

Tradition in Orthodox Theology and Practice: Norm and Distortions

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Abstract:

Based on the classic patristic formulas and contemporary Orthodox theologians' reflections, the paper explores the phenomenon of Tradition. The author pays special attention to the characteristics which allow discerning between genuine Tradition and its distortions, or 'dark twins.' This set of issues is of paramount importance due to the fact that there are no rigid, formally defined criteria for identifying authentic Christian Tradition. The predicate of 'possession' is neither applicable here: any Christian believer (as well as any Christian community) is placed in a situation of making continuous spiritual and creative efforts to remain within the true Tradition and to confirm his or her life-long fidelity to it.

Keywords:

Tradition, Revelation, cognition of God, Church, Christian identity, eschatology, St Basil the Great, Nikolay Lossky, Søren Kierkegaard

The specifics of the Orthodox tradition and mentality are usually described by the formula: this is the Church of Tradition. This formula is often developed by considerations that it is this view that expresses most adequately the essence of apostolic succession. However, the reasoning stops here, as if the subject of the tradition and apostolic succession were exhausted with such a statement. Meanwhile, the main difficulties would be encountered when explaining how

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Tradition is present in the life of the Orthodox Church, what its values and ways of identification are. Truly speaking, I think, this habit does not mean only negligence, inattention or ignorance. Most likely, we face here a rarely identified but explicit problem. I would express it as a dilemma: whether Tradition is givenness or an area of effort. If the first, then it comes to Tradition in the same vein, when we recall different practices reproducing throughout the church history, which, in some interpretations, reflect or even make up Tradition of the Church. Sometimes, these practices are viewed, with reference to St. Basil the Great, as the primary expression of Tradition of the Church. Within this interpretation, difficulties of theological nature arise only when it is necessary to identify forms and practices of church people's life, in which Tradition is not be present, or at least its presence is problematic.

One might recall here that, also according to St. Basil the Great, 'what is adopted in mystery' is characterized not only and not so much by the fact that it is not explicit but primarily by what is experienced as a fruit of the Holy Spirit's action¹. As Nikolay Lossky said, "here the horizontal line of the 'traditions' ... crosses with the vertical, with Tradition – the communication of the Holy Spirit"². Together with Lossky, we observe that Tradition turns out to be a special experience of Silence, in which the action of the Holy Spirit is experienced³. This experience of silence creates tonicity of communication between members of the Church in its innermost expression that characterizes the very essence of Christianity. This is the experience of the crucified and risen Christ's presence in our existence, among us, invisible but clear and tangible through the action of the Holy Spirit. Obviously, since such experience cannot be guaranteed ("the Spirit breathes where He will"), it is not shaped on its own into any off-the-shelf forms and much less into material signs. The latter are only means of organizing our joint efforts that let us hope our gathering would be recognized worthy of such presence.

Accordingly, one can say that the Church of the Holy Spirit is able in its historical existence to produce, to select and to reject forms of life and ways to organize its effort. The Church has not only the ability to do all this but also relevant criteria of evaluating and orientating its future steps. "Tradition represents the critical spirit of the Church"⁴.

¹ Saint Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27. PG 32, 188-193.

² Lossky V., *Tradition and Traditions // In the Image and Likeness of God*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1974, p. 147.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 524.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 531.

Regarding Tradition as the power of the Holy Spirit and the charismatic ability of the Church makes us clarify the theological grounds for such an understanding of Tradition and its ontological status, as we are inevitably supposed to answer the question of what lets Tradition be so positively efficient and, at the same time, critically elective.

The theology of Tradition, oriented towards the very tissue of the life of the Church, necessarily places it into the system of relationships between the foundations that characterize the mystery of encounter and interaction between God and creation through human being. Firstly, it is the Revelation, initiated by the Creator and only by Him, and cognition of God, caused by the Revelation and oriented towards God. Together they constitute the experience of God and man moving towards each other. This experience is absolutely personal and untransferable by itself. Speaking in terms of Kierkegaard's philosophy, a leap into the abyss, suddenly turning into a flight skywards, is not a transferable experience. With that, seeking God implies tension. Only an awake and agile spirit is able to perceive the Revelation. Doesn't this agility mean the potency of moving towards the Source of Revelation, that is, to the Creator?

Thus, the Divine Revelation produces personal experience of moving towards God, as if the human spirit overwhelmed by the Revelation asks: who are Thou who maketh me obey to Thyself? Why can't I forget this call addressed to me? Without answers it is impossible to confirm the experience of the Divine Revelation.

The experience of the Divine Revelation and cognition of God implies their inner coherence, that is, confirmation that God who calls and God who answers is the one and the same Person. This new experience of unity of revelation and cognition produces also a new experience of inner harmony in human being. He discovers himself in an unfamiliar and inspiring condition – as a creation united in its being with the Creator Himself. We get the primary experience of inner continuity of human person, in which the person is the same and simultaneously quite different, because he lives with God.

At the same time, this purely personal and directly untransferable experience has only one purpose, namely its distribution. God is the Creator not of closedness but of openness. This is a fundamental paradox of the Divine Revelation, which is absolutely personal but also intended for being witnessed. Witness, in its turn, implies perception, aimed at being somehow reproduced. A fulfilled witness always means its fruitfulness. Accordingly, the fruit must be identified as an event having a constructive value to human life. In its turn, it can be identified only be with spiritual vision, pure and seeking, inclined to perceive life-creating force. And purity of vision depends on purity of thought and on seeking the spirit that

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guides it. Either the human spirit seeks consent with the Spirit of God for setting our spiritual vision right or not – alas, the alternative is strict.

Having produced fundamental life change in human image, the Revelation lets see and somehow ‘read’ this event. In other words, the Revelation can produce an upheaval, similar in nature to itself. If someone else has proven able to perceive the existential upheaval that occurred in the first case, then this person can also be captivated by this change, it attracts him and may result in an experience comparable with the Revelation. Although in the second case we deal with something that is mediated through ‘reading’ or what might be called the Scripture in its primary and inmost sense – what is written by the Lord Himself in fleshy tables of the human heart of everyone who seeks Him.

However, this ‘writing,’ derivative of the Revelation, should awaken something similar to questioning. As we have already mentioned, it is able to produce a new experience of recognizing God that shakes the foundations of the heart through showing the transfiguration of human person by the Revelation. Then, at the level of the Scripture and the corresponding experience called Tradition, the need for consent of another kind arises. It should be achieved among all those who have this experience. In other words, the difference is that Scripture and Tradition are common heritage. Scripture is addressed to any human spirit seeking God. Tradition is open to any spirit experiencing God’s presence. Tradition as well as Scripture is not only what goes on inside the human heart; this is also something other people can enter.

Thus, Scripture and Tradition primarily constitute the spiritual experience that can be accumulated and shared. Since this experience is common, it is also able to gather people together. That is why over time the need arises to capture it as a text.

This being said, Tradition as spiritual experience is more difficult to be recorded and translated into any empirically accessible form of text. In fact, this is an experience of learning what you have already anticipated. Descriptions providing evidence of this recognition obviously cannot be as easily unified. This suggests a panorama of witnesses, which can lead to experiencing greater unity of those who live through the Spirit. Even when we deal with the interpretation of the text of the Holy Scripture, what we call Tradition will not be the interpretation as such but the hidden spiritual mindset, which enables us to identify the appropriate meanings. It is a pure spirit that seeks harmony and unity. At the same time, as a spirit, it is agile and requires multiplying harmony.

The specificity of Tradition is not limited only to the difficulty of being recorded. Its fundamental feature is that Tradition turns out to be a crucial dimension, in which the experience of being in unity and active interaction of man with

God is concentrated and simultaneously checked for authenticity. Tradition acts as a final confirmation of the reality of theanthropic being. It is Tradition that confirms God recognizes and accepts our efforts to answer the Revelation, efforts that filled up and continue the experience of Scripture. Every time this confirmation comes through the growing experience of interpenetrating between God's and human's being. Moreover, this experience is not just open to further growing but also necessarily implies such continuation. Tradition of theanthropic being can neither stop nor exhaust itself.

It is pertinent to evoke the idea that Tradition of the Church is pure dynamics, a living stream, which only somehow crystallizes in historically changeable forms. Its 'dark twin' is statics, self-complacency devolving into smugness because of the *imaginary* possession of the truth⁵. However, the dynamism of Christian Tradition does not mean pure fluidity. Tradition has a strict and unambiguous orientedness: it draws the heart, full of 'drunk sobriety' (St. Gregory of Nyssa), towards God. Tradition thus produces breathless expectation and preparation to God's presence. Therefore, it is absolutely eschatological.

The most important difference between Tradition and any form of ethno-cultural tradition as a set of customs is its unidirectionality, theocentrism and eschatologism. Therefore, Tradition is not a reproduction of the order of existence but the authentic life, that is, growth accumulating the experience that our being belongs to God's life. Tradition of Christianity as accumulating eschatologism differs significantly from even philosophy-oriented being. The latter certainly creates a creative field of life effort. However, it lacks Christian power to accumulate the experience of genuine compresence with the truth, not to mention the eschatological movement towards the plenitude of the truth. We are revealed that the life is a path. The paradox is that it is the way of living within the already experienced plenitude, while it is absolutely impossible to possess this plenitude.

Then in addition to the dynamic nature, we must point out another fundamental feature of Tradition. For the people of it is God is the supreme form of creative activity because it accumulates the experience of overcoming the inertia of the original matter for the sake of pure creative activity of the spirit. Within this continuous succession of creatively reconstructing all our life together, the unified being of creator and creature is being constituted.

⁵ "Tradition continues always and now not less than formerly; we live in tradition and create it" (Bulgakov S. 1991. *Pravoslavie. Ocherki Ucheniia Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*. [The Orthodoxy: Essays on Teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church]. Moscow: Terra, first published in Paris: YMCA-Press. P. 77). "Tradition is not something static, but something dynamic; it is lighted at the fire of our enthusiasm" (*ibidem*, p. 89).

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Obviously, emphasizing the dynamism of the Tradition does not cancel the subject of correlation between Tradition and particular practices, shaped into material forms, with the following legitimate questions. First, how is the unity between the Spirit and largely variable practices provided? And second, how are various forms brought into accordance with this living spirit? Within these correlations we encounter obviously insufficient articulateness, which devolves into the Orthodox, specifically denominational, confidence that the mentioned correlations are carried out automatically. Accordingly, there is the risk of transforming Tradition into a custom or habit that provides theological, ideological and psychological grounds for fundamentalism, which is complacency due to an imaginary possession of truth, often accompanied by an aggressive resistance to any movement, all the more to any creativity.

But one ought to admit that even if the term ‘conservatism’ is applicable to describe the life of the Church, only one sense is reasonable: when it denotes a careful attitude to any genuine experience of cognition of God and the concern of not expunging anything valuable from spiritual memory. *Deus conservat omnia* (Latin: ‘God preserves everything’) is the only acceptable interpretation of the Orthodox conservatory approach. However, this interpretation implies maximum inclusiveness, because God can accept things that would never come to mind without creative effort of us who are, alas, yet mortal. Let us remember that the Lord does not only make everything new. In His creative activity He is also unpredictable. The entire New Testament is about overcoming quite pious standards, which in particular the Pharisees were so zealous for. Didn’t they consider themselves as the keepers of Tradition, although in fact they proved to be the keepers of questionable traditions of either real or fictional elders?

The continuity of the Divine Revelation in one living stream of Tradition is conditioned by the human heart open to breathing the hypostatic Spirit, seeking to serve the Creator and to follow His vocation. Living by inertia, in terms of symbols, ceremonies, casual local habits creates the most favourable conditions for the tradition of the elders to triumph over the divine revelation.

What if the main temptation in regard to Tradition is to lock it in a formal source or authority? This is not necessarily an institutional authority. The commitment to ‘the tradition of the elders’ is even more dangerous because simulates charismatic dynamism in a much more spectacular way. It is difficult to imagine the Lord’s warning to His disciples, ‘beware of the leaven of the Pharisees,’ losing its relevance.

The Church, gathered together and grown in numbers by the single spirit of Revelation and Cognition of God, unified and manifested in living Tradition, is the place where the paradisiacal experience of accordance is being implanted and

growing, within which its rich diversity blooms. For example, within this experience of accordance one can live with quite different interpretations of the Scripture. This image creates an impression that everything rests on piles driven into the air. Nevertheless, it is the most solid foundation of true theanthropic being, 'attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ,' because a single field of truth can exist only in such a flexible, dynamic mode. Once such fixed forms are admitted as obligatory for all, the very life with God will be threatened. Plant stakes cannot substitute plants, but, inexplicably, we rather often see those who are delighted with contemplating a garden, in which blossoming flowerbeds and fruit-bearing trees have been replaced with stones, sticks and ropes.

So, Tradition is an area of effort, in which the experience of God's presence is being renewed through the risen Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit. Both the experience and its renewing are purely spiritual and existential living. It is ecstatic and inspirational but also open to risks of various distortions and speculations. There is no formal protection guaranteed. These dangers can be avoided only through faithfulness to the Creator who has revealed Himself to us and adopted us through His Son, only through honestly recognizing one's infirmities in the face of the merciful Lord, a habitual unwillingness to self-sacrifice. At the same time, this is inspiration from seeing spiritual shift in other people. Once they were strangers to me but now they are my spiritual brothers and sisters whom I share my life with as a child, though of the Heavenly Father.

Perhaps, one of the most eloquent evidence that the Church is alive through creative dynamics of the Tradition was the apparently unexpected warning by Apostle John at the end of his first Epistle: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols". The idol of Orthodoxy, so to speak, is a false tradition, a fixed code guaranteeing that the 'current' of truth passes through your being aside from the risk of life-creation. Living with this faith, one can unwittingly expunge oneself from life and fall into spiritual self-delusion that everything happens to us is necessarily through the truth of Christ, especially if translated into an illustrative language of signs, suitable to us but not accepted by Christ.

In this case, connections between the present and the past completely lose their relevance. So does the future growing out from the present and normally problematizing it. Nothing can shake this type of mentality in its false confidence that it is exactly what Tradition finds its complete expression through. Although, considering the ambiguity of the word 'complete', we might suddenly agree: doesn't this 'orthodoxy' mean the end of the living Tradition?