

Chapter III

The Role of Tradition in the Orthodox Church

Many people call the Orthodox Church a 'traditional Church'. Some would do this in a positive way and would appreciate its long history and heritage. But there are people who make this remark to prove that this is not the church that we want today. They interpret tradition as something archaic and against modern times. Some would even take the Bible and quote from here and there to convince us that to keep traditions is against the commandment of God. To see whether the two groups mentioned here are right I would like to go deep into a discussion about the word 'tradition'.

What is meant by *tradition*?

The root meaning of the word *tradition* is 'to hand over' something from one person to another. It is like the handing over of a baton from one athlete to another during a relay race. 'Tradition' can also mean that which is handed over. So it can be either 'an act of passing something' or 'the thing which is handed over'. St. Paul claims explicitly that he is 'handing on' what he has 'received' (see 1Cor 11,2.23; 15,1.3).

If an Orthodox believer spends some time to think about what he received religiously from his ancestors he may be having a long list. I would therefore like to distinguish our religious tradition into five categories. They are the following:

- a) Scriptural Tradition: The first one is a deposit of treasures that we inherited from our very first fathers. We can begin it with Abraham, the 'Father of the believers'. He was called by God (Gen.12) and he got a lot of promises from God. Not only did these promises make the basics of his faith but also are they the reasons for our faith in God. Abraham taught his people to leave the idols of gentiles and to turn to Yahweh, the living God. After Abraham we had Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, etc. as the patriarchs of the biblical period. Then came Moses, the judges and the kings of Israel. Last but not least to mention are the earlier prophets like Elijah or Elisha and the latter prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos etc. The utterances of the prophets made our tradition of faith richer and richer. If this was the case of the Old Testament period, we have a much important tradition in the New Testament period through the Gospels and Epistles. The latter is much important, because it tells us about Jesus Christ the end of all past revelations of God. Thus after each generation of our fathers the deposit of faith matters began to grow and now we have a long list of promises given by God. This kind of a tradition can be called *scriptural tradition*. It is like a treasure kept within a family for the sake of generations. For those who understand the way in which God engaged Himself in history

for the sake of mankind, it is a valuable treasure; but to the others it may be a folly to keep it and hand it on to the next generation.

- b) Doctrinal Tradition: This kind of tradition starts within the New Testament but got its full growth with the councils of the first five centuries. It includes pronouncements of the Early Christians concerning the nature of God, the nature of Jesus Christ, the person of the Holy Spirit, etc. For example, St. Thomas, the apostle of Jesus, called him “My Lord and My God” (Jn 20,25). Later on the fathers of the Ancient Church developed the ideas about the divinity and humanity of Christ using some philosophical and theological terms. These pronouncements came when some people began to teach erroneous theology. Take for example the case of Arius, a learned priest of the fourth century. He began to say that Jesus as Son of God is a lesser being to God the father. So it was the responsibility of the Fathers of the Church to convene a council at Nicea (AD 325) and discuss the matter. That council and the next council held at Constantinople (AD 381) formulated our Nicene Creed. It is one among the richest traditions of the church. Through the recitation of its four paragraphs we confess our faith about the Creator God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, Salvation and Resurrection of the Departed. We received similar teachings about all the important matters related to our faith from the councils of early fathers of the undivided Church. We keep such traditions unchanged because we can refer to them when people begin to teach us wrong ideas about the above mentioned matters.
- c) Liturgical Tradition: The third kind of tradition is our way of worshipping God. Our Church is called ‘Orthodox’ because we believe we have the right way of adoring God. The Greek word ‘ortho’ means ‘right’ and ‘doxa’ means ‘glory’ or ‘praise’. So ‘Orthodox’ is the correct way of praising God. Our worship is not simply saying some petitions before God, e.g. give us this or that. Rather we stand before God as angels do and we remember the things, which God did for the world and its inhabitants. We are not only praying for our own needs but for the needs of our fellow beings too. Our worship takes into consideration our harmony with God, with our fellow human beings and with the whole universe. Even though this kind of a worship had its origin in the New Testament (eg. Mk 14,17-31; 1Cor 11,17-34) it took its present form by the contributions of different people of different centuries. Now many churches appreciate the orthodox way of worship and they also would like to have something like orthodox liturgy. So the liturgical tradition of our church is the part and parcel of orthodox life.
- d) Customs and Practices: To the fourth category of tradition I would like to mention the customs and practices of our fathers. Take for example the custom of giving religious education to an orthodox child, the custom of marriage, the burial service of a believer, etc. This kind of tradition may differ

from place to place. It will be closely related to the culture of the land in which the Christians live.

- e) Habits and Values: The behavior and habits of a believer are also handed over from generation to generation. They have their origin in the Bible and the writings of the Fathers of the Church. There are some values like *joy in suffering, love and care for others* etc. which are considered to be Christian in origin. So the people who practice them are called disciples of Christ. That is why many people call Mahatma Gandhi a Christian without baptism. It is the moral tradition of the Early Christians which are referred here.

Did Jesus obey traditions of his forefathers?

Those who blame the Orthodox Church for its deposit of tradition should ask themselves: Did Jesus keep his traditions? I would say: yes, indeed. He was born and brought up in a Jewish family of Nazareth. He was circumcised on the eighth day as every other Jewish child. He went to the Jerusalem Temple for important festivals; don't forget that he had a long way to cover from Galilee towards Jerusalem on such occasions. On every Sabbath day (Saturday) Jesus visited the Synagogues where he was and participated in the worship there. He read the Bible of his ancestors and made sermons on the portion, which he read (Lk. 4,16-18). He paid the annual tax of Jerusalem Temple. After his death he was buried according to the customs of his ancestors.

So to say in a few words, Jesus respected the tradition of his ancestors. But at the same time he questioned the false tradition of the religious leaders of his time. An important area where Jesus had some conflicts with the Pharisees and Sadducees was the style of interpreting the scriptures. Even though he said 'I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it' (Mt. 5:17), Jesus questioned their way of teaching. He was very particular that the scripture must make people nearer to God and not the opposite. Anyway, Jesus was not giving too much weight for meaningless customs like ritual washing of hands before meals or to give alms (donations) to poor on public places. So we should be clear: Jesus was not against the good part of the tradition. Rather he was against hypocritical practices of Pharisees and Sadducees. He emphasized the fact that religion is not something to be shown to other people but it should help the poor and needy and thus people should come closer to God.

Can we change the tradition of our fathers?

This is an important but complicated question. To answer this question I look upon Jesus always. Then I see that he was not changing some traditions like obedience to the Law and Prophets, visit of Jerusalem Temple, reading of the scripture in the Synagogues, fasting for Forty days like Moses and Elijah etc. But at the same time he was ready to change some traditions, which were observed to show one's faith before the world. Because of the hypocritical attitude to such traditions religion became a show place to many people.

Similarly, the Church can change some traditions, but there are some others, which we need not change. The traditions of the first two categories, i.e. the scriptural tradition and the doctrinal tradition are not supposed to be changed. They are very fundamental to our ethos. We can not add to or subtract from them. The only thing we can do is to translate them into the language of modern man. Here I don't mean simply the paraphrases made in modern languages but the art and mode in which people of every language and culture understand our faith. We can make use of modern means of communication and audio visual aids to transmit the rich tradition of our fathers. To make TV serials about Biblical truths or to go to the Internet for teaching the doctrines of the Early Church may be some examples. There is also no question of changing the fifth category of tradition, i.e. the moral traditions.

However, change is possible in the third and fourth categories of traditions. Admitting that we have a rich liturgical tradition we should be able to transmit them in our social and cultural context. It is of no doubt that our liturgy has many things of the Middle Eastern context, where it developed. If we could make an Indian way of worship, which would not distort the essentials of our faith, our liturgy may become more understandable to millions of Indians. The Orthodox people of Egypt (Coptic Orthodox Church) worship in Arabic and those who attend it may feel as if in a mosque. But it does not mean that they are Moslems and that they are doing something against the tradition of their fathers. Similarly, the secrets of Trinity/ Nature of Jesus Christ etc. should be available in one's own language and socio-cultural context. The fourth type of tradition, i.e. customs and practices has more to do with the life situation of the believers. Change is easily possible here. Take for example the dress of Christian women in Kerala. Earlier they had '*chatta, mundu and neriathu*'. But now all women of India wear sari or churidar. In dress we may not be able to identify people of different faith.

One thing is to be mentioned regarding changing of traditions, especially the liturgical traditions: don't let the essentials be changed. Here I mean the basic tenets, which constitute the Orthodox Faith: e.g. faith in the Trinitarian God, in the conviction of Jesus as our savior, in the understanding of the *mysteria* (sacraments) as means for experiencing the salvation act, in the expectation of the Second Coming of Christ, in the resurrection of the departed and in the communion of saints. But there are things of less importance, which will not affect our orthodox faith; e.g. change of language from Syriac or Malayalam to Hindi or Tamil, of the dress of the priests, of names of the bishops, of the shape of the church building, of conducting a feast day etc. Religion should be in the hearts of the people and not in outward expressions only. Therefore, to be orthodox should not mean the external appearances; it should have to do with something very deep in our hearts. Let our traditions be not static like the water of a pond; rather it should be like the water of a running stream. It will flow uninterruptedly and living beings enjoy freedom within it.