

TRADITION AND TRADITIONALISM

PLESTED, Marcus (Dr.)

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What is tradition? What does it mean to be traditional? These are questions, which the Orthodox, in particular, are frequently called upon to answer. After all, we claim to be a traditional Church, one which follows the tradition of the holy fathers. We also have a certain tendency to doubt the ‘traditional’ credentials of the other mainstream Christian denominations. In fact, the question of the meaning of tradition is one of the most pressing and significant issues bearing upon the Orthodox Church today, both in terms of her own life and in the ecumenical arena. In trying to grasp the nature of tradition, we are led to consider not only the nature of our relationship with the past but also, and more importantly, the very nature of our Christian faith – its source, its context, its aim. The question ‘what is tradition?’ also requires us to ask ‘what is man?’, ‘what (and where) is the Church?’, ‘what (or rather who) is God?’.

Of course I shan’t be answering all these questions in what follows, but I shall be exploring some of the main issues involved in the attempt to unravel, to discern, the meaning of tradition. It is fair to say that there are few theological notions more misunderstood than tradition. In modern usage the word ‘tradition’ is most commonly defined in chronological terms, denoting that which is in some way received or handed down from the past. The emphasis here is very much on the past, and behind this definition is a very post-Enlightenment sense that that which is from the past is necessarily outdated and therefore useless. In this way of thinking, to be traditional is to accept unthinkingly the absurdities and credulities of the ‘long dark age’ that preceded the modern era. It is to be stuck in the past, to be unoriginal, uncritical, uncreative. I hope to show in this talk quite how flawed this analysis is and how foreign it is to the authentic nature of tradition.

To get closer to a more authentic understanding of tradition we can begin by looking at the etymology of the term. The word ‘tradition’ derives from the Latin *traditio*, equivalent to the Greek *paradosis*. Its primary meaning is not chronological but dynamic and inter-personal, referring to the ‘handing over’ by someone of something to someone. In other words it denotes both the process of transmission and the content of that which is transmitted. Thus at its very heart tradition implies relation – someone to give and someone to receive, and of course something to be given and something to be received. The Catholic theologian Yves Congar puts this very well, treating tradition as a chief example of that general law by which man depends upon others. It is part of the human condition (and indeed of the whole ecosystem) to depend on others and this inter-dependence is, therefore, also part of the Christian life. Just as we cannot give ourselves life in the natural sphere, so we also depend upon others for our supernatural life. In the normal course of events we receive our faith from others; we cannot baptise ourselves. This analysis gives us some pointers that will help us in our attempt to discern the meaning of tradition – that it is dynamic, that it is inter-personal, that it is to be understood within the context of a community. But it still leaves us with some way to go before we can have a real sense of what tradition actually is.

One thing tradition isn't is a sort of supplement or addition to Scripture. In fact it has been a feature of much Reformation and post-Reformation theology, both Protestant and Catholic, to assume that tradition is a kind of alternative source of revelation to Scripture. Thus the Protestants have rejected tradition in their quest for a purely Biblical theology, a quest summed up in the phrase *sola scriptura*. The Catholics on the other hand have all too frequently, with some noble exceptions, treated tradition as a source for doctrines that cannot be proven out of Scripture (e.g. papal infallibility, the bodily assumption of the Mother of God). Both positions tend to juxtapose Scripture and tradition, assuming they are both to be understood primarily as objects, as data of revelation to be accepted or rejected according to one's particular theological position.

It should already be obvious to you this assumption represents a profound misunderstanding of the nature of both Scripture and tradition. The two simply cannot be separated: the one conditions and informs and shapes the other. There never was Scripture without tradition, nor can tradition be conceived of without Scripture. When St Paul speaks of the gospel, he is not referring to a written document but to the 'good news', the *euangeleion* – the actions and teachings of Christ transmitted by him to the apostles and by them to the world at large. When the gospel was eventually set down in writing, it was already a record of a tradition, of something that had been 'handed over' from person to person. Scripture thus took shape within the Christian community. It was the Christian community that produced the Scriptures and which determined which writings would enter the canon of the New Testament. In other words Scripture does not exclude but rather assumes tradition. The Bible can only be understood in the context of the Church – the community that produced it in the first place.

It is also important to recognise that the words of Scripture always remain secondary to the primal fact of the incarnation of the Word. Taken in and of itself, the text of Scripture is a dead letter, a *lettre morte*. The words have life and meaning only with reference to the incarnate Word who is their life-giving source. As Ignatius of Antioch put it: 'For me my archives are Jesus Christ; my inviolable archives are his Cross and his death and his resurrection, and the faith which comes from him' (*Epistle to the Philadelphians* 8.2). To quote Congar again, 'God does not manifest himself in words alone, and so ultimately in ideas, but in realities'. The words of Scripture have meaning only with reference to the person of the incarnate Word. They are there not so much as a historical record or a collection of good advice but rather as a means of bringing us into contact with God, as a way of establishing a relationship with God. This is made very clear in the opening of the first epistle of John:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life [...] that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1 1-3).

This is one of the clearest statements the Bible gives us as to the nature and purpose of Scripture. We are not dealing simply with knowledge of what Christ said or did but rather with the extension to us of the apostles' encounter with the living Christ. Christ.

The apostles weren't sent out into the world because they knew a lot about Christ but because they were *with Christ*. And it is in and through the tradition of the apostles that we are brought to share in that fellowship. In other words it is in and through the community of the Church that we come to share in communion with God.

This sense of tradition as community and communion (*koinonia*) is, I think, a helpful one. It underlines the fact that tradition is not so much a thing which we receive as the context within which we are received into the divine life. Going further, we can say that the tradition is the work of God in the world, the life of the Spirit in the Church. As Christ sent his apostles into the world he also promised them the gift of the Spirit: 'But the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things [...] He will guide you into all truth.' We don't simply have to rely on texts and manuscripts, but we have the Spirit himself amongst us. This operation of the Spirit is developed by St Basil the Great in his *On the Holy Spirit*. He speaks of the Spirit as an 'illuminating power' by which we see God, the light in which we see light. This is an intuition picked up on by Vladimir Lossky in his essay 'Tradition and traditions':

Tradition is the unique mode of receiving the truth. 'It is not the content of Revelation, but the light that reveals it [...]; it is not the truth but a communication of the Spirit of Truth, outside of which the Truth cannot be received [...] The pure notion of tradition can 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 if human reason.

Tradition in this way of thinking is not what we perceive or know but that which makes it possible for us to perceive or know anything at all. It is the condition of the possibility of all meaning. In more biblical terms, it is the life of the Spirit in the Church, that which makes us sons in the Son and prays within us crying 'Abba Father' (Romans 8:15). To quote Irenaeus again, 'Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth'.

All this should be more than enough to refute the notion that tradition is no more than unthinking attachment to the past. But what does it all mean in practice? And how do we know when we are in the tradition, and when we are simply in error? How do we know where the Spirit is (and consequently where the Church is)?

I'm not sure there are any infallible answers to these questions – I certainly don't have them. But we can in what remains of this talk try and consider some of the practical implications of the understanding of tradition I've been outlining.

A helpful distinction to bear in mind is the familiar one between tradition and traditions. This is defined very well by John Meyendorff:

The one Holy Tradition, which constitutes the self-identity of the Church through the ages and is the organic and visible expression of the life of the Spirit in the Church, is not to be confused with the inevitable, often creative and positive, sometimes sinful and always relative accumulation of human traditions in the historical church.

In other words we have to distinguish between the substance of the faith, that which has a direct bearing on our salvation, and human traditions, the various ways in which that faith is presented. It is important to recognise that this doesn't mean human traditions are worthless, but rather that they only have meaning in relation to that which belongs to substance of the faith. To give an example – the celebration of the eucharist, the divine liturgy, belongs to the substance of the faith. It is essential for salvation. However the incidental details of the liturgy – the rite used, the language, the vestments, candles and incense are not essential to salvation. They are secondary, relative, and most not be treated as absolute. [cf Schism of Old Believers]. That is not to say they are without importance, but that they derive their importance from their relation with the essential substance of the liturgy – i.e. the communion in the Body and Blood. In other words traditions have meaning only as expressions of the tradition.

The distinction between tradition and traditions is essential both for Orthodox unity and within the ecumenical framework. It has to be recognised that a wide variety of practices and beliefs can be encompassed within a unity of faith. In the early Church each local Church expressed its faith in its own language with its own liturgical rite and even with its own baptismal creed. There was however no sense that this diversity indicated any sort of division over the faith. And in the theological arena, two very different schools emerged – that of Alexandria (more mystical, allegorical, focused on the underlying reality of things) and that of Antioch (more down to earth, focused on the tangible, human) – but again with no division of faith. This essentially catholic mentality [explain] held for many of the earlier debates between the Greek East and Latin West. In the ninth century for example, when the Churches of Old and New Rome were split over a number of issues it was recognised by the then Patriarch of Constantinople, Photius, that 'only those practices can threaten Church unity which have a doctrinal implication'. At the time this meant that while questions such as clerical celibacy and the pattern of Lenten fasting were not barriers to unity, the recitation of the Creed including the *filioque* did threaten that unity.

Another obvious implication of the understanding of tradition I've sketched has to do with the way we do theology. While our faith remains the same throughout history, it can and must be expressed differently according to the demands of history. Thus it is in no way sufficient for the Orthodox simply to repeat what the Fathers said. On a very basic level, the Fathers simply do not address issues such as evolution, genetic engineering, nuclear weapons. They weren't faced with modern western feminism, the environmental crisis, post-modernism. And more profoundly, simply to repeat what the Fathers said is to betray their own sense of the nature of theology. It is no accident, as Bishop Kallistos (Ware) puts it, that the symbol of the theologian is not the parrot but the eagle. The Fathers used the linguistic and conceptual tools available to them to give answers to the concerns of their day within the context of the living tradition inherited from the apostles. We have to do the same, to apply that which we have inherited to the overriding concerns of our age. In other words to acquire the 'mind of the Fathers', the ability to translate eternal truth into historical terms. Of course this is easier said than done – but that mustn't stop us from trying.

A truly traditional theology is one, which is original and creative. It goes back to the sources, the origins, in order to re-present, to manifest anew, the unchanging truth that

(or rather who) lies at the heart of the faith. Orthodoxy does not mean conservatism – in fact most heresies are deeply conservative (as for example Arianism and Iconoclasm). Orthodoxy has often required theological breakthroughs – the *homoousios*, the christological developments of the C5-C7, the theology of the icon, the essence-energies distinction.

There is an enormous difference between tradition and traditionalism. Between a living faith and a dead conservatism. As the great historian of doctrine Jaroslav Pelikan put it: ‘Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living’.

This I think is a very fitting note to end on. Tradition is all about life. It is about the now, not the past. It is about the life of the Church, which is nothing less than the life of Holy Spirit. It is about constant renewal and not mindless acceptance and repetition. It is not doing what our fathers did but being what they were – knowing, confessing and experiencing God as they did. So, to finish with an exhortation: be radical, be original, be creative – be traditional!