

Mt. Menoikeion Seminar 2018
Holy Cycles: Development and Authority
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Orthodoxy, by common understanding, often reflects an image of perfection. One which may hinder change, as it threatens the growth of heresies in the midst of the longstanding faith. This orthodoxy and its rooting in the Church's tradition may undermine the Church's early history of development and growth. How 'orthodox' is orthodoxy in relation to theological concepts and traditional practices, and how do common believers transition to become ones of authority in the Orthodox Church? In the early days of church manmade conversations were led by well spoken, often political and religious, figures to resolve dilemmas in hope to unite the Church's distracted factions. This unity was of importance starting with Constantine's Roman Empire, as it the Church's unity meant outgrowing other religious or national groups and thus promised political stability. This unity was to be achieved by agreeing on the Christological concepts, traditions, and manners. These conversations were escalated to become ecumenical councils under heavy political influence, however these conversations serve as an example to important patterns that are to some extent observed in the Orthodox Church to our current day. One of the the patterns was that in the way the councils were decided to be formed and were held. Another, is the pattern through which main figures of the councils have gained their authority and positioned themselves in the Christological conversations.

Regarding the cyclical theological discussions, in the process of aiming to understand the nature of the incarnate Word we witness an example of development that seeks a perfect conceptualization of God. This developmental stage however does not necessarily monitor an ideal example of orthodoxy as in itself it adopts the fluid proposals that were put up of discussions. The following is an initiation of examining the role of the ecumenical councils socially as they affected later doctrines of faiths for churches that are reflected in traditions, and the relationship between the councils and the common believer's faith.

“¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome[a] it.” (John 1: 1-5)

In the beginning of shaping the church and finding common beliefs in hope to reach a unified existence, emerged the question around the nature of the incarnate God, Jesus. What is Christ? Regarding his nature, Is he human, divine, or a mix of both? Does claiming that he is of dual perfect human and divine natures suggest a schizophrenic being? But how could the two perfectly exist as one? Starting with the Arian controversy leading to the first ecumenical council, the First Council of Nicea (325 AD), trying to resolve the relation between God the Father and the Son. Both Arius and Athanasius of Alexandria led the opposing sides of controversy. Arius' innovative thoughts were both viewed as extreme thoughts resulting from deep Christological studies as well as heretic uprising. Arius' complicated defense revolved

around his view of the incarnation, for if the Father begat the Son, then the Son is not coeternal. Thus the Son, the incarnate God, is not fully divine or fully human but he was rather left hanging on a range of divinity in comparison to the Father. This dispute was even earlier than the full development of the holy trinity's perception of God, Athanasius' response in his documents of *On the Incarnation* made the nature of the Word clear by following a series of answerable questions around the need for incarnation in the first place which led to the conclusion that:

The body of the Word, then, being a real human body, in spite of its having been uniquely formed from a virgin, was of itself mortal and, like other bodies, liable to death. But the indwelling of the Word loosed it from this natural liability, so that corruption could not touch it. Thus it happened that two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all was consummated in the Lord's body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished. — Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*.

In the first ecumenical council we witness the first example of an attempt to conceptualize the nature of the Word, in this attempt the imperfect cycle of developing Christianity juxtaposes with the perfect nature of God. This irony repeats as Church leaders rise over eras to defend the "perfect" nature of God without realizing that the process of conceptualizing the Word itself embodies change. In the first council of Nicaea both the Eastern and Western Churches' agreement upon the perfect human and divine nature of the Word started the debate for later specifications about the interactions between the perfect nature in relation to the world and to God within himself.

Despite God's inseparable perfection, the initial separation between our today's Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches did not take place until the fourth ecumenical council of Chalcedon. Each council follows a cyclic procedure of defining an arising heresy or Christological disagreement amongst the churches, spreading writings from those called to be of authority in the Church, calling a meeting in which each side ought to defend their proposed explanations regarding God's nature, and later deciding whether or not an agreement could be met amongst the groups. Each holy cycle closely mirrors tradition, the conflict however arises in the repetition which essentially seeks nuanced development. How is one's authority gained in such discussions, as the common believer delves into theology?

According to discussions held with members of the monastic Greek Orthodox community, a believer ought to seek God first by establishing a spiritual connection that is further from intellectual understanding. Faith dominates the reasoning of religion, however it is the duty of the believer to then know and understand the common declaration of creed so that they are not blindly following the crowd. However the common believer does not need to be a theologian to practice Christianity. Hence the authority of the believer comes from their belief in the power and deity of God as he promised in Luke 10: 19-22

Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In that

same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

One who declares authority in Church discussions, Church’ fathers, ought to realize God’s calling first and the power of the holy spirit that fills them so that God speaks on their tongues rather than allowing their individual intellectual opinions dominate their beliefs. This cycle could be seen for one to establish a relationship with God through the Church. This believer then may opt to prioritize this relationship with God through monasticism. The monastics repeatedly emphasized that this doesn't mean that one who leaves in worldly communities cannot dedicate their life to God, however it sounds that in most ecumenical council’ leaders were of a rank in the Church. Arius himself was a bishop who was thought to become the patriarch of Alexandria.

Since that seeking monasticism requires longed periods of prayers and bible study while one goes through the three step process before their final ordination, it helps the monastic who opts to focus on Christological studies to obtain more knowledge than the common believer. A monastic first expressed their interest usually to their spiritual father after they feel that they have been called to the monastic life. While the first stage is mainly experimental by both the monastery’s brother/sister-hood the monastic to-be also experiments whether they can commit to the monastic life or not. Then after about three years of testing without commitment the monastic to-be, if passes the initial development of a relationship with the monastic community, is ordained and this ordination is seen as an “engagement” to God. This second level of commitment takes further studies, prayers, and spiritual struggles, thus it is hard to be broken. However under certain circumstances the monastic is either asked or he himself asks to be released of that commitment. The final step of the cycle is the “marriage” to God is not to be broken since that “⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Mark 10:9). Hence, for the sake of the discussion, a monastic could be seen as one who holds a higher authoritarian rank in the church as they acquire deeper spiritual and Christological understanding of God. In this, cycles intertwine. A cycle which prepares the monastic to hold a position of authority in the church, and one which the church uses to hold its developmental conversations.

Citations

Athanasius, and C. S. Lewis. *On the Incarnation: the Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*.
St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002.

Holy bible

Oral discussions held with the two nuns in the monastery.*

*Note. The dialogue was not recorded literary, thus any discussions used in the paper are based off the closest derivation from my memory to the opinions shared during the conversations. Personal discussions during the conversation held were excluded from the paper.