

Cyril Lucaris (1572-1638): The "Calvinist" Patriarch

Calvinism advanced into territories beyond the borders of Western Europe. During the early years of the 17th century, it briefly gained a hearing even in the Eastern Orthodox Church. A few orthodox leaders saw Calvinism not only as an authentic reformatory impulse but also as an ally against the aggressive counter-reformation of Rome. The principle representative in the Orthodox Church was Cyril Lucaris, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. He was an educator, theologian and statesman, who became known as the "Calvinist" Patriarch. This remarkable, courageous man, with deep and genuine humility, was a brilliant scholar who received an education which few in his time attained.

Cyril Lucaris' Life

Born in Candia, Crete, while the island was under Venetian rule, he was reared in the Greek Orthodox Church. In his youth, he travelled widely through Europe and studied in Venice and Padua, which had one of the oldest and best-known universities in Europe. The university was at the height of its glory when he enrolled. He graduated at the age of twenty-three. He also studied at Geneva, where he came under the influence of the Reformed faith as represented by John Calvin, and developed a strong antipathy toward Roman Catholicism.

In 1596, the Patriarch of Alexandria, his cousin Melitos Pegas, sent Lucaris to Poland as a special envoy to lead the Orthodox opposition to the union with Rome, which was accepted by the Polish Orthodox bishops at the Council of Brest. This Council agreed that the Polish church should submit to the authority of the Pope, retaining, however, the Eastern form of the liturgy, the Julian calendar, baptism by immersion, and the marriage of the priesthood.

For six years, Lucaris served as rector of the Orthodox academy in Vilnius (now in Lithuania). In 1601, at the age of twenty-nine, the church in Alexandria elected him to be the successor of Melitos Pegas. In 1620, he was elected Patriarch of Constantinople. In every one of his assignments, he worked hard for the moral and spiritual improvement of the Orthodox Church.

The Calvinist Patriarch

Through his friendship with the Dutch ambassador in Constantinople, Cornelis Van Haga, he began leaning more toward Calvinism. He asked the ambassador to provide some books written by Dutch theologians. This request was promptly forwarded to Holland. Shortly after, Lucaris received his first set of Reformed theology. To further the cause of the Reformation within the Orthodox Church, he sent young Greek theologians to universities in Holland, England and Switzerland. Reformed pastor and theologian, Rev. Antoine Leger, was the chaplain at the Dutch Embassy. He was well-versed in Hebrew and Greek and became a close friend of Lucaris.

Lucaris corresponded with many foreign theologians. For example, he had contact with J. Uytenbogaert (1557-1644), the Dutch Remonstrant theologian, who was critical of Calvin's position on predestination. In a letter to Uytenbogaert, Lucaris admitted the existence of certain erroneous practices within the Greek Church, "which," he says, "we cannot remove on account of great difficulties." But, he adds, "in contrast to the Roman [Catholic Church], the Greek Church does not regard these practices, which have not been expressly ordained by

God, as necessary unto salvation; on the contrary she holds that they are liable to error. Inasmuch as only that which God himself has ordained as infallible, all such practices must be submitted to the scrutiny of the Holy Scriptures and of the Holy Spirit."

Lucaris' strong leanings toward Calvinism became widely known. This can be seen in a letter of the English ambassador, Sir Thomas Roe, to Archbishop Abbot: "As for the Patriarch himself, I do not doubt that in opinion of religion he is, as we term him, a pure Calvinist, and so the Jesuits....do brand him." The French King Louis XIII, wrote to his ambassador: "I have already written to demand that you endeavour to have the Patriarch of Constantinople deposed from his office, because he is a Huguenot and tainted with heresy."

In Constantinople Lucaris worked for educational reform and for a close association with Reformed churches, especially the Church of England. His correspondence with the Archbishop of Canterbury is extremely interesting. It was in this time that Mitrophanes Kritopolous – later to become Patriarch of Alexandria (1636-1639) – was sent to England to study. In 1627, as a token of gratitude, Lucaris gave the important New Testament manuscript *Codex Alexandrine* to King Charles I of England. It is now one of the treasures of the British Museum.

The Confession of Faith

In 1629 Lucaris published his famous Confession of Orthodox Faith in Geneva. As far as possible it accommodated the language and Creeds of the Orthodox Church. It appeared in the same year in two Latin editions, four French, one German and one English. The publication of the *Confession* shocked many leaders in the Orthodox Church and stirred up a storm of controversy. In eighteen articles followed by four questions and their answers, Lucaris professed virtually all the major doctrines of Calvinism: predestination, justification by faith alone, acceptance of only two sacraments, rejection of icons, rejection of the infallibility of the Church, etc. Lucaris frankly embraced the doctrine of predestination. He asserted: "We believe that the most merciful God hath predestinated His elect unto glory before the beginning of the world, without any respect unto their works and that there was no other impulsive cause to this election, but only the good will and mercy of God." But Lucaris stressed the importance of works not as the basis for the salvation of man but as proof and fruit thereof, "in testimony to faith for the establishing of our calling."

The Orthodox Church taught that Scripture and tradition work together to preserve, shape and transmit the apostolic message. But Lucaris, on the other hand, confessed: "We believe...the testimony of Scripture to be far superior to that of the Church. For it is not the same to be instructed by the Holy Spirit as by men. Man may sin or be deceived through ignorance. The Holy Scriptures neither deceive nor are deceived, nor are they liable to err, but are infallible and of everlasting authority." And Lucaris rejected the Apocrypha as not having the same authority from the Holy Spirit.

The Orthodox Church did not accept Lucaris' *Confession* as a valid expression of the faith. In 1642, the Council of Constantinople examined and condemned both the Confession and its author. It declared: "For this reason, we, the Holy Synod, unanimously reject completely these articles as well as the questions and banish them from our midst, as replete with heresies and wholly alien to our orthodox religion, and we pronounce their author a stranger to our faith, proclaiming to all that he lies against us when he claims that his own faith is the Eastern

Confession of the Christian faith of the Greeks." In 1672, the Council of Jerusalem solemnly cursed the *Confession*. It also reaffirmed its position on the Apocrypha, stating that the books in the Apocrypha are "genuine parts of Scripture." The Jerusalem Synod was not merely an Orthodox rejection of the "Reformed doctrinal innovations" proposed by Lucaris, it also attempted to articulate the dogmatic heritage of Orthodoxy in face of the disputes between Catholics and Protestants. It confirmed the teaching role of the Orthodox Church and therefore of tradition against the Protestant Sola Scriptura. It also restated its belief in the role of good works in justification. This repudiation of Lucaris' views represents the virtual extinction of Calvinism in Eastern Christianity.

The Opposition

Lucaris had few followers who admired his attempt to bring about Reformation of the Orthodox Church. Many hated him with a passion. The Roman Catholic Jesuits were his bitterest enemies. They viewed him as their greatest obstacle in their attempt to bring about the submission of the Orthodox Church to the Pope. They were aided by French ambassadors, who also tried their utmost to unite the Eastern Church with the West. But Lucaris refused to cooperate. He was supported in his stance by the Dutch and English ambassadors. Suspected of heresies and political intrigues and at the instigation of his Orthodox opponents he was deposed six times as Patriarch of Constantinople.

Lucaris' Calvinist view of authority and approach to theology clashed with the Orthodox Church's beliefs. This was the crux of his conflict with his Church. Obviously, in a short article I can only highlight a few important differences between Calvinism and the Orthodox Church. For the Orthodox Church, Calvinism is too analytical, too preoccupied with theological definitions and explanations. Orthodox Christianity has little confidence in human reason when it speaks about God. It does not expect clarification, nor teaching but adoration. Meditation and contemplation are the main paths to the knowledge of God. And the Orthodox Church has a different view of the atoning work of Christ. Though humanity suffers the effects of the fall of Adam into sin, it does not share in or inherit his guilt. No one can be guilty of another person's sin. Christ is the victor over sin, death, and the devil. He defeats those enemies and frees humanity from their bondage. Furthermore, in Orthodox Christianity the doctrine of justification does not have such a crucial place as in the churches of the Reformation. Salvation is seen as an ongoing process.

Martyrdom

Lucaris' life had a tragic ending. He became the victim of political intrigue. When the Ottoman Sultan Murad IV, who had won himself the title of "the Nero of Turkey", was about to set out for the Persian war, Lucaris was accused of plotting to stir up the Russian Cossacks. The Sultan was told that during his campaign against the Persians, Lucaris' presence in Constantinople was dangerous at a time the army was away. It was suggested he might entice the Greek population to revolt. And to avoid trouble during his absence, the Sultan had Lucaris strangled on June 27, 1638 aboard a ship in the Bosphorus. His body was thrown into the sea, but it was recovered and buried at a distance from the capital by his friends, and only brought back to Constantinople after many years.

Conclusion

Was Lucaris' reforming work futile? His work left little impression on the minds of his people. If we were to judge his work by the number of committed followers, then we might say that despite his courageous efforts to reform his Church, he had little success. Calvinism was unable to convince any considerable number of Orthodox believers. The result of his ministry testifies that Lucaris cannot be called a Reformer in the strict sense of the word. He was not ministering in an environment receptive to doctrinal "innovations". His reign as Patriarch also illustrates the impact of Catholic-Protestant rivalries on the Orthodox believers who lived under the oppressive Ottoman-Muslim rule.

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