

The Issue of Authority in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition: *A Protestant View*

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The Reformation did not produce a holistic Protestant movement or any concrete church. Rather, it left behind numerous successors that continued to defend their specific confessional views even at the cost of human lives. Nevertheless, Protestant denominations are easily recognized by some general principles, one of which is *Sola Scriptura* (or *Scriptura Suprema*). Thus, theologians begin their outlines of systematic doctrines by taking it as a rule that the Bible is the primary source of their theology. For this reason, evangelicals strive to hold fast to the motto that provides the framework within which they realize the creative content of theology: *quod non est biblicum, non est theologicum* (what is not biblical is not theological).

Protestants in Russia with an interest in Eastern Orthodox theology, in attempting to evaluate it critically, try to understand what source of theologizing is considered authoritative by Orthodox Christians. Some uncritically assume that the idea of Tradition in Eastern Orthodoxy corresponds to the idea of the Bible in Protestantism, or to the idea of some kind of authority par excellence in Western Christianity. However, at the outset we assert that this issue is the most problematic in Eastern Orthodox theology. We also must warn the reader that the treatment of this theme is polemical in character. In the presentation of this subject we will consider the works not only of those theologians who have academic recognition in Russia, but also in the rest of the world. Some Orthodox readers might object and point to others who have also contributed greatly to the theology of the Russian Orthodox Church. However, the limited framework of this article requires us to focus on those who represent the best, most mature witness in Eastern Orthodoxy worldwide. A discussion of other tendencies in the Orthodox Church may be taken up elsewhere.



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Insufficient Attention to Authority in Eastern Orthodoxy

John Meyendorff writes in his book *Living Tradition*:

This lack in Orthodox Ecclesiology of a clearly defined, precise, and permanent criterion of Truth besides God himself, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, is certainly one of the major contrasts between Orthodoxy and all classical Western Ecclesiologies.^[1]

Such an assertion may confuse an evangelical researcher. Georges Florovsky speaks about the same subject in a similar way. He is convinced that the only criterion of Truth in Orthodoxy is Christ.^[2] A similar world-view is expressed in the thinking of the Orthodox philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, who states:

Rationalism and the forensic approach are foreign to Orthodoxy, including any normatism. The Orthodox Church is not defined in rational notions; therefore, she is understood only by those who live inside her and for those who partake of her spiritual experience. Mystical types of Christianity are not subject to any intellectual definitions, nor do they have any forensic hallmarks or rational hallmarks either.^[3]

However, in our view this does not solve the issue of hermeneutics: If Jesus is Truth, how do we find, understand, and reflect that Truth?

It is possible that the stated reluctance to point to an existing authority in Eastern Orthodoxy is motivated by a reaction against both Protestantism and Catholicism. In the case of Protestantism, Orthodox scholars often point to the fragmented nature of evangelical ecclesiology. Thus, even though having a clearly stated source of authority, Protestants are not able to protect themselves either from theological disharmony in their thinking or from church schisms. Protestants, in the Orthodox view, represent not the church but organizations with *some ecclesiastical features*, each one of which differs from the others in its understanding of Truth.

On the other hand, it is necessary to note that the situation in Orthodoxy itself is not as ideal as it might appear at first glance. Pavel Evdokimov writes:

The apparent disorder of Orthodoxy which even reaches a state that creates the impression of anarchy... and the possibility for every theologian to create his own school is very accurate! There is no formal criterion for the Ecumenical Councils; however, the Councils exist and direct our lives... We would not feel free anymore, as though we were at home with God, if everything in the church were regimented.^[4]

One way or another, we may get the impression that the lack of any "external

^[1] John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 20.

^[2] Georges Florovsky, "The Authority of Ancient Councils and the Tradition of the Fathers," in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House), 119. Meyendorff says that the only and ultimate authority in the Christian Church is the Holy Spirit. See John Meyendorff, "Est' li v tserkvi vneshniy avtoritet? Istoricheskiy relativizm i avtoritet v khristianskom verouchenii" (Is there external author-

ity in the church? Historical relativism and authority in Christian teaching) in *Pravoslavie v sovremennoe mire* (Orthodoxy in the modern world) (Klin: Fond «Khristianskaia Zhizn'», 2002), 80. Sergei Bulgakov says the same: "But truth is Christ." See *Pravoslavie* (Orthodoxy) (Moscow: ACT, 2003), 111.

^[3] Nikolai Beryaev, *Truth of Orthodoxy, Library of James Krotov*, September 1998. <http://www.krotov.info/berdyaev/afterlife/19520000.html> (September 2007).

^[4] Pavel Evdokimov, *Pravoslavie* (Orthodoxy) (Moscow: Bible Institute of St. Andrew, 2002), 64-65.

authority” in no way bothers Orthodox Christians. On the other hand, such an approach hardly satisfies the evangelical theologian: What is the guide for Orthodox scholars of canon-law as they articulate Christian truths?

The Idea of Tradition in Orthodoxy

An uncritical examination of Tradition in Eastern Orthodoxy can lead the Protestant reader to think that it is something analogous to the Scriptures. In other words, it can seem that Tradition for Orthodox Christians consists of a set of authoritative books, or texts. However, that is not the case. Losskiy says:

...Tradition has a pneumatological character; it is the life of the church in the Holy Spirit. Truth cannot have an external criterion, it is obvious per se, thanks to some internal evidence that was given in different degrees to all members of the church; for all are called to know, keep, and defend the truths of the faith.^[5]

Tradition for Losskiy does not have a textual character. It is, first of all, ecclesiastical experience in its wholeness.

The theme of Tradition is considered in depth in the book *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* by evangelical scholar Donald Fairbairn.^[6] It is useful to refer to the understanding of Tradition of this author who considered various voices within Eastern Orthodoxy that are unanimous in this regard:

Orthodox tradition is neither an authoritative entity nor a human response to an authoritative writing. Rather, tradition

is the stream of grace in which the whole Church is carried along by the Holy Spirit; tradition is the life that the Church possesses in Christ. No external manifestation of the Church's life possesses a juridical authority over other manifestations, simply because no disharmony exists between them and thus adjudication between various “authorities” is not necessary.^[7]

Later on Fairbairn concludes that all particular cases of Tradition (Fathers, Councils, etc.) are neither Tradition nor authority, but *manifestations, expressions of life*. Therefore, the emphases between Eastern and Western ways of theologizing are explained by the formula: *authority versus life*. Nonetheless, it is important here to focus on and attentively evaluate certain “manifestations” of Tradition in Orthodoxy. We will consider the place of the Ecumenical Councils in the dogmatic theology of Orthodox Church and point to some problems that may explain the unwillingness of Orthodox historians to draw proper attention to the notion of authority.

Universality of the Ecumenical Councils

Some are well acquainted with the maxim that, “the Eastern Orthodox Church is the Church of the seven Councils.” Can we conclude that the Councils are authoritative for an Orthodox Christian? For instance, Orthodox theologian Anthony Coniaris is convinced that the highest authority in the Eastern Church is an Ecumenical Council, which implies the

^[5] Vladimir Losskiy, “Ocherki misticheskogo bogosloviia Vostochnoi Tserkvi” (Essays on the mystical theology of the Eastern Church) in *Bogovidenie* (God's vision) (Moscow: ACT, 2003), 258.

^[6] Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

^[7] *Ibid.*, 47.

participation of the whole church.^[8] However, concerning this issue it is important to understand what makes a council “ecumenical”?

Greek theologian John Zizioulas points out that there is no consistory that would proclaim some verdict until it is accepted and confirmed by the believing community which had sent its bishops as delegates to the council. He concludes:

It is for this reason that a true council becomes such only *a posteriori*; it is not an institution but an *event* in which the entire community participates and which shows whether or not its bishop has acted according to his *charisma veritatis*.^[9]

Therefore, Zizioulas asserts that the councils became ecumenical only when their orthodoxy was received by the whole local church. But Meyendorff points out that throughout history there were councils whose legal status and catholicity (ecumenicity) had not been approved during the course of the history.^[10] In another work he asserts something similar to what was stated above by Zizioulas: “Regional consensus is thereby a more authoritative hallmark of the truth than the opinion of one bishop, but ecumenical consensus is the highest authority in the matters of faith.”^[11] However, for all the evident simplicity in solving this issue as it is interpreted by Meyendorff and Zizioulas, it should be noted that in practice the situation was not so simple.

For example, the Chalcedonian Definition was not accepted by the Syrian and Coptic Churches. Does that mean that

the Council of Chalcedon is not Ecumenical? If one holds to the explanation offered by Zizioulas, we may conclude that such is not the case for the Council of Chalcedon. Or, contrariwise, that the Syrian and Coptic churches are not the “Church.”

In relation to the representative character of the Councils we can also note that even the accepted Ecumenical Councils do not satisfy the criterion of bishopric “attendance.” No council of that period could demonstrate significant success in attendance for a number of reasons, some of them rooted in the problem of communication. In 430 the emperor invited only those bishops of the Western Church whom he personally favored. At the Council in 381 the Western churches were not represented at all. And at the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) Pope Vigilius refused to take part.

Kallistos Ware also senses some difficulty in this matter, enumerating such councils as Ephesus (449) and Florence (1438). We can also add the councils that took place in 430, 449, and 1438 which also were not considered Ecumenical. What is more, Ware continues, “... there has been no solution that could satisfactorily deal with this problem... the Orthodox certainly know those Seven Councils but what makes them such no one really knows.”^[12]

The importance of this issue cannot be exaggerated for Orthodoxy because the teaching about the Church is connected with the issue of the recognition of all of

[8] Anthony Coniaris, *Introducing the Orthodox Church* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1982), 4.

[9] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 242.

[10] Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, 88.

[11] Meyendorff, “Est' li v tserkvi vneshniy avtoritet?” 78.

[12] Kallistos (Ware), *The Orthodox Church* (Moscow: Bible Institute of St. Andrew), 2001. 260.

the Ecumenical Councils. For instance, because Protestants do not recognize, let us say, the last Council in Nicea, their ecclesiology cannot be Orthodox, and therefore it follows that Protestants are not part of the Church.

For example, Khomyakov asserts that a council becomes Ecumenical when it is accepted by all the Church.^[13] In a similar way we see what Meyendorff affirms: “Ecumenical decree must be accepted by the whole church—only at that moment can this decision be considered the truest expression of tradition.”^[14] At the same time, the true Church is the true Church when it accepts the formulas of the Ecumenical Councils. However, this way of solving the issue has a circular character. We may note this in Khomyakov’s thinking: the Church becomes the Church when it accepts the Ecumenical Councils. The Councils themselves, on the contrary, become Ecumenical when they are accepted by the whole Church...

Actually, it is very difficult to trace a similar course of thinking and argumentation of various theologians as when, for instance, Bulgakov states: “Internal catholicity is not a quantity but a quality.”^[15]

Time as a Litmus Test for Orthodoxy

Let us take, for example, the Council of Nicaea (325). How long did people consider this Council and its doctrinal statements? A fundamental problem in our view is that the definitions offered by Zizioulas and Khomyakov eradicate all the meaning of the Ecumenical Councils.

^[13] Ibid., 261.

^[14] Meyendorff, “Est’ li v tserkvi vneshniy avtoritet?” 80.

^[15] Bulgakov, *Pravoslviie*, 121.

Thus, the Council of Nicaea was called to handle concrete problems that were damaging the Church’s unity and its spiritual welfare. However, what the Orthodox understanding of ecumenicity cannot explain—given its definition of a Council—is how could Nicaea handle the Arian controversy?

After the bishops signed the creed, they returned home to their churches. However, Constantine abolished the statements of the Council concerning the divinity of Christ and converted to Arianism. In fact, in the whole East Athanasius remained practically the only one who publicly and authoritatively stood against both Arians and the emperor (*Athanasius contra mundum*), defending the Nicene teaching about the one essence of the Father and the Son (350-361). This Alexandrian was exiled several times (he was in exile for a total of fifteen years) because of his stubbornness. We note that he could be accused of excessive individualism (protestantizing?) since he decided to stand against the majority, i.e. against the consensus of the whole Catholic Church of that period. In the days of Valent, we note, the bishop Basil the Great was the only orthodox (Nicaean) bishop in the eastern part of the empire. As for Maximus the Confessor, he was also characterized by individualism. When he was accused of being the only one who believed in his heresy (*diotheletism*), Maximus declared that even if the whole world would partake of the Eucharist with heretics, he alone would not.

What caused these Fathers to stand against the opinion of majority, i.e., to break (!) the principle of catholicity? Was it an act of the Holy Spirit? Then why did it not spread throughout the entire community?

Some Orthodox Christians believe that time is the most reliable criterion of truth in relation to the Councils. Thus Meyendorff writes that a Council's decree can even imply some *risk of faith*.^[16] But if one follows such thinking, in this case or the case of any number of other potential Orthodox Christians, there is only one way to check the Orthodoxy of Maximus: to wait for some undefined amount of time. Also, we must keep in mind that neither Athanasius, nor Basil, nor Maximus survived to see and experience the triumph of *their* Orthodoxy. In the case of the former it was the Ecumenical Council in Constantinople (381), in the case of the latter it is was the Sixth Ecumenical Council in the same city (680). Can we confirm, as Meyendorff does, that one who stands against the majority in such a way makes a "risk of faith"?

From the pastoral and practical point of view the question arises: can one be sure that the opinion of the majority is right and true, the very opinion that is supported by the council of the majority? In this case there is a danger: a person will live in constant inner tension because he has, in fact, no criterion to explain what right teaching is, or heresy either. Then as a result, a person must not bother with the question of rightness or truth. A true council is one that is supported by the present living majority. And this kind of thinking leads to theological indifference at best and to relativism at worst.

Alexander Schmemmann in some way senses this problem in defining the legiti-

macy of the Ecumenical Councils and the "catholic approach" as such. He writes:

But a Western reader should be warned immediately that in the Orthodox Church "officialdom" cannot be simply identified with the voice of the church. History is here to remind us that no official pronouncement is of any binding effect unless it is accepted by the whole body of the church, though it is very difficult, if not impossible, to give a clear-cut definition of how such acceptance is to be achieved and expressed.^[17]

Apparently, Alexander Schmemmann has in mind the historical situation of the Council of Florence. Nevertheless, he takes it for granted that the validity of the Councils is supported by the majority. However, the same history reminds us that for some church fathers "the majority" was never a decisive factor.

We may also consider a statement by Archbishop Kallistos characterized by its rigorous tone: "Only the devil loves confusion and impreciseness, whereas the manifestations of the Holy Spirit are marked by clarity and transparency."^[18] This assertion is worthy of our warm consideration; however, its author perplexes us with his unwillingness to apply this way of thinking precisely in relation to the Ecumenical Councils of the Church.

The Role of the Bishop

The role of the bishop in Orthodox theology is distinct. Unlike Roman Catholic teaching, according to which the bishop

^[16] Meyendorff, "Est' li v tserkvi vneshniy avtoritet?" 80.

^[17] Alexander Schmemmann, "Moment of Truth in Orthodoxy," in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House), 204.

^[18] Bishop Kallistos (Ware), "Bogoslovskoe obrazovanie v Pisanii i u sv. Otsov" (Theological education in the Scriptures and the Holy Fathers), *Biblioteka Iakova Krotova* (Library of Iakov Krotov), September 1998. <http://www.krotov.info/history/20/krivova\ware11.html> (1 June 2004).

is the personal guarantee of the church's orthodoxy, in Eastern Orthodoxy the bishop is the person whose role is reduced to the function of delegate and representative of the opinion of the whole community at the Council.^[19] In other words, a bishop does not impose his authority on the Church, as if he had personal power, but he represents its theological consensus on the Synod or the Council as a delegate on behalf of his flock, without which his ministry has no meaning. Bulgakov writes that a bishop is "the mouth of the congregation" when he expresses its confession, being not above it but rather inside it as its head.^[20] As a result, Orthodox ecclesiology excludes any distinction between a teaching church and a learning church.^[21]

In view of what was said above about the Councils, we can understand why the rejection of Nicene (or Chalcedonian) doctrine by some bishops in the empire did not make Arianism or Monophysitism into orthodox teaching. A formal juridical system is not the decisive factor in defining and knowing the fullness of truth, but rather experience.^[22]

However, on the practical level, in view of what has been examined concerning the bishop's role, we may doubt whether the role of the bishop is only representative. For example, the theological positions of Athanasius and Cyril imply that their awareness and knowledge of theological issues was significantly higher than that of the common members of their congregations. The well-known case of Eusebius of Caesarea, who hastened to write his justifying letter to his congrega-

tion in regard to the events at the Council of Nicaea, is an example that seems to be more typical for the time of the Early Church. We state this because the bishops of that time were the leaders of separate congregations, not of regions.

Needless to say, the understanding of the bishop's role in Eastern Orthodoxy as one who does not impose his decisions and authority over the Church but expresses its opinion on the Councils, does not solve the historical problem presented by occasions when bishops consciously stood against the majority of other bishops. For instance, under the emperor Valent we find Athanasius and Basil opposing the consensus of the majority of Arians and semi-Arians. This makes the understanding of the bishop's role even more problematic. In other words, if we conceive of some hypothetical situation in which the majority of the Church falls into heresy, can a bishop or any believer consciously stand against established "orthodox tradition" if the criterion for this, as Orthodox theologians admit, is the criterion of the majority, which, in turn, is "regional consensus." However, we are aware that there were such cases in history as in the situation with Athanasius, Basil, and Maximus.

If we consider some actual situations in the Russian Orthodox Church we can seriously doubt what was said by Sergei Bulgakov. In reality, the role of bishops in the Russian Church has the same imposing function as it does in Roman Catholicism—and in some places even stronger in practice. In view of what takes place within the canonical sphere of this

[19] Bulgakov, *Pravoslavie*, 109.

[20] *Ibid.*, 107.

[21] See Evdokimov, 224-225, 227.

[22] John Meyendorff, *Catholicity and the Church* (New York: STSP, 1983), 111.

Church it becomes difficult to understand the real place of laypeople in the inner reaches of the sanctuary. As Pavel Adel'geim asserts (see further and also in the conclusion), the official Statutes of the Russian Orthodox Church leave no significant place for their role:

The statutes of the Russian Orthodox Church do not define the place of laypeople in the Church. How can we evaluate their place in the Church if it is unknown; who are they for the Russian Church? The statutes recognize "parishioners." They define their duties, but they do not give them rights. In Soviet terminology they are *lishenitsy* (deprived ones). Perhaps you call them "laymen" or "Christians" Whatever you call them, they have lost their subjectivity and have become objects in the sanctuary on the level of lecterns, candle-sticks, and other things. They are not respected anymore as a continuation of the iconostasis, i.e. as living icons to which we burn incense in the sanctuary. Their role has been reduced to the church offerings expected of them. Parishioners find themselves excluded from the Church's very being. According to the Statutes of the Russian Orthodox Church, unlike the candlesticks, they are not even recorded in the inventory list. Their place is occupied by some ambiguous idea of the *desiatka* (ten people)—the parish gathering. Parish-laypeople have been left without a place or a voice. The people are silent and the clergy says nothing. Their creativity, energy, and love, which are vital for service to Christ and to their neighbors can

be realized only beyond the walls of the sanctuary. Outside they can recognize themselves as Christians. In these conditions it is harder to be a Christian than in the times of the persecution of the Church.^[23]

It appears from this passage that the ecclesiology of the Russian Church with its monarchical episcopacy authorizes bishops with an extremely great power. This highest church rank does not wish to use it correctly, and cannot apply it properly. In other words, an anthropological (human and essentially sinful) factor in the Orthodox episcopacy becomes apparent. A bishop who is authorized with absolute rights and opportunities is, in fact, in an unsafe situation, defenseless against various types of temptations of power.

Ambiguity in Relation to the Scriptures

Careful consideration of Orthodox theological opinions reveals the lack of a clear and precise understanding of the place and role of the Holy Scriptures in Tradition. Some writers (Aghiorguossis, Ware, Florovsky), on the one hand, think that it was the Church that granted some Scriptures authority, i.e., it created the canon. On the other hand, there are in Orthodoxy scholars who believe that the Church only recognized already existing authoritative Scriptures. Its task, they say, was to declare official a list of the books that were already read in the church (Meyendorff, Bulgakov).

This ambiguity in relation to the status of the Bible in the tradition of Orthodoxy itself also entails ambiguity in the question of how the Bible should be interpreted. It concerns an issue of hermeneutics.

^[23] Protopriest Pavel Adel'geim, Interview: "Moia sud'ba v kakoi-to mere povtoriaet sud'bu arkhiepiskopa Ermogena (Golubeva), tol'ko vremia togda bylo drugoe," (My destiny somehow repeats the destiny of archbishop Hermogen [Golubev], only the times were different) *Portal Credo*, 2002. <http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=61772> (8 April 2008).

The history of biblical criticism in simple form can be divided into two periods: pre-critical and post-critical. Protestant authors are inclined to see the pre-critical period in the hermeneutics of the church fathers, to which Orthodox writers refer. During this period biblical scholars (church fathers) see in the Bible not simply the subject of research or some reference point that indicates object *x* (an event, story, or teaching) but Scripture that is the object of research *itself*. In the critical period scholars see in the Bible first of all the *means* that point to object *x*. That is why the Fathers did not bother with questions of consistency in applying typology, allegory, or the historical-grammatical method.^[24] The desire of Protestants to separate and specify their doctrines with reference to the Catholic distortion of God's Word—because of its tendency to allegorize and speculate—resulted in the fact that Protestants find themselves in the front line of biblical studies, regardless of whether they are liberal or not in regard to the inerrancy of the Bible. The entire situation created a new critical epoch in the study of the Bible.

Scarcity in the field of biblical studies has been noticed and commented on by Bishop Kallistos. According to him, Orthodox biblical scholarship has not yet significantly contributed to the study of the Scriptures.^[25] All of this indicates that an Orthodox scholar, being in the limits of his tradition, does not feel any extreme necessity to understand the question: what does the Bible actually say? The

content of Tradition, seemingly, compensates for all other needs for critical Bible study.

Constant allusion to the (Eastern) fathers of the church can lead us to the thought that Orthodox theologians cling to a simple (non-critical) desire to present the desirable as reality. The Fathers never produced a unified and consistent exegetical method.^[26] Often they were guided by a prevalent ideology (a rule of faith or truth). A similar non-critical approach, it seems, is apparent among Orthodox theologians. We will consider this in the following section.

The Fathers of the Church

The importance of patristic studies in Orthodox theology is difficult to exaggerate. However, not all the Fathers fill an important place in Eastern Orthodox Tradition. The notion of "Eastern Fathers" itself identifies a theological preference not only in the works of a specialist such as Georges Florovsky, but in the general dogmatic orientation of Orthodoxy.

In the case of the writers of the Early Church period we may note that not everything always testifies to the "agreement of the Fathers" (*consensus patrum*). For instance, let us take the particular case when the Apostolic Fathers have no consensus with later authors who take for granted the existence of a monarchical episcopacy. This latter phenomenon is attested mainly by Ignatius of Antioch. American Catholic patristic writer Ramsey, commenting on the words of Ignatius, puts it this way:

^[24] For greater detail about the Fathers' interpretation of the Bible see John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hop-

kins University Press, 2005), 115-7.

^[25] Kallistos (Ware). *Orthodox Church*, 350.

^[26] John J. O'Keefe, R.R. Reno, 115.

...one cannot make easy generalizations about the Church's tradition. Just because Ignatius of Antioch, to take one famous example, emphasizes the role of the bishop in the early second-century churches of Antioch and Asia Minor does not mean that anyone else felt the same way about the bishop at that time, or even that bishops existed in other churches at such an early period.^[27]

We can understand Ramsey's comment by considering the fact that other Apostolic Fathers teach a two-stage system of hierarchy: elders and deacons. We find that this was taught by Clement of Rome, by the *Didache*, and by *The Shepherd of Hermas*. In the case of Clement of Rome we note that he writes a letter on behalf of the Roman elders to some elders in the Corinthian church. If in the city Corinth there was a monarchical episcopacy, the letter would be addressed to a bishop. However, it was addressed to elders. The *Didache* also unambiguously repeats the idea of Phil 1:1. It may be noted that the author of the *Didache* (15:1) insists that the community itself should appoint its bishops and deacons. The *Shepherd* (13:1) says that there are two leading ministries in the church: bishops (plural) and deacons. True, he adds the gift of the teacher. However, he also mentions the gift of prophets who, in the times of *The Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Didache*, were traveling ministers of the church. It seems that he quotes by heart the letters to the Corinthians and the Ephesians; however, he misses evangelists

and prophets and at the same time adds deacons. Nevertheless, we see a two-stage system of church administration.

Florovsky apparently agrees with this state of affairs in the Early Church: "in view of the relative smallness of the number of the flock, a bishop really could be a pastor."^[28]

Therefore, the question of consistency in relation to the fathers of the church is not so simple as to be able to assume that reference to the Fathers really guarantees continuous connection with apostolic tradition.

Moreover, it may come as a surprise to anyone who undertakes the study of such a difficult and diverse subject of historical theology as patristics that he or she will encounter how frequently the Fathers quote Scripture (for instance, Irenaeus in his work *Against Heresies* quotes the Old Testament 629 times and the New Testament 1,065 times).^[29] It gives the impression that biblical material is the only source from which the Fathers built their theological world-view. Furthermore, it even becomes amusing if we note that Augustine in his treatise *On the Trinity* only once quotes "the authority" of Hilary of Poitiers.

Concerning the creative and seminal thought of Greek theology we should note that it is built exclusively upon the Bible as well. The majority of the Eastern Fathers considered it important to comment on one or several books of Scripture. But over the course of time in the East we notice the fading of the creative and original approach to the theological issues of the day. As Hans von Campenhausen asserts:

Greek theology was gradually suffocated by its own traditionalism. No more or less justified admiration for its conceptual refinements, profundity, and sublim-

^[27] Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 10.

^[28] Georgiy Florovskiy, *Vostochnie Otsy Tserkvi* (Eastern Church Fathers) (Moscow: ACT, 2002), 22.

^[29] Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 172.

ity can alter that fact. The Fathers had become so holy that in the end they could no longer beget any sons who were their equals in vitality. Theology lived its own life in constant reference to the past and lost all direct contact with the Bible and with life outside or different from itself.^[30]

Campenhausen's conclusion is quite harsh even in view of his general dislike for the Eastern Church, something quite characteristic of German scholars. But on the whole his statement corresponds to the truth. After John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus, the Eastern Church loses its creative approach to Scripture in its attempts to solve the issues of theoretical or practical theology of its time. At that point it turns into a protective institute of custodians who consider the issues of the present time only in the context of what was said by ancient theologians. What was previously a dynamic "life and experience" approach became something antique, an object to be carefully kept, cited, and contemplated.

Evaluation and Conclusion

For evangelicals this view of authority seems curious, because, in their view, the notion of authority is not alien to Scripture. During the temptation in the wilderness Jesus several times referred to the Scriptures: "For it is written" (Luke 4:1-12). In the Old Testament prophets started their appeal to Israel with the words, "Thus says the Lord" (Isa 10:24; Jer 2:2; Ezek 2:4, etc.). The disobedient were stoned to death. What is that but an expression of *authority*?

^[30] Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 175-6.

Nevertheless, it is important to ask whether a deliberately emphasized notion of authority can somehow obscure and obstruct the idea of life and experience in theology? It seems that these two ideas are not only compatible, but also cannot exist without each other. The authors of the Bible emphasize that Christians should test the spirits (here, apparently, "teachings," see 1 John 4:1-3). Not all experience is positive. The Christian scholar asks the question: how can one distinguish an experience of the Holy Spirit from any other, perhaps demonic, experience? In this sense the Scriptures give us orientation points and a framework within which we can discern this or that experience.

It appears that Orthodox theologians, for all their desire to defend the unity of the Church when they refer to its catholic nature, do not consider that uniformity does not always mean unity. In actual practice some Orthodox churches pursue both economic and political ends, sometimes even violating Eucharistic Communion because of issues such as those mentioned above. The tension between Moscow and Constantinople with regard to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is well known to all church and para-church specialists. Although Orthodox Christians of the Moscow Patriarchate and Orthodox Christians of the Russian Church Abroad had in the past (before their reunion) one tradition and the same saints, the latter often called the former recreants and apostates from Orthodoxy. It is notable that theology here does not play a significant role.

In the case of the bishops and dioceses, as Bishop Kallistos notes, Orthodoxy in North America cannot demonstrate its unity, when, for instance, in New York

alone there are thirteen bishops.^[31] For that reason Kallistos headed one of his paragraphs with the words, “Do not look at the visible” (!). Here it is not so easy to abstain from irony and polemical remarks, because in theory we have one thing but in actual church practice we have something else. Meyendorff categorically identifies this phenomenon as “de facto racism and heresy,” when one finds in a given city certain parishes that are formed in accordance with ethnic principles.^[32]

In regard to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate we can assert the same in view of the situation with Bishop Vasilii (Osborn) who appealed to the patriarch to bless his transfer from the Moscow Patriarchate to Constantinople.^[33] According to the bishop, a great number of emigrants from Russia disturbed the accustomed course of life in the diocese of Surozh where a strong desire to witness to the truth of Orthodoxy beyond national boundaries was central and decisive for all parishioners.^[34] According to the article, the arrival of Russian emigrants nationalizes the life of the diocese and turns it into a kind of “national club” or “club of interests.”^[35]

Finally, we may conclude that each church as a local organization always pursues its own ends in one way or another.

^[31] Bishop Kallistos (Ware), “Strannaia i vse zhe blizkaia” (Strange yet familiar: *My journey to the Orthodox Church*), *Biblioteka Iakova Krotova (Library of Iakov Krotov)*, September 1998. <http://www.krotov.info/history/20/krivova/ware14.html> (1 June 2004).

^[32] Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, 169. See his understanding of the canonical issue in “One Bishop in One City,” *St Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* V (1961): 54-62. Disobedience to canon law in the life of the church, and, in particular, in the matter of the number of bishops in one city, leads to ecclesiological heresy.

^[33] Upravliaiushchii Surozhskoi eparkhii RPTs MP prosit Patriarkha Moskovskogo otpustit’ ego v

Here we observe that people struggle precisely over the issue of authority. Russian- or Serbian-Americans, considering present nationalistic tendencies, would hardly attend a liturgy where the bishop serves in the English language. Needless to say, the same is true concerning the Georgian language. Neither do they come to a Greek archpriest. This last point concerns nationalism in the Church, which, as Meyendorff says in his book *Living Tradition*, is harmful for the testimony of Orthodoxy.

The question of catholicity is the vaguest of all. Orthodoxy does not suggest any criteria to check the correctness of certain decrees announced at either local or pan-Orthodox councils. Only time, they affirm, and the criterion of universal acceptance can indicate the correctness and infallibility of written rules and decrees. As a result, it brings people to a deep feeling of insecurity because nobody has any guarantees: is this or that decree accepted by an individual truly Orthodox, or, even after the individual dies, will the catholic consciousness of the church radically change over the course of time on this issue? That is why Meyendorff alludes to the risk which the church experiences in accepting some doctrinal decrees.

Konstantinopol’skiu iurisdiksiu (Head of Surozh Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church asks the patriarch of Moscow to release him to the jurisdiction of Constantinople), *Portal CREDO*, 2002. [http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=42829&cf=\(9 May 2006\)](http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=42829&cf=(9 May 2006)).

^[34] *Ibid.*

^[35] “Novye russkie” v Surozhskoi eparkhii vospriniali londonskiy Uspenskiy Sobor kak klub po interesam, utverzhaet odna iz starykh prikhozhanok” (“New Russians” in Surozh diocese treat London’s Uspenskiy Cathedral as a special interest club, says one of its old parishioners), *Portal CREDO*, 2002. [http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=43982&cf=\(8 June 2006\)](http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=43982&cf=(8 June 2006)).

All of this may seem unsatisfying not only to a Protestant researcher but also to an independent observer. While evangelical denominations are certainly numerous, nonetheless they are recognizable and identifiable precisely as Protestant thanks to general common features in their teaching. Orthodox churches and their theologians also differ in their thinking with regard to some issues, which makes the quotation from Evdokimov at the beginning of this article quite reasonable: "The apparent disorder of Orthodoxy which even reaches a state that creates the impression of anarchy... and the possibility for every theologian to create his own school is very accurate!"

By carefully considering the notion of Tradition one gets the impression that while authority for Protestants has quite clear external forms, being "tangible" and available for testing (the Scriptures, systematic theologies, etc.), Orthodox theology deals with abstraction, ghosts, and phantoms. If Tradition is truly the life and experience of the Church, how can we check and describe that experience? How are we to pass it on to later generations? Is that experience always positive?

Here we find one more practical problem. When Protestant scholars quote the various dogmatic works of one or another Orthodox author, any Orthodox opponent can always remark that the theologian mentioned is not Orthodox enough and his thoughts do not reflect all the complexity of the issue, even though the Orthodox scholar is a genuinely recognized theologian.^[36] They (other Orthodox) also may maintain that this scholar

only *tried* to describe or express the truth. He undertook—unsuccessfully—an *attempt* to reflect Orthodox teaching. That is, a theologian is not one who expresses true statements, but one who indicates them. And these indications, in turn, are experience and life.

Something reminiscent of this is mentioned by Thomas Hopko in his article "Criteria of Truth in Orthodox Theology."^[37] The Orthodox theologian laments the fact that his colleagues have insufficient fellowship, and do not maintain a high level of relationship. The fact that they come from different ecclesiastical structures, liturgical traditions, and academic environments as well, can lead to situation in which they may contest what is the actual teaching of the Bible and tradition of the Church on many matters.^[38]

Moreover, while Protestants experience problems (and they often acknowledge this) trying to understand the content and genuine meaning of all sixty-six books of the Bible, what can be said about the thousands of patristic writings, church decrees, and icon traditions which have been created throughout history? Does anyone have the capacity to study them all and make the necessary synthesis that can be applied to a concrete historical or modern situation of the church or an individual? Here the researcher encounters not only the hermeneutical problem of understanding, but also the elemental problem of time and resources.

The final point has to do with practice. The views and opinions reflected by Orthodox authors do not yet address the

^[36] Despite the worldwide acceptance of Vladimir Losskiy, his works are sometimes disregarded by Orthodox theologians in Russia.

^[37] Thomas Hopko, "Criteria of Truth in Orthodox

Theology," *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* XV (1971): 127.

^[38] *Ibid.*

possibility of their realization in church practice. Contemporary church ideology itself and certain church realities hinder it. In the case of the Russian Orthodox Church we can point to the present conflict between Archbishop Eusebius of the Pskov diocese and his priest Pavel Adel'geim. What was said above with regard to the bishop's authority (especially by Sergei Bulgakov) has no relation to the current situation in Pskov. The archbishop in fact appears to consider himself a monarch, demonstrating lordly manners in regard to the ordering of church life in his diocese and the parishes under him.^[39] Neither the canons of the church, nor the books of modern Orthodox theologians can lay down the law to him, because both the spiritual climate of the Moscow Patriarchate and church practice in gen-

eral endow him with the power of an absolute monarch. There is a quite a Middle Ages-feudal state of affairs to be found in certain parts of the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate.

In summary, we can say that the manner of theologizing by Orthodox theologians most closely resembles intentional stylization and romanticizing (idealizing), accompanied by an abundance of aesthetic exaggerations and enigmatic sayings. The reference to Tradition as experience and life is attractive and sounds very appealing. However, a researcher can hardly approach this issue in a tangible way. The Scriptures really do speak about experience. But they speak with authority, indicating all the damaging and harmful experiences that Christians must avoid.

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^[39] Pavel Adel'geim, *Dogmat o tserkvi v kanonakh i praktike* (Dogma concerning the Church in canons and practice) (Pskov), 2002.

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