

# **THE PLACE OF SCRIPTURE IN THE ORTHODOX TRADITION**

by

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Motto: *Tradition is the living faith of the dead,  
traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.*

Jaroslav Pelikan<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of studying the implications of an appeal to tradition on the interpretation of Scripture is underlined by at least two facts:

### *1. The renewed interest for the study of tradition in modern scholarship*

For centuries the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation has been an unchallenged basis for Western scholarship. This brought about a concentration on the text of Scripture alone and a neglect of the *Sitz im Leben* in which the books of the New Testament have originated. However, as comments Von Herder, one of the first to do so, in 1796-97, 'Christianity did not begin with books, but with oral preaching'.<sup>2</sup> The progress made in folklore research and the birth of *Formgeschichte* with scholars such as Dibelius<sup>3</sup> and Bultmann<sup>4</sup> in the twenties has in turn brought about a new appreciation of the different literary forms in the Gospels and the role they played in the oral stage of the Gospel tradition. Later on, in the fifties, the redaction criticism schools of Conzelmann,<sup>5</sup> Marxsen<sup>6</sup> and Bornkamm<sup>7</sup> corrected the fragmented approach of the form-critics, concentrating on the Gospels as literary units and on the Gospel writers as theologians representing the concerns of the early Christian communities.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> B Gerhardsson, 'Oral Tradition (New Testament)' in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, RJ Coggins & JL Houlden, eds., London: SCM, 1990, p. 498.

<sup>3</sup> *From Tradition to Gospel*, 1919.

<sup>4</sup> *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 1921.

<sup>5</sup> *The Theology of St. Luke*, 1954.

<sup>6</sup> *Mark the Evangelist: Studies in the Redaction History of the Gospel*, 1956.

<sup>7</sup> *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, 1960.

This 'quest for a tradition within and behind the received text', says Jaroslav Pelikan, 'was responsible for an entire new era in the long history of biblical interpretation'.<sup>8</sup> Commenting on the oral background of the Biblical text, Gerhardsson describes in the following words the implications of this fact in the area of hermeneutics:

Awareness of the fact that the gospel is by nature a spoken word is essential for a sound interpretation of the holy scriptures of the church. It is a guard against the tendency - not uncommon within Protestantism - to think that the church believes in the Bible, not in the triune God, and it counteracts dead ecclesiastic routine, legalism and rationalistic literalism in interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

The renewed worldwide interest in the study of tradition proved to be a the right occasion for Orthodoxy to make an impact on the modern ecumenical movement.

## ***2. The new insights on tradition provided by the involvement of the Eastern Orthodox Church in ecumenical dialogue***

The first significant Orthodox input in ecumenism in this century was the 1920 Encyclical of the ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, in which the Patriarch issued a call to fellowship and cooperation to all the Christian Churches, in spite of the doctrinal differences between them. Seven years later, at the Faith and Order World Conference at Lausanne, the Orthodox theologians present formulated in the following words their own understanding of the basis for ecumenical unity: 'That reunion can take place only on the basis of the common faith and confession of the ancient, undivided Church, of the seven ecumenical Councils and of the first eight centuries'.<sup>10</sup> Such a statement can still be considered the Orthodox program for the ecumenical dialogue. Three national Orthodox Churches participated in the inaugural Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Amsterdam, 1948), the others joined later, after receiving permission from their respective Communist governments.

The involvement of the Orthodox Church in the modern ecumenical movements has brought about not only a reconsideration of the doctrine of Trinity,<sup>11</sup> but also, because of the weight which

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<sup>8</sup> Pelikan, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhardsson, p. 501.

<sup>10</sup> G Tsetsis, 'The Meaning of the Orthodox Presence', *The Ecumenical Review*, 40 (3-4), 1988, p. 443.

<sup>11</sup> See AIC Heron, ed., *The Forgotten Trinity*, London: BCC/CCBI, 1991.

tradition occupies in Orthodox thinking, has stimulated a renewal of interest on the role of tradition in the life of the Christian Church.

In his book *The Vindication of Tradition*, Jaroslav Pelikan makes the distinction between an *idol*, a *token* and an *icon* taken over from the iconoclastic controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries. He uses this hermeneutical key in order to underline the different meanings that the word *tradition* has taken in various contexts.

An *idol*, he comments, is 'the embodiment of that which it represents, but it directs us to itself, rather than beyond itself'. When respect of tradition becomes traditionalism, it is idolatrous, 'it makes the preservation and the repetition of the past an end in itself'.<sup>12</sup> This is how the Reformers and the thinkers of the Enlightenment have seen tradition, their subsequent protest against such an approach being legitimate. In its place they put tradition understood as a *token*, 'a purely arbitrary representation that does not embody what it represents'.<sup>13</sup> According to this view tradition is like a ladder leading to universal truth, which, once reached, is self-sustained, thus rendering the ladder obsolete. It assumes, however, that tradition will not be replaced by something far worse, an assumption which, Pelikan rightly believes, the past two centuries do not warrant in any measure.

In contrast with the former views, tradition seen as an *icon* 'does not present itself as coextensive with the truth it teaches, but does present itself as the way that we who are its heirs must follow if we are to go beyond it... to a universal truth that is available only in a particular embodiment...'<sup>14</sup> We, human beings living in the concreteness of space and time, do not have direct access to universal truth. This is directly accessible only to God. But this does not mean we do not have access to it, since Universal Truth came down to us and took a concrete historical form in order to translate in our language the otherwise unintelligible message of ultimate reality. This condescension of the Universal Truth is expressed in the particular forms of our historical existence.

In doing so, it vindicate itself by managing to be as universal as the theorists rightly insist it must be, and yet at the same time as particular as the devotees of the idol correctly sense that it should be. But it refuses to chose between the false alternatives of universal and particular, knowing that an authentic icon, a living tradition, must be both.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Pelikan, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> Pelikan, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Pelikan, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Pelikan, p. 57.

In the present dissertation the model of Jaroslav Pelikan will be used in order to reveal the dynamics of the relationship between Scripture and tradition in Eastern Orthodoxy in the different stages of its historical development. Our study will analyze the Orthodox understanding of tradition as an icon, together with its inherent bend towards traditionalism, which tends to neglect Scripture as well as sterilize the spiritual life of the Church.

At the same time, we shall try to argue that the interpretation of Scripture in the context of tradition, seen as an icon, offers a comprehensive model for the preservation of a relevant orthodox faith, whatever challenges history brings before the Church.

We shall pursue our study from inside the Orthodox theological framework, although we are aware that, whatever degree of intellectual honesty we will manifest, it is impossible to overcome totally our Protestant background, inclined towards understanding tradition as a token.

## I. THE ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. The need for a different perspective

Western analyses of Orthodoxy, whether Catholic or Protestant, run the risk of misrepresenting its theology. Gerald Bray explains in the following manner the reason for this: `Orthodoxy works within a conceptual framework different from that of the Western tradition... With Eastern Orthodoxy we are in another world, even when the words we use appear to be similar...'<sup>16</sup>

The difficulty with such an enquiry is real and it comes from a number of factors that differentiate these two areas of Christendom. Among them we could mention:

- a. the separated historical, political and religious development of the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire, especially after the year 500 - the development of the Roman-Catholic institution, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and Capitalism in the West; the Byzantine state, the iconoclastic and hesychastic debates, the fall of Constantinople under the Turks and Communism in the East;
- b. the almost opposite approaches to life and reality of the populations in those areas, caused partly by their ethnic and temperamental differences - juridical and practical in the Latin West, relational and contemplative in the Byzantine East;
- c. the different institutional structures of the Church - imperial and strictly hierarchical in the West; national and conciliar (synodal) in the East.

### B. The distinctives of Orthodoxy

The Romanian theologian Fr. Ion Bria, in his book *Destinul Ortodoxiei* [The Destiny of Orthodoxy]<sup>17</sup> distinguishes the following major emphases of Orthodoxy:

1. `Orthodoxy is before anything else a world of theology, of a theology that tries to protect the impenetrable mystery of the Word of God and not to verbalize and systematize faith.'<sup>18</sup> It is for this

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<sup>16</sup> G Bray, *Eastern Orthodox Theology in Outline*, paper presented at the IFES Consultation `Evangelicals and the Orthodox Church', Fairmile Court, Cobham, England, Jun 29-July 2, 1993, pp. 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> Editura IMB al BOR, Bucuresti, 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Bria, *Destinul ortodoxiei*, pp. 367-368.

reason that Orthodoxy has never developed a theological system that can be compared with those of Aquinas, Calvin and the modern Western theologians. This is a factor that makes quite difficult its investigation for a researcher trained to use logic and critical methods in theology.

Bria continues, 'theology begins with the Word of God... but does not elaborate, does not reduce or does not exhaust the revelation of this Word; it only makes transparent the richness of the divine self-disclosure'.<sup>19</sup> Orthodox theologians prefer the language of symbols and mystery to the conceptual approach, although they do not deny the usefulness of the later. In fact they see the cataphatic (conceptual or theological) approach not as opposed, but as fulfilled and transcended in the apophatic (mystical or negative) approach. In the words of Lossky, 'there is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism'.<sup>20</sup>

The reason for the first part of Lossky's statement is that without theology apophaticism has no content and genuine experiences of the transcendent cannot be distinguished from false ones. The second part of the statement is based on the assumption that verbal and conceptual pursuits cannot exhaust the "wholly Other" God of Christianity. It is very relevant in this respect the comment made by the same author, that the Eastern Church has reserved the title "theologian" to only three really mystical sacred writers: St. John the Evangelist, St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Symeon the New Theologian.

According to Orthodox thinking the mystical approach to theology could offer protection against an exaggerated rationalism in one's theological pursuit as well as guard the theologian from the natural tendency of reducing the transcendence of God to a human system. 'For the Truth is not an idea, but a person, even the Incarnate Lord'.<sup>21</sup>

2. Another distinctive aspect that Bria mentions centers around the Orthodox emphasis on sacraments and worship: the Orthodox Church is highly sacramental and of all the functions of the Church, worship is by far the most prominent. The Orthodox term for sacrament is "mystery", which is understood as 'the personal appropriation of the life of God'.<sup>22</sup> In the opinion of Georges Florovsky, 'only in the sacraments does the Christian Community pass beyond the purely human measure and become the Church'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bria, *Destinul ortodoxiei*, p. 368.

<sup>20</sup> V Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1973, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> G Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Belmont: Nordland, 1972, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Bria, *Destinul ortodoxiei*, p. 368.

<sup>23</sup> Florovsky, p. 61.

Among the implications of the Orthodox sacramentalism we can mention the tendency of institutionalizing the ministry of the Holy Spirit (because all exercise of the gifts of the Spirit is controlled by and most of the times reserved to professional clergy) and the neglect of other aspects of the Church life, like the ministry of the Word, the life in community, and the involvement in missions (because of the exaggerated importance given to liturgy in relation to the other aspects).<sup>24</sup>

*Lex orandi* is a common ground for establishing dogmatic orthodoxy both for the Church Fathers and the modern Orthodox theologians.<sup>25</sup> The emphasis on what Bria calls "a doxological dogmatic" protects theology from becoming theoretical and rationalistic, giving it an existential character. From an Orthodox perspective theology is not called to deal exclusively with abstract ideas, but also with persons and the real world; it has to be existential. It calls man to a concrete experience with Christ through the sacraments, in the context of liturgy. 'For Christ is not a text but a living Person, and He abides in his Body, the Church.'<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising then that prominent modern Orthodox theologians, like Berdiaev, Bulgakov and Staniloae, have been attracted and influenced by the existentialist philosophy.

3. The next distinctive presented in the above mentioned study is the Orthodox ecclesiological perspective. Fr. Georges Florovsky, describes the Orthodox perception of the Church in the following words: 'The Church is Christ's work on earth; it is the image and the abode of His blessed Presence in the world.'<sup>27</sup> In a different context he talks about the difficulty of giving a definition of the Church. To this problem he offers a solution which reflects in a relevant way the Orthodox mind:

In our time, it seems, one has to get beyond the modern theological disputes, to regain a wider historical perspective, to recover the true "catholic mind", which would embrace the whole of the historical experience of the Church in its pilgrimage through the ages. One has to return from the school-room to the worshipping Church and perhaps to change the school-dialect of theology for the pictorial and metaphorical language of Scripture. The

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<sup>24</sup> Bria writes in this sense: '... very little has been written [in Orthodox literature] about the relationship between the "inner liturgy", the Eucharistic celebration and the ecclesiastic life in its totality...' - *Destinul ortodoxiei*, p. 367.

<sup>25</sup> 'Liturgy... was the first and initial layer in the Tradition of the Church, and the arguments from the *lex orandi* [rule of worship] were persistently used in discussion already by the end of the second century.' Florovsky, p. 84-85.

<sup>26</sup> Florovsky, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Florovsky, p. 37.

very nature of the Church can be rather depicted and described than properly defined. And surely this can be done only from within the Church.<sup>28</sup>

The Orthodox, then, perceive the Church not so much as an institution (as in Roman-Catholicism) or as a sociological reality (as in Protestantism), but as the mystical Body of Christ, through which the whole creation is progressively sanctified as a result of the Incarnation of the Son of God. And since it is a body, no isolation of the members is acceptable.

The Orthodox Church is very critical of Western individualism, in opposition to which it tries to emphasize the importance of community, following the old Latin adagio which says, *unus Christianus - nullus Christianus*. The technical term used to describe the Orthodox understanding of community is that of *sobornost* or sobornicity, coined by the Russian theologian Alexei Khomiakov (1804-1860). In Western terms it could be described as "individual diversity in free unity".<sup>29</sup>

It is true that many times in practice this is manifested by a tendency towards collectivism and anarchy. At the same time, the Orthodox themselves have not yet worked out the practical implications of this issue. It would appear that the sacramental character of the Orthodox Church (and its subsequent institutional tendency) can stand often in opposition to the concrete implication of the believers in the Christian community.

Authority in the Church is held not by an individual person (like the Pope, in the Roman-Catholic Church), but by the synod of the bishops. Traditionally the bishop in the capital city, at the national level, and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, at the international level, preside over the synod, but they have no ontological superiority over the other bishops. In the final analysis authority resides in the Church as a whole, since the synods and even the ecumenical councils cannot impose their decisions on the community of believers. They are called to act as representatives of the local churches, who are called to validate (or invalidate) the synodal formulations.

The catholic nature of the Church is kept alive on the objective side by the apostolic succession and on the subjective side by loyalty to the apostolic tradition.<sup>30</sup>

Ecclesiology is intimately connected with another central concern in Orthodox theology, the doctrine of the Trinity, for the Church is seen as reproducing on a human and historical plane the communion in the Holy Trinity. The relevance of this perspective on the contemporary ecclesiological debates needs special attention in future theological research.

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<sup>28</sup> Florovsky, p. 58.

<sup>29</sup> G Bray, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Florovsky, p. 45.

4. The final distinctive element mentioned by Ion Bria is Orthodox spirituality, more precisely asceticism. The Orthodox understanding of spirituality was influenced to a large extent by the asceticism of the Desert Fathers. This is one of the reasons why monastic institutions have always played such an important role in Orthodoxy. At the same time, this does not mean that the way of union with God cannot be pursued outside the cloister.

A strong impulse on monastic renewal, but also on lay spirituality, came in the eighteenth century from Paissy Velichkovsky, who translated an old collection of mystic writings called *Philokalia*. This is probably at the present time the most influential body of writings in contemporary Orthodox spirituality.

Central to the Orthodox spirituality is the concept of *theosis*, by which is meant the progressive human participation in the divine life, which is the goal of salvation. This is realized through a synergy of grace – the uncreated divine energies and the voluntary participation of the human person. *Theosis* is not Pelagianism: grace is not a divine reward for the merits of the human will. Rather, it involves a free cooperation of two wills, the divine and the human. Asceticism - the voluntary opposition to passions, the mortification of sin and the renunciation to the "world" - is the negative of the human contribution in this process and without it *theosis* is not possible. The positive form in which man participates in the process is prayer and contemplation.

Hesychasm, as a specific form of Orthodox spirituality, consists in a very elaborated technique of prayer. It contains both physical and spiritual elements, the physical side - a certain breathing style, the bodily position in prayer, the rhythm of prayer - having the purpose of facilitation concentration on the meaning of the very simple words of what is called "the prayer of Jesus" - "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner".<sup>31</sup>

According to the hesychasts, the use of this method of prayer involves three stages. The first is the oral stage, the constant repetition of the words of "the prayer of Jesus". This demands discipline, effort and concentration. The second, is the mental or psychic stage, when the mind concentrates in meditation on the name of Jesus. The final stage is when the prayer of Jesus is said as of itself, in the heart, constantly and without any effort...<sup>32</sup> It is in this stage that the ascetics report to have seen the "uncreated light of God" around which the hesychast debate had taken place. The ascent of the human soul towards perfect union with God is seen in Orthodoxy as having to be achieved

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<sup>31</sup> Lossky, p. 210.

<sup>32</sup> S. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, pp. 147-148.

simultaneously on two levels, that of action (*praxis*) and that of contemplation (*theoria*). The two cannot be separated; one is not possible without the other.<sup>33</sup>

### C. Preservation and renewal in Orthodoxy

Orthodoxy is rightly considered a very conservative part of the Christian body. It certainly refuses any *aggiornamento* form of policy and still celebrates faithfully the liturgical structure established by John Chrysostom and Basil the Great. At the same time, it also denies the legitimacy of any "theology of repetition", which would be nothing else than a form of scholasticism. Theology is not an exercise of faithful imitation of the Apostles and of the Fathers, but a creative translation and application of their insights, and a search for new insights in response to the new circumstances.

Orthodox theology is rooted in a solid belief in revelation. Theology is perceived as a human response to God, and in this sense it can be seen as a "theology from below", but it is possible only as a result of revelation.<sup>34</sup>

Orthodoxy has a structural mistrust in a theology for its own sake, and consequently pure academic theology, disconnected from worship and communion has always been suspect. Florovsky justifies the Orthodox position as such: "Theology" is not an end in itself. It is always but a way. Theology, and even the "dogmas", present no more than an "intellectual contour" of the revealed truth, and a "noetic" testimony to it. Only in the fact of faith is this "contour" filled with content.<sup>35</sup>

Tradition, the living context in which theology is articulated, is not perceived by the Orthodox Church as a strait-jacket. It is a necessary presupposition, and a protection against arbitrariness. In fact no scholarly work is possible without presuppositions: to imagine that a study can be pursued starting from *tabula rasa* is dangerous and false. In fact, 'the presence of tradition does not hinder the exegete any more than gravity hampers the racer. It only keeps him on the ground'.<sup>36</sup>

Can we really talk about dogmatic development in the Orthodox frame of mind? The answer is a paradoxical "yes and no". The historical development of dogma is an obvious fact. 'But on the other hand', explains fr. Sergius Bulgakov, 'the Holy Spirit, Who resides in the Church and the eternal which

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<sup>33</sup> Lossky, p. 202.

<sup>34</sup> 'Strictly speaking, theology grows possible only through revelation. It is the human response to God, who has spoken first... Surely this response is never complete. Theology is ever in the process of formation.' Florovsky, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Florovsky, p. 109.

<sup>36</sup> G Weigel, quoted in V Kesich, 'The Orthodox Church and Biblical Interpretation', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 37, 4, 1993, p. 349.

He gives us, knows neither diminution nor augmentation, and thus the Church is always identical with itself, without evolutionary change.<sup>37</sup> The contradiction is only apparent. The explanation comes from the complex nature of the Church. In her divine side, as the mystical Body of Christ, the substance of the Church is unchangeable and identical with itself. In her human aspect, the Church evolves (or recedes) and develops in response to the historical conditions she is confronted with.

The evolution of dogmas reflects the characteristics of the epochs in which they are formulated. Thus, explains fr. Bulgakov, the Christological formulations of the ecumenical Councils reflect the Greek thinking; they are 'translations of the fundamental truth of the Church into the Hellenistic tongue (sic!)', while the contemporary ecclesiological debates reflect more the Latin spirit and the influence of modern times and philosophy. This is what the author calls the "pragmatic" character of the development of dogmas.<sup>38</sup>

This being said, we need to mention that, because of its overconcentration on tradition, Orthodoxy had been generally slow to get involved in disciplines such as Biblical studies (seen more or less as a Protestant discipline) or in shaping the cultural environment (perceived to a certain extent as a Catholic interest).

However, the twentieth century has seen a revolutionary change in this respect. The Russian Orthodox theologians who have done theology in the West after the Russian revolution have been confronted with the need to shape their theology in such a way as to make it relevant for the Western world in which they lived. In turn, Western theologians began to understand that Orthodoxy has something valuable to offer. At the same time, the Orthodox theologians have been themselves influenced by the concerns of Western theology, so that both traditions have been enriched.

We believe that this process is only in its early stage. The constant opening of orthodoxy towards new areas of research (Biblical criticism, feminist and ecological matters, the theology of the poor) and the increasing intensity of the ecumenical dialogue will bring development and maturity to the Church of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Bulgakov, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Bulgakov, p. 31-32.

## **II. THE BIBLE IN ORTHODOX THINKING**

### **A. The Bible in context**

If we are to understand the place of the Bible and its role in the Orthodox context we need to become familiar with the comprehensive system of which it is a part. The discussion about the Bible and its relationship with tradition is part of the prolegomena of any Orthodox dogmatic. The system we talk about connects in a unified and structured whole concepts like revelation, Church, tradition, Scripture, creeds. Each of these elements circumscribes other concepts, as can be seen in what follows:

#### ***1. Revelation***

The concept of revelation provides the larger context in which the whole discussion of tradition versus Scripture takes place. The Orthodox Church does not make a separation between natural and supernatural revelation. Dumitru Staniloae, following St. Maximus the Confessor, states that `the later is nothing but the incorporation of the former in persons and historical actions'.<sup>39</sup> The content of natural revelation, according to Staniloae, is formed of `the cosmos and man, who is endowed with rationality, consciousness and freedom, he being not only the object to be known of this revelation, but also the subject of its knowledge'.<sup>40</sup>

#### ***2. Church***

God revealed Himself progressively in a supernatural way to His people through words and deeds, His final revelation being in the Person of Christ, His Son, whom John the Evangelist calls the Word. God's self-disclosure in history stands supremely first. Man is called to exercise his freedom (an essential aspect of his being created in the image of God, which is not affected by the Fall). His response in faith and obedience brings about a new reality, called the Church, the mystical Body of Christ.

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<sup>39</sup> D Staniloae, *Teologia dogmatica ortodoxa* [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology], vol. 1, Editura IBM al BOR, Bucuresti, 1978, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Staniloae, *Teologia Dogmatica*, p. 10.

### **3. Tradition**

The memory of God's revelation through words and deeds of power in history is kept alive and transmitted from generation to generation through the oral tradition of the people of God (Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New). This is done first of all through liturgy and the sacraments and only secondarily through other means.

Georges Florovsky explains that `there is much of which the Church testifies not in a dogmatic, but in a liturgical manner, in the symbolism of the sacramental ritual, in the imagery of prayers, and in the established yearly round of commemorations and festivals'.<sup>41</sup> In another very relevant passage for the Orthodox understanding of the relation between liturgy and tradition Florovsky says:

"Liturgy", in the wide and comprehensive sense of the word, was the first and initial layer of the Tradition of the Church, and the argument from the *lex orandi* [rule of worship] was persistently used in discussion already by the end of the second century. The Worship of the Church was a solemn proclamation of her faith... The New Testament itself came to existence as a "Scripture" in the Worshipping Church. And Scripture was read first in the context of worship and meditation.<sup>42</sup>

### **4. Scripture**

The written Word of God is in a very concrete sense the quintessence of the three realities described above. It is first of all a form of preservation of the revelation of God, but it contains at the same time a human side to it. `Human response is integrated into the mystery of the Word of God. It is not a divine monologue, it is rather a dialogue, and both are speaking, God and man.<sup>43</sup> This is done in such a way that `what is human is not swept away by divine inspiration, it is transfigured'.<sup>44</sup>

The Bible is a record of the Church's experience with God as it was preserved in the oral tradition, which preceded the Scripture. However, this does not mean that the Bible exhausts revelation or makes tradition unnecessary.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Florovsky, p. 52.

<sup>42</sup> Florovsky, pp. 84-85.

<sup>43</sup> Florovsky, p. 21.

<sup>44</sup> Florovsky, p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> `This experience of the Church has not been exhausted either in Scripture or in tradition; it is only reflected in them.' Florovsky, p. 47.

### *5. Creeds*

The Church has distilled the Scriptural message in the Creeds, which borrow from Scripture an underlying historical structure. However, the character of system that the Creeds display is obvious. The historical structure of Scripture does not satisfy all the needs of the Church. The contribution of system consists in that it brings forth the inner structure of the Biblical message and the interdependence between its components. The Creeds, then, were never intended as substitutes for Scripture.<sup>46</sup> Rather, their role was to clarify and preserve the core message of the Scriptures, in response to challenges coming from inside the Church, through heresy, schism, etc. and from outside the Church, through adverse philosophies, pagan religions, etc.<sup>47</sup>

Since these significant components form a comprehensive system of which the Bible is a part in Orthodox theology, in order to understand the Orthodox "Scriptural mind", we need not to isolate what the Orthodox theologians say about the Bible from the conceptual context we have already described.

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<sup>46</sup> `Obviously, we need a system, as we need a map in our travels. But maps refer to a real land. And any doctrinal system too must be related to the revelation. It is of utter importance that the Church has never thought of her dogmatic system as a kind of substitute for the Scriptures.' Florovsky, p. 28.

<sup>47</sup> `No complete system of Christian faith is yet possible, for the Church is still on her pilgrimage. And the Bible is kept by the Church as a book of history to remind believers of the dynamic nature of the divine revelation, "at sundry times and in diverse manners".' Florovsky, p. 36.

## **B. The purpose of the Bible**

In Orthodoxy, as in the other Christian traditions, the Bible is seen as having two main purposes: for the spiritual edification of the Church of Jesus Christ and for bringing the world under the obedience of the Gospel. The difference comes in the way these are understood and in the specific emphasis on one rather than on the other of the purposes.

### ***1. A book for the Church***

This is by far the most important purpose of the Bible for the Orthodox Church. The Bible is, according to Fr. Florovsky, 'a sacred book addressed primarily to believers'. In the following discussion of the subject the author states emphatically, against the common Western presupposition, that the Bible's message was properly addressed to the Christian community and 'to individuals only as far as they are members of that community'.<sup>48</sup> This brings a necessary correction to Western individualism, but many times it discourages people in the pew from having access to the Bible outside of liturgy.

### ***2. A book for missions***

On the other hand, the Word of God was not intended only for the edification of the faithful, but also for the conversion of the world. Therefore, we should not overlook the missionary background of the Bible. This does not mean that anybody can have easy and unhindered access to its message. Fr. Florovsky considers Tertullian's attitude to Scripture as being typical of the Orthodox mentality. Tertullian refused to discuss with the heretics the controversial issues of faith on the Scriptural ground, the reason being that 'Scriptures belonged to the Church. Heretics' appeal to them was unlawful. An unbeliever has no access to the message, simply because he does not "receive" it. For him there is no "message" in the Bible'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Florovsky, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Florovsky, p. 19.

## **C. The Bible and the Church**

### ***1. The Church precedes the Bible***

The Orthodox theology never separates the Bible from the Church, the first reason being that without the Church we would have not had the Bible. In fact `the book as a whole, was a creation of the community, both in the old dispensation and in the Christian Church'.<sup>50</sup> The Bible, in its human aspect, is a reflection of the primitive Church, of her concerns and struggles, of her worship and teaching, of her life with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The selection of the individual books in the Christian canon was made by the Church on the basis of very clear criteria, the most important one being their Apostolic origin. This does not mean however that the Church has authority over the Bible. Florovsky writes on this matter: `The Church was not an external authority, which had to judge over the Scripture, but rather the keeper and guardian of that divine truth which was stored and deposited in the Holy Writ'.<sup>51</sup>

### ***2. The sufficiency of Scripture***

The Orthodox Church believes in the sufficiency of Scripture,<sup>52</sup> but denies that Scripture itself lays any claim to self-sufficiency. Florovsky writes on the implications of a belief in the self-sufficiency of Scripture:

If we declare Scripture to be self-sufficient, we only expose it to subjective, arbitrary interpretation, thus cutting it away from its sacred source. Scripture is given to us in tradition... The church as the Body of Christ, stands mystically first and is fuller than Scripture.

Realizing probably that he has already pushed his argument a bit too far, the author adds: `This does not limit Scripture, or cast shadows on it'.<sup>53</sup> However, this is the exact effect of such an approach on a practical level.

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<sup>50</sup> Florovsky, p. 18.

<sup>51</sup> Florovsky, p. 77.

<sup>52</sup> `The Early Church', which the Orthodox Church claims to follow on these matters, `had no doubt about the "sufficiency" of the Scriptures and never tried to go beyond, and always claimed not to have gone beyond. But already in the Apostolic age itself the problem of "interpretation" arose in all its challenging sharpness.' Florovsky, p. 98.

This kind of ambiguity is a feature of the Orthodox discussion of the relationship between Church and Scripture. On one hand, the Orthodox theologian wants to elevate the importance of the Church, as the sole guardian and interpreter of Scripture. He also insists that the meaning of the Word of God is not to be found in the literal, but in the spiritual interpretation of Scripture.<sup>54</sup> On the other side, he understands the danger of belittling the authority of Scripture.

This is an area where we believe that the Orthodox Church has not yet been able to produce a balanced and viable model. It is possible that as a result of the ecumenical dialogue, the Protestant insights on the importance of Scripture could provide useful suggestions and stimulate a rethinking of the whole area.

#### **D. The Orthodox study of the Bible**

Although the Church Fathers, so highly regarded in Orthodoxy, were men of the Word of God, the private study of the Scriptures has not been a common feature of the Orthodox circles. The explanation of this phenomenon is to be found in the restrictions imposed on lay Orthodox Christians in certain historical periods, concerning reading and preaching the Word of God. Fr. Ion Bria explains things in the following manner:

It is true that the catechisms and certain ecclesiastic writings from the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, especially of Greek origin, texts written against the Protestant Reformation, introduce in this area, in an arbitrary way, restrictive prescriptions unknown in the Patristic tradition, which is by definition a Biblical and homiletical tradition. Moreover, the ecclesiastic canons invoked many times on these matters, refer to historical circumstances which are obsolete today. The issue which confronts us today is not that of underlining these restrictions originated in deficient times and of continuing to consider the lay preaching of the Gospel a "serious offence". The issue is that of training and instructing the lay people to interpret the Holy Scripture correctly and to preach the Gospel authentically.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Florovsky, p. 48.

<sup>54</sup> „... the Church had both the competence and the authority to proclaim the Gospel and to interpret it. *This did not imply that the Church was "above" the Scripture.* She stood by the Scripture, but on the other hand was not bound to its "letter". The ultimate purpose of exegesis and interpretation was to elicit the meaning and the intent of the Holy Writ, or rather the meaning of the Revelation, of the *Heilsgeschichte*. The Church had to preach Christ, and not just the Scripture.' Florovsky, pp. 83-84.

<sup>55</sup> Bria, *Destinul ortodoxiei*, pp. 278-279.

As this statement shows, there has been a very obvious change of attitude towards the lay use of the Bible in the twentieth century Orthodoxy. The initial impetus for this change came, as Veselin Kesich contends,<sup>56</sup> from external pressures, especially from Protestant circles. The Orthodox Diaspora seems to be more affected by this change, but there are already good signs in the Orthodox countries, too. We see this attitude clearly, for example, in the powerful school of Biblical studies at the University in Thessalonika, in Greece.

In an article written for *The Orthodox Study Bible*, itself a sign of this new direction in Orthodox scholarship and spirituality, Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia analyses what he calls 'the four characteristics marking the Orthodox "Scriptural mind"'. According to him, the Orthodox approach of the Bible should be obedient, ecclesial, Christ-centered and personal.

### ***1. Obedient reading***

This involves at least two things: a sense of wonder and an attitude of listening. The first instinctive reaction of the Orthodox mind towards the Bible should be a sense of expectation of really meeting and worshipping the God who speaks through His Word. The second important thing is an apophatic (silent) attitude.

Obviously, we cannot avoid to bring our own agenda to the Bible, but for the Orthodox that is of secondary importance. In order to come to a correct understanding of Scripture, before bringing our questions and our concerns, we need to have a submissive and obedient attitude. Before we start speaking, we have to hear God speak.

### ***2. Ecclesial reading***

Kallistos Ware introduces in the following words the ecclesial perspective on the private study of Scriptures: 'We make full use our private understanding, illuminated by the Spirit. We make full use of biblical commentaries and of the findings of modern research. But we submit individual opinions, whether our own or those of the scholars, to the judgement of the Church'.<sup>57</sup> The reason for such an approach is obvious, when we see things in the Orthodox frame of mind. The individual Christian is not an autonomous entity. He is a distinctive and unique personality and this entitles him to a personal and private opinion, but he is also a member of the mystical body of Christ; therefore his opinions, and the opinions of other fellow Christians, should not come in contradiction with "the mind of the Church".

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<sup>56</sup> Kesich, p. 351.

<sup>57</sup> K Ware, 'How to Read the Bible' in *The Orthodox Study Bible*, Nashville, Tn.: Thomas Nelson, 1993, p. 765.

### ***3. Christ-centered reading***

The Orthodox exegete is skeptical towards the value of an analytical approach of the Bible. As a general tendency he refuses both the literal interpretation of the fundamentalists, which he accuses of illegitimate concentration of the "letter", at the expense of the "spirit" of Scripture, and the allegorical method, which is accused of evading history and forcing the Bible into a Platonic mold which is foreign to the "mind of the Church". What is common to both methods is their concentration on the words of the text, on the philological aspect of Scripture.<sup>58</sup>

To these approaches the Orthodox theologians present a typological method of interpretation, which is consistently reflected in the writings of the Church Fathers. It is not an interpretation of words (in fact one author goes as far as saying that 'particular words are not examined at all'<sup>59</sup>), but of the events in the light of the Person of Christ. In other words, this is a historical and eschatological approach.

Typology celebrates God as the Designer and Master of history, and as the one who when the Day of the Lord will come, will 'bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ' (Eph 1:10). At least theoretically, typology does not involve putting arbitrarily new meanings into the old text. For typology to be legitimate the meaning should have been there implicitly, even if it could not be seen before.<sup>60</sup>

The typological interpretations of the Orthodox writers have not always represented correctly the truths of Scripture and they have been tempted by allegory. This happened frequently, especially in homiletical and devotional writings. In the catechetical teachings, however, a clear typological approach was maintained,<sup>61</sup> and this is the method of interpretation recommended to the lay readers of the Bible.

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<sup>58</sup> "Allegory" was an exegetical method indeed. An allegorist dealt primarily with the texts...', while "typology" was not an exegesis of the texts themselves, but rather an interpretation of the events. It was an historical and not merely a philological method.' Florovsky, p. 30.

<sup>59</sup> JN Sparks, 'Interpreting the Scriptures' in *The Orthodox Study Bible*, Nashville, Tn.: Thomas Nelson, 1993, p. 832.

<sup>60</sup> Florovsky, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Sparks, p. 834.

#### ***4. Personal reading***

Finally, the Bible should be applied in the personal life of the readers. From a methodological point of view, Bishop Kallistos suggests to the Orthodox readers of the Bible three steps they need to make in approaching the Word of God personally:

- a. they need to reflect on Scripture as *sacred history* - seeing the Scripture as a whole and not forgetting that Christianity is a historical faith;
- b. they need to observe the *particularity* of the sacred history - paying attention to the specific ways in which God has dealt with individual persons in concrete circumstances, not letting the universal swallow the particular;
- c. they need to apply Scripture *directly to themselves* - including themselves, as it were, in the sacred history.

### III. AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE ON TRADITION

#### A. The need for tradition

##### *1. General reasons*

Human beings cannot live without traditions. We are, structurally, social beings, existing in societies based on tradition, which is a principle of conservation and of continuity. Without it every new generation would have to start absolutely everything all over again. Historically we may detect a dynamics between two opposite and inseparable force: renewal and conservatism. Without renewal life would be boring. In fact it would stop having any meaning. Everything would be just routine, and man as a creative being bearing the image of God would disappear. Yet without conservatism progressive renewal would not possible. Everything would be chaotic and unstable. Tradition, we may argue, holds the two in creative tension. It tells the human person that he (or she) is not an accident of history, but is a chapter in a long story, thus giving meaning to the person and allowing her the freedom to actualize her potential.

However, if tradition is corrupted and transforms itself into traditionalism, it becomes oppressive and creates reaction. Indeed, the anti-traditionalists cannot help but create their own tradition, only less profound and effective. If anti-traditionalism is applied consistently over a long period of time, the result is total instability, the loss of values in society and eventually the death of man as man.

Our intention with this introduction is to describe in general terms the story of tradition, but behind the words there is a sad story. It is the story of the Christian Church, built on solid traditional moral and religious values, which were eroded in time and become stale. It is the story of reaction against traditionalism, which has been carried away into over-reaction and 'through the baby with the water in the bath tub'. The result has been at various times in history, fragmentation, instability, suspicion and a new form of traditionalism. Will now wisdom prevail?

Outside the Church, where this anti-traditionalist passion, expressed through the humanism of the Renaissance and the rationalism of the Enlightenment, was pressed to its limits the result historically has been various expressions of despair, death, decomposition or, in more sophisticated, post-modern terms, deconstruction. Who is going to show the world the way back? Or is it a question of 'the blind leading the blind'?

## 2. Ecclesiastic reasons

In an article entitled 'The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church', Fr. Florovsky discusses the famous saying of St. Vincent of Lerins: "We must hold what has been believed everywhere, always and by all". This, he believes, is the proper way of establishing 'the double "ecumenicity" of the Church - in space and in time'.<sup>62</sup> We find here a nuanced analysis of St Vincent's widely accepted model, which stands in sharp contrast with Florovsky's earlier very critical discussion of the matter (published 1934).<sup>63</sup> A summary of Florovsky's paper in 1963 will be, we believe, a good introduction to our evaluation of the meaning of tradition in the Orthodox Church.

What the author tries to establish in his later paper is the absolute necessity of the concept of tradition for a correct interpretation of Scripture. He states that no one of the criteria proposed by St. Vincent - *universitas, antiquitas* and *consensio* - could be absolute or adequate by itself. "Antiquity" as such was not yet a sufficient warrant for truth, unless a comprehensive *consensus* of the "ancients" could be satisfactorily demonstrated, And *consensio* as such was not conclusive, unless it could be traced back continuously to Apostolic origins.<sup>64</sup> Thus, orthodoxy can be recognized by a double recourse - to Scripture and to tradition. To this Florovsky adds carefully: 'This did not imply however that there were two sources of Christian doctrine'.

Why then was it absolutely necessary to invoke the authority of "ecclesiastic understanding"? The answer is obvious: the Scriptures were interpreted in different ways by individuals and many times it seemed to yield quite opposite meanings. According to St. Vincent, followed by Fr. Florovsky and by most Orthodox theologians, the only protection against the danger of relativising the meaning of Scripture is to respond to it with an appeal to the mind of the Church. However, this does not make tradition into an independent authority or a complementary source of faith:

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<sup>62</sup> Florovsky, p. 73.

<sup>63</sup> Republished in Florovsky, *op.cit.*, p. 37-55 (especially 51-55). In this paper the author calls St. Vincent's words 'a dangerous minimizing formula' and he continues saying: 'It appears that the Vincentian Canon is a postulate of historical simplification, of a harmful primitivism' (p. 52). Although Florovsky seems to have put more anti-Catholic passion than understanding in this article, he still makes at least two very valuable points: a. truth is not always a matter of majority (at a certain point during the Arian debate the orthodox were a minority) (P. 51); b. 'decisive value resides in inner catholicity, not in empirical universality' (p. 53).

Fr. Sergius Bulgakov is also quite critical of this maxim. He believes it excludes any new dogmatic formulations (which would not conform then with the "semper" of the maxim), and it also encourages a kind of quantitative instead of a qualitative ecumenism. He proposes to temper these weaknesses adding to the Vincentian Canon the maxim of Augustin, *in necessariis, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas*. Bulgakov, p. 29.

<sup>64</sup> Florovsky, p. 74.

"Ecclesiastic understanding" could not add anything to Scripture. But it was the only means to ascertain and disclose the true meaning of Scripture. Tradition was in fact the authentic interpretation of Scripture. And in this sense it was co-extensive with Scripture. Tradition was actually "Scripture rightly understood".<sup>65</sup>

Such a comment can be said to represent the opinion of the majority of the Orthodox theologians and it is undoubtedly the prevalent understanding in contemporary Orthodox theology.

## **B. The genesis of tradition**

### ***1. The context***

According to Georges Florovsky the authority of tradition was first invoked in the second century, during the struggle against Gnostics, Sabellians, Montanists and Marcionites.<sup>66</sup> In fact the Gnostics were those who appealed first to the principle of antiquity as a justification for their beliefs. This challenged the early Church to balance antiquity with universality and consensus as criteria for establishing the orthodox character of a certain belief.

On the other hand, the heretics were themselves quoting Scripture in defence of their position. This forced the orthodox Christians to ask a fundamental hermeneutic question: What should be the principle of Scripture interpretation that would bring forth its correct meaning? The answer was unequivocal:

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 integral whole, had to be elicited. One had to grasp, as it were - in advance, the true pattern of Biblical revelation, the great design of God's redemptive Providence, as this could be done only by an insight of faith... But this faith was not an arbitrary and subjective insight of individuals - it was the faith of the Church, rooted in the Apostolic message, or *kerygma*, and authenticated by it.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Florovsky, p. 74-75.

<sup>66</sup> Florovsky, p. 75.

<sup>67</sup> Florovsky, pp. 75-76.

It is hard not to appreciate the soundness of this kind of reasoning, especially in the context of the heated debate over orthodoxy in the second century. What is more surprising is this very modern, almost Polanyian line of argument, which speaks by itself of its relevance, whatever the concrete historical circumstances.

## ***2. The process***

The appeal to tradition changed its character in the course of history. In the time of Irenaeus and Tertullian the Apostolic past was at hand. The main concern in that period was with the original foundation of the Christian faith, with the initial "delivery" of the *kerygma*. Later on, in the third and fourth centuries, the main concern was with the "preservation" of the message of the Gospel.<sup>68</sup>

We may distinguish three stages in the development of tradition. They are not consecutive, but build one on the other, so that at present tradition is a combined result of these stages of development.

The first stage, the oral Apostolic tradition, dates from the birth of the Church and was the means through the Holy Spirit has sustained the life of Church in the first decades of her existence. It was rooted in the preaching of the Apostles and created the dogmatic and liturgical context in which the primitive Church was supposed to grow. This does not mean that the Church existed without Scripture at that time. The Old Testament, interpreted in light of the Christ-event, provided the Apostles and the Early Church with an even more solid foundation for her life and ministry. Thus, Christianity was not an absolutely new thing. It was the fulfillment of the Messianic expectations of the Old Testament prophets.

The second stage "fixed" of the oral Apostolic tradition in the books of the New Testament. It took place in the second half of the first century, but three more centuries were necessary for the Church to come to agreement on the canon of the New Testament. Not all the Apostolic tradition is contained explicitly in the New Testament, but the essential criterion of validation of a certain book as part of the canon was conformity to the Apostolic tradition. In fact, the Councils did not decide which books to be accepted and which books to be excluded from the canon. They have only sanctioned in an authoritative manner the universal practice of the Church.

The third stage is that which followed the writing of the New Testament books. It was concerned with the preservation of the Apostolic heritage, but also with reformulating the *kerygma* in terms that would respond to the various challenges that confronted the Church. It was first of all the time of the Church Fathers and of the seven ecumenical Councils, which represent the common heritage of

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<sup>68</sup> Florovsky, pp. 100-101.

the Church. It is also the time when particular theologies and local traditions were developed. Some of these became part of the universal wealth of the Church, some were abandoned as the conditions that made them necessary have disappeared, while others have been rejected as wrong or useless. The criteria of selection were now the Apostolic *kerygma* and the Holy Scripture.

### **C. The Orthodox meaning of tradition**

It is the time now to return to the model of Pelikan concerning the different meanings of tradition. In its terms, the Orthodox Church sees tradition as an icon. It is neither the ultimate reality, nor just a token, an arbitrary sign, which could be replaced with any other. Tradition, in the Orthodox understanding, embodies in a mysterious way the reality it represents, the revelation of God. Its purpose is not to attract attention to itself - that would be idolatrous, but to the reality it represents. Nevertheless, the way towards that reality is through tradition. There is no other way.

#### ***1. What tradition is not***

It is very easy for those outside the Orthodox environment to misunderstand what the Orthodox mean when they speak about tradition. This is why it is useful to clarify first of all what tradition is not. The following significant quotations will provide a good overview:

"Tradition was not just a transmission of inherited doctrines, in a "Judaic manner", but rather the continuous life in the truth."<sup>69</sup>

"Tradition is not only a protective, conservative principle; it is primarily the principle of growth and regeneration. Tradition is not a principle striving to restore the past, using the past as a criterion for the present."<sup>70</sup>

"Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words. Tradition is a *charismatic*, not a historical principle."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Florovsky, p. 80.

<sup>70</sup> Florovsky, p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> Florovsky, p. 47.

A common feature of the above statements is that they are not formulated in absolute terms. They do not tell us what the tradition is not (with the exception of the fact that it is not an anachronistic principle) - as if they would have an apologetic character, but rather that tradition is not just what it is thought in some circles to be - in other words, they are correctives for certain misunderstandings.

In other words, tradition is all those things - a `transmission of inherited doctrines', a `protective principle', a `memory of words', but it cannot be reduced to them. Such a view would be passeistic. What these texts try to tell us is that tradition is not like a picture of a past event. It is rather the mysterious presence of that past among us, not as an oppressive weight over our heads, but as a foundation for growth.

### ***2. The different forms of tradition***

We can talk about tradition both in a general and in a restricted sense. By tradition in the general sense the Orthodox Church means the entire life of the Church, which includes the Holy Scripture. Tradition in its restricted sense refers to the preaching and the testimony of the Church, whether oral, written or monumental.

The oral tradition was handed down especially in liturgical form and contains elements that did not enter the New Testament (such as those concerning clergy, the veneration of the Holy Virgin, of the saints and of icons, etc.).

The written tradition contains the dogmatic formulations of the seven ecumenical Council, the Creeds, the works of the Church Fathers and the canonic rules. Not all canonic rules have the same authority. Many of them are reactions to various historical circumstances and lose their usefulness when the conditions that made them necessary have changed. Some also have only a local sphere of operation.<sup>72</sup>

The monumental tradition is incorporated in Church buildings, mural paintings, icons and other ritual objects. They have a high symbolic value and are non-conceptual ways in which the spiritual content of the Orthodox faith is communicated to its adherents.

### ***3. The 'silent' tradition***

Jaroslav Pelikan, commenting the conclusions of John Henry Newman's book *Arians of the Fourth Century* makes the following observation: `The specific content of the Apostolic tradition had to remain secret because so much of it, in the precredal "traditionary system, received from the first age of

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<sup>72</sup> When Orthodox authors refer to that part of tradition which is authoritative and binding for all Orthodox believers, they use the word in the singular and sometimes with a capital T. When used in the plural, the word tradition refers usually to local traditions, which are not binding for the whole Orthodox Church.

the Church" had been not dogmatic, but liturgical in its form'.<sup>73</sup> He explains this in the sense that much of tradition was not intended for those outside the Church, but for the "insiders". Fr. Florovsky would not totally agree with this interpretation.

The starting point of Pelikan may have been a passage from St. Basil's treatise on the Holy Spirit. It says: 'Of the dogmata and kerygmata, which are kept in the Church, we have some from the written teaching, and some we derive from the Apostolic *paradosis*, which had been handed down *en mysterio*. And both have the same strength in the matters of piety'.<sup>74</sup>

Florovsky explains that for St. Basil *kerygmata* were what later came to be called dogmas or doctrines - the authoritative teaching that the Church professed publicly. Secondly, by *dogmata* he meant the complex of 'unwritten habits' incorporated in the liturgical life of the Church. In this context the author believes that it would be incorrect to render *en mysterio* by "in secret", which would a certain esoteric character of tradition, more in line with Gnostic than with Christian thinking. The right translation would be "by way of mysteries", more precisely through the sacraments.

This does not deny the 'silent' character of certain traditions, which, according to St. Basil had to be kept unwritten in order to prevent profanation at the hands of the infidel, a reflection of the time when Christianity was a persecuted and secretive religion. To what extent was the insistence on the 'silent' character of tradition a relevant matter in the new conditions, after Christianity came out of the catacombs as the official religion of the Empire is a matter of discussion. We believe this is an expression of the conservative spirit which is prevalent in Orthodoxy.

#### **D. The functions of tradition**

##### ***1. Tradition versus Scripture***

There is no uniform position in the Orthodox Church concerning the dynamics of Scripture and tradition. Some authors tend to give Scripture a higher authority, which makes their position compatible, at least to a certain extent, with the Protestant understanding,<sup>75</sup> while others insist that Scripture and tradition have the same degree of authority.

Sergius Bulgakov is a very articulate proponent of the first opinion. He says in his book *The Orthodox Church*:

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<sup>73</sup> Pelikan, p. 29.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Florovsky, p. 86.

<sup>75</sup> Bulgakov, p. 14.

... the Word of God is above all other sources of faith, especially of all tradition in all its forms. Tradition adapts itself to the different needs of different epochs; Holy Scripture, that is the voice of god addressed to man, has absolute value, though revealed under a conditioned historical form... Holy Scripture and tradition are unequal in value. First place belongs to the Word of God; the criterion of the truth of Scripture is not tradition (although tradition testifies to Scripture) but on the contrary, tradition is recognized when founded on Scripture. Tradition cannot be in disagreement with Scripture.<sup>76</sup>

On the other hand, the Greek Orthodox dogmatician Christos Androutsos represents a different position. He makes the following statement in his *Symbolics*: 'The acceptance of the Tradition as source of the same value with the Holy Scriptures is historically and logically correct and necessary'.<sup>77</sup>

The explanation for the difference can be found in the two directions that divide Orthodox dogmatics in the twentieth century. Androutsos represents the older direction, which is a form of Orthodox scholasticism of Roman-Catholic origin, having its roots in the theology of the counter-Reformation. This explains its lower view of Scripture and the respective higher view of tradition, as a reaction on the Reformed insistence on the principle *sola scriptura*.

The other direction, more apophatic, represented by Sergius Bulgakov and other Russian theologians, in Russia and in the Diaspora, as well as a number of other writers such as Dumitru Staniloae, John Zizioulas and Kallistos Ware, stands under the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Gregory Palamas. Even if this group of theologians is more inclined than the others to affirm the supremacy of Scripture over tradition, at the same time, because of their sacramentalism, they tend to give an exaggerated importance to the liturgic use of Scripture, which is considered by far the most important one.<sup>78</sup> The result is a neglect of the private use of Scripture in the life of the Orthodox believer.

Fr. Ion Bria formulates in his book *Destinul ortodoxiei* [The Destiny of Orthodoxy] a number of principles governing the dynamics of Scripture and tradition.<sup>79</sup> They are an excellent summary of the Orthodox position on this issue:

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<sup>76</sup> Bulgakov, p. 18.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted by Argyris Petrou, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> 'The Word of God is used in the Church in two ways: liturgically and non-liturgically... the liturgical reading of the Word of God is possible only in the Church and nowhere outside. Such reading is of the greatest importance, because the living force of the Word of God is there manifested.' Bulgakov, p. 22.

<sup>79</sup> Bria, *Destinul ortodoxiei*, pp. 275-277.

- a. 'God reveals His presence, His grace and His works through His Incarnated Word and through His Spirit, in and through His People, the Church.'
- b. 'The Word and the Spirit of God cannot be separated; therefore the Holy Scripture and Tradition are inseparable in the life of the Church.'
- c. 'The testimony of the Holy Scripture and that of Tradition form a unified whole; therefore they are complementary and concomitant for doctrine and praxis in the Church.'
- d. 'The Holy Scripture in its entirety has a normative authority, affirmed by Tradition.'
- e. 'In Tradition the Church connects the word of the Gospel with the reality and the concrete conditions of those who believe.'

The resulting picture is that of a mysterious connection between Scripture and tradition in the context of the Church. It can be compared, at least to a certain extent to the hypostatic union of the two natures, divine and human, in the Person of the Incarnated Son of God.<sup>80</sup> This connection is emphasized even more when we see tradition as a the means to arrive to a correct interpretation of Scripture.

## ***2. Tradition as a hermeneutical principle***

'One might suggest', says Florovsky, 'that the Scriptures are the only authentic record of the revelation, and everything else is no more than a commentary thereupon. And commentary can never have the same authority as the original record.' Then he adds: 'There is some truth in this suggestion...'<sup>81</sup> By this he means that tradition is indeed a commentary, an interpretation of the written revelation contained in the Holy Scripture, but that it is more than that. It is itself a form of revelation. In this sense it preceded Scripture and, after the books of the Bible were written, it preserved those elements of the Apostolic preaching which were not contained in it.

In another very important passage for our discussion, Fr. Florovsky explains the reason why the Early Church, and following her the Orthodox Church, believe that such a hermeneutical principle is necessary:

Tradition was in the Early Church, first of all, an hermeneutical principle and method. Scripture could be rightly and fully assessed and understood only in the light and in the context of the living Apostolic Tradition, which was an integral factor of Christian

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<sup>80</sup> In fact, Fr. Bria, in his book *Credinta pe care o marturisim* [The Faith We Testify] (Editura IBM al BOR, Bucuresti, 1987), presents this dynamic in almost Christological terms. He says: 'Tradition was assumed in the New Testament, but this does not exhaust it, nor does it suppress it. Moreover, the New Testament comes from Tradition and remains in Tradition, without mixing or confusion.' p. 37.

<sup>81</sup> Florovsky, p. 29-30.

existence. It was so, of course, not because Tradition could add anything to what has been manifested in the Scripture, but because it provided that living context, the comprehensive perspective, in which only the true "intention" and the total "design" of the Holy Writ, of Divine Revelation itself, could be detected and grasped.<sup>82</sup>

A wise maxim says that "facts are simple things until set in context". In other words, facts do not carry meaning. They may mean one thing or another, sometimes totally opposite, depending on the large framework in which they are set or on the perspective from which they are analyzed. What 'tradition as a hermeneutic principle' tries to do, is to ensure that the facts we gather from our reading and study of Scripture do not come to mean something else than what they were intended to mean. How does this work practically? First of all, by coming to the Scriptures from the ground of the Church, equipped with the "mind of the Church", and secondly, by submitting the results of our research to the authority of the Church, seen as a "hermeneutic community". Such an attitude could simply called loyalty.

### ***3. Loyalty to tradition***

Loyalty to tradition does not involve stagnation and rigid conservatism, nor servile imitation. Loyalty to tradition did not prevent the Fathers from creating new words in order to protect the unchanging faith of the Church. We are called not just to learn *the* Fathers, but to learn *from* them. They have changed things in their time; we are called to follow their example in a creative way. But this should never mean change for the sake of change, nor autonomous and individualistic initiative.

If we understand what tradition really is and in what intimate way it is connected with Scriptures, it will not difficult to accept the necessity of dedication to tradition. For, as Georges Florovsky comments: 'Loyalty to tradition does not mean loyalty to bygone times and to outward authority; it is a living connection with the fullness of Church experience.'<sup>83</sup> The Church did not start with and probably will not end with us. It is an act of realistic humility to show respect for the work of the Spirit and to accept as a privilege and a manifestation of grace the opportunity offered to us to be part of this wealth of spirituality and to make it grow through our personal contribution

## **E. Critical considerations**

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<sup>82</sup> Florovsky, p. 79.

<sup>83</sup> Florovsky, p. 46.

The fact that something is a tradition, does not make it automatically right. The Orthodox agree that we need to use discernment and selectivity in the reception (or rejection) of certain traditions. Some traditions are simply wrong. As we have already said, "antiquity" is a necessary, but not a sufficient criterion for the legitimacy of tradition. A genuine tradition should be able to be traced, directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, back to the Apostles and also to be confirmed by the universal consensus of the Church.<sup>84</sup>

The model seems to be balanced theoretically, but practically speaking the issue is not so simple to resolve. First of all, the consensus is not easy to discover because of the diversity in the local traditions. From them one has to discern what is universal and timeless and what is just of limited value.

Secondly, individual differences (one should rather say "personal", in Orthodox language), sometimes really sharp ones, still persist and have always been there between theologians. Some issues have been resolved in time; others, among which also very old ones, are still discussed, while the Church is constantly confronted with new challenges.

And finally, if the balance between Scripture and tradition is inclined in the direction of tradition, in time, traditions foreign to the spirit of Scripture may be allowed in the corpus of tradition, without the 'immune system' of the Church being able to react. Obviously, the Orthodox do not see this as a serious danger, since the 'rule of faith' can still function as a protection. Sergius Bulgakov goes basically in this direction when he says:

... the connection between Scripture and tradition being so close, a man not knowing the Bible cannot be considered as deprived of Christian instruction, where the vacancy is filled by living tradition: oral, cultural, plastic. And just as the Church, at its best moments, has had the power to exist without the written word, certain communities continue to live without the written word, certain communities continue to live without the Scriptures in our day.<sup>85</sup>

Since this leaves a definite impression of putting down the importance of Scripture, he adds: 'A Christian can and should have a personal attitude towards the Bible, a life united with the Bible, just as he should have an individual prayer-life.' Then he goes on, giving the example of the Church Fathers, who were really men of the Word.

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<sup>84</sup> Florovsky, p. 99.

<sup>85</sup> Bulgakov, p. 21.

In order not to be guilty of subjectivism, let us use a short example from the Protestant realm. Argyris Petrou, pastor of the Greek Evangelical Church in Toronto writes in a polemic paper in which he tries to answer the question 'to what extent is Orthodoxy compatible with Evangelicalism?':

The Church is under the authority of the Scriptures and not the Scriptures under the authority of the Church. We do not expect anything else to be elevated to the same or higher level than that of the Word of God. We believe the Word of God to be final and complete.

We do not reject tradition altogether, but we judge the validity of tradition by the Word of God.<sup>86</sup>

From the examples given above we get the impression that something is really missing. Moreover, the reality does not justify the optimism, either in the Orthodox or in the Protestant circle. Lack of instruction in the Scriptures in the Orthodox circles has opened the gate for a lot of confusion and syncretism, while a practical neglect of tradition in the Protestant milieu has given birth to liberalism and continuous fragmentation.

Besides the practical reasons, coming from historical experience, there are also some theoretical objections to this kind of optimism. If we can manage to restore the core of revelation without Scripture, is the Bible necessary anymore, or we can do without it? And if we can survive without tradition, why should we stick to the canon and the dogma established by tradition?

The issue leaves the impression that a delicate mechanism is somewhat out of order, or, to use a better illustration, it is like in an ecosystem, where one of the important species tends to disappear, and the balance of the whole living system is in danger.

We believe that a possible solution to this problem can be found by a dynamic application of the model proposed by Jaroslav Pelikan, in the context of the model of Trinity. In the center of the model we propose there is Scripture and tradition, as two distinct, but inseparable elements. "Ontologically" they are consubstantial, both being equally forms of revelation, but "economically" Scripture has authority over tradition, in same manner in which the Son has authority over the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>86</sup> Argyris Petrou, 'Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism: Areas of convergence and divergence', paper prepared for the IFES Consultation 'Evangelicals and the Orthodox Church', June 29 - July 2, 1993, Fairmile Court, Cobham, England, p. 3.

Now, if in the delicate balance of this mechanism there is any interference (by assigning "economical" identity between Scripture and tradition or by assigning some ontological superiority of Scripture over tradition) the whole mechanism breaks down.

A viable model of the relationship between Scripture and tradition would involve seeing this inseparable pair as an icon of revelation. In this sense they embody, but are not identical with the reality they represent, each having a specific role in the "economy" of the process.

However, if one of these elements fails to direct us towards the reality it represents and attracts our attention towards itself, this transforms it into an idol and by reaction the other element is transformed into a mere token, an arbitrary sign which does not carry within it the reality towards which it points out.

Our model is only a proposal, and the space of this paper does not allow for a detailed analysis of it. We believe, however, that there is some potential in it and we shall be able to pursue it in future research.

## IV. TRADITION AND SCRIPTURE IN THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ORTHODOXY

The purpose of this section is not by any means to offer a comprehensive historical perspective of the way the Orthodox Church has used the model of "interpretation of Scripture in the context of tradition" discussed in the previous sections. The length of this paper does not allow for such an approach. Rather, we have chosen three important Orthodox thinkers from three different periods and we shall treat them as case studies for the way this model has been applied in different historical circumstances.

### A. The Patristic period - St. Athanasius

The Orthodox Church has its roots in the theology of the Church Fathers and it is there that we have to look for the patterns followed by later authors. And so we turn to St. Athanasius as an example of Scripture interpretation in the context of tradition.

#### *1. St. Athanasius and the Arian debate*

According to Fr. Florovsky exegesis was the most important, if not the only theological method in the first centuries of the Christian Church.<sup>87</sup> This was exactly the ground on which St. Athanasius (c. 300-373) had to meet Arianism.

The Arians had gathered an impressive amount of Scriptural proof-texts in favor of their position that the Son of God was no more than a creature and tried to restrict the discussion to the Biblical ground. Their method consisted in selecting their favorite passages and using them without much concern for the total context of Revelation. But, as Florovsky points out, 'Scripture had its own pattern, or design, its internal structure and harmony. The Heretics ignore this pattern, or rather substitute their own instead. In other words, they re-arrange the Scriptural evidence on a pattern which is quite alien to the Scripture itself'.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Florovsky, p. 75.

<sup>88</sup> Florovsky, p. 78.

## ***2. St. Athanasius' response***

In his reply, St. Athanasius invoked the *regula fidei*. Here is his basic statement: 'Let us, who possess the scope of faith, restore the correct meaning of what they had wrongly interpreted.'<sup>89</sup> By "the scope of faith" St. Athanasius did not mean a vague "general drift" of the Scriptures, but 'precisely their credal core, which is condensed in the "rule of faith" as it had been maintained in the Church and "transmitted from fathers to fathers", while the Arians had "no fathers" for their opinions.'<sup>90</sup> Fr. Florovsky believes that *skopos* in the language of St. Athanasius is a close equivalent to what St. Irenaeus used to denote by *hypothesis* - 'the underlying "idea", the true design, the intended meaning'.<sup>91</sup>

The way this principle was applied was that 'time and time again, in his scrutiny of the Arian arguments, St. Athanasius would summarize the basic tenets of the Christian faith, before going into the actual re-examination of the alleged proof-texts, in order to restore texts into their proper perspective'.<sup>92</sup>

## ***3. Critical conclusions***

The method used by St. Athanasius, writes H.E.W. Turner, 'has been taken as a virtual abandonment of the appeal to Scripture and its replacement by an argument from Tradition.'<sup>93</sup> The author sees a danger in this approach, which in less careful hands could lead to imposing a straight-jacket on the Scripture, much like the Arians did.

Fr. Florovsky believes that Turner exaggerates the danger, which is typical for the difference between Orthodox and the Protestant perspective. The "rule of faith" used by St. Athanasius was not an external authority imposed on Scripture, but only the condensation of the same Apostolic preaching we find in written form in the New Testament. So, basically there is no real danger in this approach; St. Athanasius is on solid ground.

To what extent is this a correct conclusion? Manlio Simonetti, in his recent work on Patristic exegesis, states that St. Athanasius holds only a marginal interest for his study, 'because he himself took little interest in exegesis'.<sup>94</sup> If this is true, then it has, we believe, a very reasonable explanation. In the

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Florovsky, p. 81.

<sup>90</sup> Florovsky, p. 82.

<sup>91</sup> Florovsky, p. 81.

<sup>92</sup> Florovsky, p. 82.

<sup>93</sup> HEW Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth*, quoted in Florovsky, p. 82.

<sup>94</sup> M Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994, p. 44.

concrete historical circumstances that he faced, St. Athanasius needed to resort to a different approach. He was a polemist. His major objective was the defence of orthodox faith against the heretics. Following his predecessors, Athanasius did not engage in Biblical debates with opponents, but through an appeal to Tradition he tried to re-establish the integrity of the Christian message, threatened by the faulty way the Arians were handling Scripture. His concern was not for the "letter", but for the "spirit" of Scripture.

When the core message of Scripture was restored, it could offer the exegete a sure ground on which to exercise his activity. The integrated model of Biblical interpretation in the context of tradition in which he strongly believed offered Athanasius the possibility to respond to the challenge he faced, emphasizing the "rule of faith" at the expense of exegesis, without being less Scriptural, for that matter.

Of course, in the hands of people who did not have such a high view of the sufficiency of Scripture this could lead to a neglect of the Bible and to an over-emphasis on tradition, a condition which is not uncommon in Orthodox circles. From an Orthodox perspective, if someone had an apprehension of the *regula fidei*, without a deep knowledge of Scripture, he could still be an orthodox believer. On the basis of that doctrinal core he would be able to build a correct understanding of the Bible and be protected from arbitrary interpretations and from heresy.

This approach stands in sharp contrast to the Protestant position, according to which, if we are faced with the alternative of the apprehension of the "rule of faith" over a knowledge of Scripture, it is preferable to choose Scripture, since from it, provided that we use the correct exegesis, we can discover the core Christian message. It is hard to avoid the impression that such a choice is based on a rationalistic and over optimistic hermeneutic, more in line with Renaissance and Enlightenment thinking, than with the Biblical mind-set.

Do we have to choose between these two hermeneutics? Not necessarily. In fact, the strength of one is the weakness of the other. So, a better solution would be a combination of both, in which equal attention is given to Scripture and Tradition, with a freedom to emphasize one or the other, according to the concrete circumstances which confront the Church.

## B. The Byzantine period - St. Gregory Palamas

Georges Florovsky believes that `Byzantine theology was an organic continuation of the Patristic Age'.<sup>95</sup> On this point there is not total agreement in the theological world.<sup>96</sup> The sure thing is that Byzantine writers, including St. Gregory Palamas, claimed to follow in their theology the Church Fathers and especially the Cappadocians.

The study of Palamas as a representative personality for the Byzantine theology is justified by his overarching influence on modern Orthodox theology. LaCugna writes about him: `Gregory is as central a figure in the East as Thomas Aquinas is in the West'.<sup>97</sup>

### *1. St. Gregory - the hesychastic theologian*

St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) was not a speculative theologian. He was a monk and a bishop. As a theologian he was concerned both to understand and explain the spiritual experience of the Church.<sup>98</sup> Palamas was the most vigorous defender of hesychasm,<sup>99</sup> a form of spiritual developed by the monks on Mt. Athos, against the accusations of Barlaam, an Italian, infiltrated by the Catholics among the Orthodox in Greece.<sup>100</sup>

In fact in the dispute between Palamas and Barlaam we have a confrontation between the mystical tradition of the East and the scholasticism of the West. The irony is that although the Palamite theology has received official recognition from the Orthodox Church at the Councils in 1347 and 1351, it was soon forgotten and Orthodox theology stood for almost five centuries under a strong scholastic influence.

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<sup>95</sup> Florovsky, p. 112.

<sup>96</sup> While neo-Palamite Orthodox theologians like Lossky, Meyendorff, Ware and Staniloae are partisans of this thesis, Catholic and Protestant scholars like Jugie, Wendebourg, Williams and LaCugna oppose it.

<sup>97</sup> CM LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, San Francisco: Harper, 1991, p. 181.

<sup>98</sup> `The ultimate purpose of St. Gregory's theological teaching was to defend the reality of Christian experience. *Salvation is more than forgiveness. It is a genuine renewal of man.* And this renewal is affected not by the discharge, or release of certain natural energies implied in man's own creaturely being, but by the "energies of God".'Florovsky, pp. 117-118.

<sup>99</sup> `Hesychasm (hesychia = quietude) was a method of contemplation whose aim was to behold the glory of god, the uncreated divine light, that appeared to the disciples on Mt. Tabor at the Transfiguration of Christ', LaCugna, p. 181-182.

<sup>100</sup> D Staniloae, *Viata si invatatura Sfintului Grigorie Palama* [The Life and Teaching of St. Gragory Palamas], 2nd edition, Editura Scripta, Bucuresti, 1993, pp. 14-20.

St. Gregory starts his theological investigation with the question: What is the essence of the Christian experience? The answer he gives to this question, which is *theosis*, is not new. The Church Fathers - St. Athanasius, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Maximus, etc. - have used it extensively before. The essence of *theosis* is probably best expressed in the famous maxim of St. Athanasius: 'He became man in order to divinize us in Himself' (*Ad Adelphium*, 4).<sup>101</sup> This does not imply an ontological change<sup>102</sup> - man cannot become God; it means a personal encounter, an intimate sharing of the divine life by the man created in His image, in such a way that he will start bearing more and more His likeness.

The real question that confronted the theologian was how could this mystical union be compatible with the divine transcendence? The answer of St. Gregory was to make an ontological distinction between God's *ousia* - the unknowable, impalpable essence of God, and His *energeiai* - the uncreated divine energies<sup>103</sup> through God can be known and participated into. Again, doing this, he claimed to follow the Church Fathers.

St. Gregory distinguishes three aspects of God's being and associates to them three types of union with God. The first aspect is God's *essence*, to which corresponds union according to essence. This takes place only between the divine persons, since the created order cannot be united with the divine essence. The second aspect is the divine *hypostases*, to which corresponds hypostatic union, possible only in the person of the incarnated Son of God, between His two natures. Finally, there are the divine *energies*, to which corresponds union according to energy, the only type of union accessible to a creature, in order for the union to be real and for God's transcendence to remain absolute.

St. Gregory avoids the risk of talking about an impersonal type of union between man and the divine energies stating that the energies are *enhyposstatic*, that is, they are personal, in other words they cannot exist apart from the divine *hypostases*.

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<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Florovsky, p. 114.

<sup>102</sup> 'The term *theosis* is indeed quite embarrassing if we would think in "ontological" categories. Indeed, man simply cannot "become" god. But the Fathers were thinking in "personal" terms and the mystery of personal communion was involved at this point. *Theosis meant a personal encounter*. It is that intimate intercourse of man with God, in which the whole of human existence is, as it were, permeated by the Divine Presence.' Florovsky, p. 115.

<sup>103</sup> Energy is the expression of some nature, and according to St. Maximus the Confessor no nature can exist apart from its energies. See LaCugna, p. 183.

## ***2. St. Gregory and the Patristic tradition***

St. Gregory was suspected of subversive innovations by his enemies and this is still the way he is perceived in general in the West.<sup>104</sup> However, he thinks about himself as being deeply rooted in the tradition of the Fathers.

LaCugna talks about two extremes in this debate. At one extreme she sees those like Endre von Ivanka, who hold that 'a real distinction between essence and energies *contradicts* the thought of the Greek Fathers. In their opinion the Cappadocians were making only an epistemological distinction, and not a real one. At the other extreme she sees the neo-Palamites, who 'celebrate the patristic pedigree of Gregory's thought and at times speak as if no time, no shift in language or philosophy, occurred between fourth and fourteenth centuries.' LaCugna believes that whilst the texts quoted by Gregory from the Cappadocians do not suggest an ontological distinction, but 'does not exclude the possibility that such a reading could be a legitimate and genuine development of Cappadocian thought..<sup>105</sup>

## ***3. Critical conclusions***

It is not our objective here to offer a critique of the theology of St. Gregory. What we are concerned about is the extent to which Palamas has used Scripture and tradition in order to respond to the challenges of his day.

What we have here is a confrontation between the East and the West, between the mystical tradition of the Orthodox Church, in light of which Palamas tries to make sense of the doctrine of deification and the scholasticism of the West, striving for philosophical coherency, understood in the terms of Aristotelianism. The whole debate takes place on a philosophical and theological plane, with very little reference to Scripture, and when this happens, as in the discussion about the light of Mt. Tabor, the Biblical text is more a pretext for speculation, than an object of exegesis.

We have seen in our presentation about the Patristic period that in the context of the Arian debate, for reasons peculiar to the nature of the debate, St. Athanasius attributed more attention to the theological argumentation at the detriment of exegesis. With St. Gregory we see the Athanasian approach taken for granted, in spite of the fact that the historical conditions had changed. The implicit result was a domination of the philosophical approach and a neglect of exegesis, a tendency that would continue in the Orthodox Church to the present days.

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<sup>104</sup> Florovsky, p. 114.

<sup>105</sup> LaCugna, p. 187.

### C. The contemporary period - Fr. Dumitru Staniloae

The Orthodox Church of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries has been confronted with a strange situation. Although in her worship she follows faithfully the patterns established by the Church Fathers, in theology she has been dominated from the seventeenth century by a form of scholasticism of Catholic origin. To this situation is addressed the call to renewal issued by Fr. Georges Florovsky:

‘It is not enough to keep a "Byzantine liturgy", as we do... One has to go to the very roots of this traditional "piety", and to recover the "Patristic mind". Otherwise we may be in the danger of being inwardly split - as many in our midst actually are - between the "traditional" forms of "piety" and a very untraditional habit of traditional thinking. It is a real danger. As "worshippers" we are still in "the tradition of the Fathers". Should we not stand, conscientiously and avowedly, in the same tradition also as "theologians", as witnesses and teachers of Orthodoxy? Can we retain our integrity in any other way?’<sup>106</sup>

This effort of re-establishing the Patristic and Byzantine character of Orthodox theology, together with its engagement in the general theological dialogue and a constant striving towards becoming relevant in the context it addresses, represent the distinctive marks of contemporary Orthodoxy. The Romanian theologian Dumitru Staniloae, who is considered by Olivier Clement<sup>107</sup> the most important Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century, is probably the best example for the purpose of our discussion.

#### *1. Staniloae and St. Gregory Palamas*

At the beginning of his academic career, in 1930, Fr. Staniloae (1903-1993) had translated into Romanian *The Dogmatics* of Christos Androutsos. He was then under the influence of the scholastic tendency that dominated at the time the Romanian Orthodox theology. Eight years later he translated and commented the main works of St. Gregory Palamas and this brought a dramatic change in his approach of theology and spiritual life. He became a hesychast and through his theological work

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<sup>106</sup> Florovsky, p. 113.

<sup>107</sup> Introduction to *Filocalia* [Philokalia], vol. 3, Editura Harisma, Bucuresti, 1994.

effected a major change of direction in Romanian theology,<sup>108</sup> from a scholastic towards a more apophatic approach, without a neglect of the cataphatic aspect.<sup>109</sup>

## ***2. The perichoretic model of Fr. Staniloae***

In our presentation here we are not concerned with the whole dogmatic system developed by Fr. Staniloae, but only with his understanding of Scripture and tradition. Staniloae borrows from the doctrine of Trinity the concept of *perichoresis* and uses it in order to create a dynamic model of the relationship between Scripture, tradition and Church. In his understanding,

The Church is the environment in which the content of Scripture or Revelation is imprinted, through Tradition. Scripture or Revelation needs Tradition as a means of activating its content, and Church as a practicing subject of Tradition and as an environment in which the content of Scripture or Revelation is imprinted. But the Church needs Scripture too, in order to be refreshed through it, to grow in the knowledge and the living in Christ and to enrich its application to her life, through Tradition. Church, Scripture and Tradition are indissolubly united.<sup>110</sup>

The interpenetrated action of Church, tradition and Scripture is empowered and works, according to Staniloae, by the Holy Spirit, who constituted the Church, the Body of Christ, at Pentecost, inspired Scripture, the Word of God, and continues to communicate Christ to us through tradition.

## ***3. Critical conclusions***

The value of the model proposed by Staniloae consists in its flexibility and in the fact that it avoids and contradiction between the constitutive elements. It also leaves space for a creative tension between them. Thus, Scripture can challenge constantly the life of the Church and is a criterion of validity for tradition; Tradition provides the hermeneutical key to Scripture and helps the Church to be both identical with its nature and ever renewed in history; and finally, the Church protects Scripture

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<sup>108</sup> 'What The Vatican II Council has done pastorally and structurally for the Roman-Catholic Church, Fr. Staniloae has done for Orthodoxy in the area of theological reflection.' Ion Bria, *Spatiul nemuririi* [The Space of Immortality], Editura Trinitas, Iasi, 1994.

<sup>109</sup> He writes on this issue: 'Negative theology needs positive terms in order to negate them... Far from demanding a denial of the rational concepts, negative theology looks for enriching them'. D Staniloae, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxa* [Orthodox Spirituality], Editura IBM al BOR, Bucuresti, 1981, p. 204.

<sup>110</sup> Staniloae, *Teologia dogmatica*, vol. 1, p. 66.

from an arbitrary individualistic appropriation and offers tradition the institutional and sacramental context in which to be developed.

The main problem in this model comes from the insistence of Fr. Staniloae on the preeminent role of the Church over Scripture and tradition,<sup>111</sup> manifested among other ways, through her infallibility. The result of this emphasis is that it disturbs the fine balance of Scripture and tradition in favor of the second, which leads, on one hand to a practical neglect of Scripture in the life of the Church, and on the other side, to a diminution of the authority of Scripture in validating or invalidating particular traditions.

The perichoretic model of Dumitru Staniloae, for the relationship between Scripture, tradition and Church, with its qualities and weaknesses is a relevant example for the stage of the debate on this issue in contemporary Orthodoxy. Is there a way out, and ahead, of here? We believe there is, and the signs for it are already showing here and there.

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<sup>111</sup> '... in this whole the Spirit gives the initiative more to the Church. She is moved by the Holy Spirit and her movement is made in and through Tradition and is refreshed through her connection with Scripture.' Staniloae, *Teologia dogmatica*, vol. 1, p. 66.

## **EXCURSUS - RECENT DEVELOPMENTS CONCERNING THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH**

The year 1993 has surprised the publishing world with an unexpected title: *The Orthodox Study Bible: The New Testament*, prepared by a group of prestigious Orthodox scholars and published by Thomas Nelson. This study tool marks the new interest in Biblical studies in the Orthodox academic world and in the regular Bible study in the Orthodox parishes.

Until recently, as a reaction against the destructive influence of Biblical criticism, Orthodox theologians have sought 'refuge in a kind of crypto-fundamentalism' as Veselin Kesich calls it.<sup>112</sup> This could not continue for long. Already in the first part of this century Orthodox theologians like Sergius Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky were pleading for a change of attitude. They were conscious that, as Kallistos Ware says, 'Orthodox Christians neglect to our own peril the results of independent scholarly research into the origin, dates and authorship of the Bible, although we shall always want to test these results in the light of Holy Tradition.'<sup>113</sup>

One of the convincing arguments brought by Kesich in favor of a renewal of interest in Biblical studies was that a repudiation of the historical examination of written revelation would undermine the importance of the historical incarnation and would encourage Docetic tendencies.<sup>114</sup> He believes that there is a middle way between Biblicist fundamentalism and radical liberalism,<sup>115</sup> and that Orthodox Biblical studies would not have to fall into either error. Biblical studies based upon the insistence on the "spirit" of Scripture as opposed to the "letter" and a strong belief in the inspiration could protect the Orthodox from both extremes, and, through this revival of interest in the Bible, could bring "theological awakening" in the Orthodox environment. As a result of this renewed interest, writes Kesich,

We may expect soon the emergence of a group of young Orthodox Biblical scholars in America, grounded in Orthodox historical and theological tradition and with first-hand

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<sup>112</sup> Kesich p. 343.

<sup>113</sup> K Ware, p. 763.

<sup>114</sup> Kesich, p. 347.

<sup>115</sup> Kesich, p. 344.

experience of doing research in Scripture. This will mark the intellectual and spiritual growth of our churches everywhere.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Kesich, p. 351.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study of tradition as the context for Biblical interpretation is particularly useful for a Protestant in search for a better hermeneutical model than that inherited and Orthodox theology is a the proper place to start such a research, because of the prominent role it gives to tradition.

Our study has shown that we cannot correctly assess the relationship between Scripture and tradition in Orthodox thinking if we isolate them from the comprehensive system of interconnected concepts they are part of.

Scripture, Tradition and Church form, in Orthodox dogmatics, a sort of "trinity" in which different roles and functions are assigned to them by various authors. Most Orthodox authors consider the Church as being preeminent and Scripture having authority over tradition, although there is less unity on the second point than on the first.

Tradition is understood by the Orthodox first of all as a hermeneutical principle, although it is seen as being much more than that - the life of the Spirit manifested in history in the Christian community.

From the point of view of the model proposed by Jaroslav Pelikan, Orthodox theology rejects the concept of tradition seen as a token and considers that tradition is better represented by the concept of tradition seen as an icon, although all along history Orthodoxy has been confronted with a corruption of this concept into an idolatrous form, in which tradition does not lead people beyond it, but becomes stale traditionalism.

The perichoretic model of the relationship between Scripture, tradition and the Church, formulated by Dumitru Staniloae, seems to be the most balanced solution to our problem and could be a profitable ground for future research.

It is possible that in time the new interest for Biblical studies manifested in Orthodox theological and popular circles will bring new perspectives and will stimulate new developments in the area of the dynamics between Scripture and tradition.

Furthermore, in the context of contemporary ecumenical dialogue, we could see in the future not only an input on the importance of tradition, coming from Orthodoxy towards Protestantism, but also a Protestant contribution to a renewed understanding of the importance of Scripture in Orthodoxy.

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