

IO  
Holy Tradition:  
The Source of the Orthodox Faith

Guard the deposit.

*I Timothy vi, 20*

Tradition is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

*Vladimir Lossky*

THE INNER MEANING OF TRADITION

Orthodox history is marked outwardly by a series of sudden breaks: the capture of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem by Arab Muslims; the burning of Kiev by the Mongols; the two sacks of Constantinople; the October Revolution in Russia. Yet these events, while they have transformed the external appearance of the Orthodox world, have never broken the inward continuity of the Orthodox Church. The thing that first strikes a stranger on encountering Orthodoxy is usually its air of antiquity, its apparent changelessness. Orthodox still baptize by threefold immersion, as in the primitive Church; they still bring babies and small children to receive Holy Communion; in the Liturgy the deacon still cries out: 'The doors! The doors!' – recalling the early days when the church's entrance was jealously guarded, and none but members of the Christian family could attend the family worship; the Creed is still recited without any additions.

These are but a few outward examples of something which pervades every aspect of Orthodox life. When Orthodox are asked at contemporary inter-Church gatherings to sum up what they see as the

distinctive characteristic of their Church, they often point precisely to its changelessness, its determination to remain loyal to the past, its sense of *living continuity* with the Church of ancient times. At the start of the eighteenth century, in words that recall the language of the Ecumenical Councils, the Eastern Patriarchs said exactly the same to the Non-Jurors:

We preserve the Doctrine of the Lord uncorrupted, and firmly adhere to the Faith He delivered to us, and keep it free from blemish and diminution, as a Royal Treasure, and a monument of great price, *neither adding any thing, nor taking any thing from it.*\*

This idea of living continuity is summed up for the Orthodox in the one word *Tradition*. 'We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set,' wrote John of Damascus, 'but *we keep the Tradition, just as we received it.*'†

Orthodox are always talking about Tradition. What do they mean by the word? A tradition is commonly understood to signify an opinion, belief or custom handed down from ancestors to posterity. Christian Tradition, in that case, is the faith and practice which Jesus Christ imparted to the Apostles, and which since the Apostles' time has been handed down from generation to generation in the Church.‡ But to an Orthodox Christian, Tradition means something more concrete and specific than this. It means the books of the Bible; it means the Creed; it means the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils and the writings of the Fathers; it means the Canons, the Service Books, the Holy Icons – in fact, the whole system of doctrine, Church government, worship, spirituality and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages. Orthodox Christians of today see themselves as heirs and guardians to a rich inheritance received from the past, and they believe that it is their duty to transmit this inheritance unimpaired to the future.

\* Letter of 1718, in G. Williams, *The Orthodox Church of the East in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 17.

† *On Icons*, 11, 12 (P.G. xciv, 1297 B).

‡ Compare Paul in 1 Corinthians xv, 3.

Note that the Bible forms a part of Tradition. Sometimes Tradition is defined as the oral teaching of Christ, not recorded in writing by His immediate disciples. Not only non-Orthodox but many Orthodox writers have adopted this way of speaking, treating Scripture and Tradition as two different things, two distinct sources of the Christian faith. But in reality there is only one source, since Scripture exists *within* Tradition. To separate and contrast the two is to impoverish the idea of both alike.

Orthodox, while reverencing this inheritance from the past, are also well aware that not everything received from the past is of equal value. Among the various elements of Tradition, a unique pre-eminence belongs to the Bible, to the Creed, to the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils: these things the Orthodox accept as something absolute and unchanging, something which cannot be cancelled or revised. The other parts of Tradition do not have quite the same authority. The decrees of Jassy or Jerusalem do not stand on the same level as the Nicene Creed, nor do the writings of an Athanasius, or a Symeon the New Theologian, occupy the same position as the Gospel of St John.

Not everything received from the past is of equal value, nor is everything received from the past necessarily true. As one of the bishops remarked at the Council of Carthage in 257: 'The Lord said, I am truth. He did not say, I am custom.'\* There is a difference between 'Tradition' and 'traditions': many traditions which the past has handed down are human and accidental – pious opinions (or worse), but not a true part of the one Tradition, the fundamental Christian message.

It is absolutely essential to question the past. In Byzantine and post-Byzantine times, Orthodox have often been far too uncritical in their attitude to the past, and the result has been stagnation. Today this uncritical attitude can no longer be maintained. Higher standards of scholarship, increasing contacts with western Christians, the inroads of secularism and atheism, have forced Orthodox in the last hundred years to look more closely at their inheritance and to distinguish more carefully between Tradition and traditions. The task of discrimination

\* *The Opinions of the Bishops on the Baptizing of Heretics*, 30.

is never easy. It is necessary to avoid alike the error of the Old Believers and the error of the 'Living Church': the one party fell into an extreme conservatism which suffered no change whatever in traditions, the other into spiritual compromises which undermined Tradition. Yet despite certain manifest handicaps, the Orthodox of today are perhaps in a better position to discriminate aright than their predecessors have been for many centuries; and often it is precisely their contact with the west which is helping them to see more and more clearly what is indispensable in their own inheritance.

True Orthodox fidelity to the past must always be a *creative* fidelity; for true Orthodoxy can never rest satisfied with a barren 'theology of repetition', which, parrot-like, repeats accepted formulae without striving to understand what lies behind them. Loyalty to Tradition, properly understood, is not something mechanical, a passive and automatic process of transmitting the accepted wisdom of an era in the distant past. An Orthodox thinker must see Tradition *from within*, he must enter into its inner spirit, he must re-experience the meaning of Tradition in a manner that is exploratory, courageous, and full of imaginative creativity. In order to live within Tradition, it is not enough simply to give intellectual assent to a system of doctrine; for Tradition is far more than a set of abstract propositions – it is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit. Tradition is not only kept by the Church – it lives in the Church, it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The Orthodox conception of Tradition is not static but dynamic, not a dead acceptance of the past but a living discovery of the Holy Spirit in the present. Tradition, while inwardly changeless (for God does not change), is constantly assuming new forms, which supplement the old without superseding them. Orthodox often speak as if the period of doctrinal formulation were wholly at an end, yet this is not the case. Perhaps in our own day new Ecumenical Councils will meet, and Tradition will be enriched by fresh statements of the faith.

This idea of Tradition as a living thing has been well expressed by Georges Florovsky:

Tradition is the witness of the Spirit; the Spirit's unceasing revelation and preaching of good tidings . . . To accept and understand Tradition

we must live within the Church, we must be conscious of the grace-giving presence of the Lord in it; we must feel the breath of the Holy Ghost in it . . . Tradition is not only a protective, conservative principle; it is, primarily, the principle of growth and regeneration . . . Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words.\*

*Tradition is the witness of the Spirit:* in the words of Christ, 'When the Spirit of truth has come, He will guide you into all truth' (John xvi, 13). It is this divine promise that forms the basis of the Orthodox devotion to Tradition.

## THE OUTWARD FORMS

Let us take in turn the different outward forms in which Tradition is expressed:

### (1) *The Bible*

(a) *The Bible and the Church.* The Christian Church is a Scriptural Church: Orthodoxy believes this just as firmly, if not more firmly, than Protestantism. The Bible is the supreme expression of God's revelation to the human race, and Christians must always be 'People of the Book'. But if Christians are People of the Book, the Bible is the Book of the People; it must not be regarded as something set up *over* the Church, but as something that lives and is understood *within* the Church (that is why one should not separate Scripture and Tradition). It is from the Church that the Bible ultimately derives its authority, for it was the Church which originally decided which books form a part of Holy Scripture; and it is the Church alone which can interpret Holy Scripture with authority. There are many sayings in the Bible which by themselves are far from clear, and individual readers, however sincere,

\* 'The Catholicity of the Church', in *Bible, Church, Tradition*, pp. 46-7. Compare also his essay, 'Saint Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers', in the same volume, pp. 105-20; and V. Lossky, 'Tradition and Traditions', in Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, pp. 13-24. To all three of these essays I am heavily indebted.

are in danger of error if they trust their own personal interpretation. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch; and the eunuch replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' (Acts viii, 30-1). Orthodox, when they read the Scripture, accept the guidance of the Church. When received into the Orthodox Church, a convert promises, 'I will accept and understand Holy Scripture in accordance with the interpretation which was and is held by the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church of the East, our Mother.'

(b) *The Text of the Bible: Biblical Criticism.* The Orthodox Church has the same New Testament as the rest of Christendom. As its authoritative text for the Old Testament, it uses the ancient Greek translation known as the Septuagint. When this differs from the original Hebrew (which happens quite often), Orthodox believe that the changes in the Septuagint were made under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and are to be accepted as part of God's continuing revelation. The best-known instance is Isaiah vii, 14 - where the Hebrew says 'A young woman shall conceive and bear a son', which the Septuagint translates 'A virgin shall conceive', etc. The New Testament follows the Septuagint text (Matthew i, 23).

The Hebrew version of the Old Testament contains thirty-nine books. The Septuagint contains in addition ten further books, not present in the Hebrew, which are known in the Orthodox Church as the 'Deutero-Canonical Books'.\* These were declared by the Councils of Jassy (1642) and Jerusalem (1672) to be 'genuine parts of Scripture'; most Orthodox scholars at the present day, however, following the opinion of Athanasius and Jerome, consider that the Deutero-Canonical Books, although part of the Bible, stand on a lower footing than the rest of the Old Testament.

\* In the west the Deutero-Canonical Books are commonly termed 'The Apocrypha'. The works in question are 1 (*alias* 3) Esdras; Tobit; Judith; 1, 2 and 3 Maccabees; The Wisdom of Solomon; Ecclesiasticus (*alias* Sirach); Baruch; the Letter of Jeremias. Some Orthodox editions of the Bible also contain 4 Maccabees. These works can all be found in English translation in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Expanded Edition: Revised Standard Version*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York 1977).

Christianity, if true, has nothing to fear from honest inquiry. Orthodoxy, while regarding the Church as the authoritative interpreter of Scripture, does not forbid the critical and historical study of the Bible, although hitherto Orthodox scholars have not been prominent in this field.

(c) *The Bible in worship.* It is sometimes thought that Orthodox attach less importance than western Christians to the Bible. Yet in fact Holy Scripture is read constantly at Orthodox services: during the course of Matins and Vespers the entire Psalter is recited each week, and in Lent twice a week;\* Old Testament readings occur at Vespers on the eves of many feasts, and at the Sixth Hour and Vespers on weekdays in Lent (but it is a pity that there is no Old Testament reading at the Liturgy); the reading of the Gospel forms the climax of Matins on Sundays and feasts; at the Liturgy a special Epistle and Gospel are assigned for each day of the year (except for weekdays in Lent), so that the whole New Testament (apart from the Revelation of St John) is read at the Eucharist. The *Nunc Dimittis* is used at Vespers; Old Testament canticles, with the *Magnificat* and *Benedictus*, are sung at Matins; the Lord's Prayer is read at every service. Besides these specific extracts from Scripture, the whole text of each service is shot through with Biblical language, and it has been calculated that the Liturgy contains 98 quotations from the Old Testament and 114 from the New.†

Orthodoxy regards the Bible as a verbal icon of Christ, the seventh Ecumenical Council laying down that the Holy Icons and the Book of the Gospels should be venerated in the same way. In every church the Gospel Book has a place of honour on the altar; it is carried in procession at the Liturgy and at Matins on Sundays and feasts; the faithful kiss it and prostrate themselves before it. Such is the respect shown in the Orthodox Church for the Word of God.

\* Such is the rule laid down by the service books. In practice, in many parish churches Matins and Vespers are not recited daily, but only at weekends and on feasts; and even then, unfortunately, the portions appointed from the Psalter are often abbreviated or (worse still) omitted entirely.

† P. Evdokimov, *L'Orthodoxie*, p. 241, note 96.

(2) *The Seven Ecumenical Councils: The Creed*

The doctrinal definitions of an Ecumenical Council are infallible. Thus in the eyes of the Orthodox Church, the statements of faith put out by the seven councils possess, along with the Bible, an abiding and irrevocable authority.

The most important of all the Ecumenical statements of faith is the *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*, which is read or sung at every celebration of the Eucharist, and also daily at the Midnight Office and at Compline. The other two Creeds used by the west, the *Apostles' Creed* and the *'Athanasian Creed'*, do not possess the same authority as the Nicene, because they have not been proclaimed by an Ecumenical Council. Orthodox honour the Apostles' Creed as an ancient statement of faith, and accept all its teaching; but it is simply a local western Baptismal Creed, never used in the services of the Eastern Patriarchates. The *'Athanasian Creed'* likewise is not used in Orthodox worship, but it is sometimes printed (without the *Filioque*) in the *Horologion* (Book of Hours).

(3) *Later Councils*

The formulation of Orthodox doctrine, as we have seen, did not cease with the seventh Ecumenical Council. Since 787 there have been two chief ways whereby the Church has expressed its mind: (1) definitions by local councils (that is, councils attended by members of one or more Patriarchates or autocephalous Churches, but not claiming to represent the Orthodox Catholic Church as a whole) and (2) letters or statements of faith put out by individual bishops. While the doctrinal decisions of general councils are infallible, those of a local council or an individual bishop are always liable to error; but if such decisions are accepted by the rest of the Church, then they come to acquire Ecumenical authority (i.e. a universal authority similar to that possessed by the doctrinal statements of an Ecumenical Council). The doctrinal decisions of an Ecumenical Council cannot be revised or corrected, but must be accepted in their entirety; but the Church has often been selective in its treatment of the acts of local councils: in the case of the seventeenth-century councils, for example, their statements of faith have in part been received by the whole Orthodox Church, but in part set aside or corrected.

The following are the chief Orthodox doctrinal statements since 787:

- (i) The Encyclical Letter of St Photius (867).
- (ii) The First Letter of Michael Cerularius to Peter of Antioch (1054).
- (iii) The decisions of the Councils of Constantinople in 1341 and 1351 on the Hesychast Controversy.
- (iv) The Encyclical Letter of St Mark of Ephesus (1440-1).
- (v) The Confession of Faith by Gennadius, Patriarch of Constantinople (1455-6).
- (vi) The Replies of Jeremias II to the Lutherans (1573-81).
- (vii) The Confession of Faith by Metrophanes Kritopoulos (1625).
- (viii) The Orthodox Confession by Peter of Moghila, in its revised form (ratified by the Council of Jassy, 1642).
- (ix) The Confession of Dositheus (ratified by the Council of Jerusalem, 1672).
- (x) The Answers of the Orthodox Patriarchs to the Non-Jurors (1718, 1723).
- (xi) The Reply of the Orthodox Patriarchs to Pope Pius IX (1848).
- (xii) The Reply of the Synod of Constantinople to Pope Leo XIII (1895).
- (xiii) The Encyclical Letters by the Patriarchate of Constantinople on Christian unity and on the 'Ecumenical Movement' (1920, 1952).\*

(4) *The Fathers*

The definitions of the councils must be studied in the wider context of the Fathers. But as with local councils, so with the Fathers, the judgement of the Church is selective: individual writers have at times fallen into error and at times contradict one another. Patristic wheat needs to be distinguished from Patristic chaff. The Orthodox must not simply know and quote the Fathers; they must enter more deeply into the inner spirit of the Fathers and acquire a 'Patristic mind', and must

\* Items (i) - (ix) can be found in Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (ed.), *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (New Haven/London 2003); for (xi), see *Creeds and Confessions*, vol. 3

treat the Fathers not merely as relics from the past, but as living witnesses and contemporaries.

The Orthodox Church has never attempted to define exactly who the Fathers are, still less to classify them in order of importance. But it has a particular reverence for the writers of the fourth century, and especially for those whom it terms 'the Three Great Hierarchs': Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus (known in Orthodoxy as Gregory the Theologian), and John Chrysostom. In the eyes of Orthodoxy, the 'Age of the Fathers' did not come to an end in the fifth century, for many later writers are also 'Fathers' – Maximus, John of Damascus, Theodore of Stoudios, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas, Mark of Ephesus. Indeed, it is dangerous to look on 'the Fathers' as a closed cycle of writings belonging wholly to the past, for might not our own age produce a new Basil or Athanasius? To say that there can be no more Fathers is to suggest that the Holy Spirit has deserted the Church.

#### (5) *The Liturgy*

The Orthodox Church is not as much given to making formal dogmatic definitions as is the Roman Catholic Church. But it would be false to conclude that because some belief has never been specifically proclaimed as a dogma by Orthodoxy, it is therefore not a part of Orthodox Tradition, but merely a matter of private opinion. Certain doctrines, never formally defined, are yet held by the Church with an unmistakable inner conviction, an unruffled unanimity, which is just as binding as an explicit formulation. 'Some things we have from written teaching,' said St Basil, 'others we have received from the Apostolic Tradition handed down to us in a mystery; and both these things have the same force for piety.'\*

This inner Tradition 'handed down to us in a mystery' is preserved above all in the Church's worship. *Lex orandi lex credendi*: our faith is expressed in our prayer. Orthodoxy has made few explicit definitions about the Eucharist and the other Sacraments, about the next world, the Mother of God, the saints, and the faithful departed: our

\* *On the Holy Spirit*, xxvii (66).

belief on these points is contained mainly in the prayers and hymns used at services. Nor is it merely the *words* of the services which are a part of Tradition; the various *gestures* and *actions* – immersion in the waters of Baptism, the different anointings with oil, the sign of the Cross, and so on – all have a special meaning, and all express in symbolic or dramatic form the truths of the faith.

#### (6) *Canon Law*

Besides doctrinal definitions, the Ecumenical Councils drew up *Canons*, dealing with Church organization and discipline; other Canons were made by local councils and by individual bishops. Theodore Balsamon, Zonaras, and other Byzantine writers compiled collections of Canons, with explanations and commentaries. The standard modern Greek commentary, the *Pedalion* ('Rudder'), published in 1800, is the work of that indefatigable saint, Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain.

The Canon Law of the Orthodox Church has been very little studied in the west, and as a result western writers sometimes fall into the mistake of regarding Orthodoxy as an organization with virtually no outward regulations. On the contrary, the life of Orthodoxy has many rules, often of great strictness and rigour. It must be confessed, however, that at the present day many of the Canons are difficult or impossible to apply, and have fallen widely into disuse. When and if a new general council of the Church is assembled, one of its chief tasks may well be the revision and clarification of Canon Law.

The doctrinal definitions of the councils possess an absolute and unalterable validity which Canons as such cannot claim; for doctrinal definitions deal with eternal truths, Canons with the earthly life of the Church, where conditions are constantly changing and individual situations are infinitely various. Yet between the Canons and the dogmas of the Church there exists an essential connexion: Canon Law is simply the attempt to apply dogma to practical situations in the daily life of each Christian. Thus in a relative sense the Canons form a part of Holy Tradition.

#### (7) *Icons*

The Tradition of the Church is expressed not only through words, not only through the actions and gestures used in worship, but also

through art – through the line and colour of the Holy Icons. An icon is not simply a religious picture designed to arouse appropriate emotions in the beholder; it is one of the ways whereby God is revealed to us. Through icons the Orthodox Christian receives a vision of the spiritual world. Because the icon is a part of Tradition, icon painters are not free to adapt or innovate as they please; for their work must reflect, not their own aesthetic sentiments, but the mind of the Church. Artistic inspiration is not excluded, but it is exercised within certain prescribed rules. It is important that icon painters should be good artists, but it is even more important that they should be sincere Christians, living within the spirit of Tradition, preparing themselves for their work by means of Confession and Holy Communion.

Such are the primary elements which from an outward point of view make up the Tradition of the Orthodox Church – Scripture, Councils, Fathers, Liturgy, Canons, Icons. These things are not to be separated and contrasted, for it is the same Holy Spirit which speaks through them all, and together they make up a single whole, each part being understood in the light of the rest.

It has sometimes been said that the underlying cause for the break-up of western Christendom in the sixteenth century was the separation between theology and mysticism, between liturgy and personal devotion, which existed in the later Middle Ages. Orthodoxy for its part has always tried to avoid any such division. All true Orthodox theology is mystical; just as mysticism divorced from theology becomes subjective and heretical, so theology, when it is not mystical, degenerates into an arid scholasticism, 'academic' in the bad sense of the word.

Theology, mysticism, spirituality, moral rules, worship, art: these things must not be kept in separate compartments. Doctrine cannot be understood unless it is prayed: a theologian, said Evagrius, is one who knows how to pray, and he who prays in spirit and in truth is by that very act a theologian.\* And doctrine, if it is to be prayed, must also be lived: theology without action, as St Maximus put it, is the

\* *On Prayer*, 60 (P.G. lxxix, 1180B).

theology of demons.\* The Creed belongs only to those who live it. Faith and love, theology and life, are inseparable. In the Byzantine Liturgy, the Creed is introduced with the words, 'Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Trinity one in essence and undivided.' This exactly expresses the Orthodox attitude to Tradition. If we do not love one another, we cannot love God; and if we do not love God, we cannot make a true confession of faith and cannot enter into the inner spirit of Tradition, for there is no other way of knowing God than to love Him.

\* *Letter 20* (P.G. xci, 601C).

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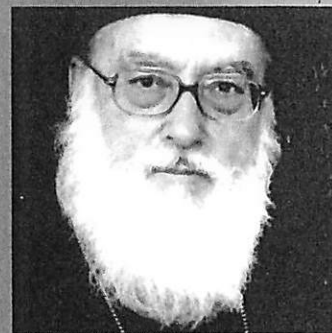
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