

Orthodoxy vs. the Protestant Reformation: Two Case Studies

By Mark Sidwell

The commonly understood narrative of the Reformation is Protestantism vs. Catholicism. The Protestant reformers, inspired first by Martin Luther, challenged the institutional church, while Catholics in what is variously called the Catholic or Counter-Reformation responded to that challenge to maintain their dominance. The strength of this narrative is that it generally accords with the events of the Reformation. Missing from the story, however, is a whole branch of Christianity in Europe, the Orthodox churches of Eastern Europe. The Orthodox did not encounter Protestantism in the same manner and to the same extent that Catholics did, but neither were they ignorant of the Protestant movement. Two revealing controversies between the Orthodox and the Protestants shed light on Orthodox attitudes toward the Reformation. One involved Russia's Tsar Ivan IV, "the Terrible," and his personal response to Protestantism. The other concerned the seventeenth-century Patriarch of Constantinople Cyril Lucaris and resulted in a more far-reaching response. The events involving these two men demonstrated how the Orthodox viewed the Protestant Reformation and in doing so revealed how Orthodoxy, like Catholicism, rejected the Protestant position.

Tsar Ivan IV (1533-84) has gone down in history as "the Terrible," an approximate translation of *Grozny* ("severe," from the word for "thunder").¹ He was a key figure in the transformation of the office of Grand Prince of Moscow into Tsar and Autocrat of all the Russias. In building what was essentially an absolutist state, Ivan pursued policies of terrorization and control that validated the epithet "Terrible." As both autocrat and professedly devout Orthodox Christian, Tsar Ivan sought to control as well as to defend the Russian Orthodox Church. Ivan's activities led to clashes with the hierarchy of the church, notably metropolitans of Moscow such as Filipp, whose opposition to the tsar's policies led to his arrest and secret murder.² Ivan's autocratic policies and unyielding devotion to Orthodoxy made him unlikely to accept the Protestant Reformation.

Yet surprisingly Ivan the Terrible did allow a sort of disputation over Protestantism at his court. In 1570 a diplomatic delegation from Poland arrived to negotiate peace with Ivan. Among its members

was the chaplain, Jan Rokyta, an elder of the Hussite church known as the Unity of the Brethren (or sometimes Czech Brethren). A former student in Wittenberg, he was a skilled speaker and theologian. Despite the central political purpose of the delegation, Rokyta had earlier expressed his hope that in this diplomatic mission “perhaps it might please God to give to the Russian people ... the knowledge of the Gospel.”³ Those hopes were completely dashed, for Ivan had no intention of allowing Protestant teaching to spread in his domain. However, Ivan somewhat remarkably offered to allow Rokyta to present the Protestant position to the tsar without fear of reprisal, and Ivan would then reply to Rokyta’s doctrine.⁴ According to the surviving documents, the debate consisted of ten questions given to Rokyta, Rokyta’s brief written replies, and Ivan’s much fuller responses.⁵ Jelínek notes that this format meant that the interchange “was neither a disputation nor a dialogue; it was only listening to the monologue of Ivan, absolute monarch.”⁶

Ivan’s responses were clearly blunt and unkind, as in calling the Protestants “dogs” and “pigs,”⁷ but not really out of line with the tone of Catholic and Protestant polemics of the Reformation era. In fact, the tsar displayed great learning in Byzantine and Russian tradition and dogma. One striking feature of Ivan’s response was the abundance of Scripture quotation and allusion. At least one-third or more of Ivan’s work consisted biblical quotations and paraphrases. He clearly had no use for Rokyta or his teaching, however. As Tumins notes, Ivan often used the plural in his address, indicating he was rejecting Protestants in general.⁸ The tsar insisted that in criticizing Luther he was refuting the embodiment of Protestantism, despite the fact that the Brethren were not Lutheran and that Rokyta had expressly rejected Luther as an authority except where his teaching accorded with Scripture.⁹

Doctrinally, Ivan consistently rejected Protestant distinctives and defended points of Orthodoxy that Protestants questioned. On the central Protestant teaching of justification by faith alone, the tsar contended for “the salvation of men through faith and deeds,” not faith alone. He rejected what he described as their teaching “that through grace sins are being absolved for nothing, but not through deeds connected with grace.”¹⁰ He defended the mediation of Mary and the saints as well as the use of relics and especially the veneration of icons.¹¹ Although he upheld the authority of tradition, Ivan tried to root some Orthodox practices in Scripture, perhaps responding to the Protestant emphasis on the authority of the Bible alone. Ivan argued for the celibacy of clergy tracing back to the New Testament, dismissing references to the families of Peter and Philip as preceding their conversion, and also contending that Christ established monasticism based on Christ’s call to forsake family and to practice self-denial (Matt. 10:37-38; 16:24; Luke 14:26-27, 33).¹²

From beginning to end, Ivan the Terrible rejected not only the teaching of Protestants but also Protestants themselves. In his introduction he said to Rokyta that “you are not a Christian, for you distort the doctrines of Christ, reject the doctrine of the holy apostles and the holy fathers.”¹³ He said at the close, “You are not only a heretic, but also servant of the Antichrist’s of the Devil’s counsel.... In the future you shall not preach your teaching in our country.”¹⁴ As Jelínek concludes, “The political result of the meeting in Moscow was not great, but viewed in its religious aspect, the affair was an absolute fiasco.”¹⁵

Ivan’s devotion to Orthodoxy undoubtedly spurred his harsh reaction to Protestant teaching, but as Andrey Ivanov points out, the anti-Protestant polemic meshed well with the internal and external political policies of the tsar.¹⁶ Russian church leaders feared a repetition of the pattern in places such as Poland where the nobility had led in the acceptance of Protestantism, and they saw Ivan as a protection against any such tendency among the Russian boyars. Furthermore, the tsar was deeply involved in his Livonian Wars where Protestant presence in regions near the Baltic made up part of the opposition to Russian expansion, and he complained that Livonian Protestants resisted his “legitimate” rule.¹⁷ From both political and religious motives, Ivan the Terrible rejected the Protestant Reformation.

One could discount Tsar Ivan’s opposition as personal rather than representative of the Orthodox churches. A second controversy, however, dealt more directly with an official stance by the Orthodox against Protestantism. This controversy centered on the career and views of Cyril Lucaris, patriarch of Constantinople (1621-38).¹⁸ Born in 1572 in Crete when that island was under the rule of Venice, Constantine Lucaris (as he was named before his consecration as a priest) attended the University of Padua. Entering orders as an Orthodox priest, the newly christened Cyril undertook a mission to Poland, where the monarchy was seeking to bring Protestants and Orthodox under Catholic control. Details of Cyril’s work in Poland are scant, but the Poles executed his companion in this mission, and he apparently developed at this time a deep-seated opposition to the Catholic Church.

After these events Cyril Lucaris began to rise in the Orthodox hierarchy. A cousin to the patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril became abbot of a monastery in Egypt and then succeeded to the patriarchate of Alexandria (1601-20). In 1620 he was elevated to the office of patriarch of Constantinople, titular head of all Orthodox Christians. His patriarchate was troubled. Opposed by factions within the Greek Orthodox Church and by European Catholic powers seeking influence in the Turkish empire, Cyril was exiled twice. Eventually,

his opponents leveled a charge of treason against the patriarch, and he was summarily executed on the sultan's orders in 1638.

One of the primary reasons for this opposition was Cyril's apparent turn toward Protestantism and his unquestioned cultivation of Protestant European diplomats. Although some writers have theorized that Cyril was first exposed to Protestantism during his abortive mission to Poland, he left clear evidence of such sympathy only as early as his time in Alexandria. Through contact with Dutch diplomats, he began to study Protestant works. In a letter dated 1618, he wrote, "I then invoked earnestly the assistance of the Holy Ghost, and for three years compared the doctrines of the Greek and Latin Churches with that of the Reformed.... Leaving the Fathers I took for my only guide the Scriptures and the Analogy of Faith. At length, having been convinced, through the grace of God, that the cause of the Reformers was more correct and more in accord with the doctrine of Christ, I embraced it."¹⁹

As patriarch of Constantinople Cyril launched a series of reforms, some reflecting possible Protestant influence on his thought and all of which were opposed by certain factions of the Greek Orthodox Church. He authorized the translation and publication of the Bible into contemporary Greek. To promote education, as well as his reforms, he arranged through the help of the English to establish a printing press in Constantinople, but it was destroyed through the intervention of European Catholic ambassadors with the Turkish authorities. In his most controversial action, the patriarch published a confession of faith. In this confession, he affirmed not simply Protestant teachings but explicitly Calvinistic ones. Among other doctrines, he asserted the supreme authority of Scripture, justification by faith alone, and predestination as well as rejecting the ideas of transubstantiation and purgatory.²⁰

The work of Cyril Lucaris and his confession in particular stirred controversies that have yet to be settled. Because the confession of faith was unquestionably Protestant, interpreters have debated how the patriarch came to write it or whether he wrote it all. One theory is that the confession was a forgery, written either by Protestants trying to exploit Cyril's position or by Jesuits trying to discredit a man they saw as a roadblock.²¹ George Michaelides summarizes the arguments used to contend that Cyril did not write it, such as Cyril's lack of knowledge of Latin, the unlikelihood that he would have been so popular with the laity had he held these Protestant views, and correspondence that allegedly shows Cyril rejected Protestant opinions. He concludes that authorship of the confession is a puzzle.²²

Although probably the majority of interpreters believe Cyril wrote the confession, or at least approved its publication under his

authority, the question remains open of what his motives were. For some, notably his modern biographer George Hadjiantoniou, Cyril Lucaris was a sincere Protestant attempting against great opposition to carry forward his reforming work. Or it is possible to view the patriarch as a skilled politician. Needing a counterweight to Catholic influence in the Turkish capital represented by the embassies of France and Austria, he cultivated the Protestant powers of England and the Netherlands by professing some sympathy with their religious views. Most interpreters fall somewhere between these poles, granting Cyril's sincerity but acknowledging the political motives that also drove him.²³

In terms of Reformation history, the key is not the sincerity of the patriarch's motives but the Orthodox reaction to his teachings. The half-century after his death saw a series of synodical condemnations climaxing with the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 that specifically repudiated his confession.²⁴ This synod responded directly to Cyril's teaching, but it did not condemn him by name, to protect the possibility that his name had been misused by others. However, the Confession of Dositheus that the synod issued contained eighteen decrees that corresponded to the eighteen chapters of Cyril's confession. Furthermore, the Confession of Dositheus included four "Questions" as appendices that defended the use of icons and the adoration of saints and upheld the Orthodox view of Scripture (i.e., that the Bible was not to be translated, was not intended for the unlearned, etc.).²⁵ In brief, Cyril Lucaris's confession "provoked Orthodoxy's first historic confessional reaction to the Reformation."²⁶ The Confession of Dositheus provided an explicit repudiation of Cyril and in doing so repudiated the Protestant Reformation. As Vischer puts it, in ecumenical relations between Orthodoxy and Protestantism, "The 'No' said to Kyrill [Cyril] has, so to speak, become doctrinally 'fixed.'"²⁷

It is important to temper this conclusion, however. The Synod of Jerusalem was not an ecumenical council, and the Orthodox do not view the Confession of Dositheus as universally binding. In fact, it is possible to see Cyril and the synod as contending parties, neither of which was wholly right. Cooper notes that "it is not clear whether the defence of Cyril Lucaris was the defence of true Orthodoxy or the victory of a Latinising-Conservative Orthodox coalition."²⁸ Calian likewise argues that the position of Orthodoxy is somewhere between Cyril and the Synod of Jerusalem.²⁹ Still, Cyril Lucaris's position in Orthodox history is unique. Runciman notes that Cyril's "was the only attempt to bring the Orthodox Church into line with the livelier Churches of the West."³⁰ As the "Protestant Patriarch," as Hadjiantoniou calls him, Cyril was virtually a stand-alone figure, the only serious attempt to introduce a Protestant leaven into Orthodoxy

and the unintentional cause of a reaction that set the Orthodox firmly in opposition to Protestantism.

Tsar Ivan's debate with Jan Rokyta and the patriarchate of Cyril Lucaris represented two of the more prominent encounters between Orthodoxy and Protestantism in the Reformation era. These large conflicts support the generalization that the Orthodox saw little more value in Protestantism than Catholics did, despite the historic antipathy between Catholics and Orthodox.³¹ It is a truism to say that the East experienced no Reformation. As these incidents indicate, the East really did not want one.

¹ Probably the best biography of the tsar is Isabel de Madariaga, *Ivan the Terrible: First Tsar of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), a thorough and magisterial work. Also useful on this particular topic is Robert Payne and Nikita Romanoff, *Ivan the Terrible* (New York: Crowell, 1975).

² See George P. Fedotov, *St. Filipp, Metropolitan of Moscow: Encounter with Ivan the Terrible*, trans. Richard Haugh and Nickolas Lupinin (Belmont, MA: Norland, 1978).

³ Emil Jelínek, "Un membre de l'Unité des Frères reçu par le Tsar: Trad du Polonais," *Communio viatorum* 21 (1978): 64, "peut-être il plairait à Dieu d'accorder au peuple russe ... la connaissance de l'Évangile."

⁴ The surviving documents recounting the disputation in both the original languages and English translations are found in Valerie A. Tumins, ed., *Tsar Ivan IV's Reply to Jan Rokyta*, Slavistic Printings and Reprintings 84 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971). Brief accounts of the disputation are found in de Madariaga, 251-53, and Payne, 293-97. Jelínek also reviews the history of the text of the original disputation.

⁵ Tumins, 45, notes that Rokyta complained some of his questions were not answered, so Rokyta's list of ten questions may be incomplete.

⁶ Jelínek, 64, "ce n'était ni une disputation, ni un dialogue; il ne s'agissait que d'écouter le monologue d'Ivan, monarque absolu."

⁷ Tumins, 295.

⁸ Tumins, 33.

⁹ Tumins, 297, 312-13, 481.

¹⁰ Tumins, 303, 309.

¹¹ Tumins, 307, 323-29.

¹² Tumins, 330, 333.

¹³ Tumins, 297.

¹⁴ Tumins, 334.

¹⁵ Jelínek, 68, "Le résultat politique de la rencontre de Moscou ne fut pas grand, mais envisagée dans son aspect religieux, l'affaire finit par un fiasco absolu."

¹⁶ Andrey Ivanov, "Reformation and the Muscovite Czar: Anti-Protestant Polemic in the Writings of Ivan the Terrible," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009): 1109-29. Tumins likewise mentions that Ivan "did not want religious feuds to mar his plan" for expansion, 46.

¹⁷ Ivanov, 1122-23.

¹⁸ Probably the best biography in English is George A. Hadjiantoniou, *Protestant Patriarch: The Life of Cyril Lucaris* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961), although as the title indicates he follows the pro-Protestant interpretation of Cyril's career. Also very helpful is chapter 6, "The Church and the Churches: The Calvinist Patriarch," in Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity: A Study of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the Eve of the Turkish Conquest to the Greek War of Independence* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 259-88.

¹⁹ Quoted in Hadjiantoniou, 43.

²⁰ For the text of the confession, see Hadjiantoniou, 141-45.

²¹ Writers as early as Cotton Mather reported that stories went about that Cyril's work was a forgery by Protestants over Cyril's name. George Huntston Williams, "New England Puritan Interest in the Christian East," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 15 (1975): 275-76.

²² George Peter Michaelides, "The Greek Orthodox Position on the Confession of Cyril Lucaris," *Church History* 12 (1943): 118-29. In an extended footnote on this point, Hugh Trevor-Roper reviews the documents used in debates over Cyril's "real" views and authorship of the confession and demonstrates how hard it is to reconcile them. Whatever position an interpreter chooses, Trevor-Roper argues, that interpreter must choose to accept some documents and to ignore or downplay others. Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Church of England and the Greek Church in the Time of Charles I," 214-15, in *Religious Motivation, Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian: Papers Read at the Sixteenth Summer Meeting and the Seventeenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978).

²³ See, e.g., Lukas Vischer, "The Legacy of Kyrill Loukaris: A Contribution to the Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue," *Mid-Stream* 25 (1986): 169.

²⁴ See Michaelides, 119.

²⁵ On the work and documents of the synod and its confession, see J.N.W.B. Robertson, ed. and trans. *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem* (1899; rpt., Charleston, SC: BiblioLife, n.d.). The text of the Confession of Dositheus is found on 110-62.

²⁶ Carnegie Samuel Calian, "Cyril Lucaris: The Patriarch Who Failed," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 10 (1973): 320.

²⁷ Vischer, 174. Likewise Michaelides observes, "On one point all Orthodox theologians agree. The Confession poisoned the relations between Orthodox and Protestants. It forced the Eastern Church to define its position with reference to that of Protestantism and to declare itself openly against it." (Michaelides, 129.)

²⁸ David J. C. Cooper, "Eastern Churches and the Reformation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31 (1978): 429.

²⁹ Calian, 331.

³⁰ Runciman, 288.

³¹ In the Russian debate, Rokyta tried to appeal to Orthodoxy's opposition to Latin Catholicism as a point of contact for Protestants (Tumins, 481, 485), but Ivan IV brushed these appeals aside: "You have written about the Latin church; I also do not wish to speak much about it, for just as Rome is enticement, so are you darkness" (Tumins, 315). For Ivan, the enemy of his enemy was not necessarily his friend.

Protestantism vs. Orthodoxy

A Comparison of the Confessions of Cyril Lucar and Dositheus

<u><i>Confession of Cyril Lucar</i></u>	<u><i>Confession of Dositheus</i></u>
“The Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father by the Son” (Chap. 1)	“The Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father” (Decree 1)
“We believe the authority of the Holy Scripture to be above the authority of the Church.” (Chap. 2)	“The witness also of the Catholic Church is, we believe, not of inferior authority to that of the Divine Scriptures. For one and the same Holy Spirit being the author of both, it is quite the same to be taught by the Scriptures and by the Catholic Church. Moreover, ... the Catholic Church, as never having spoken, or speaking from herself, but from the Spirit of God ... it is impossible for her to in any wise err ... but like the Divine Scriptures, is infallible, and has perpetual authority.” (Decree 2)
“We believe that the most merciful God has predestined His elect unto glory before the beginning of the world, without any respect of their works and that there was no other impulsive cause to this election, but only the good will and mercy of God.” (Chap. 3)	“But to say, as the most wicked heretics do and as is contained in the Chapter [of Cyril’s Confession] to which this answers—that God, in predestinating, or condemning, did not consider in any way the works of those predestinated, or condemned, we know to be profane and impious.” (Decree 3)
“We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ sits on the right hand of His Father and there He makes intercession for us, executing alone the office of a true and lawful high priest and mediator” (Chap. 8)	“We believe our Lord Jesus Christ to be the only mediator... Notwithstanding, in [our] prayers and supplications unto Him, we say the Saints are intercessors, and, above all, the undefiled Mother of the very God the Word; likewise, the holy Angels—whom we know to be set over us—the Apostles, Prophets, Martyrs, Pure Ones, and all whom He hath glorified as having served Him faithfully. We also count with those the Bishops and Priests, as standing about the Altar of God, and righteous men eminent for virtue.” (Decree 8) “Since The Saints are and are acknowledged to be intercessors by the Catholic Church, as has been said in the Eighth Decree, it is time to say that we honor them as friends of God, and as praying for us to the God of all.” (Question 4)

<p>“We believe that without faith no man can be saved. And we call faith that which justifies in Christ Jesus, which the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ procured, the Gospel published, and without which no man can please God.” (Chap. 9)</p>	<p>“We believe that no one can be saved without faith. By faith we mean the right notion that is in us concerning God and divine things, which, working by love, that is to say, by [keeping] the Divine commandments, justifies us with Christ; and without this [faith] it is impossible to please God.” (Decree 9)</p>
<p>“For it is true and certain that the Church on earth may err, choosing falsehood instead of truth, from which error the light and doctrine of the Holy Spirit alone frees us.” (Chap. 12)</p>	<p>“The Church is taught indeed by the Life-giving Spirit, but through the medium of the holy Fathers and Doctors (whose rule is acknowledged to be the Holy and Ecumenical Synods; for we shall not cease to say this ten thousand times); and, therefore ... it is impossible for the Catholic Church to err, or at all be deceived, or ever to choose falsehood instead of truth. For the All-holy Spirit continually operating through the holy Fathers and Leaders faithfully ministering, delivers the Church from error of every kind.” (Decree 12)</p>
<p>“We believe that man is justified by faith and not by works. But when we say by faith, we understand the correlative or object of faith, which is the righteousness of Christ, which, as if by hand, faith apprehends and applies unto us for our salvation.” (Chap. 13)</p>	<p>“We believe a man to be not simply justified through faith alone, but through faith which works through love, that is to say, through faith and works. But [the idea] that faith can fulfill the function of a hand that lays hold on the righteousness which is in Christ, and can then apply it unto us for salvation, we know to be far from all Orthodoxy.” (Decree 13)</p>
<p>“This is the pure and lawful institution of this wonderful Sacrament, in the administration of which we profess the true and certain presence of our Lord Jesus Christ; that presence, however, which faith offers to us, not that which the devised doctrine of transubstantiation teaches. For we believe that the faithful eat the body of Christ in the Supper of the Lord, not by breaking it with the teeth of the body, but by perceiving it with the sense and feeling of the soul.” (Chap. 17)</p>	<p>“Further [we believe] that after the consecration of the bread and of the wine, there no longer remains the substance of the bread and of the wine, but the Body Itself and the Blood of the Lord, under the species and form of bread and wine; that is to say, under the accidents of the bread.</p> <p>Further, that the all-pure Body Itself, and Blood of the Lord is imparted, and enters into the mouths and stomachs of the communicants, whether pious or impious....</p> <p>Further, that the Body and Blood of the Lord are severed and divided by the hands and teeth, though in accident only, that is, in the accidents of the bread and of the wine, under which they are visible and tangible. (Decree 17)</p>

<p>“We believe that the souls of the dead are either in blessedness or in damnation, according as every one has done, for as soon as they move out of the body they pass either to Christ or into hell.... By which it is evident that the fiction of Purgatory is not to be admitted.” (Chap. 18)</p>	<p>The souls of the departed in Hades “are aware of their future release from there, and are delivered by the Supreme Goodness, through the prayers of the Priests, and the good works which the relatives of each do for their Departed; especially the unbloody Sacrifice benefiting the most; which each offers particularly for his relatives that have fallen asleep, and which the Catholic and Apostolic Church offers daily for all alike.” (Decree 18)</p>
<p>(Cyril Lucar published a translation of the Bible in modern Greek.)</p>	<p>“Should the Divine Scriptures be read in the vulgar tongue [common language] by all Christians? “No.... they should not be read by all, but only by those who with fitting research have inquired into the deep things of the Spirit, and who know in what manner the Divine Scriptures ought to be searched, and taught, and finally read.... For it is the same thing to prohibit undisciplined persons from reading all the Sacred Scriptures, as to require infants to abstain from strong meats.” (Question 1) “Are the Scriptures plain to all Christians that read them? “It is evident ... that the Scriptures are very profound, and their sense lofty; and that they need learned and divine men to search out their true meaning, and a sense that is right, and agreeable to all Scripture, and to its author the Holy Spirit.” (Question 2)</p>

Quotations from <http://www.crivoice.org/creedcyril.html> (accessed 2/22/11) and <http://www.crivoice.org/creeddositheus.html> (accessed 2/22/11)

Original Source: *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem*, translated and edited by J. Robertson (1899).