

THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CONCEPTION OF TRADITION

Dogmatically there are very few basic differences between the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Churches and that of the Catholic Church. The Council of Florence, even though it was a failure from a historical point of view, did however show that differences in terminology and ways of thought do not necessarily mean differences in the fundamental understanding of the truth. The Western Church after the separation has advanced steadily in its unfolding and interpretation of the primitive Tradition under the guidance of the Holy Ghost through a clearly defined *magisterium*. The Eastern Church, too, has gone forward always holding to this same Tradition but without this guidance of an absolutely definite *magisterium*. Since, then, differences between eastern and western dogmatic concepts have arisen during the centuries after the separation, it would seem profitable to examine just how the Eastern Orthodox think about this Tradition which is common to both East and West. One could turn to the various manuals on the history of dogma and on so-called "Oriental Theology" for an answer, but it does seem that for an understanding of what the present-day Orthodox think about Tradition we should go to these Orthodox themselves to find what they say and believe—in other words, we should let the witnesses speak and then on this basis form our own opinion. For this purpose I have selected two generally accepted Orthodox Confessions of Faith as a more or less official Orthodox presentation of the doctrine of Tradition. Then, three of the "classic" Russian theologians of the nineteenth century. Then, two modern Greek theologians. And finally, a fairly recent Russian, who, although suspect of heresy on certain points, has presented an exposition of the Orthodox belief which is generally recognized by all as an accurate expression of the Orthodox faith. Naturally, I have omitted both the Greeks and the Russians of an earlier period during which both were under the influence of German Protestantism and temporarily deviated from the Orthodox tradition—particularly in holding that Scripture was the unique source of Tradition.

The Orthodox Confession of the Eastern Church was originally composed by Peter Moghila, Metropolitan of Kiev, who died in 1647. In its original form it showed too much western influence—Latin—and was only accepted in a revised Greek version which was adopted by the Synod of Jassy in 1643 and signed and approved by the Eastern Patriarchs. It was again ratified by the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672. The following is taken from the most easily available Greek text, that published in Schaff's *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. II, N.Y. 1877, p. 278. In Question IV (on the Faith) after quoting St. Paul on Tradition (2 Thess 2, 15 and 1 Cor 11, 2), the Confession goes on to say:

From all this it is clear that the Articles of Faith receive their authority and approval partly from Sacred Scripture and partly from Ecclesiastical Tradition and the teaching of the Councils and of the Holy Fathers. All of which St. Dionysius makes clearer in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (c. 1) where he says as follows: "Indeed the essence of this Hierarchy of ours lies in the divinely handed down utterances, of which we consider the most to be respected are those which have been given to us by our divinely inspired sacred initiators in sacred scriptures and theological books; and also all those in which our leaders have been initiated by those holy men through a more immaterial initiation, in some way close to the Celestial Hierarchy, from mind to mind through the medium of the corporeal word, though in a less material sense, not in writing; all of which means to say that the dogmas are from two sorts of sayings. The first are those handed down in writing and which are contained in the theological books of Sacred Scripture, while the other dogmas are those which have been handed down orally by the Apostles and have been explained by the Councils and the holy Fathers. And in these two is contained the Faith."

The Confession of Dositheus, or the 18 Decrees of the Council of Jerusalem. This Council was held in 1672 and its 18 decrees were published in refutation of the 18 Decrees of Cyril Lucaris which were patently Protestant in tone. The following is the twelfth Decree and is to be found in Schaff, as cited above, on p. 417 of Vol. II:

We believe that the Catholic Church is taught by the Holy Ghost. For this is the true Paraclete whom Christ sends from the Father to teach the truth and dispel the darkness from the

mind of the faithful. However, the teaching of the Holy Ghost does not immediately illuminate the Church, but through the holy Fathers and leaders of the Catholic Church. For just as all Scripture is, and is so called, the word of the Holy Ghost, not that it was given directly by Him but because it was given by Him through the Apostles and Prophets, so also is the Church taught by the life-giving Spirit as well as through the medium of the holy Fathers and Teachers (for whom the ecumenical and holy Councils should be recognized as a norm of interpretation—and this I shall not desist from saying ten thousand times); and for this reason we are not only convinced but do confess positively that it is both true and certain that the Catholic Church cannot err or be entirely deceived or ever choose falsehood in place of truth. For the all-Holy Spirit ever acting through the faithfully ministering holy Fathers and leaders keeps the Church from all error whatsoever.

Makarii Bulgakov (1816-1882) was Metropolitan of Moscow and one of the leading Russian theologians of the nineteenth century. The following is taken from his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, St. Petersburg 1883, Vol. I, pp. 13 sqq.

From the aforegiven understanding of Christian dogmas it is obvious that they are all of divine origin. Consequently, they may neither be increased or decreased in number, or changed or modified in any way whatsoever; no one has the right to do this. Just so much as was revealed by God in the beginning, so much must remain for all time, as long as Christianity exists. But, although the dogmas of faith remain unchanged in Revelation itself, both in number and in substance, yet they must unfold and they do unfold in the Church with relation to the faithful.

Then he shows how during the first three centuries various theological opinions lead to the formulation of Creeds, such as those of Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Caesarea, Aquileia, and those of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, and, especially, of Gregory the Wonderworker. During the fourth century came the necessity for one Creed and this was composed by the first Ecumenical Council and completed by the second. The next five Councils brought necessary supplements to the doctrine of the Nicene Creed, explaining dogmas which had not hitherto been explained but then had to be explained due to various rising heresies. He continues:

This does not mean that with the end of the Ecumenical Councils the further unfolding of dogma was stopped in the Orthodox Church. It did not stop simply because errors and heresies did not stop. The chief of these errors were, in the first place, those of the Church of Rome separating herself from the Universal Church—and in the Orthodox East once more councils were held against her and precise professions of faith were written, in the second place, the errors of Protestantism in its various sects were also more than once subjected to the scrutiny of the Pastors of the Eastern Orthodox Sobornaya Church who at the same time formulated more precise expositions of the Faith against these errors for the preservation of the purity of Orthodoxy. Thus, two detailed Confessions of the Orthodox Church have been composed, in which the definitions of the ancient Ecumenical Councils have been developed with particular reference to the errors and heresies which arose later. We mean: *The Orthodox Confession of the Catholic and Apostolic Church of the East* and the *Epistle of the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Catholic Church on the Orthodox Faith*.

He goes on to say (p. 19):

All this development is no more than a more precise definition and explanation of those substantially unchangeable dogmas which has gradually come about during the course of the centuries because of the various errors and heresies which have arisen and which do not cease to exist in the bosom of Christianity.

He then concludes (pp. 20-21) that (1) the only source for orthodox dogmatic theology is Divine Revelation, that is, Scripture and Sacred Tradition; and that (2) the unchangeable foundation for this theology must be recognized as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed which contains in itself all the preceding creeds and which is accepted by the universal Church as the unchangeable expression of the faith for all centuries—and together with this Creed, as a supplement to it, also all the other doctrinal definitions of the holy universal and local Councils and of the holy Fathers, as mentioned by the Council in Trullo, and the creeds of St. Gregory the Wonderworker and that known under the name of St. Athanasius of Alexandria, as received and honored by the whole Church; and that (3) as a constant guide in the particular exposition of dogmas in orthodox dogmatic theology we must accept (a) the Orthodox Con-

fession of the Catholic and Apostolic Church of the East, (b) the Epistle of the eastern Patriarchs on the Orthodox Faith, and (c) the Long Christian Catechism of the Eastern Catholic Church (by Philaret Drozdov, Metropolitan of Moscow, 1867). The first and the third, he says, are particularly important in those parts in which is contained the explanation of the Creed.

N. Malinovskii was Rector of the Vologda Seminary around the turn of the century. He is the author of a rather important manual of *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Sergiev Posad, 1910). In this he says of Tradition (Vol. 1, pp. 81-94 passim):

Divine revelation was spread amongst the people and maintained by the Church not only by means of Sacred Scripture but through holy Tradition as well.

Then he gives the usual about the teachings of Christ and the Apostles that were not recorded in writing at the beginning. Then:

In the days of St. Irenaeus there were still some nations which had no Sacred Scripture at all. They contented themselves with holy Tradition only, or, as St. Irenaeus says, "without paper and ink they have their salvation written by the Holy Ghost in their hearts and they carefully observe the ancient tradition" (*Adv. Haer.* III, 4,2). Holy Tradition in the strict sense of the word is that part of divine revelation which had been received by the Apostles from Jesus Christ and transmitted by them to the Church under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, but apart from Scripture. . . . It is very difficult to define concretely the composition of holy Tradition in the strict sense of the word, or, rather, it is for the time being impossible. Its content is the common property of the Church's collective conscience and manifests itself in the Catholic Church by that testimony which we call the Voice of the Church. . . . Tradition in the broad sense involves the transmittal of divine Revelation in the Christian Church through the Sacred Scriptures and the care and transference of their spirit and sense of interpretation and comprehension. Tradition is not a source of divine Revelation in the proper sense of the term, but it is, rather, a guide to the use of divine Revelation, or a rule for the proper understanding of truths which were given to us by Revelation. In short, it is the testimony or voice of the Catholic Church. . . . This conscience, being united with the conscience of the individual members of the Church, could not withstand all the conditions involved in

the unchanging care of the truth, but its deficiencies and weaknesses are made up for by the Holy Ghost who ever guides the Church invisibly. . . . The voice of the Church, when speaking on matters of Faith, has these forms of external expression: 1) the ancient Creeds; 2) the so-called Apostolic Constitutions and the decisions of both the Ecumenical and the local Councils; 3) the ancient liturgies which were used or are still being used in the various Churches of the East and the West. . . ; 4) the writings of all the early Fathers of the Church, which appear as a particularly copious source of Tradition; 5) the early acts of the martyrs; and finally, 6) the whole practice of the early Christian Church relating to feasts and fasts, the construction of churches and their furnishings, the sacred acts and ceremonies, and, in general, everything pertaining to the order of divine service. . . . It is immediately evident that not all of what is included in the above sources is a part of the true apostolic teaching or law . . . only such things as meet the conditions of universal and successive adoption by the Church can be considered as the true expressions of the voice of the Church. . . . Holy Tradition is necessary as a guide to the correct understanding of Sacred Scripture. Not all of the truths of Divine Revelation are expressed fully and clearly in Sacred Scripture. Some are expressed fully and clearly in Scripture. Some are found in other truths in the same way as a conclusion is found in its premises.

Augustine, as he is usually called, was Rector of the Litov Seminary and later became bishop. He wrote a *Guide to Fundamental Theology*. In this work he treats Tradition at some length, much along the lines of Malinovskii. And he concludes (3rd ed., Moscow 1894, pp. 237-245):

Holy Tradition is just the same divine revelation as is the word of God, with this difference only, that it is the word of God handed down orally to the Church by Jesus Christ and the Apostles, while Sacred Scripture—the word of God, is contained in books written by inspired men and handed down to the Church in writing.

Then he goes on to speak of the possibility and the fact of the preservation of the contents of Tradition in its entirety and infallibility, speaking of the preaching of the Apostles and of how much of the tradition handed down by them was very early consigned to writing by the Apostolic Fathers and then in the early Creeds,

canons, liturgies, acts of the martyrs, the Fathers of the Church, and finally in the whole practice of the early Christian Church. He gives the signs of the Apostolic Tradition: its consistency with itself and with Scripture and the fact of its antiquity and its being claimed by the Ecumenical Councils and its preservation by the Church. He speaks of the Church as the treasury of Scripture and Tradition, and then:

So when we say that the Church is the preserver and interpreter of Sacred Scripture and Tradition, we do not mean all the faithful taken together as making up the Church, but only its representatives, its leading members, that is, the pastors and teachers of the Church, which is to say, its Hierarchy. . . . The infallibility of the Church does not consist in the pastors and teachers of the Church constantly receiving new revelations, but only in their strict and exact adherence, under divine guidance, to the original revelation preached by the Church.

And finally he says that truth is the universal agreement of the Fathers and teachers of the Church, but that they individually are not infallible, although when supported by the Councils they have the same authority as the Councils themselves.

Before going on I should like to mention Sylvester Malevanskii (1828-1908) who was rector of the Kiev Academy and later bishop. He is the author of one of the most important manuals of dogmatic theology in the Russian Church—*Essay on Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Kiev, 1892). In this he hardly touches Tradition but only speaks of Symbolics. I bring this in only to show how little importance many Orthodox theologians attach to Tradition.

Khristos Androutsos, a leading theologian of the Greek Orthodox Church and professor on the theological faculty of the University of Athens, is the author of *Dogmatic Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (Athens, 1907). Speaking of Tradition he says (pp. 7-8):

Tradition comprises the teachings of our Lord and the Apostles which concern the Faith. We say those teachings which concern the Faith, meaning that not all Tradition is a source of God's word but only that dogmatic tradition which comprises teachings of faith which are scantily and indistinctly given in Scripture and which uses this for the filling out of Scripture as well as for the explanation of those things contained in it in a general and in-

distinct manner. Because such teachings constitute an equally authoritative part of the Christian knowledge, taking account of this, one is persuaded that Sacred Scripture, as having been written for particular circumstances, neither proposes to be or is the full and systematic exposition of the faith transmitted by the living voice; and certainly the Apostles taught more than either they or their successors wrote. Scripture in various places presupposes the unwritten teaching and declares the parallel part through the written word of the whole Christian faith which was first transmitted by the living voice, where it says: "Stand fast and hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word or by our epistle" (2 Thess 2, 14). It has also rightly been maintained by Protestant theologians that one who accepts Scripture as a self-sufficient receptacle of the divine word changes it into something which it can neither be by its nature nor should be according to the purpose of our Lord, nor wants to be according to the same testimony, nor ever has been accepted as such in the ancient Church either theoretically or in practice. The Apostolic Fathers have recourse to the teaching by the living voice and particularly oppose this to the heretics, and they all confess the faith in Tradition, declaring substantially what Basil the Great says: "of the dogmas and preachings preserved in the Church, some we have from the written teaching and some handed down to us from the tradition of the Apostles *in a mystery*, both of which enjoy the same force in relation to religion" (*De Spiritu Sancto* 27,2).

Panyotis T. Bratsiotis, also a professor on the theological faculty of the University of Athens, treats of Tradition in an article which appears in an English translation by E. Every in *Biblical Authority for Today, a World Council of Churches' Symposium*, Westminster, 1951. This article is entitled "An Orthodox Contribution." From page 22:

. . . the tradition which is regarded as having equal honour and equal validity with the Bible in the Orthodox Church is not only ecclesiastical tradition, but principally the apostolic tradition, which being communicated by word of mouth from generation to generation, under the supervision of the divine Spirit, was preserved without change in the undivided Church of the first eight centuries. The Greek Orthodox Church recognizes no single office as having final authority in doctrinal matters. It regards its whole body as bearers of the true apostolic tradition and as protectors of Orthodoxy, in accordance with the apt formulation

in the Encyclical of the Orthodox Patriarchs in 1848—the guardian of Orthodoxy is the body of the Church, which is to say, the people themselves. The hierarchy, which meets at ecumenical councils, is the voice of the Church; the ecumenicity of these councils, however, and the infallibility of their decisions, are to be tacitly recognized by the whole body of the Church. Moreover this Church regards tradition as something not merely static, but also dynamic. On the other hand it does not believe that this dynamism should ever override tradition so far as to create new dogmas, as this would be contrary to the conscience and spirit of the ancient Catholic Church. This, however, does not signify that the apostolic tradition is treated in the Orthodox Church as static, as many heterodox people think it is, for in her it is regarded, and also it is, dynamic, being the treasure stored in the conscience of the Church, enlivened by the divine Spirit remaining in her, a treasure capable of clarification and exposition, without the alteration of its essential truth.

Sergii Bulgakov taught at the Orthodox Academy of St. Sergius. Although his theories on Sophianism are generally rejected by the Orthodox and although he is not strictly a theologian, yet he has given us one of the most lucid expositions of Orthodoxy in a book which he contributed to a French series on the religions of the world. This is *L'Orthodoxie*, Paris 1932. One section of this book is devoted to "la Tradition Ecclésiastique" (pp. 12-50). From there the following excerpts are taken:

Page 13: The fulness of the true faith and true doctrine is much too vast to be contained in the conscience of one isolated member of the Church; they are kept by the whole Church and transmitted by the Church from generation to generation as the Tradition of the Church. Tradition is the living memory of the Church, containing the true doctrine such as it is manifested in history.

Page 13: The unity and continuity of Tradition result from the fact that the Church is always identical with herself. The Church has a unique life guided at all times by the Holy Ghost.

Page 14: Scripture and Tradition belong to the unique life of the Church moved by the same Holy Ghost, who acts in the Church in manifesting Himself through Tradition and by inspiring the sacred writers. . . . It is this Tradition which bears witness to the value of the Sacred Books.

Page 21: We follow the course of history and the word of God

seems to evolve according to the degree of our understanding. It does not change in its content, but in its development which is accessible to human understanding.

Page 22: On the other hand there cannot be an imposed exegetic discipline. With us there is no "Biblical Commission" pretending to tie down and direct scientific study, forgetting that a servile science is no science and is of no use.

Page 26: Tradition is founded upon Sacred Scripture, of which it is the interpretation. [*And this is the key to Fr. Bulgakov's understanding of the exegesis of Sacred Scripture.*]

Page 38: Tradition is not a sort of archaeology which, through shadows, would bind the present to the past, nor a law—it is the fact that the life of the Church always remains identical with itself.

Page 39: So Tradition is not a book which would fix a certain moment of the development of the Church but a book which is always being written.

Then he tells how the oral Tradition of the Church became in part written—in particular, in the canons and dogmatic definitions of the Councils and the Creeds. Then, the maxim of St. Vincent of Lerins (*quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus traditum est*) is not entirely valid, because it excludes the possibility of new dogmatic formulae.

Page 43 sq.: Beyond the part of Tradition fixed by the Church as the *lex credendi* or the *lex orandi* or the *lex canonica* or the *lex ecclesiastica* there remains a vast domain of Tradition which does not have the same clearcutness and presents in a certain way a value to be sought for in theological conscience and science. The monuments of Tradition are, before all, ecclesiastical literature in the generally accepted sense of the term, the works of the Apostolic Fathers, the Fathers of the Church, and the theologians. Then come the liturgical texts, architecture, iconography, and finally the ecclesiastical practices and oral tradition.

Page 44: The measure of the fulness of this comprehension can vary. Certain periods can perceive with more or less clarity such or such an aspect of the doctrine of the Church. So, all that the living memory of the Church preserves forms the Tradition as far as its volume is concerned. The quality of ecclesiastical Tradition is the unique life of the Church moved by the Holy Ghost at all times. The life of Tradition consists in the inexhaustible

creative work of the Church through which are manifested the depths of its conscience.

Page 49: We have here to elucidate a question of principle. What is the organ of this infallible judgment—that is, of dogmatic pronouncements? Does it exist in the Church? This question brings to study the hierarchy of the Church. First of all, it is not useless to rectify an error often committed concerning the “Symbolic Books” of the Orthodox. Certain books called by this name . . . may have more or less authority, but they are not symbols of faith. Symbolic books in the strict sense of the word can hardly exist in Orthodoxy. If they did exist, they would replace and abolish Tradition.

These excerpts fairly well sum up Father Bulgakov’s views on Tradition. As can be seen, he is in substantial agreement with the rest, although he treats the matter much more fully. In fact, with few exceptions, I may say that all accepted Orthodox theologians substantially agree in their interpretation of the so-called “Symbolic Books” of Orthodoxy, so that it is easy to form a clear idea of the teaching on Tradition of what we may call the Orthodox Church. The conclusion which we draw from all this is that the historic teaching of the Orthodox Church on the nature and function of Tradition as a source of revelation is substantially in accord with the Catholic position. The principal divergence is in the identification of the organ of so-called active Tradition, which the Orthodox recognize in the conciliar (*sobornaya*) unanimity of the hierarchy and the practical consensus of the faithful, without reference to the petrine “persona” which in Catholic doctrine is the authentic expression of both of these authentic sources.

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