

Keeping the Tradition Alive Today

How do we help young people as they struggle with questions of gender, identity, and sexuality? How can the church intervene positively on behalf of racial justice? How can unfair economic structures be challenged? How should we understand the liturgical roles of women today? How might we reconcile our fast-paced, technologically advanced culture with the Byzantine embrace of order and static structure? How shall we grapple with change in a tradition that values stability and antiquity?

How do we honor icons and relics without sliding into superstition? How can we reconcile prayers for healing and practices of anointing with making use of contemporary medicine? How do we evaluate new medical advances, especially surrounding the beginning and end of life? How can we respond to environmental devastation with a theology that emerged in the context of paganism? How do we think about community and society today beyond ethnic and national boundary lines?

These and many other pressing questions do not go away just because we find them difficult. In most cases these questions simply did not pose themselves to the ancients. In other cases our situation and worldview have shifted so radically that patristic answers no longer apply or satisfy. We do not and cannot live in the fourth century.

Faithfulness to the tradition cannot mean adopting the scientific and cultural worldview of the patristic age. We need to live today and confront the questions that our present society poses to us, as the fathers themselves did for their own time. This calls for careful and deep theological thinking about what the tradition means today, within the current worldview.

We actually have plenty of precedent for rigorous thinking and argument in the tradition. Syriac homilies and poetry are full of debates and disputes, many of which have entered liturgical texts. Basil of Caesarea and Gregory Nazianzen went to Athens to be trained at the most prestigious philosophical school of the day. All three Cappadocians, as well as many other patristic thinkers, draw extensively on Greek philosophy in their writings, while being profoundly engaged in church life.

Maximus the Confessor was not only steeped in philosophical learning, but made creative use of it in his own highly original writings. John of Damascus preceded his summation of the “Orthodox faith” with a series of “Philosophical Chapters” that succinctly state all the learning of the day. Even his more theological discussions draw extensively on broader philosophical knowledge, as filtered through Nemesius of Emesa and Maximus.

More recently, Sergei Bulgakov, Nicolai Berdyaev, and Paul Evdokimov discussed with scholars from many different backgrounds in Paris in the early 20th century. Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, and Vladimir Lossky participated in gatherings and discussions with people from various Christian traditions throughout New York City.

Every generation must make the tradition its own in new ways. Otherwise the tradition will die. This always entails shifts, adjustments, even developments. We cannot pretend that nothing ever changes or to condemn all new positions outright simply because they are new. Nor can we dismiss real questions by hiding behind an emphasis on mystery and transcendence. Appeal to mystery cannot become an excuse for sloppy thinking.

If Orthodoxy is true, substantive, or meaningful, it must be able to stand up to questioning and critique. If we are unwilling to think deeply about our positions or to support them with substantive argument, our children and others may well suspect that they are fragile or untenable. Argument is not the only path to truth, but it is an important one. Such debate must be conducted in charity, with honest listening to other positions. A refusal to think or dialogue is merely hiding one’s head in the sand.

Genuine academic freedom means being able to discuss even controversial topics in an atmosphere of generosity and hospitality. It means being able to engage deeply and openly with colleagues in the academy who come from all possible religious and non-religious backgrounds. It means drawing on the most up-to-date and relevant research for the topic in the most rigorous and transparent ways possible, even if such research comes to conclusions others find unpalatable or threatening.

If we are unwilling to converse with anyone who thinks differently, we remain insular and cannot welcome newcomers. Suppression is never a healthy way of engaging with ideas. The sort of virulent response that results when, for example, questions about homosexuality or the ordination of women are raised, even when no particular position is advocated, does Orthodoxy no service. Condemning those who ask them provides no answers to anyone and does not strengthen anyone’s faith.

Orthodox scholars need to be able to engage in dialogue with Christians of all confessions and with agnostic and atheist scholars of their respective disciplines without being maligned or crucified on the blogosphere. They need to be able to publish and think without fear of being accused of heresy or dismissed as no longer sufficiently orthodox.

Eschewing the best academic learning available—whether philosophical or scientific—or simply rejecting it out of hand makes us reactionary and blind. That does not mean jumping on every bandwagon or automatically adopting every new academic fad. New approaches and theories should be carefully examined. But it does mean that contemporary Orthodoxy must be open to creativity, to change, and even to originality. New questions require new answers.

Orthodox places of learning have an obligation to sustain safe spaces of genuine open inquiry and to foster rigorous and creative theological thinking with the best academic tools of the 21st century. Seminaries, the ecclesial hierarchy, parishes, and Orthodox academics *together* must undertake the task of thinking through what it might mean to live the tradition today, within the present reality, faced with contemporary problems.

Academic freedom promotes an environment where we can think deeply theologically, where we can try out ideas creatively, where we can support and listen to each other, where we can experiment with ways of thinking through the tradition in light of contemporary challenges—and where such thinking is heard and taken seriously, including within the daily life of parishes. Only in such a way will we be able to keep the tradition alive and meaningful today.

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