

Comparing and Contrasting Forms of Christianity

Organizational Matters

The three branches of Christianity are organized quite differently. Catholicism is a single, worldwide Church. Eastern Orthodox Christianity exists as several self-governing, nationally-based churches, each with its own leadership. Protestant church organization is much more diffuse. There are many Protestant denominations and many independent, nondenominational churches as well.

Priests in the Catholic Church must remain celibate while Eastern Orthodox priests may marry before ordination. Bishops are always chosen from the ranks of the celibate clergy. In both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, priesthood is restricted to males. Protestant ministers are typically married, and many denominations ordain both women and men to the ministry.

Authority

In addition to the authority of the Bible in many Christian denominations, the Catholic Church recognizes the authority of the Pope and of the Tradition of the Church. Eastern Orthodox Christians also hold the Bible to be the primary source for doctrine and the supreme authority, but they honor the authority of the first seven councils of the church (the “seven Ecumenical Councils”) and the authority of the bishops of the churches as well. The Patriarch of Constantinople is the titular leader of all the world’s Eastern Orthodox Christians, but his is a position of honor; he is not in any way an “Eastern Orthodox Pope.” Beginning with the German reformer Martin Luther, Protestants have held that the Bible is the sole authority in matters of faith and practice. The church as the community of faith is equally as important to Protestants as to Catholic and Orthodox Christians, but it does not have the position of authority given the church in the latter two groups.

Both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches recognize Apostolic Succession, the teaching that priestly authority is derived from that of the Apostles, in an unbroken line of succession, although they interpret it differently. The Anglican Church teaches Apostolic Succession as well. Most Protestant Christians do not hold this teaching.

Sacraments

Both the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches celebrate Seven Sacraments. In the Catholic Church, they are Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance and Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders. Catholics typically have their children baptized shortly after birth. They are then confirmed in their faith when they are older. The elements of bread and wine are believed to actually become the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

The Orthodox Churches also recognize Seven Sacraments. The usual term for the Sacraments in Orthodoxy is Sacred Mysteries. Baptism, accomplished by triple immersion in water, is usually carried out soon after birth, and immediately followed by Chrismation, anointing with blessed oil. Orthodox



Christians also believe the bread and wine actually become the Body and Blood of Christ. Unction is the Orthodox term for the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick and it functions very similarly as in Catholicism.

Protestants celebrate two Sacraments, regarding the other five as rites of the Church without sacramental significance. Baptism may be for infants and children, or it may be restricted to those old enough to understand its meaning for themselves (“believer’s Baptism”). Holy Communion, or the Lord’s Supper, is celebrated with bread and either wine or unfermented grape juice. Protestants typically do not believe the bread and wine actually transform into Christ’s Body and Blood, holding rather that both are present, that the elements symbolize the Body and Blood, or that the Sacrament is a memorial of Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples.

