The Great Schism

The schism between Eastern and Western Christendom evolved over several centuries. A combination of theological and political factors contributed to this sequence of events. Much of the wide-ranging aberrations of modern Western society can be attributed to its parting of the ways with the Christian East. Over the course of the past millennium the Western world has been moving further and further away from the Truth as revealed to the Prophets and Apostles, formulated by the Ecumenical Councils, and experienced in the Orthodox Church. In this essay we will attempt to highlight some of these factors and events.

Historical background

During her first three centuries the Church grew and expanded mostly in the area of the Roman Empire, thus experiencing a large degree of cultural and political unity. By the fifth century this unity began to weaken due to the Germanic invasions of Western Europe and the fall of Rome. In the meantime the imperial capital had been moved to Constantinople by the Emperor Constantine I early in the fourth century. Further isolation was effected by the Slav and Avar invasions of the Balkan peninsula during the late sixth and early seventh centuries. With the rise of Islam shortly thereafter the Mediterranean fell largely under Arab control, making trade and other contacts between the Eastern Roman Empire (also known as Byzantine) and the Latin-speaking West even more difficult.¹

Until the eighth century Rome continued to see itself as part of the Byzantine world, but in 754 Pope Stephen visited the Frankish king Pepin. This step inaugurated the close link between the Papacy and the Germanic emperors that was to last for centuries, turning the Roman orientation northward instead of eastward. It was cemented in 800 when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as emperor of the ‘Holy Roman Empire’ – a step that was correctly viewed by Constantinople as an act of schism with the official Roman Empire in the East. Charlemagne was openly anti-Greek, and as such had the Eastern Church condemned for not using the Filioque (see further on) in the Symbol of Faith, or the Creed.²

Western theological deviations

Already in the early Church there were differences of emphasis between the Greeks and the Latins, although sharing a common faith rooted in Scripture. Generally speaking Latin theology was more

² Ware, p 45-47.
practical and juridical, while Greek theology was more speculative and liturgical. Regarding the Trinity, the Latins started with the unity of the Godhead and the Greeks started with the three Hypostases; regarding the Crucifixion, the Latins saw Christ primarily as victim and the Greeks saw Him as victor over death. We accordingly have the Roman Catholic and Protestant emphasis on the Crucifixion and Good Friday, while the Orthodox emphasise the Resurrection and Pascha.

In matters of Church worship and discipline there were also divergences between Rome and the East. For example, the Greeks allowed married clergy while the Latins insisted on priestly celibacy; only the Latins fasted on Saturdays; the Greeks used leavened bread in the Eucharist and the Latins unleavened bread. Furthermore, during the second century a dispute arose between Rome and the churches of Asia Minor regarding the date of Easter. Rome calculated the date of Easter according to the day of the week, while the East followed a more ancient way of calculation. This issue remained unsettled even after synods held in Rome, Palestine and elsewhere around 190 decided in favour of the Roman practice.

The roots of these Western deviations go back to the Roman legal mentality. Rome is the cradle of the science of jurisprudence, so that eventually in Western thought the dynamic indeterminacy of life was replaced by definitive models of life, as the Orthodox philosopher Christos Yannaras so aptly stated the case. In other words, definition took the place of experience.

A further Western deviation to arise in the early Middle Ages was the belief in purgatory. It was found already in the writings of St Cyprian of Carthago, while St Augustine of Hippo was ambivalent about it. By the end of the sixth century Pope Gregory I taught belief in purgatory to be a matter essential to the faith. In his Dialogues the saint wrote that there is a purgatorial fire before the judgement for certain light sins. This is opposed to the Eastern Christian belief in an intermediate state between death and the judgement which is not for us to define. In this matter as in so many others, the Orthodox Church prefers to maintain a reverent silence before the mystery of the afterlife rather than making categorical statements concerning it.

The Filioque controversy

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3 Ware, p 48.
4 Ware, p 51.
7 Walker, pp 174-75.
While the differences in emphasis and usages between Rome and the Eastern Church were not serious enough to warrant a schism, there appeared a Western innovation that was finally to achieve such a schism. This was the addition of the *Filioque* clause (Latin for ‘and the son’) to the Creed, immediately after confessing that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. The procession of the Spirit from the Father as the unique source of the Godhead had been confessed by the whole Church from the earliest times, following the promise made by Christ according to the Gospel of St John (15:26): “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.” From this it is clear that the Spirit proceeds (Greek *ekporeuetai*) from the Father alone, just as the son is born from the Father alone.

However, late in the sixth century the Western Church began inserting the *Filioque* into the Creed, claiming that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. It appeared first at the local council of Toledo in Spain in 589, ostensibly to reaffirm the divinity of Christ against Arianism, the latter being the heresy that was condemned at the First Ecumenical Council in 325 but which continued to draw support in parts of Western Europe. Next to appropriate the *Filioque* were the Franks, with Charlemagne having it adopted at the local council of Frankfurt in 794, which also rejected the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 regarding the veneration of icons. The German ruler’s court ‘theologians’ went so far as to accuse the Greeks of heresy for reciting the Creed in its original form! To its credit the Roman Church continued using the Creed without the *Filioque* until the early eleventh century. Pope Leo III even dared to challenge Charlemagne by having the Creed in its original form inscribed on silver plaques and set up in St Peter’s in Rome.

From around 850 the Greek Church began condemning this Western innovation. The first objection to the *Filioque* is that the original Creed was adopted at an Ecumenical Council and could therefore only be altered by one. This was not the case, since the councils at Toledo and Frankfurt were only local ones. As the Russian theologian Alexei Khomiakov aptly declared, the West committed moral fratricide by unilaterally altering the Creed. The second objection to the *Filioque* is that it is theologically false, the Father being the sole principle (Greek *mone arche*) of the whole Godhead. To state that the Spirit proceeds from the Father as well as the Son is therefore to introduce two principles into the Godhead, which is a heretical teaching.

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8 Scriptural quotations are from the New King James Version, unless otherwise indicated.
9 Ware, p 51.
10 Ware, p 51.
Roman claims to papal supremacy

With the Germanic invasions of Western Europe from the fifth century onwards and the resulting cultural and political disintegration, the Roman Papacy increasingly functioned as a centre of unity, continuity and stability. The Popes were moved to exercise authority over not only their subordinates in the Church, but over secular rulers as well. The Western Church thus became highly centralised and monarchical. This is in contrast to the situation in the Eastern Roman Empire, where law and order was enforced by the Emperor, whose authority over ‘secular’ matters was never in dispute. The authority of the Eastern Church remained collegiate in nature, as it had been received from the early Church. In other words, the Orthodox Church is governed by all her bishops meeting in synods, and not by a centralised Patriarch whether in Constantinople or elsewhere.

In his monumental On the City of God, the Latin theologian St Augustine formulated his influential theory of history, according to which the visible church (or to be more precise, the elect in it) is the City of God that should increasingly rule the world. Out of this theory flowed the medieval idea of the theocratic state. Accordingly the Popes moved quickly to secure their supremacy over the whole Church. First Innocent I (402-17) claimed a universal jurisdiction for the bishop of Rome. Then the churches of Gaul, Spain and North Africa were subjected to Roman authority by Leo I (440-461), who protested the decision of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 that Constantinople be placed on an equality with Rome.

This difference in approach to church authority was respected by the Greeks until the Roman Popes began to assert their authority over not only the Western Church but the entire Church. The Greeks were quite willing to assign a primacy of honour to the Pope, but not the universal supremacy that was claimed. During the eight century a document called the Donation of Constantine started doing the ecclesiastical rounds in the West. It claimed to be an instruction from the Emperor Constantine that all hierarchs be subject to the Roman bishop, who should also be the overlord over the Western half of the Empire. The document was extensively used by the Popes to further their claims, until it was proven to be a forgery by Nicholas of Cusa in 1433.

To make matters worse, the Popes started claiming infallibility as their own prerogative, while the Eastern Church preserved the tradition that final decisions on matters of faith can only be taken by an ecumenical council representing all the bishops of the Church. As Archbishop Nicetas correctly

11 Ware, p 47.
12 Walker, p 167.
13 Walker, p 124.
14 Walker, pp 186-87, 193.
stated the case in the fifteenth century, the Roman Church wished not to be in a relation of
brotherhood or even parenthood to the Eastern Church, but in a position of mastery.\textsuperscript{15} It was not
enough for Rome to wish to dominate the entire Christian world – it had to create the impression
that the Roman bishop was incapable of erring, thereby rejecting the fundamental Christian teaching
of the sinfulness of every human person (see for example Romans 3:23).

Viewed from a philosophical angle, the scholastic rationalism of the West found political
eexpression in the theocratic vision of a universal papacy. This entails all spiritual, legislative,
judicial and political power being concentrated in the hands of the Roman bishop. After the Western
Church broke away formally from its Eastern Christian roots in 1054, the leading Roman Catholic
theologian Thomas Aquinas in his \textit{Summa Theologiae} introduced the principle of papal infallibility;
Pope Gregory IX established the Inquisition to enforce infallibility (in 1233); and Pope Innocent IV
authorised the use torture in the trials of suspected heretics, thereby setting an example for later
Western totalitarianisms to exterminate dissent.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{The Photian prelude}

One of the most gifted Orthodox Patriarchs ever, St Photios, was elected to the throne of
Constantinople in 858. This took place after the previous Patriarch, Ignatios, had been exiled by the
Emperor and resigned under pressure. In the following year Photios called a synod attended by 170
bishops, who confirmed Ignatius’ deposition.\textsuperscript{17} The latter’s followers then appealed to the Roman
Pope Nicholas, who sent legates to Constantinople to investigate the matter. They declared Photios
to be the legitimate Patriarch, but Nicholas saw his chance to enforce Papal supremacy over the
eastern Church also. He wrote to the other three Eastern Patriarchs (i.e. of Alexandria, Antioch and
Jerusalem), branding Photios a ‘wicked intruder’.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, Pope Nicholas held a Council in
Rome in 863 that deposed Photios and declared Ignatios to be Patriarch, thus effecting a breach in
communion between Rome and Constantinople.\textsuperscript{19}

This blatant papal interference in the affairs of the Eastern Church was at first ignored by the
Greeks, but when German missionaries using the \textit{Filioque} appeared in Bulgaria, St Photios decided
to take action. In 867 he wrote to the other Eastern Patriarchs and denounced the \textit{Filioque} as a
heresy, because it admitted of two principles in the Godhead.\textsuperscript{20} He also summoned a local council in

\textsuperscript{15} Ware, p 50.
\textsuperscript{16} Yannaras, p 158.
\textsuperscript{17} Hussey, Joan. \textit{The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire}. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, p 73.
\textsuperscript{18} Hussey, p 76.
\textsuperscript{19} Ware, p 53.
\textsuperscript{20} Hussey, p 78.
Constantinople which excommunicated Pope Nicholas, who died before the news could reach him. However, shortly thereafter Photios was deposed by the new Emperor, Basil I, who had murdered his predecessor Michael. Basil promptly restored Ignatios to the throne and restored communion with Rome. Ignatios called another local council in Constantinople in 869-70, which condemned Photios and reversed the decisions of his council. However, on request of the council the Emperor decided to assign the new Bulgarian Church to Constantinople rather than to Rome, with the positive result for the East that the German missionaries there were expelled from Bulgaria and the *Filioque* with them.

More positive developments were in store for St Photios, who had been exiled to a monastery by the 869 council. He was reconciled with Ignatios shortly before the latter died in 877 and succeeded him as Patriarch. Two years later another local council was held in Constantinople, attended by 383 bishops compared to 103 at the meeting a decade earlier. The new council anathematised the 869 council and withdrew all the condemnations of Photios. Furthermore, the assembled bishops confirmed the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council and the symbol of faith without the *Filioque*. The council’s decisions were accepted by the Roman Pope John VIII, who wisely did not insist on the *Filioque* or try to enforce his supremacy in the East. Later Roman Catholic claims that there was a second Photian schism have been proven to be false, with no documentary evidence to substantiate it. Thus Photios spent his second term as Patriarch (877-86) in communion with Rome and in charge of the Bulgarian Church. Ever since he as been honoured by the Orthodox as a great saint and theologian.

**The Formal Schism: 1054**

The eleventh century early on saw what would prove to a harbinger of things to come, when the name of the newly-elected Roman Pope Sergius IV (in 1009) was omitted from the Diptychs at Constantinople. Technically the two Churches were out of communion from that date, although this omission was not taken seriously in Rome, since cases like that had been experienced before – always by default and not intentionally. In addition, the *Filioque* had continued to be widely used in Spain and the Carolingian empire even after its condemnation at the council of Constantinople in 879. For more than a century afterwards Rome had remained Orthodox in this respect, but in 1014

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21 Hussey, p 81.
22 Ware, pp 55-56.
23 Hussey, p 82.
24 Hussey, p 86.
25 Ware, p 56.
26 Hussey, p 85.
the Papacy finally adopted the *Filioque* when it was sung as part of the Creed during the coronation of the German Emperor Henry II at Rome.\(^{27}\)

By the middle of the eleventh century the Papacy had reached the summit of its power in the West. For the East the renewed papal claims to universal supremacy occurred at a difficult time of Norman incursions in Byzantine Italy and the expansion of Italian maritime commerce in the Eastern Mediterranean. In reaction to the Normans forcing the Greeks in Byzantine Italy to follow Latin usages, Patriarch Michael Cerularios of Constantinople demanded that the Latins in the imperial capital adopt Greek practices. When they refused, he closed the Latin churches in 1052. However, a year later Michael wrote to Pope Leo IX and offered to restore the Pope’s name to the Diptychs. This conciliatory gesture prompted Leo to send three legates to Constantinople in 1054, including Cardinal Humbert who drafted a rather hostile letter signed by the Pope. The Patriarch naturally refused to have any further dealings with the legates, whereupon Humbert laid a Bull of Excommunication on the altar of the Church of the Holy Wisdom (*Hagia Sophia*) while the Liturgy was being celebrated. In a remarkable display of arrogance, Humbert accused the Greeks of *omitting* the *Filioque* from the Creed. Cerularios in his turn excommunicated Humbert, but not the Roman Church as such.\(^{28}\)

This rupture has traditionally been taken as the official date of the Great Schism between East and West, but for many in both parts of Christendom is was not seen as such. Something more serious was needed to finally seal the schism, and the Crusades conducted by Western knights and exhorted by the Roman Popes would provide that something.

**The Fourth Crusade: 1204**

Following the success of the First Crusade at the end of the eleventh century in capturing the Holy Land from the Muslims, Latin patriarchs were set up at Antioch and Jerusalem by the Crusaders. This was done in direct challenge to the existing Greek patriarchs in these areas, thereby dividing the Christian population the Crusaders had claimed to ‘liberate’ from the Islamic yoke. This Western hostility towards their Christian brethren in the East would turn into open massacre during the Fourth Crusade in 1204. The Crusaders were diverted from their original destination of Egypt by internecine squabbling for the imperial throne in Constantinople, but they came as enemies. The Christian capital of the East was sacked for three days and its numerous sacred treasures carried off to Western Europe. It was done with a brutality that would cause permanent resentment and

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\(^{27}\) Ware, p 57.

\(^{28}\) Ware, pp 58-59.
indignation among the Greeks towards the West. To make matters worse, the Crusaders set up a Latin kingdom and patriarch at Constantinople, which was ended in 1261 when the Greeks took their capital and restored the Greek Patriarchate. However, the Eastern Empire had been severely crippled politically and economically by the Latin aggressors, so that the ultimate Turkish conquest would henceforth only be a matter of time.

Conclusion
With characteristic insight Christos Yannaras evaluates the Great Schism as opening the way for a radical falsification of Christianity, turning the living faith of the Gospels and the Fathers into a static ‘religion’. The Frankish differentiations in theology, of which the Filioque was the most important, therefore brought not only a new empire or a new heresy, but a new civilisation. The next phase of Western falsification would be medieval scholasticism, which amounted to a rejection of apophatic theology, of the priority of life and of the person in his existential otherness and freedom. The Western scholastics returned to the ancient Greek ontology which the Greek Fathers had rejected and rejected the ancient Greek gnosiology which the Greek Fathers had adopted. As a result, knowledge was reduced to individual understanding and truth was reduced to intellectual achievement.

Because of its break with the Christian East, the Western civilisation that developed from the Middle Ages onwards and eventually came to dominate most of the world has displayed imbalances and aberrations throughout. This applies to all of its manifestations: moral, cultural, socio-political, economic, aesthetical and ecological. This state of affairs could only be reversed if the modern West had the courage to admit its wide-ranging heresy and returned to its Eastern Christian roots. Given the stranglehold of the satanic powers in the present-day world, such an admission and conversion has to considered extremely unlikely. As much as one would wish for Christian unity, the schism between Eastern and Western Christendom has to be recognised as a permanent estrangement that only the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ could conceivably overcome.

Having said as much, it remains our duty as Orthodox Christians to be witnesses, both individually and collectively, of the fulness of the Truth towards all those who are seeking for it. This would include co-operating with our fellow Christians in the West on matters of common interest, but not for the sake of so-called ecumenism at all cost.

29 Ware, p 60.
30 Yannaras, pp 156-57.
31 See the Orthodox philosopher Philip Sherrard’s powerful works on the spiritual grounds of mankind’s destruction of the natural environment: The rape of man and nature, and Human image: Divine image.
Vladimir de Beer
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