AN OLD FAITH IN TERRA NOVA:
THE EASTERN ORTHODOX TRADITION

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An Orthodox "Ecumenical" Introduction

Due to cultural and religious pluralism, society today is witnessing a remarkable revival of traditionalisms. There is a widespread search for roots, to be seen, for example, in the claiming of rights by Aborigines and the self-assertion of distinctive cultures by various ethnic groups. Any collective identity is inseparable from tradition as particularly can be seen in the life of the church. A person is a Christian because he or she identifies with the historical person of Jesus Christ and with Christians of former ages. Yet in the history of Christian life, confusion inevitably arises because of competing or conflicting interpretations of who Christ was and what He preached. Thus in modern times the communities of the Reformation, in undermining any authority other than scripture, tend to understand the test of Christian tradition as a purely human and therefore necessarily relative element in Christianity. The Catholic Churches, on the other hand, interpret tradition as the authentic expression of the central reality of the existence of the Church, but whereas the East believed that this could authoritatively be expressed only through consensus or conciliarity, the more "realistic" West gradually concentrated all authority in the papacy, whose judgements became the ultimate criterion of true tradition.

The Orthodox Church is known for its devotion to Tradition. This renders an authenticated history decisive for the consciousness of its faithful, who are thus oriented towards the ecclesial past with profound reverence. This statement might elicit a critical response. The current reaction to the word "tradition" assumes that it means a backward-looking, retrograde bulwark against the present guaranteed by the hierarchy of ecclesiastical institutions and documented in the archaic manuscript literature of museums. Yet for the Church Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem and Basil the Great, tradition is the living "faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3),\(^1\) and is closely connected to the life of the Church and

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the communion of the saints. There is, in this context, a virtual identity between Christ and Tradition, between Christ, who is not only past but present and future (Rev. 4:8), and His continuing presence in the world. In the New Testament and the Church Fathers, the real presence of Christ in the Church is a saving liberation from any historical determinism and theological relativism. Tradition, therefore, is seen as consistent throughout the ages, though never fully stated in words and formulae, and never reduced to external authoritative standards, material or human. The "ecumenical" conclusion that arises for Orthodox theology is the claim that the entire church, and not some particular "authority" alone, is responsible for the manifestation of tradition. Holy tradition should be defined not by means of Scriptural proof-texts, nor in relation to papal, patriarchal and even conciliar approval, but in terms of that which is received by the entire church.

**Tradition and the Orthodox Church**

In practice, the absence of formal criteria or authorities has led the Orthodox Church to adopt a very conservative attitude. Changes do occur, but the process of reception and its recognition is slow. In fact, refusal of change is frequently equated with traditionalism. Yet in Christian revelation, as already noted, the alpha and the omega coincide in the person of Christ. So, without reference to the future, traditionalism is turned in to antiquarianism.

From as early as the time of Tertullian, Western theology is characterised by its deep sense of the history of the Church. As a result, there is a preoccupation with the institutional and the moral aspects of Christianity.

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2 Cf. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Eranistes* 1 (in PG Migne 83:28f), who links tradition with the eucharist. For other Fathers, Tradition includes scripture and its interpretation, the unwritten tradition, the practices and norms of the faithful, reminiscences and miracles of elders, liturgical (baptismal) formulas and customs.

3 Indeed, Orthodox thinkers would always point out that some councils, such as the Robber Council of Ephesus (431), have been convened as "ecumenical" but were eventually rejected by the Church.

4 For Clement of Alexandria, an alternative term for παραδοσίας (= tradition) is precisely παραδοχή (= reception). See his *Stromateis* I, 1, PG 8:704C.
On the other hand, Eastern theological thought has been concerned with the meta-historical and with the spiritual dimensions of the Christian life seen in light of eschatology. It took a long time for Western theologians to cease treating eschatology as being a last, unnecessary chapter of dogmatics. Gradually, the Omega was seen as giving meaning to the Alpha, the eschatological vision of the present as the way of liberation from the evils of provincialism and confessionalism, and the sacrament of the eucharist — as the fullest communion with the body of Christ — was accepted as the only way of truly appreciating the world. This was the way of the early church, reflected in liturgy, art and theology.

To recover the eschatological content of Christian Tradition, one must first of all understand the variety of dimensions within eschatology:

(a) eschatology may be seen as apocalyptic. Here no mission or responsibility for society or culture is possible or even desirable. In response to this overemphasis on the last things, an authentic Christian theology underlines the cooperation ("synergy") between God and creation in history.

(b) The opposite extreme is the rationalistic view of eschatology. Here humanity is seen as controlling the historical process. In response to this misinterpretation of the temporal process, Christian theology underlines the supremacy of the freedom of human beings created "in the image and likeness" of God (Gen. 1:26).

(c) The third type is conditional eschatology, wherein holy Tradition is seen as the history of right choices made by free human beings confronted with the prophetic word of God.5

This duality, which should not, despite the temptation, be transferred simply into a dichotomy, of the traditional/historical and the eschatological/meta-historical/theophanic elements, was somewhat obscured during the fourth century with the establishment of Christianity in the Roman empire and more recently with the establishment of national or

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5 For an illuminating analysis of the concept of tradition in light of eschatology, see J. Meyendorff, "Does Christian Tradition Have a Future?", in St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly XXVI, 3 (1982), pp. 139-154.
autocephalous churches in the 19th and 20th centuries, but it is very obvious in the writing of the pre-Nicean Fathers.6

Tradition and Orthodoxy in Australia

It is important to have the courage to pose the various questions confronting Christian Churches in this country in the light of a Tradition conditioned by finality. This, however, requires a realism very often lacking in the Churches, which are frequently characterised by a certain romanticism. In the Orthodox Church for instance, it is easy for the theologian to be forever hiding behind something, instead of looking beyond clericalistic prerogatives, jurisdictional privileges, anachronistic titles, liturgical rubrics, canonical prescriptions, patristic quotations. Yet these are not Tradition. What is required is a reception of Tradition, namely a process of critical reflection, neither credulity nor outright rejection. Nor is it simply a matter of revision; this is perhaps an inadequate term. For one continually lives within Tradition, never pronouncing judgment upon it from the outside. Furthermore, one is called to interiorise the whole of Tradition. This is precisely where the genuine Orthodox phronema is able to remind other Churches that the temptation continually facing Christians of all denominations is that of fragmenting Tradition. Some may, for instance, show preference for social consciousness alone, or to individual ascetico-mysticism, or else to doctrinal relativism. Yet the assimilation of Tradition exacts an embracing vision of all elements of the catholic Tradition.

One example will suffice in this respect. The Orthodox emphasis on doctrinal maximalism is a reminder that the creed is not a relic of the past, and that the impact of dogma on the course of human history and the present recognition of human dignity and social justice is immense. To quote Fr. George Florovsky:

"I have often a strange feeling. When I read the ancient classics of Christian theology . . . I find them more relevant to the troubles and

6 Particularly in Ignatius of Antioch (d.c. 107) and Irenaeus of Lyons (d.c. 202), both of whom lived at a time when no New Testament canon had as yet been universally accepted and no defined "magisterium" existed in the Church. Cf J. Zizioulas, "Apostolic Continuity and Orthodox Theology: Towards a Synthesis of Two Perspective", in St. Vladimir's Theol. Quart. XIX, 2 (1975), pp. 75-108.
problems of my own time than the production of modern theologians".  

I am not sure whether Fr. Florovsky desired to raise the Church Fathers in our estimation or to erase from it certain modern theologians, but I would suggest that he recognised the significance of doctrinal depth and of theological perspective, both of which are integrally preserved in Eastern Orthodoxy and its Tradition.

Following on from this point, the Orthodox world-view uncovers two false alternatives that must be avoided: pietism on the one hand, and secularism on the other. The first separates off a narrow area of human experience or society, treating it as "sacred" and all else as "secular" — such a distinction is unknown in traditional Orthodoxy. The second accepts the fallen world on its own terms — perhaps in reaction to traditionalism. The godless anthropocentrism and secularism that colours Australian society, the relatively new phenomena of the desacralisation of the world and the rape of nature: these are vital issues of debate between East and West, a debate which has yet to begin. To this debate, the Eastern Orthodox Church brings an unprecedented dynamism and affirmation of the whole world in God.

Other Churches should be ready to learn from the age-old character of the Orthodox Tradition and its continuity with the early Christian community, an identity immediately apparent in doctrine and particularly in liturgy. But for the Orthodox themselves, conformity and consistency with the "Church of our Fathers" should not be the primary concern; the powerful impact and influence of the entire living trunk of the Tradition is sufficient to guarantee this identity. They need rather to turn their attention to the more pressing issues of today, which they must address from the rich and enriching deposit of this very Tradition.

In the Australian context, the Orthodox Church needs to come to terms with and to encounter the modern antipodean world and its contemporary problems. Previously it was easy to seek assistance from or to find refuge in the "old world" overseas, and even to possess a false sense of security or complacency. What is required at this time is a process of "demythologisation" of the past, though not its condemnation, from the

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7 See his *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Nordland: Belmont 1972), p.16.
perspective of the liturgy and the ecclesial experience. A liturgy that does not relate to and transform the world around it is no liturgy at all.

The demand, then, upon the Orthodox Church in this country is to evaluate former achievements and successes, while recognising historical mistakes and failures. Instead of clinging to the glory of the distant past (the "golden age" of Byzantium) or of the speculative future (the "age to come"), Orthodox theologians must recognise their vocation to the authenticity of Christ here and now. They must find the courage and accept the responsibility to understand Tradition not as a fossilised hierarchical structure but as a living force residing dynamically within the entire Body of Christ. There is no normative period of time to which one must seek to return; nor is there an ideal geographical place ("we have no lasting city" [Heb. 13:14]), from which traditions are dispersed (the "diaspora") into "foreign lands" (the "xeniteia" [cf. LXX Ps. 136:5]). It always remains a great temptation to seek to be elsewhere, or to be in another period; and sin is precisely the absence from the present. The mission is to examine and not to escape responsibility; to transform and not to transfer our problems or predicaments. The "diaspora" is a blessing, and "mixed marriages" (marriage between Orthodox and non-Orthodox partners) are a positive starting-point, though the negative connotations of both expressions might suggest otherwise.

The voice of Tradition calls for the full realisation of implications arising from the arrival of Orthodox Christians to this country, an act, for the believer at least, by no means fortuitous but providential.

Pressing matters to which Orthodox must turn their attention are: that Christ also shed His blood for the Aborigines; that the "medicine of immortality" must be related to the drug addict; the suffering love and "abundant life" of the crucified Christ to the Aids victim; the hope of the risen Christ to the problems of contemporary medical science and bioethics. Much "closer to home", Orthodoxy must forge links with its young people and communicate in their language; it should seek greater unity among its faithful, jurisdictional and local; it needs to expand theological education.  

8 A promising feature is the newly established St. Andrew's Theological College in Sydney.
Conclusion

For Hippolytus, what is handed down "according to Tradition" (παραδότω?) may even appear, in its actual application, to be "paradoxical" (παραδόξω?). The authentic experience of Tradition, which embraces the evangelical, the liturgical and the ascetical dimensions of the Church, may at times present certain features difficult to accept. Christ, who is "the Lord of peace" (II Thess. 3:16) and "in whom there is peace" (John 16:33), comes "not to bring peace, but the sword" (Matt. 10:34). And just as the very content of Tradition is "the Word [of God that] assumed flesh" (John 1:14), so also the method of discernment of what is truly Tradition is "the living and active Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow" (Heb. 4:12). Otherwise, παράδοσις (= Tradition) may very easily degenerate into πρόδοσις (= betrayal).

The role, then, of the Orthodox Church in this country is both one of giving and one of receiving. This mutual enrichment is a tacit but crucial dimension of Tradition which suggests both presence and receptiveness. For the depth of Tradition is not ultimately something that invites our questioning, but something that questions us.

9 Fragment 22 In Psalmis, PG 10:613A