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III

Scripture and Tradition in the Orthodox Church

James Stamoolis

ORTHODOXY AS THE TRUE CHURCH

The concept of being the true Christian church is the dominant theme of Eastern Christendom. 'Orthodoxy is the Church of Christ on earth.'¹ There is a strong, even overpowering sense of tradition that envelops the whole body of believers.² This awareness is a mark that affects everything about the church. Panagiotis Bratsiotis asserts that the fundamental principle of Orthodoxy is 'the idea that the Orthodox Church adheres to the principles and piety of *early, undivided Catholic Church*'.³

¹ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1935), p. 9. This is the opening sentence of Bulgakov's work on the church.

² This concept is stressed in teaching Orthodox youth about their church. There is an emphasis on being the true church. Cf. the Sunday School manual by Stan W. Carlson and Leonid Soroka entitled *Faith of Our Fathers* (Minneapolis: Olympic Press, 1962), p. 6.

³ 'The Fundamental Principles and Main Characteristics of the Orthodox Church,' in *The Orthodox Ethos*, ed., by A. J. Phyllippou (Oxford: Holywell Press, 1964), p. 24.

According to the Eastern Orthodox, the early church was steadfastly devoted to holy tradition and therefore this is an essential characteristic that must be maintained.⁴ 'We derive our knowledge of the teaching of the Christian Religion from Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition, which we therefore call the *sources of our Religion*.'⁵ It is thus a 'treasure' that must be carefully guarded.

There have been overtures from Protestant Churches to the Eastern Church since the Reformation. None has been successful at bringing about union, any more than the attempts at union in the waning centuries of the Byzantine Empire when the East sought the military might of the West. All have floundered on the exclusivistic claims of the Orthodox Church. At the heart of these claims is the position that the Orthodox Church and only the Orthodox Church has guarded the deposit of divine truth. p. 132

THE TWO SOURCES OF REVELATION

The official position of the Orthodox Church is stated very distinctly in several places.⁶ The *1962 Almanac* of the Greek Archdiocese of North and South America contains the following statement:

Eternal truths are expressed in the Holy Scriptures and the Sacred Tradition, both of which are equal and are represented pure and unadulterated by the true Church established by Christ to continue His mission: man's salvation.⁷

In the *Greek Orthodox Catechism*, Divine Revelation is identified as the source from which Christianity draws all its truths.

As, however, those things which God revealed to man were promulgated either from mouth to mouth, or by the written word, we say, therefore, that Christianity has two sources: the oral Divine Revelation or *Holy Tradition*, and the written Divine Revelation or *Holy Scripture*.⁸

While all revelation comes from God so that one can speak of a single divine source or single Christian tradition, there is still the concept of the two channels in which this revelation reaches the church. Indeed according to the Orthodox Church, it is imperative to think in terms of these two channels because not everything necessary for salvation can be found in Scripture.

Archbishop Michael clearly expresses this point of view when he writes, '... there exist in Tradition elements which, although not mentioned in the New Testament as they are in the Church today, are indispensable to the salvation of our souls.' An example is how tradition supplies the words of invocation at the Eucharist. Without these words, '... It is

⁴ Stefan Zankov, *The Eastern Orthodox Church* trans. by Donald A. Lowrie (London: SMC Press Ltd., 1929), p. 33.

⁵ Frank Gavin, *Some Aspects of Contemporary Greek Orthodox Thought* (Milwaukee: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1923), p. 17. Gavin is quoting the *Orthodox Catechism* of Balanos which was published in Athens in 1920.

⁶ One must be careful to distinguish between official positions (those held by the church at large as a result of the decisions of ecumenical councils or local councils that have received universal support) and the theologoumena, i.e., theological opinions. Many beliefs are theologoumena and are not binding on other believers. Cf. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 319.

⁷ *1962 Almanac* (New York: Greek Archdiocese of North and South America. 1962). p. 195.

⁸ Constantine N. Callinicos, *The Greek Orthodox Catechism* (New York: Greek Archdiocese of North and South America, 1960), p.6.

impossible to have the sacred mystery of the Eucharist; but without the mystery ... there is no salvation for the soul.’⁹

Orthodox theologians are in agreement that there is no conflict existing between the two sources. Instead, the two sources are viewed as complementary. The whole content of Christian tradition provides the dogmatic base for the church. The Bible is part of this overarching tradition. The several components of the tradition are also expressions of the source of ultimate authority, the Triune God.¹⁰ p. 133

The content of the tradition is found in the decisions of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, certain local or regional councils, the statements of individual bishops, the Fathers, the Liturgy, canon law and icons. Of the above, the Ecumenical Councils have irrevocable authority. However the process of acceptance of a council as ecumenical was by no means automatic. The Council of Nicaea (325) was not recognized for more than fifty years, but it later became the symbol of what an ecumenical council was to be. The Council of Ephesus (449), which was declared to be ecumenical, was later repudiated. How does one determine which councils are ecumenical? The final judge of a council is the Holy Spirit. This is because any council which truly represents the church and is gathered together in the name of Christ ‘will certainly be inspired by the Holy, Spirit and will therefore be infallible’.¹¹ The Spirit expresses himself through the church. Thus we can speak of the church recognizing this or that council to be ecumenical. The period of the Ecumenical Councils has great significance for Orthodoxy. It is regarded as a normative period because not only were the great dogmatical forms determined, but also the basis of the canon law was laid down.

THE ROLE OF TRADITION AS THE INTERPRETER OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Eastern Orthodoxy considers the Bible to be the possession of the church. Therefore it follows that the church, not the Bible, has final authority. The Bible is only one aspect of the deposit of divine revelation given to the church. As the guardian of this divine revelation, the church has the sole right and obligation to interpret and convey the message of the Bible. ‘The Church alone can interpret Holy Scripture with authority.’¹²

It has always been admitted that there are portions of the Scriptures that are unclear. Within the Bible itself, a warning is given against those who would use the sacred text for their own ends.¹³ However, it appears that the church’s right of interpretation covers not

⁹ ‘Orthodox Theology,’ *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, III, 1 (Summer, 1957).

¹⁰ Cf. the article ‘Tradition and Traditions,’ *St. Valadimir’s Seminary Quarterly*, VII (1963), 102–114 by Metropolitan Athenagoras in which he speaks of all Christian tradition stemming from Christ and his life. The Metropolitan distinguishes four channels, not just two (written and unwritten tradition). He laments the lack of interest in the other channels, the theandric life of Christ and the reproduction of that life in his apostle. A similar viewpoint was expressed in the decrees of Vatican II. The ‘Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation’ speaks of the unity of sacred tradition and sacred Scripture. Walter Abbot, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: American Pres, 1966), p. 117. Cf. Christopher Butler, *The Theology of Vatican II* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, Ltd., 1967), pp. 41–46. Also cf. G. C. Berkouwer. *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism*, trans. by Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 89–111.

¹¹ John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church, Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*, trans. by John Chopin (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962), p. 31.

¹² Ware, *The Orthodox Church* p. 207.

¹³ For Example, Peter speaks about the ignorant (*amathesis*) and unstable (*asterktoi*) who twist the difficult parts of Paul’s letters as they do with other Scriptures. [2 Pet. 3:16](#).

only what might be considered obscure passages, but covers the whole text. 'Orthodox, when they read the Scripture, accept the guidance of the Church.'¹⁴ Ware cites as his authority the *Confession of Dositheus*. This seventeenth century document arose out of the conflict between 'traditional' Orthodoxy and the Calvinistic party of Cyril Lucar. It is admitted by Orthodox theologians that the reaction to Calvinism borrowed from Roman Catholic sources. And while p. 134 Dositheus is regarded as being Orthodox in spirit, he did employ Latin terminology in his *Confession*.¹⁵ Ware refers to Article II in the *Confession of Dositheus* which is in essential agreement with the Tridentine decree. Phillip Schaff gives the following summary of the article:

The Holy Scriptures must be interpreted, not by private judgment but in accordance with the tradition of the Catholic Church, which can not err, or deceive, or be deceived, and is of equal authority with the Scriptures.¹⁶

It should be remembered that this confession was a point by point refutation of the confession of faith circulated under the name of Cyril Lucar. Article II of Lucar's confession maintained that the authority of the Scriptures is superior to that of the church. In his second edition, the perpicuity of Scriptures in matters of faith is declared.¹⁷

Two things should be clear. The first is that the Orthodox Church clearly rejected the Reformation position of the authority of the Scriptures. The overwhelming sentiment against such views is indicated by the three-fold anathema pronounced by the Synod of Jerusalem (1762) against the heretical Calvinistic doctrines.

The second point to note is that the *Confession of Dositheus* holds to a two source theory. Both Scripture and tradition are necessary for a correct understanding of the Orthodox faith. The problem is what is the relationship between them. How does tradition serve as an interpreter of the Scripture? To answer this question, we must look at the hermeneutical principles used by the Orthodox Church. It is an exceedingly difficult area to investigate but there are some important distinctions made by Orthodox scholars. Writing in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Nikos Nissiotis attempts to offer aid in the area of the prolegomena to hermeneutics. He outlines several key principles that the Orthodox believer must take into account 'before entering the complexities of the hermeneutical problem'.¹⁸

Nissiotis deals with the key issue of authority. His conclusion is that the authority belongs to the church, but that this authority relies on the believing community, both clergy and laity. What significance does this have for exegesis? This presents an entirely different question from the p. 135 question faced by the West, in both the Roman Catholic

¹⁴ Ware, *Orthodox Church* p. 208.

¹⁵ Cf. John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962), p. 96.

¹⁶ *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, n.d.), p. 63 The Greek text of the *Confession of Dositheus* is found in *Creeds*, Vol. II, pp. 401–444.

¹⁷ *Creeds*, Vol. I, p. 57. For the complete text of Lucar's confession see *The Synod of Sixteen Seventy-two: Acts and Decrees of the Jerusalem Synod held under Dositheus Containing the Confession Published Under the Name of Cyril Lukaris*, trans. and ed. by J. N. W. B. Robertson (London, 1899, reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1970). The *Confession* is also found in George A. Hadjiantoniou, *Protestant Patriarch: The Life of Cyril Lucaris (1572–1638)* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961), pp. 141–145. Lucar was a regularly elected Patriarch of Constantinople who was a Calvinist. His *Confession* is a high water mark of Protestant influence in the Orthodox Church as far as the hierarchy is concerned.

¹⁸ Nikos A. Nissiotis, 'The Unity of Scripture and Tradition, an Orthodox Contribution to the Prolegomena of Hermeneutics', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, XI, 2 (Winter, 1965–66), 204.

and the Protestant churches. The discussion about authority or the guarantee of right biblical exegesis is foreign to the Orthodox Church. The conception of exegesis is totally different. Nissiotis attempts to express the Orthodox hermeneutical principles regarding authority in the following way.

The Orthodox regard exegeses as an offering of the whole community, as the voice of the Church in a given situation, a reinterpretation which helps the believers struggling in this world and for this world to readapt the message of the Gospel to a new situation.¹⁹

This is really the key to the Orthodox Church's concept of the unity of tradition and Scripture. Everything revolves around the concept of the church as a whole being the guardian of truth. Therefore the other principles that must be believed before the problem of hermeneutics is discussed all revolve around the church. For example, Nissiotis does not want hermeneutics left as the exclusive domain of New Testament scholars and exegetes. He feels that the specialist is more concerned with the methodological problem and does not pay attention to the other uses of the Bible, if only for their devotional or liturgical life.

Thus everything is arranged around the ecclesiological presupposition which views the church as the ultimate authority on earth. Furthermore, the church is the central focus of all Christian work. All the gifts of the Spirit were given to enable her to be strengthened. However, the prophetic charisma was not exercised by Paul on the question of receiving Gentiles into the Church until he had received the unanimous support of the Church in Jerusalem ([Ac. 15:22](#)). Nissiotis sees this approach to be a key principle in hermeneutics. "This phrase "Then it seemed good to the apostles and elders, with the whole church," must be the basis for all efforts to build up the Christian community and interpret the Scriptures.'²⁰

The needs of the witnessing community are met by the application and interpretation of Scripture. The task is undertaken for the purpose of meeting these needs and the church as a whole is responsible for this task.

Guidelines can be drawn according to this ecclesiological principle when there are apparent contradictions between the biblical authors. The problem of interpreting the whole of revelation is for the Orthodox not a problem of systematizing the various scriptural passages. In fact nothing could be farther from the spirit of Orthodoxy. The Bible is not regarded as giving a blueprint for organization or a systematic exposition of moral teaching or dogmatic theology. "The Bible is the book of life of the Ecclesia, it does not dictate to it rules of behaviour and canon p. 136 laws.'²¹ Rather the Bible is the revelation of God in history, dealing more with the acts of God and the Christian community. This should not be construed to mean that the Orthodox are not concerned with the revelation of propositional truth, for they most certainly are. It only means that with reference to the Bible, there is no systematic presentation of this truth.²²

The lack of a systematic framework in the Bible is balanced by the unity that is established with tradition. Since the Spirit that inspired the Bible also inspires the church

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ 'The Unity', p. 205. From a Protestant viewpoint this interpretation mistakenly calls the 'Council of Jerusalem' an Ecumenical Council when it would appear to be only a conference of local churches. For a classic defence of the Protestant position, see A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1967), pp. 908–914.

²¹ Nissiotis, 'The Unity', p. 206.

²² Florovsky, 'Revelation', p. 174.

in its tradition, any logical contradictions or apparent deficiencies are eliminated.²³ This view follows logically from the Orthodox Church's position on the Bible. Therefore, tradition and Scripture are a team, both working together for the salvation of humankind, both vital parts of the Christian community.

The appeal to tradition as an interpreter of Scripture apparently arose out of the needs of the early church. In the controversies with various heretics, those who were orthodox, i.e. those who held the traditional view, needed some source to reinforce their interpretation of the Scripture. An appeal to the Bible seemed to be insufficient because the heretics cited scriptural passages to support their positions. For example, the Arians claimed their view was biblical. But one can go back even earlier for the problem did not arise for the first time in the fourth century. In the second century Gnostics, Sabellians and Montonists also appealed to the Bible. Who was to decide the issue? What were the principles of interpretation?

It was in this historical situation that the authority of Tradition was first invoked. Scripture belonged to the Church, and it was only in the Church, within the community of right faith, that Scripture could be adequately understood and correctly interpreted. Heretics, that is those outside of the Church, had no key to the mind of the Scripture. It was not enough just to read and to quote scriptural words—the true meaning or intent, of scripture, taken as an integrated whole, had to be elicited.²⁴

Thus the church which has the true meaning of Scripture alone could interpret the Scripture. This meaning was contained in the apostolic tradition which the church preserved. Florovsky points out that for the Fathers, Scripture and tradition were always connected. Without the correct 'rule' of interpretation, the Bible was merely words; tradition supplies the key to interpretation.

With tradition playing such a vital role in the understanding of the faith, it is obvious that the bearer of tradition is charged with an exceedingly important role. The church is therefore central in the task of exegesis. However, the early Fathers, for example, Tertullian, did not claim authority for the church. As Florovsky expresses it:

The Church was not an external authority, which had to judge over p. 137 the Scripture, but rather the keeper and guardian of that Divine Truth which was stored and deposited in Holy Writ.²⁵

It can be seen that quite early in the history of the church the question of tradition came up. The appeal to the continuity with the apostolic faith is understandable. It is always the appeal of those wishing to underscore their link with the past. There is little problem in applying this principle when one of the opposing parties claims a new revelation. The problem becomes more difficult when both sides appeal to the ancient tradition and both claim to be the lineal descendants of the earlier custodians of the faith. For this reason, both Protestants and the Roman Catholics attempted to discover in the Eastern Orthodox Church elements that would support their respective positions.

The replies of Jeremiah II to the Lutheran Reformers (1573–81) have taken on a confession or dogmatic significance in the Orthodox Church. Jeremiah II was the first

²³ Nissiotis, 'The Unity', p. 206.

²⁴ Georges Florovsky, 'The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church'. *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, IX, 2 (Winter, 1963–64), 183.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 184. Cf. Ellen Flesseman-van-Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp., 1954) for a discussion of the views of the second century Christian writers. Also cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 29–79.

official Orthodox response to the Reformation. Jeremiah II calls on the Lutherans to return to the true faith as found in the Orthodox Church. He broke off the correspondence when the Lutherans persisted in seeking his recognition of the validity of the Reformation.

The Reformers, from the Orthodox point of view, were correct in appealing to the Orthodox Church. From the Orthodox point of view they, unlike the Western Church, preserved the true tradition. The church would have ceased to have been the church if she had departed from the holy tradition. It is the very historical continuity with the early church that marks Orthodoxy as the true faith.

The result of the Orthodox Church's stand is to weld the Scripture to the tradition preserved in the church. One can speak of tradition standing over the Scripture, because the meaning of Scripture can be unlocked only by the key of tradition. Therefore, the hermeneutical bond between the two sources of faith, Scripture and tradition, in effect produces the single source that modern Orthodox theologians are so fond of speaking of as Christian tradition.²⁶

TRADITION: THE TESTS OF AUTHENTICITY

What constitutes authentic tradition? There are some criteria which the church used in determining the dogmatic symbols. For the most part, the criteria reflect the general acceptance of the symbol by a significant section of the church or its production by a recognized hierarchy. But it must always be remembered that these doctrinal statements while 'new' are held by the Orthodox to be only explications of what had already been held.

Therefore there are not what p. 138 might be called 'new' doctrines expressed in the church. The central tenets, for example, those defined by Ecumenical Councils must be adhered to by all Orthodox. This is not because Ecumenical Councils are the supreme authority, but because the decrees of Ecumenical Councils have been recognized and witnessed by the whole church. It is precisely this universal recognition that makes a council ecumenical. As Bratsiotis expresses it: '... the decisive criterion of an Ecumenical Council is the recognition of its decrees by the whole Church, which is therefore in fact the sole authority in Orthodoxy.'²⁷

As the only authority, the church does have the role of deciding what is authentic tradition. Two facts must be noted at this point. The first is that there can be legitimate local tradition that does not have universal authority. In other words, national churches have the right to maintain certain practices that differ from other Orthodox Churches. The unity of the Orthodox Christians is not a unity of language, liturgical rite or baptismal creed. Rather the unity is a unity of faith which the national churches express in their own languages and rites.²⁸ This is a freedom that the East rejoices in and is considered to be a fundamental characteristic of Orthodoxy.

Strict conformity in matters of liturgical practices has never been considered to be a real obstacle to the reunion of the East and West. Meyendorff cites several important thinkers such as Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople (858–886), and Peter, Patriarch of Antioch (1052–56), who considered local practices, even those defined by local conciliar decrees, as matters of indifference. These practices in no way affected the unity of the

²⁶ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, pp. 204 ff; and Metropolitan Athenagoras, 'Tradition and Traditions', *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, VII (1963), 104.

²⁷ 'Fundamental Principles', p. 29.

²⁸ John Meyendorff, 'Tradition and Traditions', *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, VI (1962), 122.

faith. The main problem dividing East and West was seen in the doctrinal question of the procession of the Holy Spirit.²⁹

Within the central faith there remains room for the local practice to shine through, creating what might be considered a unique and expressive worship experience.³⁰

The second point to note is that there seem to be two tests to determine authentic tradition. The two are 1) apostolicity: the doctrine comes from the apostles who in turn received it directly from the Lord, p. 139 and 2) the concept of the universal acceptance on the part of the church, that is, decisions considered to be ecumenical because of recognition by the whole church. It is incorrect to view these doctrines as opposed to each other because no Orthodox theologian does so.

An illustration of the concept of apostolicity is found in an article by Archbishop Michael in which he refers to the tradition received from the apostles orally. This same tradition was handed on 'from generation to generation until it was embodied and codified in the works of the major Fathers of the Church and in the resolutions of the seven Ecumenical Councils and the ten local Synods of the Church.'³¹ There is no thought here of enlarging or changing the deposit of tradition. The Archbishop speaks against those who ignore or repudiate tradition (i.e. Protestants) and those who enlarge and add to tradition (i.e. Roman Catholics). Orthodoxy is seen to hold a 'middle-of-the-road-policy' by neither adding to or subtracting from the apostolic tradition.

The sentiment expressed by Archbishop Michael is common in the Orthodox Church which is by self definition the church of tradition.³² However, there is another test of the authenticity of tradition that can be employed but has not been used in recent history. This is the test of universal acceptance by the church. As has been shown above, this does not mean conformity in practice or liturgical rite, but in matters of faith.³³ The concept of

²⁹ John Meyendorf, 'The Meaning of Tradition', in *Scripture and Ecumenism*, ed. by Leonard J. Swidler (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1965), pp. 55–56. The significance of the *filioque* controversy is sometimes understated by those who are accustomed to reciting it in the Creed. Both the East and West teach the full divinity of the Holy Spirit; however, the Eastern Church maintains that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone through the Son, while the Western Church holds that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. The Latins felt the *filioque* (and the son) gave the Second Person of the Trinity the honour due him and the Greeks resented any change in an Ecumenical Creed without the approval of an Ecumenical Council, NJ: Reference Book Publishers, 1965), pp. 237–241.

³⁰ C. S. Lewis, writing on the experience of worship, said: 'What pleased me most about a Greek Orthodox mass I once attended was that there seemed to be no prescribed behaviour for the congregation.... The beauty of it was that nobody took the slightest notice of what anyone else was doing.' *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London: Fontana Books, 1966), p. 12.

³¹ 'Orthodox Theology', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, III, 1 (Summer, 1957), 13. The Archbishop does not list the ten local councils he considers authoritative.

³² Cf. Bratsiotis, 'Fundamental Principles', p. 24; Ware, *Orthodox Church*, pp. 203–204; Dean Timothy Andrews, *What Is The Orthodox Church?* (New York: Greek Archdiocese of North and South America, 1964), p. 7.

³³ 'Faith' in this content means the primary doctrinal definitions to which the entire church adheres. An example would be the question of the two natures of Christ which was decided at the fourth Ecumenical Council. The Copts, Ethiopians, Syro-Jacobites and Armenians broke with the Greek speaking churches over this point, it is quite significant that two theological consultations have been held between the Eastern (or Greek) Orthodox Churches and the Oriental (Non-Chalcedonian) Churches. These meetings centred on the basic difference between the groups in Christological dogma. For a complete text of the consultations see *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, X, 2 (Winter, 1964–65) for the meeting at the University of Aarhus in Denmark, and Vol. XIII, 2 (Fall, 1968) for the consultation at the University of Bristol, England.

universal recognition and acceptance by the church determines which councils are recognized by the Orthodox as ecumenical.³⁴

With the concept of universal acceptance as a test of tradition, it seems clear that the interpretation of the Faith of the church rests with the church as a whole. Indeed, this is the Orthodox position. The whole church is the guardian of orthodoxy, not just the hierarchy.³⁵ However, it has been the normal practice for the laity to delegate this authority, knowingly or unknowingly, to the hierarchy. The bishop is the representative p. 140 of Christ in the Eucharistic gathering and is the symbol of the authority of the church. There is both a blessing and a problem in the delegation of the authority of the believers to the ecclesiastical leadership. The blessing is the historical continuity of the traditions and customs. The problem is that the life of the Holy Spirit who indwells all believers is not free to express the full dimensions of the Christian life. Form rather than personal experience inside the form comes to dominate the church.

Perhaps this is the central problem of tradition. It both preserves the past experiences and understandings of the people of God and does hamper the ongoing work of the Spirit in the believing community. The work of the Spirit in both preservation and freedom of expression must be kept in creative tension so that the voice of God in today's situation can be heard.

Thus the interpretation of the faith can and must move beyond the elements that have been handed down, because the church herself is a living body. The Orthodox Church has suffered a decline in attendance (but not necessarily membership) in a country like Greece because the church is not perceived to be relevant to the secularized society. The church is respected as a preserver of culture and for the witness of the church to the oppressors in the past, but is not thought to be relevant to today. It will be interesting to see if the same phenomena occurs in the former Soviet Union. The challenge is for the church to keep the Faith once delivered and make it speak to today's world. Some Orthodox maintain that the Byzantine liturgies are timeless and neither can nor should be changed. Other Orthodox speak of the need for liturgical reform to make the services more acceptable in terms of length.

There is some interest among the Orthodox in sorting out true tradition from what might be called human traditions. A hierarchy of tradition exists in the Orthodox Church. It is recognized that not everything from the past is of equal value. The elements that have unique authority are the Bible, the Creed, and the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils.³⁶ The decrees of the Synod of Jassy (which ratified the *Confession of Peter Moghila*) and of the Synod of Jerusalem (which ratified the *Confession of Dositheus*) are not considered to be on the same level with the earlier statements. This is not because they are later and thus past the age of the Fathers, but because at the time they were composed Orthodoxy was in an uneven struggle with the West. Some theologians blame the problem on Moslem conquest and interference. It was not Orthodoxy at her best which

³⁴ Cf. A. A. Boglepov, 'Which Councils are Recognized as Ecumenical?', *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, VII (1963), 54–72. The concept of universal acceptance is particularly well handled by John Meyendorff, *Orthodox Church*, pp. 29–32.

³⁵ Zemov, *Eastern Christendom*, p. 231; Bulgakov, *Church* pp. 75–81.

³⁶ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, p. 205. The Creed referred to is what the West knows as the Nicene Creed which was drawn up at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD). The Creed is commonly known among the Orthodox as the '*Pistevo*' (I believe) and is recited at every liturgy (without the Western addition of the *filioque*. For the complete text as used by the Orthodox Church, see *The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (London: Faith Press, n. d.). This edition has the official Greek text with an English translation.

met the challenges of the Reformation [p. 141](#) and Counter-Reformation.³⁷ This frank admission of foreign elements in the seventeenth century doctrinal statements may provide an opportunity for dialogue with Evangelicals. However, it should be realized that while the formulations of the seventeenth century are not in the fullest spirit of the Eastern Church, the Orthodox nevertheless attribute to them confessional status.³⁸

Her role as the true church and guardian of tradition lays upon Eastern Orthodoxy the duty to examine what has been handed down. Antiquity is not to be confused with truth. Not everything received from the past is to be accepted. One of the bishops at the Council of Carthage (257) reminded his fellows that ‘The Lord said, I am truth. He did not say, I am custom.’³⁹ Human opinions or mere custom must be separated from the authentic deposit of tradition. To do this means that the past must be critically reexamined. There is a growing awareness of the need for historical studies by Orthodox theologians.⁴⁰

CAN THE DEPOSIT OF TRUTH CHANGE?

Can tradition ever be modified? The answer is yes and no. Dealing with the no first, it is the position of the Orthodox Church that they have preserved the faith handed down. They believe that they have not tampered with the sacred deposit, having neither added anything, nor subtracted anything. Therefore, it is obvious that having preserved the true faith for nearly 2000 years, they will hardly consider tampering with it now.

Yet while there is, to say the least, a definite ring of finality in the above statements, it is also possible to answer the question in the affirmative. ‘Petrified mummy’ is a term of opprobrium that has been hurled at the Eastern Orthodox Church by Western theologians.⁴¹ However, the Orthodox do not regard their position to be static and unmoving in any way. To consider the Eastern Churches as lifeless and dead is to miss the wonder of Orthodoxy. There is a remarkable blend of unchanging authority and present experience. As Bratsiotis expresses it:

But if Holy Tradition is accepted as a source of faith, its immutability must be recognized as immutable. Moreover, in the Orthodox Church tradition is not regarded as a static factor—as many non-Orthodox people think—but as a dynamic one. Loyalty to tradition does not simply mean slavish attachment to the past and to external authority, but a living connection [p. 142](#) with the entire past experience of the Church.⁴²

According to Bratsiotis, the reasons for the Orthodox Church appearing to be static are purely historical, not organic. In light of the three centuries of Frankish and Venetian rule

³⁷ John Kaloghirou, ‘Sacred Tradition: Its sources and its Task in the Church’. *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, XI, 1 (Summer, 1965), 110–111.

³⁸ Cf. Eusebius A. P’Stephanou, *The Orthodox Church Militant* (New York: Greek Diocese of North and South America, 1950). P’Stephanou outlines what the Orthodox Church considers to be the ‘chief heresies that have endangered the purity of the Faith’. Included among others are Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvinism.

³⁹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ Cf. Theodore Stylianopoulos, ‘Historical Studies and Orthodox Theology or the Problem of History for Orthodoxy’, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, XII, 2 (Fall, 1967), 394–419; also cf. Ware, *Orthodox Church*. pp. 205–206.

⁴¹ Bratsiotis, ‘Fundamental Principles’. p. 24.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 25. Bratsiotis does not take credit for this concept but refers in a footnote to Georges Florovsky and Sergius Bulgakov.

and four centuries of Moslem domination, not to mention the more recent Bolshevik tyranny, the fact that the church still exists is somewhat miraculous. It is these historical reasons that account for a lack of theological advance.

But turning away from the problem of the past, can we discover anything within tradition that will unlock the door and give meaning to the expression, 'a living connection with the past'? Precisely how is this past experience relevant to our present situation? What is the link that joins the Orthodox Church of this day and age to the church of the Ecumenical Councils? The gap is bridged because the church, Christ's church, remains indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Spirit thus signifies the true bond that unites the church to her past.

There is here more than just an unbroken *historic continuity*, which is indeed quite obvious. There is above all an ultimate *spiritual and ontological identity*, the same faith, the same spirit, the same ethos. And this constitutes the distinctive mark of Orthodox.⁴³

It is on this basis that one must understand tradition and indeed, the role of tradition in the church. Tradition is not something external that one investigates from the outside. Rather 'Tradition is far more than a set of abstract propositions; it is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit.'⁴⁴ Considering the characteristics of a personal encounter, one would expect a dynamic experience, an interaction between two living persons. In terms of this encounter tradition can thus be thought of as a living, growing relationship. Therefore, while the main body of truth does not change, the outward forms can change to conform to the new situations in which the church finds herself. It is incorrect to speak of doctrinal stagnation in the Orthodox Church. Such a concept is not in keeping with the nature of the Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky, considers new doctrinal formulation a distinct possibility.

Tradition, while inwardly changeless (for God does not change), is constantly assuming new forms, which supplement the old without superseding them. Orthodox often speak as if the period of doctrinal formulation were wholly at an end, yet this is not the case. Perhaps in our own day new Ecumenical Councils will meet, and tradition will be enriched by new statements of faith.⁴⁵

Here we return to the concept of the consensus of the church as the determiner of tradition. In Ware's statement we see the two answers, [p. 143](#) the no—Tradition does not change—and the yes—the church is able to enrich the deposit of Faith. This promise of openness can form the basis of inquiry into an exchange between the East and the West. The door is not closed for discussion.

Tradition plays a central role in the Orthodox East. But the very tradition that separates East and West may be found to be the bridge which will unite those who are called Christians. Perhaps there is a new role for tradition in this generation.

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⁴³ Georges Florovsky, 'The Ethos of the Orthodox Church', in *Orthodoxy: A Faith and Order Dialogue* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1960), p. 39.

⁴⁴ Ware. *Orthodox Church*, p. 206.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*