

# Holy Tradition: Giving *and* Receiving

James Chater

It is a truism that Orthodox are traditional. But what do we mean by “tradition”? More specifically, how do we differentiate between “Holy Tradition” and tradition as mere habit or formalized custom? Orthodox believers frequently use the terms interchangeably, confusing the capital “t” variety with the lowercase “t” one, and all too often, this confusion is used to serve ideological ends. Just as, in a missionary context, an overzealous imposition of Christian “behaviors” and customs can often conceal a colonialist agenda, so an excessively narrow and reductionist view of tradition can serve reactionary, clericalist, or fundamentalist purposes.

When the Church fails to understand and transmit its own traditions adequately and appropriately, it falls prey to those who would construe them for their own purposes. In an age of globalized religion, where the Orthodox Church is adding significant numbers of converts, it becomes particularly important to distinguish Tradition from traditions, for the first is timeless while the other may bend to adapt to time and place. In an era of “fake news,” empty catchwords, and officially sanctioned lying, it has never been more important to seek a correct understanding of Tradition and traditions.

In this article, I will attempt to distinguish Holy Tradition from what I call “sacred tradition”—that is, human tra-

ditions and habits shaped by history. I will then discuss some of the difficulties the Orthodox Church faces in its ability to understand and interpret Holy Tradition correctly. I will also provide some pointers toward gaining a deeper understanding of Tradition and draw parallels between two overlapping types of transmission: temporal (Tradition) and geographical (mission).

Tradition—with a capital T—transcends our intellect and eludes definition, as emanating from a God who cannot be contained. However, it is useful at the outset to state the obvious: Tradition is, among other things, the memory of the Church. Remembrance is at the heart of Orthodox belief: we remember and pray for the dead (“Eternal memory!”) and we remember and relive the Last Supper whenever we receive the holy gifts at communion. Our feasts are, among other things, remembrances of events and people of the past. Just as important, Tradition involves remembering and applying what has been handed down to us by Christ through the apostles, the church fathers, the ecumenical councils, and also through all who have borne witness: martyrs, saints, theologians, practitioners of the ecclesiastical arts, and so on.

However, Tradition means neither an uncritical reverence for everything old nor blind obedience to customs laid down by routine or habit. It is far more

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than the setting down in words of the Church's teachings and doctrines; it is the "invisible and actual communication of grace and sanctification."<sup>1</sup> As such, Tradition can be recognized in a beautiful artistic creation or in an act of kindness, wisdom, or forgiveness as much as in a verbal formulation of doctrines, teachings, or rules.

Tradition is a relational process, implying both giving and receiving. The word derives from the Latin *traditio* used to translate the Greek word *paradosis* ("giving," "delivering," "passing on") in the New Testament. The Greek word also has a verb form, *paradido*.<sup>2</sup> Both *traditio* and *paradosis* denote a faithful adherence to the teachings that have been handed down from the apostles.

This giving of Tradition must be complemented by receiving and learning, a process which must not be understood as passive, but includes a calling to explore, to create, and to tease out how best to "translate" Holy Tradition in different circumstances. As Father Christophe d'Aloisio writes, "One is not the owner of what one receives, but rather the repository, with the idea that one is to make it bear fruit."<sup>3</sup> And the quality and nature of this fruit will be contingent on the terrain on which the seed of Tradition falls. Tradition as process requires the full participation of the Church in all its ecumenical, evangelical, pedagogical, and conciliar aspects. It cannot be reduced to an assemblage of "things" to be hermetically sealed off from the modern world. It is therefore important to include a discussion of the different layers of tradition, which I will call Holy Tradition, sacred tradition, and human traditions, along with a closely associated quality, habit. I will then discuss the importance of treating each category in a distinct way for the sake of the Church's unity, expansion, and mission.

The ambiguity inherent in the Church's often vague use of the word tradition was pointed out by Vladimir Lossky, who distinguished "Tradition" from "traditions" by comparing them to a vertical and a horizontal line. Drawing on Lossky's analogy, we may compare Tradition to a shaft of light which becomes visible only when it falls on a flat surface, while traditions are like the reflected images bounced off that surface. Lossky writes: "The pure notion of Tradition can then be defined by saying that it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, communicating to each member of the Body of Christ the faculty of hearing, of receiving, of knowing the Truth in the Light which belongs to it, and not according to the natural light of human reason."<sup>4</sup> Holy Tradition is therefore a force, an emanation from God that can be made manifest and tangible in various ways, including sacred traditions. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes that Tradition needs to be seen "from within."<sup>5</sup> Holy Tradition, which emanates from God alone, is an inner mystery, the full revelation of which will come to us only in the world to come (1 Cor. 13:12).

Holy Tradition manifests itself in what I call sacred traditions. This involves synergy between the Holy Spirit and human beings and thus can and will assume different forms in different times and circumstances. These sacred traditions are, to some extent, contingent on the realities of this world: language, taste, customs, geopolitical considerations. Sacred traditions are the outward forms Holy Tradition takes, including formulations of dogma, orders of service, liturgical texts and their musical dress, along with iconography and other ecclesiastical arts. Metropolitan Kallistos writes: "Tradition, while inwardly changeless (for God does not change), is constantly assuming new forms, which supplement the old without superseding them."<sup>6</sup>

Opposite page: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." First page of the Gospel of Matthew, Lindisfarne Gospels, c. 700–725. British Library.

<sup>1</sup> Filaret of Moscow cited in Vladimir Lossky, "Tradition and Traditions," in *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1974), 154.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:6; 1 Peter 1:18 (here *patroparadosis*, "tradition of the fathers," is used instead of *paradosis*).

<sup>3</sup> Christophe d'Aloisio, "Innovation and Tradition: An Orthodox Perspective," trans. Michael Berrigan Clark, *The Wheel* 2 (Summer 2015): 4.

<sup>4</sup> Lossky, "Tradition and Traditions," 152.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy [Metropolitan Kallistos] Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. ed.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 198. (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 198.

Not only must we be on guard to distinguish properly between Holy Tradition and sacred tradition, but we must also identify a further form of tradition that we might label human tradition, and its close associate, habit. Whereas sacred traditions incarnate Holy Tradition and exist for our grace and salvation, “human” traditions are referred to frequently in the New Testament, always as a deceit, a deviation, not to be mistaken for the true teaching or tradition emanating from God and handed down through the apostles (Mark 7:8, Col. 2:8). Human traditions are the common ritualization of religious principles in daily life and are often highly contingent on time and place. When taken too far, they often result in the replacement of the spirit by the letter and were thus a common object of Christ’s criticism. This does not mean that all human traditions are bad; rather, that the writers of the New Testament and the early church fathers were at pains to warn against deceitful attempts to pass off human, counterfeit traditions as the divine Tradition transmitted by the apostles.<sup>7</sup>

Human traditions often take the form of habit. Habit passed off as “tradition” is almost always bad, being incapable of communicating grace or sanctification. Maxime Kovalevsky, the great liturgist and church musician, pointed out that tradition is often confused with habit, taking the form of mechanical repetition of the routines of the immediate past.<sup>8</sup> He advocated a return to primordial liturgical and musical types as a means of spiritually feeding and instructing the faithful. As long as this “return to the source” is carried out sensitively, it can lead to spiritual as well as liturgical renewal.

Although Tradition is often presented as continuous, it is sometimes necessary to break with continuity—and therefore with habit—in order to return to Tradition.

We should never flinch from returning to first principles, reappraising our behavior and decisions in the light of the *fons et origo* of our Church. It is to be expected that at times pastoral considerations will militate against overly abrupt or speedy changes; however, we should always be willing to renounce cherished habits to embrace necessary change—for instance, in correcting the translation errors still found in our liturgical books.

When sacred traditions and human traditions and habits are accorded the reverence due to Holy Tradition alone, we are in danger of committing the same “hermeneutical blunders” that the Pharisees made during Christ’s ministry.<sup>9</sup> This reduction of tradition to a dead letter was at stake when Jesus angrily denounced this establishment for its hypocrisy and for oppressing the poor and vulnerable, and when, as he healed someone, he disregarded the pettifogging restrictions about working on the Sabbath. The religious leaders of the time failed to see the wood for the trees. Jesus came not to abolish the rules and customs but to reveal their deeper sense, enshrined in the supreme commandment that takes precedence and must when necessary be allowed to override the lower-order rules: love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37–9).

The Orthodox Church, perhaps because of the specific historical context in which it developed historically, has particular trouble when confronted with the changing ethos of the present day or place. Too often, it views Tradition in a simplistic and reductive manner in order to avoid confronting hard questions and working through them as a church. Tradition becomes an end rather than a means. Nostalgia and nationalism often play into this as well; whether the ideal is Paris in the 1920s, Byzantium in

<sup>7</sup> Ernesto M. Obregon, “Paradosis, an Important Greek Word, Part 02” *OrthoCuban* (blog), March 26, 2009, www.orthocuban.com/2009/03/paradosis-an-important-greek-word-part-02.

<sup>8</sup> Maxime Kovalevsky, *Retrouver la source oubliée: paroles sur la liturgie d’un homme qui chante Dieu* (Paris: Editions Presence orthodoxe, 1984), 101–3. See Cyrille Sollogoub, “Maxime Kovalevsky’s Legacy in the Realm of Liturgical Music,” *The Wheel* 24 (Winter 2021): 27–33.

<sup>9</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Mark Chater, *Jesus Christ, Learning Teacher: Where Theology and Pedagogy Meet* (London: SCM Press, 2020), 69.

the sixth century, or pre-revolutionary Moscow, a semi-mythic past is often invoked to provide some rule or standard for the Church of today. We stifle the spirit so that it can no longer blow, like the wind, “where it wills” (John 3:8).

Today the Orthodox Church is riven with bitter divisions, mainly of a jurisdictional nature, and in defending a particular point of view, canons are often cited out of context, without regard for the fact that they were made in response to geopolitical circumstances far different from those that exist today. This is a classic instance of confusing the letter with the spirit. A less feeble attempt to distinguish between the spirit and the letter of our canons and traditions could have resulted in more enlightened decisions concerning the jurisdictional conflicts and crises of recent years.

It would not be difficult to find many examples showing a flawed understanding of Tradition, but rather than going into more detail, I would like to conclude with a few pointers for discerning what Holy Tradition means and how to apply it in our particular circumstances.

Interpreting Tradition can be compared to translation, a field that is especially relevant to the “handing down” aspect of Tradition insofar as liturgical texts have to be translated from Greek or Church Slavonic into other languages. Any translator knows that a word-for-word gloss usually fails to convey adequately the sense of the original text; that it is necessary to seek the mind of the author working through the text, by unveiling the sense of whole phrases and sentences; and that a truly faithful translation will seek primarily to convey this mind, even if it means making changes in the literal sense of individual words and syntactical structures. A believer discerning how to enact Tradi-

tion is like a translator searching for the essential meaning behind the words. Whereas the translator tries to grasp the mind of the author, the believer reaches toward the mind of Christ.

Holy Tradition is therefore dynamic, unfolding in time; it is the Holy Spirit working in the Church from generation to generation, in a never-ending, call-and-answer, ecumenical-cum-evangelical process. This dialogue of the generations is captured by G. K. Chesterton: “Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.”<sup>10</sup> These “dead,” of course, are Saint Paul’s “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1).

There is a clear relationship between Tradition and evangelical work, and the two overlap. The latter is to space what the former is to time. Evangelism presents its own set of challenges: how to transmit truth while remaining respectful of the culture and customs of the receivers, and what language and imagery to use, reflecting Jesus’ question, “To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God?” (Luke 13:20; Mark 4:30).<sup>11</sup>

Tradition and mission overlap above all in translation of liturgical texts. This is a field in which it is critical to present Tradition in a sensitive and convincing manner without lapsing into obscurity or causing offence. This can give rise to some difficult dilemmas, as in the kontakion of the Nativity of the Mother of God:

In your holy birth, Immaculate One, Joachim and Anna were rid of the *shame* [emphasis added] of childlessness; Adam and Eve of the corruption of death. And so your people, free of the guilt of their sins, celebrate, crying: “The barren one gives birth to the Theotokos, who nourishes our life.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Bodley Head, 1909), 83.

<sup>11</sup> The imagery of our scriptures and liturgical texts may appear remote to modern sensibilities. This issue is explored in John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

<sup>12</sup> Translation from the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, available at <https://www.goarch.org/chapel/saints?contentid=198>.



G. K. Chesterton in 1915. Library of Congress.

<sup>13</sup> Translation from the Orthodox Church in America, available at <https://www.oca.org/saints/troparia/1000/09/08/102541-the-nativity-of-our-most-holy-lady-the-mother-of-god-and-ever-vi>. Thanks to the Rev. Ivan Moody for assisting me with the Greek text and its translations.

It would be hard to disagree that the word “shame” sends absolutely the wrong message, given the persistence, even into present times, of the view that infertility is a mark of shame or of God’s disfavor, an opinion that contradicts the values of the New Testament and the teachings of the Church. Yet we should also be careful not to falsify the meaning of the original text by replacing “shame” with an innovative word designed to soothe the modern sensibilities, for instance “tragedy.” Probably the most tactful solution is to omit the word altogether, as OCA translation does: “By Your Nativity, O Most Pure Virgin, / Joachim and Anna are freed from barrenness.”<sup>13</sup>

This approach is consistent with the emendation or omission of those words and phrases from the Holy Week ser-

vices that strike us today as anti-Jewish. At other times, a less literal translation would seem to be indicated. For instance, in the hymn to the Mother of God “Ti hypermacho” (Kontakion of the Annunciation), it is customary during services to replace the literal translation “I your city” with “we your people” or “we your servants,” in order to make it more relevant to worshippers today.<sup>14</sup>

Another field in which there is a need to correctly “translate” tradition is that of liturgical music. For churches outside of traditionally Orthodox regions, liturgical music often consists of adaptations of melodies from Russia, Greece, eastern Europe, and the Caucasus to translated hymns. When Orthodoxy comes into contact with western European people and their languages, the question arises as to whether this encounter ought to bear fruit in new musical creations—what I will call “new-language compositions”—not only in order to accommodate the sounds and structures of the new language but also as the free, creative response to an encounter with Tradition. Our answer to this question is likely to depend on whether or not we adopt the kind of reductive view of Tradition described above. In such a view (which I have directly encountered), Tradition should be expressed in a simple, literal manner, by replicating those chants seen as “canonical,” to the exclusion of new compositions, which are seen as posing an unnecessary risk.

By contrast, the broader view of Tradition—which considers that the Russians, Bulgarians, Georgians, and others gradually evolved their own musical traditions out of the particular genius of their different languages—sees no contradiction between Tradition and creativity, so that it is in fact only normal for new-language compositions to stand side by side with old-language

ones, as is often the case in the United States and Finland, but only rarely so in other countries. Furthermore, to exclude compositions in the new language can be just as dangerous as admitting them, for it splits the Church into an earlier, actively creative part and a more recent, passive part, in which any creative response to Tradition is stifled. Such a barrier threatens the unity of the Church (even if the intention is the opposite) and distorts the concept of Tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Referring back to Chesterton, the voice of the dead, though important, should never be allowed to drown that of the living. Tradition does not exclude creativity; rather, conservation and creativity are the twin bases on which Tradition rests—or at least they should be, for in practice, the former often dominates at the expense of the latter.<sup>16</sup> Creativity is the assurance of the reciprocal, relational nature of Tradition; it is nothing less than the human, personal response to the grace communicated by Tradition. When the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost, He appeared in the form of tongues of fire which separated and came to rest on those present, a symbol of personal responsibility and freedom (Acts 2:3). Creativity can include interpreting Tradition in new, unexpected ways; if these ways are accepted within the Church, they can in time form part of its sacred traditions. Likewise, when it comes to missionary work, dialogue and shar-

ing are more effective than imposing a fixed set of expectations. It is vital that the people being evangelized be given the space and freedom to express the Christian faith in their own way, which is bound to be influenced by their customs and culture. These observations apply not only to missionary work in regions encountering Christianity for the first time, but also to the “missionary” situation in which the Orthodox Church finds itself in regions that are not traditionally Orthodox.

We have seen that Tradition is a divine emanation, not reducible to texts or rules; that it is reflected and embodied in sacred traditions; and that it is relational, a dialogue between God and humanity and between successive generations of humanity. It is an important unifying force for our Church, and also the “glue” that holds together the sacred scriptures. Perhaps the best image of Tradition at work in time is to be found in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed recited in our Liturgy. After invoking the Trinity and summarizing the work of each of its members (“handed down from”), we move to the human aspect (“handed down to”), which sweeps us from the past into the present and on toward the Eschaton: “I believe in one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church; I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins; I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.” ✱

<sup>14</sup> James Chater, “Between Babylon and Pentecost: why the absence of a common translation should not be allowed to impede compositional creativity,” in *Composing and Chanting in the Orthodox Church*, Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Orthodox Music, University of Joensuu, Finland, 4–10 June 2007, 216–17.

<sup>15</sup> James Chater, “Dare! A plea for renewal in Orthodox Church music,” *Sourozh* 97 (2004): 42–53; James Chater, “Le chant liturgique francophone entre passé et future,” *Le messager orthodoxe* 164–5 (2018): 215–28.

<sup>16</sup> Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, “Creativity and Tradition,” February 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2e1ueg0uOsw>; Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 198–99.



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