

UNIT 1A: ORTHODOX FAITH AND LIFE

4: Sources in Tradition

Tradition: The Search by the Individual and the Church for Renewal by the Holy Spirit

In Orthodoxy, Tradition is certainly not “how we have always done things.” Tradition is a living, active stream of revelation and witness imparted by the Holy Spirit to the Church, handed down from generation to generation. Thus Tradition is continually unfolding its potential from the creativity of God and will do so until the End of all things. In this respect, Tradition (with an uppercase “T”) must be distinguished from traditions which are simply ways of doing things particular to different cultures and times. These are useful in themselves but nothing to do with revelation which is primary and endures in all places and for all times. The late Fr. Georges Florovsky wrote that: “Tradition is not a principle striving to restore the past, using the past as a criterion for the present. Such a conception of tradition is rejected by history itself and by the consciousness of the Orthodox Church... Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words. Tradition is a charismatic, not a historical event.”¹

Ironically then as Father Georges has reflected, Tradition is “not only *concord* with the past but, in a certain sense, *freedom from the past*,” so that Tradition is “not only a protective, conservative principle,” but rather, “primarily, the principle of growth and regeneration.”² Metropolitan Kallistos is certainly right to stress on the opening page of his beautiful little book, *The Orthodox Way*, that:

Our situation, say the Greek Fathers, is like that of the Israelite people in the desert: we live in tents, not houses, for spiritually we are always on the move. We are on a journey through the inward space of the heart, a journey not measured by the hours of our watch or the days of the calendar, for it is a journey out of time into eternity.³

¹ Father Georges Florovsky, “The Catholicity of the Church.” In Vol. 1 of *The Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972), 46-47.

² Florovsky, *The Bible, Church, Tradition*. Cited by John Behr, “Faithfulness and Creativity.” In *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West: Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia*, edited by John Behr, Andrew Louth, Dimitri Conomos. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 160.

³ [then] Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Revised Edition (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 7.

Therefore, each journey for an Orthodox Christian is “not primarily the acceptance of formulae or customs from past generations, but rather the ever-new, personal and direct experience of the Holy Spirit, *in the present*, here and now.”⁴

It is this quality of reaching out for a personal experience of communion with the Holy Spirit that these E-Quip lecturers seek to communicate to their readers. Such an experience is intensely personal, often private, but also capable of communication to others. For example, a former Poet Laureate, Sir John Betjeman (1906-1984), a practising Anglican, was deeply aware that his own experience of Christianity was also relevant to others. In “The Conversion of St. Paul,” Betjeman wrote:

Saint Paul is often criticised by modern people who’re annoyed at his conversion, saying Freud explains it all. But they omit the really vital point of it, which isn’t *how* it was achieved but what it was that Paul believed. He knew as certainly as we know, “you are you and I am me,” that Christ was all He claimed to be....What is conversion? Turning round, to gaze upon a love profound for some of us see Jesus plainly and never once look back again. And some of us have seen and known and turned and gone away alone, but most of us turn slowly to see the figure hanging on a tree and stumble on and blindly grope, upheld by intermittent hope. God grant before we die we all may see the light as did St Paul.⁵

Furthermore, Sir John demonstrated in his poem, “Greek Orthodox” a considerable awareness that the Orthodox Church itself and those who sought to embrace it could experience their “own perpetual resurrection:”

The domed interior swallows up the day.
Here, where to light a candle is to pray,
The candle flame shows up the almond eyes
Of local saints who view with no surprise
Their martyrdoms depicted upon walls
On which the filtered daylight faintly falls.
The flame shows up the cracked paint- sea-green blue
And red and gold, with grained wood showing through-
Of much-kissed ikons, dating from, perhaps,

⁴ Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 8. [Emphasis in original text.]

⁵ John Betjeman, “The Conversion of Saint Paul.” In *Faith and Doubt of John Betjeman*, edited by Kevin J. Gardner, (London: Continuum, 2011), 70-72. Available on the web by searching in Google for “John Betjeman + conversion of Saint Paul.”

The fourteenth century...
 Thus vigorously does the old tree grow,
 By persecution pruned, watered with blood,
 Its living roots deep in pre-Christian mud,
 It needs no bureaucratic protection.
 It is its own perpetual resurrection...⁶

Although the author of this poem was not an Orthodox Christian, Betjeman has captured powerfully the significance of Tradition for both the individual within the Orthodox Church and for the Orthodox Church itself over the centuries. His poem concludes:

The painted boats rock empty by the quay
 Feet crunch on gravel, faintly beats the sea.
 From the domed church, as from the sky, look down
 The Pantocrator's searching eyes of brown,
 With one serene all-comprehending stare
 On farmer, fisherman and millionaire.

Thus, here in the icon of Christ Pantokrator, "the Ruler of All,"⁷ is a balanced portrayal of Tradition in which Christ blesses us and holds the Gospel, communicating His relationship to each of us and His gift of the Gospel to the Church across the centuries.

Betjeman's accomplished poem about "the old tree" of the Orthodox Church sets out a similar experience to that of the Greek Orthodox deacon John Chryssavgis, described in *Light through Darkness: The Orthodox Tradition* of an earlier visit to Mount Athos in 1979 during his student days:

I recall, then, journeying by foot through a deluge of stormy winter weather. I had travelled several hours during the night, accompanying an abbot, to attend the funeral of a monk, who had just passed away. That night, at an abandoned hermitage where we stopped to rest, the abbot celebrated Liturgy in a tiny chapel that could fit no more than three or four people.

⁶ John Betjeman, "Greek Orthodox." Garner, 195-196. Quoted by Ware, 8-9.

⁷ See the visual portrayal and discussion of Christ Pantokrator and many other icons in the readily available and reasonably priced study by Alfred Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of The Eastern Orthodox Church*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004), 242-243.

What impressed me most was not the utter silence of the little church, the deep darkness of the still night, or even the solemn beauty of that memorable service. It was, rather, the sense that this church was overwhelmingly filled with a presence. There was a strong sense of the company of others – countless others, it seemed. It was so vividly clear to me that the two of us—the abbot and myself – were in fact the minority in that chapel, far fewer than the multitude that actually constituted, almost stiflingly crowded, the celebration of Liturgy.⁸

It is this “presence” that Tradition (with an uppercase “T”) seeks for every Orthodox Church and every Orthodox Christian.

Defining Tradition: A Unifying Perspective

For any Christian church, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s challenge is relevant: “What you have as heritage, take now as task for thus you will make it your own!”⁹ However, for all Christian churches, Jaroslav Pelikan’s distinction between “tradition” and “traditionalism” is equally important: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives Tradition such a bad name.”¹⁰ Furthermore, within all Christian churches, as Pelikan points out, we have a choice: “whether to understand our origins in our tradition or merely to let that tradition work on us without our understanding it, in short, whether to be conscious participants or unconscious victims.”¹¹ In this context, “the very concept of Holy Tradition cannot be defined until a specific tradition has been studied at some depth, in the details of its concrete historical development.”¹² Even in the midst of serious and sustained study, we must always be aware of the danger that “tradition becomes an idol . . . when it makes the preservation and the repetition of the past an end in itself.”¹³

The search for a living, yet mature, tradition is challenging for all Christian churches—the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic with their tendency to affirm traditionalism, as well as the Protestant churches with their tendency to affirm Post-modernism in both theology and social behaviour. Perhaps all families have at least a tinge of dysfunctional behaviour (at least in the

⁸ John Chryssavgis, *Light through Darkness: The Orthodox Tradition*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 14.

⁹ Goethe, *Faust*, 682-683, translated by Jaroslav Pelikan and cited on the concluding page of his *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 1984), 82.

¹⁰ Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, 65.

¹¹ Pelikan, 53.

¹² Pelikan, 52.

¹³ Pelikan, 55.

eyes of grown-up children as they look back on their lives), so Pelikan's simile of the family as a model for Christian churches is worthy of reflection:

Maturity in our relation to our parents consists in going beyond both a belief in their omniscience and a disdain for their weakness, to an understanding and a gratitude for their decisive part in that on-going process in which now we, too, must take our place, as heirs and yet free. So it must be in our relation to our spiritual and intellectual parentage, our tradition. An abstract concept of parenthood is no substitute for our real parents, an abstract cosmopolitanism no substitute for our real traditions. Jerusalem truly is 'the mother of us all,' or perhaps more precisely the grandmother of us all, with Athens as our other grandmother (since everyone is entitled to two grandmothers). The tension and the complementarity between Athens and Jerusalem has been a recurring theme, a sort of melodic counterpoint, of our tradition. . . .It is . . . a mark of an authentic and living tradition that it points us beyond itself.¹⁴

In brief, whatever our present perspective on Tradition, we would do well to reflect carefully on the sources of that belief.

Defining Tradition: Non-Orthodox Perspectives

For many non-Orthodox Christians, Tradition is often viewed simply as "the process of handing on Christian faith and practice."¹⁵ At best, such a perspective is grounded in the conviction that Christian tradition "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."¹⁶ Today in some Christian churches Tradition is thought to be a parallel source of authority in the Church to the Scriptures. In other non-Orthodox churches, Tradition is barely recognised, but rather Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) is emphasised. In the first view, Tradition and Scripture do not necessarily inform each other. Indeed, many non-Orthodox Christians claim that in Christian history these two sources of authority have frequently drifted apart, which partly explains why certain churches have dropped Tradition altogether. Such an elimination of Tradition

¹⁴ Pelikan, 54.

¹⁵ Paul Avis, "tradition." In *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, edited by Adrian Hastings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 711-712.

¹⁶ [then] Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New Edition (London: Penguin, 1993), 196.

is theologically unsound, as such an approach completely ignores the facts about how we came to receive the Scriptures in the first place.¹⁷

For over 300 years there was no single accepted collection of New Testament writings. In fact, the Old Testament was probably the only written source in use by Christians for the first 30 years after the resurrection. What Jesus said and did was collectively committed to memory by the churches across the eastern Mediterranean, but each church had a different part of the oral tradition; and it was the bishops' responsibility to collect together an authoritative collection or canon. Tradition, therefore, preceded both the writing down of Scripture by at least a generation, as well as preceded the settling of the canon by more than 300 years. Scripture was identified as the supremely authoritative part of Tradition, but it was and is only part of Tradition.

When some Christian churches try and interpret the Scriptures apart from Tradition, this always fails. Interpretations multiply; and so do the denominations that convince themselves that they have the right interpretation of the Scriptures. From an Orthodox perspective, Tradition rather serves to present Scripture in the sense in which it was originally codified from the apostolic oral tradition. Thus Holy Tradition guided the Church through her own collective memory to assemble the canon of Scripture. Therefore, to interpret Scripture without Tradition is comparable to listening to a voice muffled at the bottom of a deep well. The words are there but the sense and meaning are lost in conflicting and changing interpretations, whose echoes quickly fade away.

Defining Tradition: An Orthodox Perspective

As Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia explains in *The Orthodox Church*, Tradition, for an Orthodox Christian, includes the Bible (both Old and New Testaments), the decrees of the first seven Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Fathers, the Church 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."¹⁸ Here then, as set out by Metropolitan Kallistos, is the dynamic panoply — the full presentation of the many different sources in Orthodox Christianity which individual Orthodox Christians can then draw upon in their own personal

¹⁷ For a succinct discussion on differing attitudes to Tradition among Protestants and Roman Catholics, see the entry "tradition." In *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1635 [Note that this Hendrickson Publishers edition is the same as that of the Oxford University Press, but within a student budget.] Cf. R. P. C. Hanson, "Tradition." In *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1983), 574-576.

¹⁸ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 196.

searches to become one with Christ, being guided by the Church's lived experience over many centuries.

Writing in *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* — a comprehensive companion to Metropolitan Kallistos's earlier study — Father John Anthony McGuckin has pointed out that Orthodoxy has never been “dependent on the intelligentsia to articulate it,” because as “a lived theology of the whole church, not a theoretical religion for the highly educated, ” throughout 2,000 years it has been “the people as a whole in the Orthodox Church who hold to the Tradition of belief they have received from earlier times.”¹⁹ However, in the light of this populist understanding of Orthodoxy, the question must be considered: Is such a perspective too grounded in traditionalism, too oriented to the past, to achieve “the growth and regeneration” of doctrine and worship that Metropolitan Kallistos and Father McGuckin and these E-Quip lectures and many other Orthodox Christians (both clerical and lay) seek?

A good resource to use to begin to resolve this issue of how to achieve a flexible, growing tradition characteristic of Orthodox regeneration is Father McGuckin's *Patristic Theology*, which helps us “to make sense of the turmoils, passions, and inspirations of the early Christians” and traces “how the ‘pace’ of patristic theology speeds up to a climacteric in the fourth and fifth centuries.”²⁰ Father McGuckin notes perceptively that:

In the apostolic age, St. Paul operated with a double sense of Tradition. At some times he is conscious of how carefully he must deliver to others ‘what I myself received’ (1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:1-4), especially when it concerns traditions about the Lord, or liturgical process. At other times, in advancing the cause of the church's effective preaching of the message of salvation he is more than conscious of how the risen Lord has empowered him to ‘seize the moment’ (*kairos*), and how he himself authoritatively transmits his own contribution to the Tradition, with the authority of no less than Christ, whom he serves apostolically. The first concept of Tradition Paul sees as an unchanging verity. The second he sees as economically

¹⁹ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 12.

²⁰ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), ix, xi.

related to the saving kerygma,²¹ and changing across the times as the servant of the efficient proclamation of the gospel in various conditions (1 Cor 7:10-12, 25, 40).²²

Across the centuries the Orthodox Church has sought to balance this sense of remaining true to Christ, while also boldly proclaiming the Gospel in changing cultures, amidst changing challenges. That remains the contemporary challenge for every Orthodox preacher, teacher, theologian, celebrant of the Divine Liturgy and lay person if the twin dangers of nationalism and traditionalism are to be confronted and defeated in the hearts and minds of each Orthodox Christian.

Intriguingly, Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out that many of the greatest founders of their respective traditions, such as Moses, Socrates and Christ, have themselves presented a profound critique of the particular tradition they were seeking to uphold:

Moses smashed the tablets of the divine law itself in protest against idolatry; Socrates was executed as an enemy of the tradition because he believed that ‘an unexamined life is not worth living’ and an unexamined tradition is not worth following; and Jesus went to the cross because he would not have any earthly form of the divine (not even, let it be remembered, his own²³) become a substitute for the ultimate reality of the living God.²⁴

It is precisely “the presence and the power, within the tradition, of such voices as these”—of Moses, Socrates and Christ — that indicates an important characteristic of a living tradition with the power to regenerate doctrine and life — the “capacity to develop while still maintaining its identity and continuity.”²⁵

Sources in Tradition: Challenges to Tradition in Contemporary Culture

Certainly, this capacity to develop doctrine while still remaining true to Tradition is not solely an Orthodox attribute, as indicated by the life journey of John Henry Newman, especially in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.²⁶ However, the lingering impact of the evangelicalism of the so-called Reformation, the lingering rationalism of the so-called

²¹ proclamation [of the gospel]

²² McGuckin, *Patristic Theology*, "Tradition," 334-338. See also the entry on "Kerygma," 201-202.

²³ Mark 10:18 – Christ’s disavowal of the description of Himself as “good” (only God – that is, the Father – being “good”) reflects the kenotic restraint and humility which characterised his doing of the works of the Father, (cf. Philippians 2:6-7). To the Twelve and especially the inner circle of Sts. Peter, James and John, He was less restrained and declared His true identity and purpose.

²⁴ Pelikan, 57.

²⁵ Pelikan, 58.

²⁶ For an insightful study of Newman’s life and theology, see the second lecture by Pelikan in *The Vindication of Tradition*, “The Recovery of Tradition,” 21-40.

Enlightenment, and the misguided historicism of the nineteenth century – each of which contributed significantly to the Modernism and Post-modernism of the twentieth century – have left a detritus of theological confusion and genuine perplexity which will not be easy to overcome in the twenty-first century. The word *detritus*, defined as “bits and pieces of rubbish left over from something” is a rather harsh analysis of the impact on the West of a millennium of non-Orthodox theology and liturgy; however, the Latin root of *detritus*, *deterere*, meaning to rub away, captures accurately an historical process in which Protestant and Catholic theology have together rubbed away a previously underlying awareness of Orthodox Tradition.

It is important to acknowledge that although Tradition represents the accumulation of revealed truth it is an incomplete resource in one important respect. There are questions where Christian principles have to be applied to new situations or where it takes time for a Christian witness to take hold in a society – for example, with the issues of usury and slavery. Such issues can often cause disagreement, even contention in the Church if the new situation is not analysed carefully or where insufficient attention is paid to an applicable and enduring Christian principle. Notwithstanding any pressure from external sources, it is vital in these circumstances that the Church reflects carefully and prayerfully together and waits on God without rushing to hasty or ill-considered decisions. This may cause consternation in some quarters that the Church is not “moving with the times.” This is not, however, how the Church considers any issue. She refuses to be pushed and cajoled by social trends. As the Anglican, Dean Inge (1860-1954), once said: “Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widower in the next.”²⁷

Contested issues that do not yet have a secure place within Tradition should indeed be subject to debate; and it is proper for teachers in the Church to offer personal judgements (*theologumena*) until such time as the Church’s mind has been formed and a teaching received by the faithful. Tradition, therefore, is always a dynamic process enlivened by both the Holy Spirit and human debate. In all these concerns, we can be confident that God will enlighten us if we follow faithfully the well-known and well-worn patterns of discernment enshrined in Scripture and Tradition.

Sources in Tradition: Resolving the Challenges to Tradition in Contemporary Culture

For the Orthodox Church, in the twenty-first century, just as in earlier centuries, the substantive content of Tradition sustained by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit comprises the Fathers, the Ecumenical Councils and their creedal and canonical definitions, the lives and

²⁷ For this quotation from Dean Inge, see the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, easily consulted at: www.ccel.org/ccel/inge. Note that 46 volumes of writings by the Church Fathers are readily available free from the home of this website.

writings of the saints and the iconography that is itself a theological medium. It is not possible, therefore, in Orthodox Christianity to point to one definitive catechism or confession or treatise and say: "That is it. That's Christianity."

There are, therefore, no short cuts or pithy summaries that might serve to encapsulate the richness of Holy Tradition. Tradition is a resource of mystical theology to be mined, not a straitjacket to which one must be confined.

All the different elements of Tradition play their part here. Those who have known God personally and who are adept at applying the salve of the apostolic faith to those wounded by sin, as well as those who have plumbed the depths of prayer. These are the God-bearing fathers and mothers who have earned the right to speak for and on behalf of the Church. When these persons and the bishops called to pastor the Church are called together in Council to address difficult issues, the errors they exclude leave a territory which Christians can safely explore. This is how the ecumenical creeds and the councils that defined them continue to function in the Orthodox Catholic Church, which retains its catholicity in the context of universality. Then there are the saints and the icons that have presented these Creeds and Councils to the Church being both models of sanctity to be emulated and a heavenly host of friends and intercessors that draw the faithful closer to Christ. Amongst these, pre-eminently is the Theotokos and Ever Virgin Mary herself. All these too are part of Holy Tradition.

Finally, Tradition finds concrete expression in the Liturgy itself whereby the faithful receive Him whom they confess, even Christ Himself. St. Gregory Palamas wrote of the Holy Eucharist: "We hold fast to all the traditions of the Church, written and unwritten, and above all to the most mystical and sacred celebration and communion and assembly (*synaxis*), whereby all other rites are made perfect." ²⁸

It should now be clear that it is not possible to be guided by Tradition unless and until one is actually a member by baptism and repentance of the one, holy, Orthodox Catholic Church, receiving the sacraments and believing in and following Christ. Others hear the voice of Tradition, but it is consistently a muffled and not a clear voice. However, for those who do hear and respond to the call of God, Tradition is a sure guide if it is heeded. Moreover, the responsibility rests with each Orthodox Christian today to follow in the footsteps of St. Paul — first, to deliver to others what we ourselves have received. Perhaps we too will then find that we have been empowered by the risen Lord to 'seize the moment' (*kairos*), and by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit in

²⁸ St. Gregory Palamas, *Letter to Dionysius*, 7. For a discussion of the Greek word, *synaxis*, "signifying the assembly of believers, especially as gathered together for the Eucharist . . . or the Eucharist itself," see McGuckin, *Patristic Theology*, 321-322.

the Tradition of the Church to play our part in the transformation of the world in Christ, the 'Lover of Mankind'. We may be, in the words of Bernard of Chartres: "standing on the shoulders of giants"²⁹, but that means that we can reach that much further.

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Ware, [then] Timothy. *The Orthodox Church*, New Edition. London: Penguin, 1993.

²⁹ Bernard of Chartres (d. 1124?), cited by John of Salisbury in his *Metalogicon* [and later by Sir Isaac Newton]. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 167.