

Tradition as the 'Platonic Form' of Christian Faith and Practice in Orthodoxy

by Kenny Pearce

Preface

I, the author of this essay, am not a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church. As such, I do not necessarily *believe* the things that I attribute in this essay to the Orthodox Church. I am also not an expert on Orthodoxy, nor am I a theologian. I am a student of philosophy, and of the classics. However, I have decided to publish this essay because I believe that a western Protestant attempting to understand the Orthodox Church's view of Tradition is something of a rarity in the available literature – or at least is less common than it should be. I have reason to believe that my analysis of the subject is correct, or at least within the realm of what the Orthodox Church takes to be, well, orthodox, in that my professor, an Orthodox believer who holds an appointment at the Center for Orthodox Christian studies at Cambridge, had no factual corrections to make as to my presentation of the Orthodox view. I think also that the use of Plato may be helpful, at least to those who are familiar with Greek philosophy in trying to understand the concept of tradition as the Orthodox Church sees it, as something distinct from (and yet, in another sense, identical with) the traditions passed down through history in the form of the various documents and practices of the Church. Finally, it is my hope that other Protestants will see that, while we may believe the Orthodox view of this subject to contain many errors, especially in the case of the infallibility of all seven ecumenical councils, we ought not to view Orthodox doctrine on Tradition as being a dangerous heresy we should fear: rather Protestants ought to acknowledge that, from our perspective, this view falls within the realm of small-o Christian orthodoxy.

The Essay

One of the key issues of the Protestant reformation in the West was the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, and the accompanying radical rejection, at least in principle, of the traditions of the church as developed over the centuries following the completion of the canon of Scripture. This continues to be one of the chief bones of contention between Catholics and Protestants. Due primarily to a lack of significant contact with the East, there is also a tendency among Protestants to transfer the view of tradition they have gleaned from their interaction with the Roman Church to Orthodoxy. Of course, despite significant similarities, Orthodoxy is not by any means identical with Catholicism, nor is the Orthodox view of Tradition identical with the doctrine the Protestant reformers reacted against – there are no indulgences, no “super-bishops” with absolute authority, and no attempts to subjugate Scripture to Tradition in Orthodoxy. Rather, the Orthodox Church views Tradition as a natural outgrowth of Scripture, developed over the ages as

the Church attempts in each generation to understand the fundamental truths of Christianity and communicate them in a new context. Tradition is the *logos*, the language- and culture-independent fundamental meaning, of that which Christians have always believed, and the substance of the life true Christians have always lived. Tradition is static and eternal when seen from a spiritual or eternal perspective, and yet as it is seen in its interaction with history it is living and dynamic. Tradition is that abstract pattern or ideal which every Orthodox believer attempts to instantiate in his life and beliefs. Thus, Tradition becomes, to the Orthodox, in a very important sense a sort of 'Platonic form' of Christian belief and practice, and just as Plato's 'couch-maker' attempts to instantiate the form of the couch, every Orthodox Christian is a 'tradition-maker' attempting to instantiate Tradition in a concrete way in his life and beliefs.

The classic statement of Plato's theory is found in the tenth book of his *Republic*. Here we have the following exchange between Socrates and Glaucon, his interlocutor:

“We are in the habit, I take it, of positing a single idea or form in the case of the various multiplicities to which we give the same name. ... In the present case, then, let us take any multiplicity you please; for example, there are many couches and tables.” “Of course.” “But these utensils imply, I suppose, only two ideas or forms, one of a couch and one of a table.” “Yes.” “And are we not also in the habit of saying that the craftsman who produces either of them fixes his eyes on the idea or form, and so makes in the one case the couches and in the other the tables that we use, and similarly of other things? ... [H]e does not make the idea or form which we say is the real couch, the couch in itself, but only some particular couch.” (*Rep.* 10.596a-597a)¹

Plato, of course, is not an Orthodox believer, and therefore is not what I have termed a 'tradition-maker.' However, there is good reason to believe that the theory developed in the above passage will be helpful to our understanding of Tradition and traditions among Orthodox thinkers. For instance, the discussions of Tradition, and especially the distinction between Tradition and traditions, in Timothy Ware's book makes substantial implicit use of the Platonic distinction between the changeless forms of the 'realm of being,' and the and the ever-changing objects of the physical 'realm of becoming:' “many traditions which the past has handed down,” he remarks, “are human and accidental – pious opinions (or worse), but not a true part of the one Tradition, the fundamental Christian message.”² Later he says, “Tradition, while inwardly changeless (for God does not change), is constantly assuming new forms, which supplement the old without superseding them.”³

It is not clear whether Ware in fact has Plato in mind in his discussion, but the usefulness of Plato in understanding the concept of Tradition here outlined should be immediately apparent: like Plato's forms, Tradition itself is an unchanging, eternal, perfect entity, and like Plato's carpenter, the Orthodox believer seeks to intellectually apprehend this entity in order to create a concrete instantiation of it. This, I take it, is what Ware means when he says, “true Orthodox fidelity to the past must always be a

1 Quotation from Paul Shorey, tr., *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

2 Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1997): 197.

3 Ibid. 198.

creative fidelity,”⁴ or as Bulgakov puts it, “we live in tradition and create it.”⁵ It is not sufficient for the Orthodox believer to understand tradition as the inheritance of the past. He cannot be merely a recipient of the traditions, he must *create* his own tradition, and he must create it according to the pattern of the eternal and changeless Tradition of the eternal and changeless Church.

A problem arises at this point, however: it is difficult, or perhaps impossible, for the individual believer, the tradition-maker, to apprehend Tradition directly. Just as Plato's carpenter recognizes the 'real' couch, the form, only after he has come to understand the many imperfect copies of this form which exist in the visible realm,⁶ so the Orthodox believer must begin his quest for apprehension of Tradition by looking at concrete examples of traditions as they have played out in history. This is the reason that the Orthodox church uses the word 'Tradition' to refer to “the fundamental Christian message.” Tradition is manifested in history in the form of the concrete traditions of the Church which, to unspiritual eyes, look much the same as the traditions of any human society. However, they have this fundamental difference: only the true traditions of the Church have as their pattern that Tradition which is created by God and entrusted to the Church to proclaim to all mankind. All traditions which do not follow this pattern are mere human inventions.

Yet, as with the relationship between Plato's couch and its form, the relationship of traditions to Tradition can be viewed as the relationship of imitation only as a pedagogical simplification. In reality, the true traditions of the Church have a sort of imperfect and incomplete *identity* with that true and eternal Tradition which is the revelation of God to mankind. They are not merely copies, but *instantiations*, just as the true Church is *instantiated* in history, albeit imperfectly and incompletely, wherever two or three believers gather together in the name of Christ (Matthew 18:20).

Unlike Plato's Couch, Tradition does have a perfect and complete instantiation in history: the Holy Scripture. Bulgakov tells us: “tradition is recognized when it is found in Scripture ... Tradition always supports itself by Scripture; it is an interpretation of Scripture. The germ found in Scripture is the seed; tradition is the harvest which pushes through the soil of human history.”⁷ This last image is particularly telling, as it shows that, while Scripture is contained within Tradition, and the canon of Scripture is itself a tradition of the Church, all Tradition is likewise contained implicitly in Scripture. Scripture is the seed, the source, the fountainhead of Tradition. Above and beyond the rest of the traditions of the Church, Scripture alone is “the *eternal revelation* of divinity.”⁸

It is here that the believer must begin his quest to apprehend Tradition. However, the primacy, completeness, and perfection of Scripture as an instantiation of Tradition does not render the rest of the traditions of the Church irrelevant. Ware points out to us what any reader of Scripture will quickly discover for himself: “There are many sayings in the Bible which by themselves are far from clear, and individual readers, however sincere, are in danger of error if they trust their own personal interpretation.”⁹ Not all that is found in Scripture can be found immediately by just anyone. Rather, we must rely on the Holy Spirit to reveal this truth to the Church. As this revelation is made over time, in

4 Loc. cit., emphasis original.

5 S. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (London: The Centenary Press, 1935): 38.

6 See, e.g., the famous 'allegory of the cave' at the beginning of *Republic* book 7.

7 Op. cit., 28-29.

8 Ibid., 28, emphasis original.

9 Op. cit., 199.

history, it is manifested in traditions, including the various councils, Christian writers, the liturgy, canon law, and the icons. All of these are also instantiations of Tradition in history, although none of them instantiate it completely as the Scripture does, and only the seven ecumenical councils instantiate it perfectly, in their incomplete way. By observing these outward manifestations, the work of other tradition-makers, the Orthodox believer is able to come to better apprehend Tradition, and thus create traditions which participate in this form to a greater degree.

The doctrine of Tradition is itself an excellent illustration of the process a believer must follow to instantiate Tradition in his life and beliefs. The 'germ' of this concept is indeed found in Scripture: the Greek word *παράδοσις* occurs thirteen times in the New Testament. Three of these, 1 Corinthians 11:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, use the term in a positive sense, referring to Christian traditions which Paul directs believers to continue observing. Elsewhere in Scripture we have the implicit idea of a tradition passed on by oral preaching, and of a dynamic harmony between this tradition and Scripture. An excellent example of this is 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 where Paul writes, "I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day, according to the Scriptures."¹⁰ Here Paul intimates the existence of an unwritten tradition that was preached first to him, and which he now preaches to others, but nevertheless asserts quite insistently that this tradition is "according to the Scriptures."

Still, this is merely an intimation of such a tradition. There is nothing in Scripture resembling the 'Platonic form' understanding of Tradition developed above, nor could there have been a detailed understanding of the relationship of Tradition to the New Testament Scriptures before the New Testament was canonized. For this reason, the believer must continue his search for clarity on this subject in the traditions of the Church. Since this doctrine was not the primary subject of any ecumenical council, the logical place to continue this search is in the writings of the early fathers.

As early as Irenaeus, we do in fact see the development of the concept of tradition as the core meaning of the faith, which is independent of both time and language (1.330-331). The idea of Tradition as the substance of Christian belief also occurs in Clement of Alexandria, who says, "It is necessary for men to abandon impious opinion and turn from there to the true tradition" (2.530).¹¹ Clement also asserts the unity of this tradition (2.555). In Tertullian we have "the true Scriptures and explanations thereof, and all the Christian traditions" listed as signs of the "true Christian faith and rule" (3.251-252).¹² This investigation can be continued throughout the writings of the early Christians, but one point is clear already: the doctrine of Tradition as the single, universal belief and practice toward which all the Church is being led by the Holy Spirit began to develop from a very early period in Christian history.

Following this, the writings and practices of modern Orthodox believers should also be considered. Here we see in practice that the Orthodox Church positions itself as a continuer of a living tradition, but is not afraid to adjust its practice, and in some cases even its beliefs, on matters that have not been conclusively settled. It does not blindly accept the past, nor does it in any case ignore the past. We have also the writings of thinkers such as Ware and Bulgakov, who, along with all other Orthodox believers,

10 Quotation from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

11 Quotation from David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003): 649.

12 Quotation from loc. cit.

should be seen as tradition-makers in precisely the same way as the ancient fathers. We must evaluate each of these sources in the context of the traditions of the Church as a whole, in order to gain an image of that one true Tradition which is the faith and practice which all Christians everywhere strive to instantiate in their lives, and we, both as individuals and as a community which is an earthly instantiation of the heavenly and eternal Church, must become tradition-makers and create concrete traditions after the pattern of that one true Tradition. These traditions, manifested in the lives of Orthodox believers, are always new, and yet always the same, just as the church on earth is always new as it progresses through history, and yet always identical with itself and with the true and spiritual Church which exists outside history. In this way, the Orthodox understanding of Tradition can best be understood as a sort of 'Platonic form' of Christian faith and practice.