

Factsheet on **Orthodoxy**, Radicalization and Polarization



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Introduction

Orthodoxy (from the Greek word *ορθοδοξία*, 'righteous/correct opinion') means actually “adherence to correct creeds and to righteous praxis”.

The Eastern Orthodox Church (marked with shades of blue in the map), officially named Orthodox Catholic Church, is the second-largest Christian denomination, with approximately 220 million baptized members, while the Oriental Orthodox Churches (marked with shades of red in the map) add a total of approximately 60 million members worldwide. In 1990 Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches agreed that they have exactly the same Christological faith; anyway, still there are many steps to be taken till the complete reunion “in communion”. More than half of Eastern Orthodox Christians live in the territory of the former Soviet Union, while a significant number lives in Southeast and Eastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, and in the Middle East; the majority of Oriental Orthodox Christians live in North East Africa, the Middle East, Armenia and India. There are also many Orthodox in other parts of the world, formed through diaspora, conversions, and missionary activity.

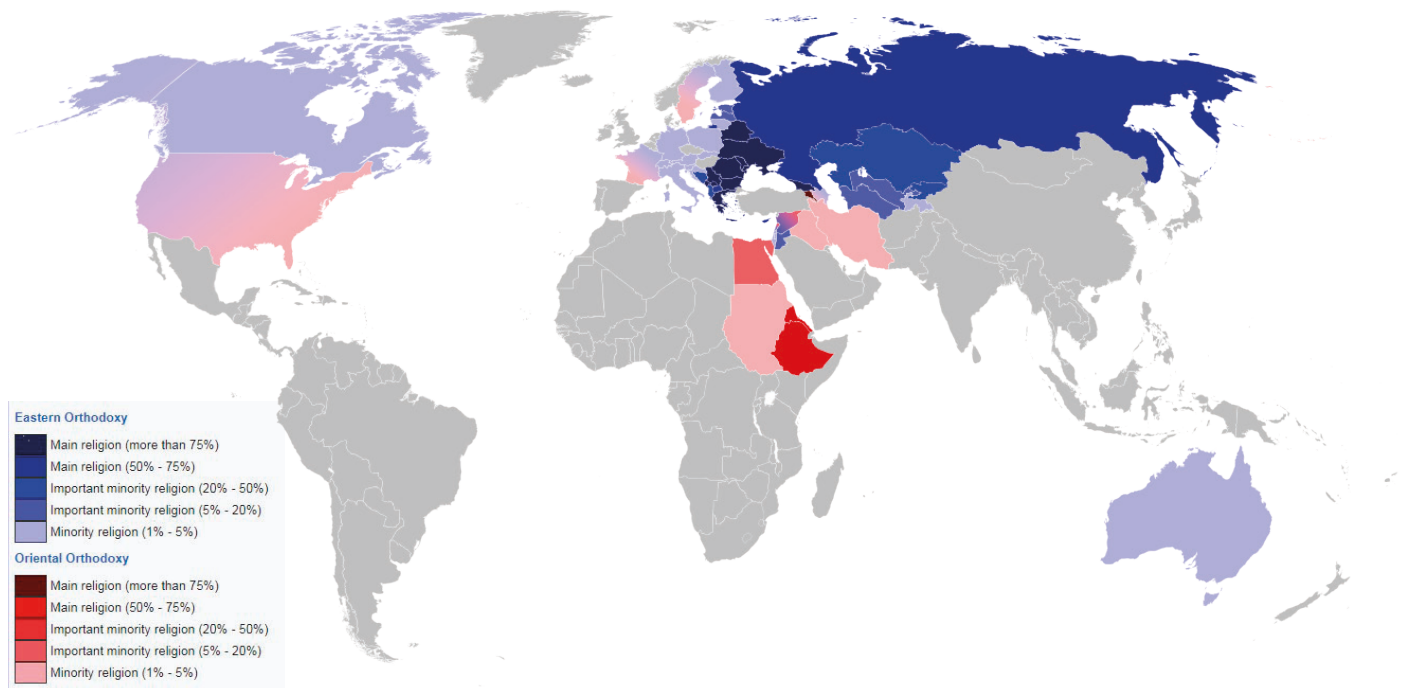


Figure 1 Demographic distribution of Orthodox populations around the Globe

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orthodoxy_by_Country.svg#/media/File:Orthodoxy_by_Country.svg (2010)

Structure

Both the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches operate as communions of autocephalous (i.e. self-governed) churches, each moderated by its own bishops in local councils called “synods”. The Church has no central doctrinal or governmental authority analogous to the Roman Catholic Pope, but the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (in Istanbul) is recognized by the Eastern Orthodox as *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”) of the bishops, exercising a “primacy of love and service” and convening the pan-Orthodox meetings. A significant degree of self-government and diversity exists inside local churches too. As some of the oldest surviving religious institutions in the world, the Orthodox Churches have played a prominent role in the history and culture of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, as well as North East Africa.



Emerging issues

The Orthodox Church's stance towards emerging issues does not show complete uniformity due to its aforementioned decentralized structure. The Church claims to have stayed faithful to the Old Christian traditions, but this claim should be approached with caution as everything evolves and everything is affected by major historical events, like the formation or the dissolution of states and empires, the scientific progress and the technological achievements etc. The Orthodox Church is no exception to that. Responding to the emerging issues, the current Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I has included the struggle for environmental issues in his agenda, as well as the advocacy of human rights (including minority rights), gender equality, issues of social justice, the condemnation of all forms of violence against human life (including war, death penalty and abortions) etc¹, issues which were almost untouched or non-existent in earlier centuries. Anyway, due to the decentralized structure of the Orthodox Church, there are also different approaches, especially on these contemporary issues which have not garnered a general consensus yet.

Condemnation of violence

Following both the old writings and the contemporary interpretations, all forms of terror and radicalism are condemned in the Orthodox Church. Violence is considered to be "sin par excellence" and it cannot be accepted, "either as an end in itself or even as a means for achieving some other end." While the Church accepts that there are cases where violence, as a form of self-defense, is unavoidable, it makes clear that the use of violence should be the last resort and should never become excessive. "The Church rejects all violence—including defensive acts—that are prompted by hate, racism, revenge, selfishness, economic exploitation, nationalism, or personal glory. Such motives, which are all too often the hidden springs behind the waging of so-called 'just wars,' are never blessed by God. Even in those rare situations in which the use of force is not absolutely prohibited, the Orthodox Church still discerns a need for spiritual and emotional healing among all persons involved."



Figure 2. Depiction of conflict between Byzantine and Arab soldiers in the *Madrid Skylitzes* manuscript (12th c. CE)
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Madrid_Skylitzes#/media/

Of course, wise views as those above were not always the case. Especially in periods of war, many crimes have been committed against civilians. Cases of abuse of people of different beliefs have been reported all over the centuries, and Jews have been a regular target, while, in the last years, a typical such target is Muslim refugees and African immigrants that arrive from the "global south". While most of the times such violence is denounced by Church leaders, in many cases it has been inflamed even by members of the clergy, who consider the newcomers as a threat to the national or religious traditions.

Majorities and minorities

One must underline that the situation can be very different in the various countries and local churches. In cases where the Orthodox population is dominant, the Church tends to align with the Government, providing an ideological alibi for discriminations or oppression, even for the activity of the deep state. In cases where Orthodox remains a minority, the approach is totally the opposite. In all cases, reports of direct engagement of the Church with violence, or even with direct praise of violence, are extremely rare.

¹ See the official document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate: "For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church", <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>, available in various languages. All quotations come from this text. Also, the blogs Public Orthodoxy, <https://www.publicorthodoxy.org> and Orthodoxy in Dialogue, <https://orthodoxyindialogue.com/> deal with such topics.



Figure 3. Elpidophoros, the Archbishop of the Orthodox Church in America, participates in a Black Lives Matter demonstration in the spring of 2020.

Polarization

Polarization has been a rather common practice in the Orthodox world in the previous centuries and it was directed not only towards the other religions, but also towards the rest of the Christian confessions. There has been an attempt to change this attitude since the mid-20th century, when the Orthodox Churches started participating officially in many organizations of inter-Christian and interreligious dialogue (like the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches, Religions for Peace etc.) "Knowing that God reveals himself in countless ways and with boundless inventiveness, the Church enters into dialogue with other faiths prepared to be amazed and delighted by the variety and beauty of God's generous manifestations of divine goodness, grace, and wisdom among all peoples". However, a significant part of ultra-conservative Orthodox still consider that communication with different confessions and different faiths is a sin and many Dioceses have "anti-heretic" departments. Thus, it is somehow evident that the two tendencies, polarization and reconciliation are still co-existing and contesting inside the Orthodox world, and there is a lot to be done in this direction.



Figure 4. One of the icons used for polarization propaganda by ultra-conservative Orthodox. The Orthodox Church is presented as a ship of saints, with Christ as its captain, while its supposed enemies (including the Roman Catholic Pope, Luther, Ecumenists, devils, the "Antichrist" and monsters of the Revelation) try in vain to attack it from the shore.

Cover: The Chapel of St. George of Grotta on the island of Naxos, Greece.
Photo by Olya Gluschenko, 2018

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