

Guide to the family tree of the churches

The family tree of the churches provides a representation of the different churches in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, India and North Africa and their interrelationships. The purpose of the flyer is to serve as an orientation, it does not claim to be exhaustive.

The five colors of the tree trunk symbolize the five rites that are above all characterized by their different liturgies. The colors of the leaves indicate the affiliation with a family of churches, the size of the individual leaves allow conclusions with respect to the number of religious believers in the respective regions. The grey color on the left hand side of the tree trunk symbolizes the East Syrian rite. The liturgy celebrated by the Assyrian Church (orange) and by both united Catholic Churches (represented in light green) is in accordance with this rite.

The part of the tree trunk that is represented in grey-blue (second from the left) represents the Byzantine rite. All different churches represented in purple in the diagram as well as the Catholic Churches represented in dark green celebrate their liturgy in accordance with the Byzantine rite. The middle part of the tree trunk epitomizes the Latin or Roman-Catholic rite with its liturgy that is only celebrated by the Roman-Catholic and Latin Church. The fourth part of the tree trunk stands for the rites of the Oriental liturgy. The churches which celebrate this liturgy are indicated in purple. The churches that celebrate in accordance with this rite but are related with Rome are marked in turquoise. Two protestant churches that have developed from the Oriental rite are part of the diagram, they are marked in bright blue. The fifth part of the tree trunk that is represented in light brown shows the rites that have come into existence as a consequence of the Reformation. The churches celebrating those rites are represented in dark blue.

The diagram does not provide all the details and cannot provide a comprehensive overview of the facts. For instance, a simplification has been performed by grouping together the different churches that have developed as a consequence of the Reformation in the three leaves represented in dark blue. In reality, each leaf represents several independent church communities. The diagram does not mirror the division of the Assyrian Church. As a matter of fact, there is a branch of the Apostolic Church of the East in Iraq nowadays.

While the individual leaves – with the exception of the summarized presentation of the churches that evolved as a consequence of the Reformation – symbolize independent churches, this is not applicable for the Catholic Church. It is the only church that celebrates the mass in accordance with different rites. Although it would have been more correct to represent the Catholic Church as a leaf in the family tree of churches with different colors, this representation method would have been to the detriment of the presentability and functionality of the diagram.

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A short historical summary as a supplement to the family tree of the churches

After the death and resurrection of Christ, a multitude of Christian groups with different theological orientations developed. However, when Christianity was tolerated and later recognized in different states, especially in the Roman Empire, those states worked towards reaching a unified church on a theological as well as organizational level. Also the ecclesiastical hierarchy expressed a great interest in a unified church. The endeavors to reach a unified church resulted in a great external diversity. The large churches imposed their definition of the right faith, the so-called orthodoxy, and they marginalized all those whose theological opinion deviated from their own convictions. As a result of this, the latter often founded independent churches. The third ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431) reprehended "Nestorianism" that recognized Mary just as mother of Christ and not as mother of God. The "Nestorians" attached importance to a separation of the divinity of Christ from his humanity. On the one hand, the Council resulted in a unification of the theology throughout the Roman Empire. On the other hand, it led to a separation of the churches in Persia that officially accepted "Nestorianism" at the Synod in Beth-Lapat in 484. The separation did not only happen for theological but also for political reasons. In Persia, an independent church developed into the church with the most significant number of faithful believers in the Middle Ages. This church that called itself the Apostolic Church of the East had already spread to Peking in the 7th century. Nowadays, this branch of the church is also referred to as "Assyrian Church", and the number of its adherents has diminished considerably. In 1960 the introduction of the Gregorian calendar led to a split of this church family. Those following the old calendar call themselves the Old Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East. The Indian metropolis of Malabar as well as the whole of India with its base in Thrissur are also part of the Apostolic Church of the East.

In 451, once again a Council took place, this time in Chalcedony. Again, Christological questions were raised. The Council dealt with the relationship of Christ's divinity and his humanity, and it defined that those two natures of Christ were at the same time without confusion but without separation. Also this attempt to bring about a consolidation of an ecclesiastical unity resulted in the development of new churches. The Christians who disagreed with the resolutions of the Council of Chalcedony and who committed themselves to a miaphysite theology ("The one enfleshed nature of the divine Logos.") developed their own ecclesiastical structures that quickly took on a national character. Those churches are grouped together under the terms Oriental-Orthodox or Ancient Oriental Churches. This denomination comprises the Syrian-Orthodox Church, the Coptic-Orthodox Church (from this Church, the Ethiopian-Orthodox and the Eritrean-Orthodox Churches developed), the Armenian-Orthodox, the Armenian-Apostolic or Armenian-Gregorian Churches and the Indian Syrian Orthodox Church. Although all these churches are part of the same family of churches, they are all autocephalous (independent), and most of these churches have a patriarch as their spiritual leader. Only the Indian-Syrian-Orthodox Church is under the command of the patriarch of Antioch. However, since 1958, there has been a religious subgroup, namely the independent Syrian Orthodox Church of the East.

After the Council of Chalcedony different attempts were made to reunify the divided churches. After the Islamic conquests, the Roman state church gave up its attempts to

reunify these churches at the Council of Constantinople in 680/1. Nearly all miaphysite Christians were living under Islamic rule by then. However, another church evolved that did not want to abandon the former theological views and that did not support the direction of development of the Byzantine church. This Chalcedonian Church is the Maronite Church that was initially independent but that is nowadays completely united with Rome. Its theology that was seen as a compromise between the Chalcedonian and the miaphysite doctrine, was initially monothelite (only one will in Christ, not a human and a divine will).

The further political developments fostered the increased alienation between the Byzantine part of the Roman Empire that displayed markedly Greek elements and the heirs of the Western Roman Empire. In the year 1054, there was eventually a break between the Western and the Byzantine churches. In the course of time, churches with a national structure developed in the Byzantine sphere, such as the Russian-Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian-Orthodox Church, the Serbian-Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Church of Georgia and the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, as well as the Orthodox Church of Albania. In the Arabic sphere, the ancient Patriarchates maintained a non-national character but remained independent. These included the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Patriarchate of Alexandria and the Patriarchate of Antioch.

The Council of Florence that took place in the middle of the 15th century was an important attempt to restore the church unity. In the end, this Council turned out to be a failure, although churches such as the Maronite Church and parts of the Chaldean Church had permanently submitted themselves to the Roman authority. However, the Roman-Catholic Church kept on pursuing the aim to unify all Christians under Roman leadership. Hence, individual bishops and monasteries joined the community with Rome. In the course of the centuries, a variety of Catholic Churches developed that all recognize the Pope as their spiritual leader. Each of these churches has its own eventful history and each of them faced moments when individual parts of an Oriental-Orthodox or a Byzantine-Orthodox Church submitted themselves to the Roman authority or when parts of the church separated from Rome. There is a catholic counterpart for nearly each Oriental-Orthodox or Byzantine-Orthodox Church: the Chaldean Church and the Syro-Malabar Church (developed from the Assyrian Church); the Coptic-Catholic Church, the Syrian-Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, the Eritrean Catholic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, the Syro-Malankara Church (all of them have Oriental Orthodox sister churches) and the Maronite Church (the only oriental church that is completely united with Rome); the Ukrainian Catholic Church, the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, the Ruthenian Catholic Church, the Romanian Catholic Church, the Slovakian Catholic Church, the Catholic Exarchate of Greece, the Exarchate of Sofia in Bulgaria and the diocese of Krizevci, former Yugoslavia (all from the Byzantine sphere).

In the 19th century, especially the Protestants and Anglicans did missionary work among the oriental Christians, which resulted in the development of several small Protestant and Anglican Churches in the Orient. In the 20th century, increased numbers of Free Churches and Pentecostals have done missionary work among the oriental Christians and Muslims with a reasonable degree of success.

Introductory literature

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