

Innovation and Tradition: An Orthodox Perspective

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Note: The following article originally appeared in the French language journal Études: revue de culture contemporaine as the third part of a discussion on tradition and innovation in major Christian communions. The first two parts, a Protestant and a Roman Catholic perspective, are not reproduced here.

¹ Sergei Bulgakov, *L'Orthodoxie*, trans. Constantin Andronikof (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1980), 40.

One of the major theologians of the 20th century, Sergius Bulgakov, wrote the following with respect to the Orthodox Church and its relationship to tradition:

Nothing is more erroneous than the image, widespread in the West, of an Eastern Church, a Traditional Church, fixed in the motionlessness of exterior ritualism and traditionalism. Although one might observe such an attitude here and there, it shouldn't be considered anything more than a partial failing, a local weakness; it would not express what is essential about Tradition, which consists precisely in an inexhaustible stream of ecclesial life and which becomes known through its own creation. And so it is that Tradition must be creative. And it could not be otherwise, for, through the creativity of its life, Tradition takes on life in our very selves with its power and depth. This creative work is not at all individualist or arbitrary, rather it is the ecclesial, catholic witness that the Spirit dwelling in the Church gives of itself.¹

Indeed, the epithet “orthodox” often carries a negative connotation; sometimes it is interpreted as a synonym for *conservative*, at other times as *unchangeable*—even *fundamentalist*—or, more trivially, as *narrow*. It must be recognized that even today, for some

portion of Orthodox Christians, this formalist interpretation constitutes grounds for pride, running counter to the teaching of theologians such as Bulgakov. In fact, when it is defined theologically, Orthodox Christianity is far removed from budgetary “orthodoxy” or “orthodox” Marxism, which both represent rigorous and precise forms of the objects in question. It is well justified to conceive of the Orthodox Church as a space of openness to critical propositions and to free theological discourse.

In the same manner as the question of orthodoxy, the notion of tradition, as the ecclesial theologies conceive of it, constitutes a philosophical challenge for the contemporary world: Does the aspiration to liberty not render crippling any reference to tradition, to that which has been transmitted and passively received? How is the autonomy claimed by the human person compatible with a dogmatic teaching one is obligated to obey? One aspect of this question inevitably sends one back to an existential debate inherent in the life of every human being, whether a religious believer or not: the articulation of obedience and liberty. In theological terms (contrary to ordinary portrayals), obedience cannot be reduced to



a spirit of servitude; rather it is a way of actively listening, a fact of the relationship between persons animated by love.

One of the keys to understanding the resolution of the dialectic between individual autonomy and heteronomy is found in ecclesiology: the relationship with God is never lived independently of the relationship to our brothers and sisters in humanity. According to Bulgakov, God “teaches us to address Him saying ‘Our Father’ and not ‘My Father,’ which by that very fact brings every human ‘me’ into the catholicity of ‘us.’” Tradition regains, from that moment forward, a communitarian dimension to the experience of faith, a dimension that cannot be exhausted by the experience of an individual alone.

Rather than approaching the problem philosophically only, it is more pertinent to approach the question historically as well. Two constituent parts of the idea of tradition can be distinguished. The history of Christian communities shows the constant character of certain elements across

ages and cultures, but also the more contingent character of certain secondary traditions. John Meyendorff, another Orthodox theologian of the last century, on the basis of several patristic authorities, writes: “One cannot grasp the real sense of Tradition without keeping in mind the condemnation of ‘human traditions’ by the Lord himself. One must not indeed confuse the one holy Tradition, which constitutes the identity of the Church through the centuries and which is the organic and visible expression of the life of the Spirit in the Church, with the accumulation of human traditions in the historic Church; the latter are inevitable, often creative and positive, sometimes sinful, but always relative.”² Meyendorff illustrates his point by referring to Photius the Great, who preached with vigor on the virtue of the multiplicity of secondary practices and doctrines and their connection to the catholic teaching of the ecclesial faith. The ordination of married men, the wearing of the beard by priests, fasting on Saturdays, all these arise, according to Photius, from local traditions. “The reasonable man respects the practices and the laws of others; he considers that it is neither erroneous to observe them nor illicit to violate them,” Meyendorff cites.

Indeed, the principal characteristic of the ecclesial tradition in relation to other human traditions is tied to the Church’s dogmatic function. This function allows the Church, which takes its life from the divine-humanity of Christ, to assume all of history while transcending the historical contingencies of space and time. Although in communion with the resurrected Christ, the Church is no less earthbound and in possession

² Jean Meyendorff, “Le sens de la tradition,” *La Tradition: La Pensée orthodoxe*, ed. Constantin Andronikof (Lausanne: l’Âge d’Homme, 1992), 157.

of its own mission in the history of the world: its historical path must assume the temporal dimension. Ecclesial discourse must accept the test of time and questioning from the world in which that discourse resounds.

However, more than the objective content of tradition, which is not easily defined, it is the ethical posture in which the faithful find themselves that appears as the principal factor of innovation in the Church. Indeed, tradition is the gift of the Holy Spirit to each generation: by receiving the gift from preceding generations, the faithful find themselves in a truly eucharistic position. One is not the owner of what one receives, but rather the repository, with the idea that one is to make it bear fruit. The seed of the Word that falls on good soil bears fruit; it is not intended for preservation in order to be handed back to the one who gave it.

As a eucharistic process, therefore, tradition manifests a fundamental eschatological aspect of the Church: its roots plunge deep into the *eschaton*. They are oriented toward the future. It is the eschatological fulfillment of the Church, and not its past, which should determine its present. Tradition appears, from that perspective, as the source of that eschatological dimension that makes Christianity

something other than a religion of the book, even if it incorporates *the* Book. One can take an analogy from the realm of education. The term of an apprenticeship is reached when the apprentice surpasses his master; so, in the ecclesial tradition, it is appropriate to conceive of this potential to surpass preceding generations in an analogous way.

Thus, contrary to the logic of natural causality which insists that the past determine the present, as illustrated, for example, by the Indian faith in karma, the Church's theological understanding of tradition upends everything: it makes the body of the Church into an inverted tree, with its roots planted firmly in the heavens.

To return to the original question, we can then understand in what manner the ecclesial notion of tradition transcends the philosophical dialectic between the autonomy and heteronomy of the thinking subject: conceived not as normative historical baggage, loaded with doctrinal, ethical, or hermeneutical models extrinsic to the faithful, tradition constitutes an historical deposit of inspiring examples, virtually meta-historical, filtered by the communal wisdom of the ecclesial body which, by the faith, hope, and love that animate it, is able to discern Tradition and the traditions. ✱



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