Orthodox Paradoxes. Introduction

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At the heart of this volume are paradoxes of “lived religion” or religion as practiced by members of the largest and most influential of the Eastern European Orthodox churches—the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Various ambiguities and complexities created by the dynamic between Tradition and innovation within the ROC are examined here from different perspectives and disciplines. The volume gathers nineteen contributions from eighteen authors. With one exception the articles are proceedings from the interdisciplinary conference1 ‘Orthodox Paradoxes: Heterogeneities and Complexities in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy’, held on 12–14 September 2011 in the Netherlands by INaSEC (Institute for the Academic Study of Eastern Christianity at VU University, Amsterdam).2 The title of this conference is an oxymoron, a trope that consists of two contradictory notions which will be clarified in the following. The subtitle highlights the fact that its ‘underlying meaning is revealed only by careful scrutiny’,3 and is in this sense reflective of INaSEC’s main goal: to make colleagues, collaborators, and readers “stop and think”, not to shrink from paradoxes or frictions, but rather to seek to engage in a mutual academic effort. INaSEC thus provides a space to explore new approaches to interdisciplinary research involving scholars in intellectual debate, and stimulating them to confront difficult and delicate issues.

The contributions in this volume do just that. They share this critical function of provoking fresh thought and directing our attention to coexisting phenomena that under careful (academic) scrutiny reveal frictions or paradoxes. Each contribution addresses an “Orthodox paradox” from a specific angle and with various resonances; in many cases several paradoxes are in play. The reader will encounter some of the challenges the ROC has faced in reviving, reinventing or reconstructing religious practices, skills, and knowledge after the Soviet period. These challenges highlight both the necessarily evolving nature of religious life and the tensions such evolution generates.

The contributions in this volume are arranged in six sections. This rather artificial division between “social work”, “theology”, “transformation or invention

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1 Within the scope of the nwo Veni-grant ‘From Orthodoxy to obscurantism? Theological frictions in the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church’, laureate Katya Tolstaya (director of INaSEC).

2 See www.in-a-sec.com.

of Tradition” etc. mainly serves to point out the need for a multi-disciplinary approach, as almost all the problems and paradoxes discussed have—among others—social, theological, and historical aspects. In that sense, while the papers are tentatively grouped in ‘sets’ (a key term in the following discussion), one of the challenges of this ‘Introduction’ (and then for the reader) will be to trace the fundamental interrelations between the themes and questions addressed.

Diverse as the contributions in this volume are, they all center on two issues: the perception, or rather, definition of Orthodox Tradition, and (consequently) a method for framing questions relating to tradition. In this ‘Introduction’ I will try to identify some of the paradoxes in the Orthodox conception of Tradition in order to elucidate the need for a methodological approach to tradition.

One way to characterize the paradox of (Russian) Orthodoxy is to point to the fact that, on the one hand, like any living tradition the contemporary ROC is continually changing and evolving, and incorporates a remarkable diversity of positions and levels, for example, from extreme “left” to extreme “right”, from highly academic to poorly educated etc. As an institution the ROC also develops new normative teachings (cf. *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, 2000, and *The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights*, 2008). Furthermore, new religious practices and phenomena are authorized as belonging to Orthodox Tradition, and those interrupted during the Soviet regime have been “re-invented”. For Orthodoxy in general, and for the ROC in particular, these dynamics call for a rethinking of the concept of Tradition. For—on the other hand—each of the continually developing factions of the ROC, including those producing new norms, claims to relate to Orthodoxy and Orthodox Tradition, which the Orthodox perceive and present as the most “unchangeable” and normative Christian confession. This perception of Tradition as all-embracing, changeable and unchangeable at the same time is summarized in the words of a prominent Orthodox scholar:

> We Orthodox think of Orthodoxy as the ‘Church of Holy Tradition’, steadfastly guarding ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3), ‘neither deleting anything nor adding anything’, as the fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) affirmed. Yet at the same time we recognize that this unchanging Tradition has to be combined with personal experience, and needs to be rethought and relived in each new generation.

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4 In this ‘Introduction’ Tradition meaning the ultimate Orthodox frame of reference is written with capital letter, while tradition referred to in a general sense, or applied to diverse phenomena or aspects is written with small letter.