

## The Growth of Eastern Orthodoxy

*Summary: The decentralized structure of Eastern Orthodoxy resulted in the divided ecclesiastical organization of Eastern Orthodox churches in the United States, where congregations are often drawn together by shared national origins.*

Orthodox Christianity was first established in North America in 1794 when Russian monks from Valaam Monastery founded a mission to native Aleut peoples on Kodiak island in Alaska. One member of that mission, Father Herman, who lived and served on Spruce Island for nearly forty years, has now been canonized as St. Herman of Alaska. Russian Orthodox influence remained substantial after the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867. Orthodoxy has always grown by the indigenization of the church, with its liturgies translated into the languages and cultures of the local people—whether Greek, Arabic, Armenian, Slavonic, or more recently, English. In Alaska, the Aleut culture of Native Alaskans became the first cultural home of American Orthodoxy.

Other kinds of Eastern Orthodoxy came into America during the great migrations of the late 19th century. At that time, Ukrainians, Serbians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Albanians, Syrians, and additional Russians settled in the United States, all bringing with them ancient and distinctive national Christian traditions. Orthodox Christians share a common understanding of doctrine, an emphasis on sacramental forms of worship, and the practice of venerating icons. However, these elements have been elaborated in different cultural contexts for many centuries, forming a variety of churches with unique characteristics.

Initially, because the Russian Orthodox Church was the first Orthodox church in North America, all Orthodox churches were de facto under the ecclesiastical authority of the Moscow Patriarchate, regardless of their ethnic, national, or linguistic associations. This structure changed following World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, when churches renegotiated their organizational ties with their mother churches abroad. The result was overlapping American jurisdictions that still exist today.

Unlike the unified and central papal authority of the Roman Catholic Church, each respective Orthodox church maintains its own primate, called a patriarch, on the model of early Christianity. Each of these patriarchs is considered equal, though the Patriarch of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) is accorded a special honor as the “first among equals.” Many of the smaller dioceses in America (such as the

Ukrainian Orthodox Church of America, for example) now look directly to him as their ecclesiastical leader.

This conciliar but decentralized structure has tended to separate Orthodox churches from one another in the United States, where religious practice has often been closely tied to ethnicity. As with many immigrant churches, Orthodox churches have sought to preserve the distinctive practices and language of worship that they brought with them to the United States and which provided them with community and identity in their new homes. Nonetheless, Orthodox Christians have participated actively in American life. For example, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, established in 1922 and based in New York, has long anchored a vibrant American Greek Orthodox community. For nearly four decades Archbishop Iakovos was a visible participant in national affairs, including the civil rights marches led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His successor, Archbishop Spyridon, who presided from 1996 until 1999, was the first American-born head of the Archdiocese. The Antiochian Orthodox Church, which arrived with Arabic-speaking Christian immigrants, pioneered the use of English in its liturgies as early as 1917. Perhaps most dramatically, in 1970 the Russian Orthodox Church in America established its independence from the church in Russia and was renamed the Orthodox Church in America, committed to creating a truly American Orthodoxy and using the English language in its liturgy and hymnody.

Today, over a million Orthodox Christians live in the United States. While Orthodox Christians constitute an integral part of American society, steps toward the Americanization of their traditions have been cautious. Although a movement of greater collaboration among the Orthodox churches gained strength in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the importance of tradition and links to ethnic homelands have continued to present obstacles. Similarly, while Orthodox churches have become members of ecumenical organizations such as the National Council of Churches of Christ, they have tended to remain disengaged from the more activist Christianity of mainstream America. Nevertheless, American Orthodox Christians have found ways to balance sacramental piety and humanitarian work. Besides the efforts of individual churches and dioceses, the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) established the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) in March 1992. In addition to its international mission, it administers many programs throughout the United States.