
Outline the events that lead to an overall schism between the church of the East and the West. Was such a schism inevitable given the social, political and ecclesiastical circumstances?

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1. Introduction

The East-West Schism (also known as the Great Schism) resulted in the division of Christianity into Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) branches. The mutual excommunications in 1054 marked the climax to a long period of tension between the two streams of Christianity and resulted from, amongst other things, cultural, linguistic, political and theological differences that had built up over time. Here we examine a number of these differences and their ultimate culmination in dividing East from West.

2. Greek and Latin Cultural Differences

In his work 'Turning Points', Noll argues that “As early as the first century, it was possible to perceive pointed differences between the representatives of what would one day be called East and West.”¹ The Eastern Orthodox theologian Timothy Ware expands on this:

From the start, Greeks and Latins had each approached the Christian mystery in their own way. At the risk of some oversimplification, it can be said that the Latin approach was more practical, the Greek more speculative; Latin thought was influenced by judicial ideas...while the Greeks understood theology in the context of worship and in the light of the Holy Liturgy...²

The division of the Roman Empire into western and eastern halves c.293 by Diocletian and the conversion of the Emperor Constantine c.312 formed the background to a process of cultural division, which in later times would become much more pronounced. Constantine authorised the creation of a new city in the East as a counterweight to Rome (Constantinople or the 'City of Constantine'), strategically placed on the Bosphorus and on the trade routes between East and West.

1. Noll, *Turning Points*, p134.
2. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p48-49.

It had been common in the early church for theologians to be bilingual in both Greek and Latin. For example Jerome (c.340-420), who later completed a translation of the Bible into Latin (The *Vulgate*) had learned both languages. However, geographical and cultural factors later served to isolate East from West as increasingly fewer educated people were bilingual. With linguistic isolation, other factors began to occur such as differences in liturgical rites and practices. Examples include the use of unleavened bread as part of the Eucharist in the West against leavened bread in the East, and the growing requirement for Clerical celibacy in the West.

3. Rome and Constantinople

Western Christianity was centred around the city of Rome. The city was the capital of the Roman Empire and also according to tradition, the place of martyrdom of the Apostles Peter (who was regarded as the first Bishop of Rome) and Paul. For some, the Bishop of Rome had a primacy of jurisdiction over the whole church. For example Irenaeus of Lyons (d. c.202) argued in his work *Against Heresies* that “For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority”, but this view was contested by others who argued for a primacy of honour, not jurisdiction. At the Council of Constantinople in 381, a Canon was issued stating that “The Bishop of Constantinople, however, shall have the prerogative of honour after the Bishop of Rome because Constantinople is New Rome.” The result of this was two fold:

1. Demotion of the ancient sees of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.
2. Protests by the see of Rome, who saw it as a potential challenge to its own position.

Tension between East and West was deepened at the Council of Chalcedon (451), which met to deal with the issue of Monophysitism, that is the view the Christ had only one nature. Prior to the council, Pope Leo I had issued a document, known as the *Tome of Leo*, which stated that Christ had two natures, human and divine.

At the council, the rejection of Monophysitism subsequently led to a schism, with some Churches in the East rejecting the outcome and thus the doctrine espoused by the Pope. Canon 28 of this council gave the same privileges to Constantinople as well as Rome, a decision later protested by the later, who continued to advocate Papal supremacy.

In the East, the efforts of the emperor Justinian (483-565) led to the expansion of the Eastern (Byzantine) Roman Empire, which later found a political rival in the revived Western 'Holy Roman Empire', symbolised by the coronation of Charlemagne in 800. East-West relations were made more difficult by the rise of Islam whose conquests eventually left Constantinople as the undisputed master in the East.

4. The *Filioque*

At the Council of Nicea in 325 the Arian Heresy which denied the full divinity of Christ was repudiated. Nicea produced a creed (later modified at the Council of Constantinople in 381), which stated that Christ was “of one substance with the Father.” However, the council and its successor did not end the controversy about the nature of Christ. Arianism, though dying out in the East after Constantinople, lingered on in the West. For example Ulfilas (c. 311-383) completed a translation of the Bible into the language of the Gothic people of Eastern Europe and promoted an Arian theology.

The Third Council of Toledo in 589 met to deal with Arianism, which was found in Visigothic Spain. The original creed at Nicea (later modified at Constantinople) declared belief in the “ Holy Spirit, the Lord, and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father...” It was against Arianism, that the council added the text “and the son” to this phrase (Latin: *Filioque*). Some of the early Christian writers (e.g. Ambrose of Milan) had argued previously that this was theologically sound and therefore permissible.

The revision to the creed spread throughout the West, but not the East, who argued it was invalid as the alteration was done outside of an Ecumenical council and also because, as McGrath comments: “To the Greeks, the Latin approach seemed to introduce two sources of divinity in the one Godhead and to weaken the distinction between the Son and the Spirit.”³

As time went on, the *Filioque* was gradually accepted in the West and in c.1014 the Pope integrated the addition into the liturgy of the Latin rite. This further deepened the rift with the East. Western theologians at Charlemagne's court accused the Greeks of heresy because they recited the Creed in its original form.⁴

5. The Iconoclastic Controversy

The dispute over the use of icons in worship raged throughout the eighth and ninth centuries in the East and was instituted by Emperor Leo III in c.726 who banned their use. At the synod of Hieria in 753, the destruction of icons was mandated, but iconodules (supporters of icons) such as John of Damascus (c. 676-749) appealed passionately for their use, arguing that icons were an aid to worship, a representation of the divine; not to be worshipped themselves but venerated. During the controversy, Pope Gregory III held two synods at Rome condemning Leo's actions, which further deepened resentment in the East over perceived 'Papal Interference'. Leo retaliated by transferring Southern Italy and Illyricum (part of the Balkan area) from the papal diocese to that of the Patriarch of Constantinople.

The dispute continued until 787, when at the second council of Nicea allowed for the veneration of icons in worship. A further period of iconoclastic activity took place from 814-842, but a synod held in 843 confirmed the rulings at Nicea and ultimately ended the controversy.

3. McGrath, *Historical Theology*, p71.

4. Orthodox Christian Information Centre, <http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/greatschism.aspx>

6. The Photian Schism

This schism resulted from the decision of the Eastern Emperor Michael III to depose the existing Patriarch Ignatius I with a layman, Photius (c.820-891) in 858. Photius had been ordained Priest and then Bishop in a period of just six days.

However, Ignatius refused to abdicate and appealed to Pope Nicholas I to arbitrate. In 863, at a synod in Rome, the Pope declared Photius' appointment invalid and excommunicated him for refusing to stand down.

However, this did not solve the issue and Photius took advantage of the recent western missionary activity amongst the Bulgars to raise again the issue of the *filioque*, which he regarded as heresy. In 867, Photius arranged for a synod to be held which excommunicated the Pope, terming him 'a heretic who ravages the vineyard of the Lord'. The dispute raged on for several more years until a council held at Constantinople in 879-80 confirmed Photius appointment, this being eventually confirmed by Pope John VIII.

The schism highlighted two themes that were to prove fundamental in leading up to the final schism, that is the degree of control the Eastern emperors had over the church and also the extent to which Constantinople was subject to the authority of Rome. It also highlighted the significant rift regarding the *filioque*, which still had not formally been adopted by Rome, but was growing in acceptance in the West.

7. Excommunication and Final Schism

Perhaps due to the *filioque*, from 1009 onwards the Patriarch of Constantinople no longer included the name of the Bishop of Rome in the Diptychs, a list maintained showing the names of other Patriarchs, living or dead who were regarded as theologically orthodox.

However the growing tensions between East and West finally came to a head in the mid 11th century. The initial issue was a Papal requirement that Greek churches in Southern Italy should conform to the Latin rites. In return the Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, demanded the Latin churches in Constantinople should use Greek rites. Their refusal led to their closure and Cerularius authorised a letter attacking the western use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist. The letter reached Pope Leo IX, who asked one of his trusted advisers, Cardinal Humbert to reply. Humbert reasserted papal primacy and rebuked the emperor for using the term 'ecumenical' to refer to his patriarchate.

Eventually the Pope sent a number of legates to Constantinople (headed by Humbert) to settle the matter once and for all. On 16 July 1054, Humbert entered the Hagia Sophia and placed a bull of excommunication on the altar. The bull anathematized Cerularius, the Greek doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the marriage of Greek priests, and the Greek use of leavened bread for the Eucharist. Soon after Cerularius responded in kind by excommunicating the Roman legation.

8. Aftermath and Reflection

Despite these excommunications, as Ware points out, contact still occurred between East and West:

Even after 1054 friendly relations between East and West continued. The two parts of Christendom were not yet conscious of a great gulf of separation between them. . . . The dispute remained something of which ordinary Christians in East and West were largely unaware ⁵

The impact of the schism was perhaps more keenly felt in the East, with the continuing problem of the Islamic empires which had been continually encroaching and eventually seizing by force much territory under Orthodox control. The Eastern church continued its expansion northwards, to the evangelisation of Russia.

⁵ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p67.

For the West, the schism led to the Catholic church becoming “Christendom for Western Europe - a feudal society with a catholic vision of the imperial identity, indicated in the person of the Holy Roman Emperor.”⁶

It was perhaps the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204 that sealed the schism, leaving an indelible mark upon the Eastern conscience and confirming the distinct nature of the Eastern and Western branches of Christendom. In 1274 and 1439, attempts were made to restore unity, but failed due to lack of support.

9. Conclusion

The schism was the culmination of a long period of estrangement and struggle. It was inevitable not least because of the growing Papal claims to supremacy which proved unacceptable to the East, which when allied with political and theological motives on both sides proved to be strong factors driving the churches towards schism.

A useful summary is provided by Ware:

Orthodoxy and Rome each believes itself to have been right and its opponent wrong upon the points of doctrine that arose between them; and so Rome and Orthodoxy since the schism have each claimed to be the true Church. Yet each, while believing in the rightness of its own cause, must look back at the past with sorrow and repentance. Both sides must in honesty acknowledge that they could and should have done more to prevent the schism.⁷

6. Norman, *The Roman Catholic Church: an illustrated history*, p38.

7. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p67.

10. Bibliography

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