

Byzantine Orthodox Christianity

Differences between East and West

Since early Christian times, differences had emerged over Church leadership. Although the Byzantine emperor was not a priest, he controlled Church affairs and appointed the patriarch, or highest Church official in Constantinople. Byzantine Christians rejected the pope's claim to authority over all Christians.

Further differences developed. Unlike priests in Western Europe, the Byzantine clergy kept their right to marry; Greek, not Latin was the language of the Byzantine Church; and the chief Byzantine holy day was Easter, celebrated as the day Jesus rose from the dead. In contrast, Western Christians placed greater emphasis on Christmas, the birthday of Jesus.

During the Middle Ages, the two branches of Christianity drew farther apart. A dispute over the use of icons, or holy images, contributed to the split. Many Byzantine Christians prayed to images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. In the 700s, however, a Byzantine emperor outlawed the veneration of icons, saying it violated God's commandment against worshipping "graven images."

The ban set off violent battles within the empire. From the West, the pope took a hand in the dispute, excommunicating the emperor. Although a later empress eventually restored the use of icons, the conflict left great resentment against the pope. In 1054, other controversies provoked a schism, or permanent split, between the Eastern (Greek) Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches. The pope and the patriarch excommunicated each other. Thereafter, contacts between the two churches were guarded and distant.

1. What were some of the religious differences between the East and West?
2. Why was there a Great Schism?

Geography of Russia

Russia lies on the vast Eurasian plain that reaches from Europe to the borders of China. Although mapmakers use the Ural Mountains to mark the boundary between Europe and Asia, these ancient mountains were long ago worn away to wooded hills. They posed no obstacle to migration.

Three broad zones with different climates and resources helped shape early Russian life. The northern forest supplied lumber for building and fuel. Fur-bearing animals attracted hunters, but poor soil and cold, snowy climate hindered farming. Farther south, a band of fertile land attracted early farmers. This region—modern day Ukraine—was home to Russia's first civilization.

A third region, the southern steppe is an open, treeless grassland. It offered splendid pasture for the herds and the horses of nomadic peoples. With no natural barriers, the steppe was great highway, along which streams of nomads migrated from Asia to Europe. Russia's network of rivers provided transportation for both people and goods. The Dnieper and Volga Rivers became productive trade routes. Major rivers ran from north to south, linking the Russians early on to the advanced Byzantine world.

1. How would you describe Russian geography?
2. How were the Russian linked to the Byzantine Empire?

Growth of Kiev

During Roman times, the Slavs expanded into southern Russia. Like the Germanic peoples who pushed into Western Europe, the Slavs had a simple political organization and were organized into clans. They lived in small villages, farmed, and traded along the rivers that ran between the Baltic and the Black Sea. In the 700s and 800s, the Vikings steered their long ships out of Scandinavia. These expert sailors were as much at home on Russian rivers as on the stormy Atlantic. The Vikings, called Varangians by later Russians, worked their way south along the rivers, trading with and collecting tribute from the Slavs. They also conducted a thriving trade with Constantinople.

Located at the heart of this vital trade network was the city of Kiev. In time, it would become the center of the first Russian state. Within a few generations, the Varangians who had settled among the Slavs were absorbed into the local culture. Viking names like Helga and Waldemar became the Slavic names Olga and Vladimir.

1. How did the Vikings impact Russia?
2. Why was Kiev symbolic?

Byzantine Influences

Early on, trade brought Kiev into the Byzantine orbit. Constantinople later sent Christian missionaries to convert the Slavs. About 863, two Greek monks, Cyril and Methodius, adapted the Greek alphabet so they could translate the Bible into Slavic languages. This Cyrillic alphabet became the written script used in Russia and Ukraine to the present.

In 957, Princess Olga of Kiev converted to Byzantine Christianity. But it was not until the reign of her grandson Vladimir that the new religion spread widely. After his own conversion, Vladimir married the sister of a Byzantine emperor. Soon Greek priests arrived in Kiev to preside over the mass baptisms organized by the prince.

As Byzantine Christianity gained strength in Russia, princes began to see themselves as heirs to many cultural and political aspects of the Byzantine Empire. The Russians acquired a written language, and a class of educated Russian priests emerged. Russians adapted Byzantine religious art, music, and architecture. Byzantine domes capped with colorful, carved “helmets” became the onion domes of Russian churches.

Byzantine Christianity set the pattern for close ties between the Church and state. Russian rulers, like the Byzantine emperor, eventually controlled the Church, making it dependent on them, for support. The Russian Orthodox Church would long remain a pillar of state power.

Kiev enjoyed a Golden Age under Yaroslav the Wise, who ruled from 1019-1054. Like Justinian, he issued a written law code to improve justice. A scholar, he translated Greek works into his language. Yaroslav arranged marriages between his children and some of the royal families of Western Europe. Kiev declined in the 1100s as rival families battled for the throne. Also, Russian trading cities were hurt because Byzantine prosperity faded. As Russian princes squabbled among themselves, Mongol invaders from central Asia struck the final blow.

1. Who were Cyril and Methodius? How did the religion spread into Russia?
2. Describe Kiev’s golden age.