

Maria Gwyn McDowell
Paper Presentation: AAR/SBL 2005

Tradition, Change, and the life of the Faithful in Dumitru Stăniloae

In this paper, I will argue that in light of the work of the Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Stăniloae, theological development, even innovation, is essential to the life of the Orthodox Church. The heart of this discussion is the dynamic tension between first, Tradition, the central content of which for Stăniloae is the person of Jesus Christ, second, the lived traditions which change and develop over time, and third, union with God. This paper will not sort out the admittedly muddled combination of what we call 'Tradition' and 'traditions.' Rather, I will argue that the criterion for the viability of a particular Tradition is whether it contributes to our deification. Given Stăniloae's understanding of deification as change and movement forward, theological innovation which reflects such transformation is essential to Orthodoxy as the living faith of the dead, not the dead faith of the living.¹

For Stăniloae "Holy Tradition in the *strict sense* of the term"² is constituted by "the whole divine revelation, which found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ," a revelation contained in "Holy Scriptures, ...the *regulae fidei* which developed in baptismal confessions of faith, in the hierarchical and sacramental structure of the Church, which was proclaimed and defined by the undivided Church in the ecumenical councils, and in the unanimous writings of the Fathers of this period."³ Alone, however, this strict sense is insufficient for understanding and entering into the living Tradition of the Church. According to Stăniloae, neither Orthodox faith nor Tradition is propositional. Faith is never the mere memorization and repetition of scriptures or creeds which sum up for us what it is to be an Orthodox Christian. It is not the proposition which saves, but the content toward which propositions point.

The content of Tradition, not traditions, is none other than the person of Christ. There is no greater revelation of God, and in particular, the relation that God has with humanity, than what we see in the relationship of God in Jesus Christ. Thus Stăniloae can say that "as Christians, we are convinced that there can be no progress in principle, in the relationship between God and man, beyond that established in Christ."⁴ No human being can ever be taken "beyond the union with God in Christ."⁵ This revelation of God in Christ is not augmented, extended nor transcended. Stăniloae, in an article originally published in 1968, argues against Bultmann's thesis of the demythologization of the gospel, but not because Stăniloae thinks theologians are innocent of mythologizing the gospel: he agrees with Bultmann here. Rather, he believes Bultmann assumes there is no real content to the revelation of God in Christ, and is thus seeking to augment something which needs no addition.⁶ For Stăniloae, revelation is a series of *acts* of God, personal acts of a personal God who invites humanity into a dialogue. Stăniloae argues for "three stages in the self-disclosure of God."⁷

It is the crucial second stage on which I wish to focus. This stage "is the period when complete union of God with man and complete spiritualization are achieved but only in one person, Jesus Christ."⁸ Humanity tastes the first fruits of this union, a period of eschatological expectation in which we prepare for "the complete spiritualization realized in Christ."⁹ In speaking of this stage, Stăniloae continually uses the language of development and growth, emphasizing our active participation in deification. It is only in Christ that we see the full union of God and humanity. In Christ we see what our union with God is *supposed* to be. With Athanasius, we can say that God became human in Christ so that we might become gods. We see

⁴ Ibid.: 654.

⁵ Ibid.: 655.

⁶ Dumitru Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, trans. Robert Barringer (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 109ff.

⁷ Ibid., 122. The first is the period of creation to John the Baptist, in which God laid the foundation for greater intimacy. The third stage is our entrance into eternity, where our 'spiritualization,' or deification, continues in a growth of reception rather than development. See also: Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Guide for the Scholar*, trans. Archimandrite Jerome and Otilia Kloos (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002), 364.

⁸ Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, 123.

⁹ Ibid.

¹ Thanks to Jaroslav Pelikan for the pithy distinction.

² Dumitru Staniloae, "The Orthodox Conception of Tradition and the Development of Doctrine," *Sobornost* 5, no. 9 (Summer 1969): 653. Emphasis added.

³ Ibid.

the possibility of our divinity in Christ as well as the *possibility* of our full humanity. Inasmuch as we are not yet like Christ, we see not only our own lack of divinity, but our lack of humanity. So when Stăniloae says that there is no way to progress beyond this relationship, he is not saying that there is no change in our traditions or the practices which help us move into this relationship. Rather, he is saying that there is no greater attainment of relationship between God and humanity than that which we see in Christ. We must change and grow in order to attain our full humanity in Christ, whose humanity we will never move beyond.

This is not to say that our understanding of the implications of that revelation for our growing humanity is also complete. Note that the relationship is established not between God and Abraham, or God and James, John, Peter, or Mary, but God in Christ. We, as individuals *and* as a Church, grow into the relation of God in humanity revealed in Christ, we grow into the humanity that Christ *is*. So, while Christ himself cannot be transcended as the fullness of the revelation of God in humanity, the experience and lives of the members of the Church, its saints as well as its sinners, can be transcended. The mystery of Christ cannot be transcended, but the articulation of that mystery can be transcended.

Discernment of the mystery of Christ must be done in concert with the early expressions of the Church, Tradition in a strict sense. Revelation cannot be reduced to theological shorthand because revelation is an ongoing growth into the relationship of God in humanity. The continuous experience of Christ in the world, by both individuals and the Church itself changes, grows, develops. Our understanding transcends without transcending the One who is revealed. Stăniloae calls this “a progress in the knowledge of divine activity.”¹⁰ We are, according to Stăniloae, “more ready to receive” the “Kingdom of perfect love,” which means that Christ is enabling us to move further along our journey into the likeness of Christ, to further grasp the implications of incarnation, sacrifice and resurrection.¹¹ “The mystery of Christ’s action, where it is preserved and lived in its wholeness, is the same. But mankind is no longer the same, or rather it

¹⁰ Staniloae, “The Orthodox Conception of Tradition and the Development of Doctrine,” 659.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 658.

no longer finds itself at the same stage of spiritual development. It remains in continuity with itself, but it is advancing towards ever higher degrees of realization of what it is to be human.”¹²

Stăniloae takes very seriously the implication of the Church being *in history*. Revelation is extended into history through the Church. Christ and the Holy Spirit is a hidden presence revealed by visible effects. He is open to theology which emphasizes that we do not know what God is, but what God will be for us. Stăniloae’s articles positively intersect with the theology of both Johann Baptiste Metz and Jürgen Moltmann.¹³ Stăniloae emphasizes the promises of God, which are our hope for the future. It is clear that while the fullness of mystery cannot be expressed, new expressions of that mystery are necessary in new contexts. The revelation in Christ and of Christ does not change, but we develop in our experience and understanding of that revelation and the implications for our changing life and history.¹⁴

Stăniloae cites Gregory of Nyssa, reminding us that we are either in constant progress or we become dull and dusty.¹⁵ It would appear from this that change is essential. If we do not change, we have become dull and dusty. This does not mean we reject the experiences and understandings of our mothers and fathers before us, but that we remember that we are not them, that we must add to their experience and knowledge our own experience and knowledge, recognizing “the human factor, which is also always the same, but in different degrees and in different situations is confronted with new moral and intellectual

¹² *Ibid.*: 659. It is important to note that the progress is not necessarily uncursal. It is not a clear evolutionary progress that always moves forward. While we build on the insights of the past, our ability to live them out may itself ebb and flow. We have more knowledge and perhaps therefore more responsibility. However, we may not have more ability. In addition, the progress of individuals over the course of their lifetime, and the progress of the Church over history should be treated as distinct though interrelated.

¹³ See especially “Revelation as Gift and Promise,” originally published in 1969, in Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, 155-180.

¹⁴ It is clear that scripture gives warrant to such progress. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, a French Orthodox Christian who advocates for the full ordination of women, notes that the scriptural passages most often referred to as support for the infallibility and perfection of the Church contain an undeniable *future* orientation. Jesus “has promised his disciples that he would send them the Spirit who would lead them (note the future tense) into all truth (Jn 16:13).” We, as individuals and as a community, are *being led*. See: Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Michael Plekon, and Sarah E. Hinlicky, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: The Vision of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 13.

¹⁵ Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, 174ff.

problems.”¹⁶ New answers to new problems do not entail a rejection of Tradition, though it may entail a revision of Tradition in light of a new context.

Stăniloae distinguishes between Dogmas, *theologoumena* (theological opinions), and teachings. Dogmas are infrequent, and consist chiefly in those explicated by the first seven ecumenical councils. They are ‘general formulae’ which provide definition, but do not enter into detail.¹⁷ They themselves are to be interpreted. This interpretation is theological opinion, which should be in line with the Dogmas, but which permit much more specificity and contextualization. Teachings are presented by the teachers of the Church, and grow as the Church grows. Both *theologoumena* and teachings (which at times tend to be interchangeable) may become dogma if a conflict arises in which clarity is crucial for the life of the faithful, and they can only do so by unanimous consensus. New expressions do not merely verbally re-express ancient truths in contemporary idioms. According to Stăniloae, language and content cannot be so easily separated. By using a new expression, “one throws new light onto the content expressed,” one makes “clear certain vital sides or aspects implied in the divine revelation, elements insufficiently brought to light by the ancient formulas....”¹⁸

Stăniloae speaks of theological progress which must abide by three conditions: “fidelity to the revelation of Christ...; responsibility for the faithful...; openness to the eschatological future....”¹⁹ Any progress in theology which does not meet these conditions is at best “inadequate” and at worst “damaging to the Church and to the faithful.”²⁰

What makes the discussion of Tradition versus traditions difficult is this: many Orthodox theologians are willing to say that our practices can change. We are much less willing to say that our

¹⁶ Staniloae, “The Orthodox Conception of Tradition and the Development of Doctrine,” 659.

¹⁷ Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, 81ff.

¹⁸ Staniloae, “The Orthodox Conception of Tradition and the Development of Doctrine,” 660.

¹⁹ Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God. Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994; reprint, 1998), 88.

²⁰ Ibid.

theology can change.²¹ Yet in a Church where *lex orandi est lex credendi*, our practices *are* our theology. Separating the two is immensely difficult since as Orthodox we tend to believe that what we do not only shapes what we believe but springs out of our beliefs, as it should. The problem is unexamined practices, or practices which take on a meaning other than that which was intended at their inception. We cling to our practices with far more than merely ethnic or nationalistic fervor. The way we do things has itself become a matter of faith for many of our faithful.

According to Frederica Mathewes-Green Orthodoxy is “untouched” by “theological revision or liturgical innovation.” Innovation is impossible for two reasons. First, we are so decentralized there is no one with the kind of power that could actually effect innovation. Second, Mathewes-Green argues that the faith and wisdom of the past does not “need to be adapted to a new generation, because God is still making the same basic model of human being he has from the beginning.”²² And yet this is precisely where theosis and progress as presented by Stăniloae may say otherwise. We are not the same as Adam or Eve. We are not the same as Abraham or Sarah, Isaac or Rebecca, Jacob or Rachel. We are not the same as Peter, James, John, the many Marys, nor are we the same as Nicholas or Seraphim or Nina or Mother Maria.

Our full humanity in full union with God is seen in the person of Jesus, and until we have achieved that union, we are not fully human. We are partial humans moving slowly towards a greater humanity. According to much patristic thought, we were created as children needing to grow into our full maturity. Perhaps it is more typical to think of this progress with Paul, as a path of growth from childhood to

²¹ I am not arguing against the theology of the incarnation or resurrection. My argument for change in the Church rests on the reality of the incarnation, on the reality of a God who is present and participating in our becoming human.

²² Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Orthodoxy: Unhindered by the Culture Wars* (<http://belief.net>, 2005, accessed 14-Oct-2005 2005); available from http://belief.net/story/172/story_17206_1.html. In this article, Mathewes-Green states that “Orthodoxy has remained untouched. It’s as if the contemporary American furor is just a tiny blip in history, and not our concern.” According to Mathewes-Green, while Orthodox wrangle over charters, calendars, and the WCC, “people on both sides still believe the same things...holding a common faith.” As she says, “All the ‘big questions’ were settled over a millennium ago, and no one is inclined to revise them.” It is interesting to note the issues she is concerned about: gay marriage, women’s ordination, abortion, the resurrection, as if these issues have all been settled by theological dogmas. According to Mathewes-Green, Orthodoxy is “untouched” by “theological revision or liturgical innovation.” Should a bishop innovate, he would “be recognized as a kook and rejected.” Authority is not in an institution, process or person, but in the faith itself, which is “what Orthodox before us have believed.” She imagines us a snowball that just gets larger and larger the longer we roll.

adulthood, growing in wisdom and maturity, moving from drinking milk to eating solid food. But I think the language of being or not being human, of theosis as *becoming* human indicates an important anthropological point. We are not necessarily the same basic model. As our understanding of what it is to be human changes our humanity changes. The very model of our humanity is not what God has made us, whether Eve or me, but what God has done in Jesus. Jesus is our model of humanity and inasmuch as we fall short of being the kind of human that Jesus Christ is, we are not human.

As an ethicist, I am particularly concerned about human relationships. Stăniloae constantly emphasizes the importance of relationship. Dogma is not proposition, but pointers to a relationship with Jesus. What is revealed in the incarnation of Jesus is the full possibility of relationship between God and humans.²³ To be fully human is to have relationships of love, dignity, respect, responsibility, compassion, mutuality, justice. To be a religion that puts this understanding into practice is to then construct our practices to be practices that convey love, dignity, respect, and responsibility. As our understanding of humanity changes, as our humanity itself changes, our practices must change to account for the transformation of humanity in God. To refuse to change is not merely to be conservative or traditional, it is ignore our participation in the ongoing work of God who is gracefully shaping us into a transformed people.

Stăniloae states that the “the Church in her totality as body of Christ is the one who does not err and who receives what is not erroneous, that is, *what does not jeopardize the salvation of her faithful*.”²⁴ If the content of Tradition is the person of Christ, then Tradition does not change. Here I agree with Stăniloae. But inasmuch as Tradition is our reception of the person of Christ, our understanding of the relation of God in humanity revealed in Christ, Tradition changes. Our ability to fully receive the person of Christ is hampered by our finite nature, by our historical contingency and our sin. To say that we are being guided by the Holy

²³ We toss around the word ‘relationship’ all the time. Feminists of a variety of stripes want to talk about a ‘relational theology.’ Orthodoxy prides itself on its own theology of Trinitarian relations. ‘Relationship’ is the answer to whatever question is being asked. I think it is fair to say that many feminists find the kind of relationships exemplified in Orthodoxy to be problematic, and many Orthodox are suspicious of the kind of relations advocated by feminists. But as an Orthodox feminist ethicist, I want ask, with both feminists and Orthodox, what *kind* of relationships are we to have?

²⁴ Stăniloae, *The Experience of God. Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, 86, emphasis added.

Spirit does not erase our developing humanity. We cannot over identify ourselves or our community with Christ, ignoring the historical reality of the eschatological body of Christ. If the Truth of the Church is the relationship between God and humanity in Christ, then we must attend to any place where relationships are clearly skewed away from holiness and justice. If we do not, we fail to acknowledge the ways in which we are an interdependent community, the reality that my humanity or inhumanity may indeed affect yours.²⁵ We are moving into the full humanity of Christ, but as we grow in our humanity, our understanding of that humanity in ourselves and in Christ also grows. As we expand, our understanding of the source and object of our salvation also expands. This expansion is lived out in our many traditions, and may at times include a modification or even rejection of a belief or practice.

So, when we ask what Tradition or traditions should we abide by, the question is not only what did our foremothers and fathers believe and do, but rather, what about this practice or that belief contributes to the union of humanity with God in Christ? What about this practice *no longer* furthers the growth of our humanity in God? What of our practices may reduce our humanity in God? Does it recognize the full humanity of the person, his or her full dignity and capability to be an actor in their life of faith? Does it enable him or her to grow towards God? This question is asked and answered by *all* of the faithful in the context of our community, and requires those of us who do theology on a more permanent basis to listen to the lived experience of our brothers and sisters in Christ, to ask hard questions about how a practice or tradition may be helping or hurting particular individuals, communities, or even the Orthodox community as a whole. This ongoing interaction takes into account the wisdom of God as it is discerned in science, philosophy, psychology, sociology, art, literature.

²⁵ We are too blithe in our denial of practices engaged in by members of our Church, writing them off as aberrations, as ‘outside the True Church.’ So the regular pogroms in Russia is merely the misunderstanding of poorly taught believers, not the problem with Holy Week services which, without theological explanation, sound suspiciously anti-jewish to modern ears; the complicity of some priests with Slobodan Milošević is outside the bounds of True Orthodoxy, not a result of the kind of ethnocentrism which pervades Orthodoxy; the crimes of bishops regarding property are the fault of sinful individuals, not the result of a view of hierarchy which has ignored accountability.

Such questions and the change and innovation which follow from them are essential to the life of the Orthodox Church. If we are not asking these questions, if we are not challenging others and ourselves, we are neglecting the very task of the Church, which is to promote the deification of every one of its members and the transformation of the world. We change, our world changes, and so our theology must not merely repeat, but also change, without ever losing its focus on the unchanging core of our faith, Jesus Christ, not the Church.

These questions do not demythologize Christianity, Stăniloae's fear in light of Bultmann. Instead, they push us to be the kind of theologians Stăniloae argues are crucial:

We, the theologians of today, can and must reveal, even more than was done in the past, what the principal acts of divine revelation culminating in Christ – the incarnation of the Son of God, his sacrifice on the cross, his resurrection and ascension as man – what these contribute as a vision of Christian humanism and what consequences flow from them for the service of progress and of the process of spiritualization in general.²⁶

²⁶ Staniloae, *The Experience of God. Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, 89.

Bibliography

- Behr-Sigel, Elisabeth, Michael Plekon, and Sarah E. Hinlicky. *Discerning the Signs of the Times : The Vision of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel*. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001.
- Mathewes-Green, Frederica. *Orthodoxy: Unbruised by the Culture Wars* <http://belief.net>, 2005, accessed 14-Oct-2005 2005; Available from http://belief.net/story/172/story_17206_1.html.
- Staniloae, Dumitru. *Theology and the Church*. Translated by Robert Barringer. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980.
- _____. *The Experience of God. Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*. Translated by Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994. Reprint, 1998.
- _____. *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Guide for the Scholar*. Translated by Archimandrite Jerome and Otilia Kloos. South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002.
- _____. "The Orthodox Conception of Tradition and the Development of Doctrine." *Sobornost* 5, no. 9 (Summer 1969): 652-662.