an integral part of religious education in Catholic schools.

An Overview of Eastern Churches

What are Eastern Churches?

The distinction between Eastern and Western Christians was originally a geographical one. From Rome there developed what we now call Western or Latin Catholicism (Levik, 2000). Christians who trace their origins to Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandra, Constantinople, great patriarchal

centres of the Roman Empire, and from Edessa in eastern Syria and Armenia are given the collective title Eastern.

The development of Eastern and Western expressions of belief and practice developed slowly. Well into the third century there was not an easily understood distinction between Eastern and Western Christians (Comby 1985). Irenaeus of Lyon who died around 200CE, for example, although the bishop of Lyon in Gaul, was born in Asia Minor and wrote and thought in Greek (Hamman, 1991). From the time of Tertullian, however, Latin began to emerge as an accepted language of learned discourse and gradually began to dominate intellectual discussion in the western parts of the Empire. The great theological debates of the period, were however, conducted in the East where Greek remained the dominant language and cultural expression (Frend, 1982). By the time of Augustine it is accurate to speak about Eastern and Western mentalities distinguished by theological, cultural and linguistic emphases (Merdinger, 1991).

What Are Oriental Orthodox Churches?

The first split in Christianity, if we leave aside the divisions caused by the multitude of Gnostic sects, was not along the lines of East and West (Roukema, 1999). It was rather a division lead by the Church of Alexandria and other Christian communities, both Eastern and Western (Chadwick 1964). This was caused by the refusal by the Patriarch of Alexandria and his followers to accept the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) concerning the relationship between Christ's human and divine natures.² They regarded this a deviation from earlier defined dogmatic teaching (Attia, 1995). These Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches are also described as Oriental Orthodox and comprise, amongst others, the Coptic Orthodox Ethiopian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic Churches.

The Growing Division between East and West

The split between the Western Church as exemplified by Rome and the Eastern Church by Constantinople was a gradual drift fuelled by cultural misunderstanding, some serious theological and ecclesiological issues and unedifying political intrigue (Knowles & Obolovsky, 1969). All of this culminated in the dramatic excommunications of the eleventh century, although this was not the definitive break.

The suspicion between East and West was confirmed by historical events such as the Crusades and the Sack of Constantinople by the mercenaries of the Fourth Crusade and the perceived intimidation by the Latin Church trying to force reunion on Eastern Churches in the fifteenth century (Southern, 1970). Incidents such as these have left a legacy of mistrust but in recent times great efforts have been made to overcome this.³

Who are Eastern Catholics?

Most Catholics belong to the Western or Latin "Roman" Catholic Church. There are other Catholics, smaller in number, who belong to Eastern Catholic Churches who share with all Catholics the same profession of faith. These Eastern Churches have their own history but often this involves a complex interaction between Orthodox and Catholic jurisdictions (Maloney, 1973). In many cases Orthodox communities sort to reestablish links with Rome whilst retaining their customs, traditions and liturgical life. These communities who accept the primacy of the Pope and who share an Eastern history and culture are given the collective title Eastern Catholic Churches.

Historically Eastern Catholic Churches, with the exception of the Maronites, have a common background and culture with other, much larger Christian communities, usually called Orthodox Churches that are not in communion with the Pope. For example, the Melkite Catholic Church is the mirror image of the Antiochian Greek Orthodox Church.

Eastern Catholic Churches are often incorrectly referred to as Rites. The word Church is the correct term in describing communities of Eastern Catholics. Church in this context means a communion of dioceses who share a common theology, history, liturgy and canon law. Rite means all the liturgical practices and customs of a particular Church. Rite also refers to how Christians of that tradition live – how they pray, their customs and how they worship. It is possible for Eastern Catholic Churches to share a common Rite. For example, both the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Russian Catholic Church follow a Byzantine Rite. The Chaldean Catholic Church, in contrast, follows an East Syriac or Chaldean Rite.

Table 1. Eastern Catholic Churches and Liturgical Rites

Historical Traditions	Eastern Catholic Churches	Liturgical Family
Antiochene	Maronite	Antiochene Rite -West Syriac Rite
Antiochene	Chaldean	East Syriac or Chaldean Rite
Alexandrian	Coptic	Coptic Rite
Constantinople	Melkite	Originated in the Patriarchate of Antioch
Constantinople	Russian	Byzantine Rite
Constantinople	Ukrainian	Byzantine Rite
Armenian	Armenian	Armenian Rite

(Catholic Education Office, Melbourne 1999)

Teaching about Eastern Churches: Four Great Eastern Themes

In this article it is not possible to provide any sort of comprehensive overview of Eastern beliefs and practices. There are, however, a number of seminal themes that are well-expressed in Eastern traditions and if presented well help restore the richness and integrity of the Christian tradition (Cross, 1988). As well as identifying four of these themes some comments about how these can be presented in the classroom will be made.

Mystery of the Trinity – the Heart of Christianity

In the early Christian centuries the great theological debates were conducted in the East. These debates were not restricted to bishops and theologians but were part of the everyday life of cities such as Alexandria and Antioch (Young, 1991). Discussions were heated and were perpetuated by a variety of groups displaying a wide variety of opinions. Against the views of the Arians, Nestorians, Eutychians and others who supported

particular understandings of the nature of the Godhead – the Orthodox position was argued, defended and ultimately triumphant. To this day Eastern Christian thought remains deeply immersed in the Trinity (Ware, 1996). It is represented in art and in countless other ways in the lives of the faithful. Many Eastern prayers, for example, include or end with the invocation of the Trinity. Delving into the exact doctrinal formulations of Nicaea, Ephesus and Chalcedon requires precision with language and can be too dense for secondary students. However, as Eastern Christian theological vision is so heavily Trinitarian, to be faithful to this vision some attempt should be made to encounter this teaching.

The Trinitarian emphasis is somewhat at odds with Western practices which are often heavily Christocentric. Pedagogically Western Catholics often, following Rahner, begin with a low Christology and then ascend to a more complex understanding (Egan, 1998). For example, catechetical programs that begin with a presentation of Jesus as a friend or mentor. This is a prelude to a gradual unfolding or development of the theme. An Eastern approach is far more likely to begin with a strong doctrinal statement that tries, as far as possible, to express in human terms an aspect of God's interaction with the world and then attempts to *unpack* or explain the statement (Elias, 2001). This type of immersion in doctrine runs the risk of losing students at very early stages, especially if it is done too often. But it does allow for the mystery to be stated as clearly as possible and perhaps to cultivate student interest.

Importance of Tradition and Patristic Writing

Eastern Christians have a great love of tradition as seen in the way many customs and rituals are observed with great care and reverence (Coniaris, 1982).

Many of these traditions are also a vital way of connecting the individual or family group with the faith community. One example of this is the widespread practice amongst Eastern Christians of ritualised blessings to mark significant events in both the liturgical calendar and family life. One example is the tradition of house blessings in the Byzantine Rite. This is held in at least two forms. Firstly, when the house is first occupied. This is a solemn occasion and involves, amongst other things, the priest blessing with oil the four walls of the main room with a sign of the cross. The second type of blessing occurs every year around 19 January to commemorate Jesus being baptised in the River Jordan. This is called the Jordan Blessing and marks the start of a New Year. As always the language of the prayers and readings at these blessings is heavily Trinitarian.

The Eastern love of the tradition is also seen in the high esteem that Patristic writings are held. These writings were crucial in shaping Christian belief and practice in the post apostolic period. The leading writers who were active in this era have been given the collective name Fathers of the Church and include Basil, Irenaeus, Augustine, Origen and Tertullian. Interest in the patristic period is not, however, just a nostalgic appreciation for a bygone era. The Patristic writers are seen as having something to contribute to current issues and dilemmas. As De Lubac puts it: "Every time a Christian renewal has blossomed in our West whether in thought or life it has blossomed under the sign of the Fathers" (Comby, 1985). For the contemporary RE teacher using the Fathers of the Church does offer students a change in the regular offering of saints and heroes. A figure like St Basil, for example, is little known and discussed in the contemporary Catholic schools. It is hard to overemphasise the historical importance of Basil. As well as writing the definitive rule for monastic life, he has one of the great Eastern liturgies attributed to him (the fourth Eucharistic prayer in the modern Roman Rite is a shortened adaptation of the great Eucharistic prayer of the liturgy of St Basil the Great). Basil was also a prolific writer and something of a model bishop, exemplifying a great concern for the poor and destitute. Making Basil or other patristic figures better known could be a worthwhile goal for any RE curriculum.

Liturgy as the Heart of Worship and Belief

It is often said of Orthodox Traditions that the key to understanding them is to ask not what they believe but how they worship (Coniaris, 1982). The Divine Liturgy is at the centre of Eastern worship. It also expresses, in the most perfect way, the mystery of the Church as the Body of Christ and reveals and makes present Jesus (Walker, 1996). The liturgy also has an important educative role presenting, through prayer and action, the most important teachings of the Tradition. The liturgy expresses most perfectly Christian belief and is something to be revered and honoured (Meyendorff, 1964). In the Eastern Churches the liturgy is celebrated with devotion and splendour. This can be seen in the interior of an Eastern Church. In the Byzantine Rite the church is ablaze with colour, from numerous icons and light from candles. This is designed to give a sense of the liturgy on earth being transformed into a taste of the eternal. A prominent feature of some Eastern Churches, as well as homes of the faithful, is the presence of icons. Icons are sacred paintings or mosaics in different styles which represent religious persons or events. The icon is more than just a painting. It tries to convey something of the nature of God to those who look on it and pray before it.

The liturgy in Eastern Churches is not to be tampered with. In our research work with Coptic Orthodox students I once asked a group of them, very early in our research, if they thought the liturgy could be improved. They looked at me with a sense of bemusement and incomprehension. Eventually one spoke and said that to change the liturgy was unimaginable – “think of the shame we would bring on our ancestors if we were the ones to change the sacred liturgy that has been handed down to us from St Basil.”

For Western Christians the best way to learn about an Eastern liturgy is to experience it – this is also Eastern pedagogy – you learn by seeing, acting and doing as much as by thinking. The most readily accessible Eastern liturgies for Catholics are celebrated by the Maronites and Ukrainian Greek Catholics. In most Australian capital cities there are communities who celebrate these liturgies. Most Eastern Catholics are delighted to have Westerners experience their liturgical life.

An Embodied Spirituality

A feature of much Eastern spirituality is the unity of thought and action. This is seen in the celebration of the Byzantine celebration of the Divine Liturgy (Roccasalvo, 1992). There is little sense here of the pious reverence that sometimes pervades Western liturgies. All the senses are engaged, the air is filled with incense, the congregation moves about, light candles, bless themselves and come and go when they see fit. On occasion the worshippers may even prostrate themselves, unconcerned with the thoughts of others. This sensual expression of faith is carried over to other aspects of the Christian life.

Fasting is a practice that is central to the Eastern Christian way of life although it has largely disappeared in the West (Greeley, 1999). The practice of fasting goes back to the earliest Christian times. To fast is to prepare the whole body and mind. It also enables the believer to take part with other members of the faith community in a tangible expression of their beliefs that links them with not only their peers but with the great teachers and ascetics of the tradition and with Christ himself.

In Eastern traditions prayer is both a communal and individual experience (Raya, 1976). The great prayer of the Church is the Divine Liturgy and this is always celebrated in an intensely communitarian way. Individual prayer, however, is often associated with silence or solitude. The importance of private prayer flows directly from the strong emphasis on Incarnation in Eastern Christian thinking (Hall, 1991). The Incarnation – the word made flesh – is a common creedal statement. An Eastern emphasis, however, is that because Christ

became like us, Christians have the possibility to be transformed and become like God. This personal union with God is a critical part of the Eastern spiritual tradition and was first expressed in the experience of the early monks such as St Anthony. The flight into the desert is to seek solitude, not just to be away from other people, but to be able to devote all of one's energies toward God who can best be found in silence. This great emphasis is on contemplative, silent prayer or *hesychia* – which seeks as its ultimate expression to think and see with the mind of God (Ware, 1979).

Underlying much of Eastern spirituality is the concept of *theosis* – a complex concept but which in essence describes a union of the human with the divine (Stavropoulos, 1995). As St Basil the Great teaches humans are creatures who have received the command to become like God (Bettenson, 1970). This is achieved not by changing our human nature but by elevating it to something greater. In this context it is worthwhile noting that Eastern spiritually writing looks for inspiration to writers such as Gregory of Nazianzus. There is less influence from figures such as Augustine who is regarded as a Latin Father *par excellence* (Brown, 1967). Hence there is more emphasis on the creation of humans in the image and likeness of God and less on the consequence of sin. Theologians, such as Gregory of Nazianzus, developed their thought, influenced by Paul's famous words in Galatians where he instructs that before God we are no longer slaves but sons (Lossky, 1995). Because we are truly children of God, through divine adoption, we can participate in the very life of God and this brings profound and sustaining joy. The idea of *theosis* and divine adoption are well summarised in Athanasius' famous statement, “God becomes a man, so that he may make Adam into a God” (Lewis, 1944).

Conclusion

Teaching in schools today is often marked by the pressure of the *crowded curriculum*. Religious education is no different. A mark of an increasing sophisticated debate amongst religious educators is around what topics to include in the RE curriculum and, perhaps more pointedly, what to exclude. In light of this pressure I think a case can be made for teaching about Eastern Churches. It responds to the need to be more expansive in curriculum planning and include discussion about other traditions, albeit in this case Christian ones. The ancient nature of the Eastern Churches makes their history and theology an indispensable part of understanding Christianity. For Catholic schools there is the additional factor of the *Oriental Lumen* imperative with its clear emphasis on the importance of studying Eastern Churches not as a useful addition but as an *integral part of the heritage of Christ's Church*.

Endnotes

¹ This was first reported in *L'Osservatore Romano* 15/7/85.

² Oriental Christians have always rejected the claim that they are Monophysites. The relationship between the Oriental Churches and the Catholic Church, certainly over the issues that divided them at Chalcedon, has improved immensely in recent times. In May 1973 the Coptic Pope-Shenouda III and Pope Paul VI issued the following common Christological statement:

We confess that our Lord and God and Saviour and King of us all, Jesus Christ, is perfect God with respect to His divinity, perfect man with respect to His humanity. In Him His divinity is united with His humanity in a real, perfect union without mingling, without commixtion, without confusion, without alteration, without division, without separation

³ In a visit to Greece in 2001 Pope John Paul II expressed his regret and sorrow for the destruction of Constantinople during the fourth crusade. Here is a report of part of his speech:

Some memories are especially painful, and some events of the distant past have left deep wounds in the minds and hearts of people to this day...I am thinking of the disastrous sack of the imperial city of Constantinople, which was for so long the bastion of Christianity in the East. It is tragic that the assailants, who had set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land, turned against their own brothers in the faith. The fact that they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret (*Zenit* 4/5/01).

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