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15.1 History and Origins of the Greek Orthodox Church

Historically, “Greek” in “Greek Orthodox” can refer to the heritage of the Byzantine Empire. Orthodox Greeks pride themselves on having a church of apostolic origins. The origins in Greece go back to the second missionary trip of the apostle Paul who accompanied by his disciples left Asia minor and set foot on European soil. Being under Roman rule at that time, the Christian religion was “imported” to Greece and Europe. Thus, Paul founded the first Christian communities in Greece leaving local disciples to continue his work [10].

The Great Schism of 1054 between the Greek Orthodox and Western Roman Catholic Church was an important event to mark the further development of Christianity. The separation came about through a gradual process of estrangement that

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spanned almost six centuries. During the 4th Century, Christianity revolved around five primary areas: Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome. The Mediterranean world was turned upside down due to barbarian invasions in the West and the rise Islam in the East. Because of this, the primary focus of Christianity became Constantinople and Rome [12].

The dominant language of the West was Latin, while the dominant language of the East was Greek. Due, in large part, to the language barrier, the two halves of the church began to develop different rites and approaches to religious doctrines. Additionally, when a French bishop was elected as Pope Leo IX, he was intent on reforming the Papacy and the entire church. He claimed he held supreme authority over the entire church, including Constantinople.

After this, Greek churches were forced either to close or to conform to Latin practices. In retaliation, the patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, attacked many of the practices and closed many of the Latin churches in Constantinople. Instructed by Pope Leo IX, the papal legate passed litigation to refuse Michael I the title of “Ecumenical Patriarch” and insist that he recognize the Pope’s claim to be head of all the churches [2].

On Saturday, July 16, 1054, Cardinal Humbert walked into the Cathedral of Hagia and placed a parchment that declared the excommunication of Michael I on the main altar. This is the event that is credited for the complete schism between the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholicism. Two attempts at reunion took place in 1274 (Second Council of Lyons) and 1438–1439 (Council of Florence), but neither was successful [8].

The Great Schism is a tremendous reminder of the need to properly abide by God’s word (2 John 9). The Greek Orthodox church claims to hold God’s word in the highest regard. They teach that one is not to add to what God has said. Man cannot sit where God belongs (2 Thess. 2:1–4). Paul warned the Thessalonians about apostasy. This would culminate with a man trying to sit where only God belongs. As long as humankind tries to rule, there will always be division (1 Cor. 1:10–13). Division proves that a group is no longer abiding in God’s word. Jesus prayed for unity (John 17) which only happens when we are abiding by the same standard [8].

In 1864, before the Greeks arrived in masses to the United States, the first Greek Orthodox Church was established in New Orleans by a few wealthy merchants in the cotton trade. Mass immigration from Greece to the United States began in the late nineteenth century. About 400,000 Greeks had gone through Ellis Island by the 1920s. By the end of World War I, Greek Orthodoxy in America acquired a centralized administrative structure and governing body: the archdiocese. Composed of numerous self-governing ecclesiastical bodies, each geographically and nationally distinct but theologically and sacramentally unified. Each self-governing (autocephalous) body is shepherded by a Synod of bishops.

15.2 Overview of Greek Orthodox Beliefs

There are approximately 300 million members of the Greek Orthodox Church worldwide. It is the second largest Christian church. The church teaches that it is the one, holy, and apostolic church established by Jesus Christ and that its bishops are the successors of Christ's apostles. Orthodox churches, unlike the Catholic Church, have no single Supreme Pontiff or Bishop and hold the belief that Christ is the head of the Church. However, they are each governed by a committee of Bishops, called the Holy Synod, with one central Bishop holding the honorary title of "first among equals."

The Church holds a common doctrine and a usual form of worship, and they see themselves not as separate churches but as administrative units of one single Church. It maintains that it practices the original Christian faith, as passed down by holy tradition. They are notable for their extensive tradition for their veneration of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and the Saints and for their use of the Divine Liturgy on Sundays, which is a standardized worship service dating back to the fourth century A.D. in its current form. The Greek Orthodox Church recognizes seven major sacraments, of which the Eucharist is the principal one, celebrated liturgically. The church teaches that through consecration invoked by a priest, the sacrificial bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. A person's communion with God expressed in love. Where there is no love, God is absent and there is no spiritual life. All are already saved (Christ's death and resurrection), are still being saved (through participation in the church) and will be saved in the future (second coming of Christ).

The Greek Orthodox view the Trinity as, three persons, one in essence and undivided. Christ is understood to be the Son of God, both fully divine and fully human, and the Holy Spirit enables humanity to apprehend God's presence in the world. The Father (God) is eternal and does not proceed from any, the Son is eternal and begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit is eternal and proceeds from the Father. The doctrine regarding the Trinity is summarized in the Nicene Creed [26]. In understanding the Trinity as "one God in three persons", "three persons" is not to be emphasized more than "one God." While the three persons are distinct, they are united in one divine essence. In the Bible, God has revealed Himself as living and present in his people. It is considered the "Word of God" though not considered literal.

According to the Greek Orthodox faith, at some point in the beginnings of human existence, humanity was faced with a choice: to learn the difference between good and evil through observation or through participation. The biblical story of Adam and Eve relates this choice by humankind to participate in evil, accomplished through disobedience to God's command. The result was the diminishment of human nature and its subjection to death and corruption, an event commonly referred to as the "fall of man." When Greek Orthodox Christians refer to fallen nature, they are not saying that human nature has become evil in and of itself. Human nature is still formed in the image of God; humans are still God's creation, and God has never created anything evil, but fallen nature remains open

to evil intents and actions. It is sometimes said that humans are “inclined to sin”; that is, people find some sinful things attractive [13].

The Greek Orthodox Church teaches that through baptism into Christ’s death, and a person’s death unto sin in repentance, with God’s help humanity can also rise with Christ into heaven, healed of the breach of man’s fallen nature and restored to God’s grace. To Greek Orthodox Christians, this process is what is meant by “salvation,” which consists of the Christian life. The Church understands the death and resurrection of Jesus to be real historical events, as described in the gospels of the New Testament- but He, alone among humans, has two natures, one human, one divine, which are indivisible and inseparable from each other through the mystery of the incarnation. Not only this, but He opened the gates of Hades to all the righteous dead of past ages, rescuing them from their fallen human nature and restoring them to a nature of grace with God, bringing them back to life, this time in God’s heavenly kingdom [26]. Therefore, the Greek Orthodox proclaim each year at the time of Easter (Pascha), that Christ “trampled down death by death, and on those in the tombs bestowed life.”

The Church believes that Hell, though often described in metaphor as punishment inflicted by God, is in reality the soul’s rejection of God’s infinite love which is offered freely and abundantly to everyone. The Greek Orthodox believe that after the Final Judgment: All souls will be reunited with their resurrected bodies, all souls will fully experience their spiritual state, and having been perfected, the saints will forever progress toward a deeper and fuller love of God, which equates with eternal happiness [19].

The Greek Orthodox Christian life is a spiritual pilgrimage in which each person, through the imitation of Christ, cultivates the practice of unceasing prayer. It is then through God’s love in the action of the Holy Spirit that each member becomes more holy, more wholly unified with Christ, starting in this life and continuing in the next [4]. In Greek Orthodox services, the earthly members join with the heavenly members to worship God as one community in Christ, in a union that transcends time and space and joins heaven to earth. This unity of the Church is sometimes called the communion of the saints [7]. Therefore, the Church believes that the congregation of the church comprises both the living and the dead. All people currently in heaven are considered to be saints, whether their names are known or not. There are, however, those saints of distinction whom God has revealed as particularly good examples. Numerous saints are celebrated on each day of the year. They are shown profound respect and love but not worshipped, for worship is for God alone. In showing the saints this love and requesting their prayers, the Greek Orthodox manifest their belief that the saints thus assist in the process of salvation for others.

The most highly revered saint is the Virgin Mary (“Mother of God”). The Greek Orthodox believe that Christ, from the moment of his conception, was both fully God and fully human. Mary is thus called the “Theotokos” or “Bogoroditsa” as an affirmation of the divinity of the one to whom she gave birth. It is also believed that her virginity was not compromised in conceiving God-incarnate, that she was not harmed and that she remained forever a virgin. Due to her unique place in

salvation history, Mary is honored above all other saints and especially venerated for the magnificent work that God accomplished through her [26].

Greek Orthodox Christians hold the belief that the Bible is a verbal icon of Christ, as proclaimed by the 7th ecumenical council. They refer to the Bible as holy scripture, meaning writings containing the foundational truths of the Christian faith as revealed by Christ and the Holy Spirit to its divinely inspired human authors. Holy scripture forms the primary and authoritative written witness of holy tradition and is essential as the basis for all Greek Orthodox teaching and belief [25]. The Bible provides the only texts held to be suitable for reading in worship services. Through the many scriptural quotations embedded in the worship service texts themselves, it is often said that the Greek Orthodox pray the Bible as well as read it.

Holy tradition does not change in the Greek Orthodox Church because it encompasses those things that do not change: the nature of the one God in Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the history of God's interactions with his peoples. Holy tradition is firm, even unyielding, but not rigid or legalistic; instead, it lives and breathes within the church. The continuity and stability of worship throughout the centuries is one means by which holy tradition expresses the unity of the whole church throughout time. The church strives to preserve holy tradition "unchanging" that it may express the one unchanging faith for all time to come.

15.3 Beliefs Around End-of-Life Practices

Followers of the Greek Orthodox religion believe in eternal life. Thus, the church strongly emphasizes a positive outcome in death—that the deceased is alive with God. While death is the separation of the soul (the spiritual dimension of each person) from the body (the physical dimension), the physical body will be reunited with the soul at the Last Judgment. Death is considered a special stage of human development and preparation for the resurrection and the last judgement [24].

The Greek Orthodox Church considers death not as a biological event but as a mystery with a sacred, spiritual character and as a great blessing. The church has no position on end-of-life decisions since the task of Christians is to pray and not to decide about life and death [1]. The beliefs of the Church suggested that death is an attainment of the deceased to pass on to eternity and away from the sins on earth. Death is viewed as a sacred event and marks the passing of the deceased's soul either to Heaven, or Hell [23]. Life and death are viewed as being totally "in God's hands" (Job 12:10).

The word "euthanasia" comes from the Greek for "good death," and the Greek Orthodox Church defines good death as "a peaceful death with dignity and without pain." On the contrary, the current international meaning of "active euthanasia" is perceived rather as "mercy killing" and is under no circumstances allowed [1]. It is viewed that we may medically intervene in the body for therapeutic reasons. Any act that favors and precipitates the body's decay is insulting to the soul and therefore is unethical. The decay process should be entirely natural and should never be forced [6].

15.4 Preparations Around the Time of Death

The Greek Orthodox religion is practiced today much as it was practiced hundreds of years ago and is highly ritualistic and symbolic. It is a tradition that a wake will be held in the house of the deceased among relatives and friends. It is believed that when someone dies in a household, the “evil spirit” has entered that house. For that reason, all the windows need to be open for the evil to be “washed out” with fresh air. The deceased’s body must be dressed up with new clothing which has not been washed, to be buried in grace, and all the mirrors in the house, as well as shiny surfaces, are covered with white towels or sheets, hence the bereaved are not diverting their interest into anything else but the reality of the deceased [3, 21].

During the wake, candles are burning by the head of the body, which is placed in a coffin and usually on a table. The candlelight is a means of saying “goodbye” to the person who has died, while the head of the deceased should face the front door of the house, as he/she is ready to leave. A Greek Orthodox priest administers the last anointing with holy oil on the forehead of the deceased.

The wake lasts for twenty-four hours, and during those hours family and friends are wailing, mourning, and expressing their feelings in an intense and demonstrative way. It is believed within the Greek culture that expressive ways of grieving show greater empathy to one’s loss [3, 9, 16]. Announcements are made in the community, prior to the wake, for whoever wants to have a chance of a last “goodbye.”

15.5 Funeral Practices

The coffin is most of the time left open unless the body has deteriorated too much due to an accident or an illness. With an open casket placed in front of the chancel, the first-degree relatives seated on the left side of it, and everybody else sitting or standing and holding a burning candle each, the ceremony begins. By the end of the chants and the priest’s compliments to the family and the deceased, the priest proceeds and kisses the deceased on the forehead. Kissing the dead symbolizes the farewell from this world [9, 16, 23]. After the priest, the family members will do the same, and the rest of the guests will follow.

Afterwards, the first-degree relatives of the person who passed stand (or sit if the grief is unbearable) by the exit of the Church and receive sympathy from the guests as a sign of respect for their presence. It is believed by the relatives that this will contribute to a passable trail of the dead in the Afterlife [21]. When everyone has shown his or her condolences and sympathy, they head back to the deceased’s house where the “coffee of comfort” is offered to everyone. During this time relatives and friends share experiences and memories for their loved one who has recently died. This ritual lasts from an hour to three or four hours, depending on how close the attendees were to the deceased.

Traditionally, a widow must wear black typically for one year, whereas men wear a black “weeper” around their left arm for forty days. If the widow does

not wear black after the death of someone in the family disrespect is shown to the deceased. Additionally, after someone dies, a candle is lit for forty days in that household to remind everyone of the absence and the loss that has been experienced [17].

15.6 Burial

At the church, every person lights a candle as they enter, in memory of the deceased. The coffin is usually open, and an icon is placed on the body or the coffin. At the end of the service, everyone pays respect to the deceased and the icon, by passing the coffin. At the cemetery, the last funeral prayer is said, and the body is buried facing east, because when Christ was born the guiding star was in the East. The family has supplied a small bottle of wine mixed with oil and some wheat or bread, to the priest at the church. When the last prayer is finished, the priest pours the wine and oil mixture over the lowered coffin, making the sign of the cross three times, symbolizing the Holy Trinity and sustenance for the departing soul. The priest sprinkles earth into the grave, followed by family and friends.

In the Greek Orthodox religion, cremation is not permitted because it is believed that we are made from earth and that we shall return to earth. Additionally, it is believed that when Christ returns in the Last Judgement, the physical body will be reunited with the soul. Therefore, the body should be buried rather than cremated.

15.7 Afterlife

Greek Orthodox Christians believe that when a person dies the soul is temporarily separated from the body. Though it may linger for a brief period on earth, it is ultimately escorted either to paradise or the darkness of Hades, following the Temporary Judgment. The Greek Orthodox do not accept the doctrine of Purgatory, which is held by Catholicism. The soul's experience of either of these states is only a "foretaste"—being experienced only by the soul—until the Last and Final Judgment, when the soul and body will be reunited [20]. For this reason, the Church offers a special prayer for the dead on the third day, ninth day, fortieth day, and the one-year anniversary after the death.

The fortieth day is symbolic because it is believed that the soul roams on earth for forty days, as did Christ. The lighting of the candle during church service is symbolic in asking God for forgiveness on behalf of the deceased. Those rituals are commemorations, in which family and friends participate, and which are known as 'Mnemosyna' or memorial "Memory Eternal." After each mass, food is eaten in honor of the deceased's soul.

Special prayers are offered during a 'Mnemosyno' for the parting of the deceased from the world of the living. Furthermore, at those remembrances, boiled wheat is offered to the attendees. The wheat represents reciprocity and solidarity

between the dead and the living. Since ancient times it is believed that this offering will remit the deceased's sins and that it has the meaning of renaissance [21, 27]. There are also several days throughout the year that are set aside for general commemoration of the departed, sometimes including nonbelievers.

15.8 Considerations in the Medical Setting

Learning about traditional customs and rituals among different religions and cultures can provide unique expertise to practitioners such as social workers, psychologists, and health care professionals who work with such populations especially in the fields of Hospice and Palliative Medicine which are highly involved in death and dying. It is of paramount importance that these practitioners are aware of the cultural and religious differences on death and grief, and how those have an impact on the ways people would like to be treated as well as how they provide care.

In the Greek Orthodox religion, God is understood to be the "Divine Physician" and the healer of our souls and bodies, which is facilitated through prayer and participation in the life of the Church. Traditional medical interventions are accepted. Greek Orthodox doctors generally do not withdraw treatment but instead usually withhold or set limits around treatment. Greek Orthodox doctors are less likely to discuss end-of-life decisions with patients and family. Although, acculturation may explain why doctors of the same religion have different practices in various locations [11].

Religion and cultural beliefs affect the decision and how to discuss end-of-life information with the patient's family if at all. About 55% percent of Greek Orthodox identifying physicians discussed the decision to withdrawal care with families in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) setting ($P < 0.001$) [22]. Religious affiliation of the practitioner also affects the median time from ICU admission to the first limitation of care. The median time to overall first limitation of care was on average 3.2 days but varied according to the physician's religious affiliations. Greek Orthodox physicians first initiated or limited end-of-life treatment after a median of 7.6 days [22]. This does align with prior studies that show Greek Orthodox doctors are less likely to have withdrawal from care discussions and when they do tend to be later than physicians of other faiths.

The principle of "double effect" permits acting when an otherwise legitimate act may also cause an effect one would normally avoid, such as alleviating pain even if it unintentionally hastens death. The Greek Orthodox Church adamantly rejects intentional shortening of life by withdrawing therapy and would only allow alleviation of pain if it in no way leads to the patient's death. On the other hand, artificial support is justifiable only when it offers the prospect of continued life. Therefore, termination of ventilator therapy in a brain-dead person is allowed. Organ transplantation is permitted if the donor or his family has agreed knowingly and voluntarily [1]. It is viewed that the doctor is there to protect life (as indicated in the Hippocratic Oath) and the family is there to support the patient [6].

These views and beliefs can affect the ways in which a family meeting or goals of care conversation would be conducted. In Greek Orthodoxy, the patient and family make medical decisions together. At times, the family may request that the patient not be told about their prognosis as to minimize their loved one from “giving up hope.” The desire to sympathize with the dying person and the effort to delay the moment of death express the struggle of human nature against death as the consequence of original sin. The need for the patient to stay alive is sometimes greater for those standing by, even if the patient may not even be conscience anymore of his or her own existence [6]. The attempt to prolong life is viewed as ethically permissible as opposed to hastening death as in euthanasia.

On the other hand, quality of life should be compatible with survival. Advancements in medical technology allow patients to survive under conditions that are not always considered acceptable quality-wise as defined by patients and families. Thus, surviving and living become two different things [6]. It seems at times that technological survival can be worse than death due to the unbearable suffering and loss of dignity that it can bring. These technological advancements may create an environment in which human beings are unable to die in a natural way. Artificial life support is justifiable only when it offers a prospect of life and hope for meaningful recovery for the patient. Just as providers are not entitled to speed up death, the medical team is not to prolong its natural process. When the inevitable moment of death comes, it is believed that it should be humbly accepted and respected [5]. Therefore, timely advanced care planning and early goals of care conversations to help the medical team understand how the patient and family would define quality of life prior to a crisis or the patient losing capacity is critical. That way limitations around artificial life support can be better defined as to avoid situations where medical treatments are being withdrawn which can be viewed by Greek Orthodox families as hastening death.

It is also important to remember that there are various degrees of religiosity in which an individual may identify. Over time, especially in the United States, there may be varying degrees of assimilation toward or away from the Greek Orthodox faith. Therefore, the medical team should not assume that all patients of this faith will feel the same around end-of-life beliefs and practices. Additionally, further studies and analysis are needed to better understand the beliefs of other East Asian Orthodox churches such as the Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Indian, and Ethiopian to name a few. The medical team must remember that as humans we all have unique perspectives on how we would like to receive medical and end-of-life care. It is important that providers take the time to learn each patient's unique social, cultural, religious, and spiritual background to help guide them and their families on what to expect as they near the end of life. The individualized and culturally sensitive approach is what patients and their families will perceive as receiving the highest quality and personalized care.

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