

What is Theology? Pt. 2

## Tradition as Life-Giving Memory

### Summary of Last Lecture

In the last lecture we did several things so as to suggest that

- Thinking is vital to the health of Christian faith
- Theological thinking is always particular in that it is done in particular contexts
- Theology, as serving the proper confession of faith, has its end/*telos* in doxology or the practice of the worship of God – i.e., it is essentially significant for Christian practice
- That there are numerous pressures resisting such insights, forcing a separation between faith and reason, and making reason dispensable in Christian life and practice

Over the next few lectures we will begin to address the proper context of Christian thinking – suggesting that it is ...

### Lecture Aim

This lecture intends to

- Challenge individualist and constructivist accounts of human knowing;
- Contest propositionalist and past-centred accounts of theological knowing;
- Begin to understand the mediatedness of God's Self-revelation;
- Learn to comprehend the nature of human hearing and response to divine revelation;
- Retrieve the particularity of the past in critical conversation with the present for the sake of the future.

### Crisis of Authority: Exteriorisation and Interiorisation

[It is worth reading Immanuel Kant's essay 'What is Enlightenment?' at this point]

Authority is a concept that comes to take a specific shape in modern thinking and has done so in such a way as to lead several commentators on the modern period to speak of a 'crisis of authority'. The modern period has generated significant "difficulties that stand in the way of ascribing to any particular authority – any book, any proposition, any institution, any individual – the absolute authority of truth itself".<sup>1</sup>

In the previous lecture we mentioned the so-called 'turn to the self' with the philosophies of the Enlightenment. This had pronounced consequences for the discipline of theological knowing, the understanding of human identity, and the relation of the self to others. Many commentators perceive this type of philosophising to lie behind the generation of a 'crisis of authority' in the modern world, particularly in modern Western culture. The crisis largely originates in protests made and directions taken by thinkers during and after the Enlightenment. Thus Colin Gunton argues that

the modern quest for freedom has a single thrust. The common element can be put in negative terms, as a wish to be free from the past, whether that past be conceived in terms of political, ecclesiastical or psychological enslavement.<sup>2</sup>

Moderns have come to identify 'authority' with external authority, and have identified a problem with just such a notion of external authority:

- authority as given and wielded by some, imposing or asserting itself – dominating coerciveness<sup>3</sup>
- which entails authority is received internally in passivity by others – slavishness<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Lash, *Voices of Authority*, 55.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation*, 57.

<sup>3</sup> We do not have to imagine that this is consciously or deliberately dominating, using authority in order to seek a power that can be coercively wielded. We can feasibly conceive of situations in which those wielding power honestly believe they are serving the Good and the wellbeing of all, including those the power is wielded over. But sincerity is not a guide to truthfulness, since the sincere can be misled and therefore mistaken. In the movie *Mississippi Burning* Mrs. Pell explains to FBI agent Anderson: "People look at us and only see bigots and racists. Hatred isn't something you're born with, it gets taught. At school they said segregation's what it said in the Bible, Genesis 9:27. At seven years of age you get told it you believe it. You believe the hatred. You live it. You breathe it. You marry it." [*Mississippi Burning*, dir. Alan Parker (MGM, 1988)]

As the late Scottish philosophical theologian Donald MacKinnon recognises, “No virtue is surely more deeply questionable than obedience.”<sup>5</sup>

In assuming that external authority is oppressive so-called modernity has turned inward, to the self, and thus *interiorised authority*. Consequently, ‘Authority’ is privatised, individualised, and rationalised in modernity. Even ‘religious’ authority has been spiritualised or privatised – the extreme version of which is the subjectivity of experience of the spiritual among each and every person engaged in spirituality, and particularly reduced to that which is therapeutic to these individuals. Don Cupitt, for instance, argues that

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. The letter is fixed, the Spirit moves. Codified religion, believed and practised according to ready-made rules, is dead religion, whereas living religion is something *we* must make up, all the time and as we go along.<sup>6</sup>

There have been many shifts and developments in Cupitt’s thinking over the years, but in the past couple of decades he has come to believe that “An objective God [the ‘God’ of the realists] cannot save.”<sup>7</sup> Cupitt’s alternative is a theological ‘non-realism’. Against the realist belief in ‘Truth-Out-There’, Cupitt’s constructivism stresses that our knowledge of the world is more a matter of *making* than discovering. Religious language does not refer to any beyond *outside* of the language that creates it. Both language and the world are radically *outsideless*, and any question of a Beyond is meaningless.<sup>8</sup>

We have come to see that there can be for us nothing but the worlds that are constituted for us by our own languages and activities. All meaning

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<sup>4</sup> This means that the ‘victims’ of oppressive ideologies learn to understand themselves through the systems. This process of ‘ideology-internalisation’ is one reason why, for instance, many *women* have willingly opposed the various versions of feminism.

<sup>5</sup> Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (CUP, 1974), 105.

<sup>6</sup> Don Cupitt, ‘From Religious Doctrine to Religious Experience’, <http://www.sofn.org.uk/cupitt97.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Don Cupitt, *Solar Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1995), 24: “If our thinking life is radically dependent upon language, then knowledge itself and all our awareness of the world is mediated by language. Indeed, for us the world must be always already packed in language. And our many different languages by no means present the world to us shrink-wrapped in transparent clingfilm. Rather, they *encode* it within syntactically-ordered chains of conventional signs.”

and truth and value are man-made and could not be otherwise. The flux of experience is continuous and has no structure of its own. It is we who impose shape upon it to make it a world to live in.<sup>9</sup>

This means that we are accorded a kind of godlike status: “we’ve got to do what God used to do for us.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently Cupitt can announce,

So we should give up the old metaphysical dogmas completely, remembering that we have no absolute knowledge. All our knowledge is only human knowledge, fallible and limited by language.<sup>11</sup>

Now it is important to see the way discovery and constructiveness, realism and non-realism, freedom in the spirit and deadening tradition are simply contrasted by Cupitt. In this he reflects modernity’s tendency to contrast external and internal authorities, privileging the former as life-affirming and liberating and the latter and stifling and deadly. Hence Cupitt declares,

A non-realist, then, thinks it obvious that we ourselves gradually evolved our own world-picture, our morality, and our religions; whereas a realist cordially dislikes ‘humanism’ and ‘relativism’ and insists that we owe everything to an objective God, who has himself settled all questions of truth and value from all eternity, before ever we were created. God has all the answers, and is indeed himself the whole Answer.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Cupitt can speak of deadening tradition and contrast it to the freedom of traditionlessness in the Spirit, it will come to be seen later,<sup>13</sup> actually

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>10</sup> Don Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 4. Cupitt draws on the christological image of the kenosis in order to make this point: “Christian humanism does not wholly dispense with God but retains precisely the God *who dispenses himself to us*, dying into us and communicating to us his own attributes” [1988, 19].

<sup>11</sup> Cupitt, 1997, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Don Cupitt, ‘Free Christianity’, in *God and Reality: Essays in Christian Non-Realism*, ed. Colin Crowder (London: Mowbray, 1997), 14-25 (19).

<sup>13</sup> Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation*, 70: the Enlightenment “misunderstood the nature of what it is to be authentically human.”

demonstrates a pronounced misunderstanding of ‘tradition’ as something secure, formulatable, codified and finalised.

### **Group Exercise – What makes us human?**

- Group conversation: word association – ‘human’
- Video clip – *Blade Runner*

We can see several features from the movie clip that are worth considering:

- Biology does not make humans unique
- Physicality circumscribes – human desire to surmount embodied limitations
- Attempts of the creators to control and manipulate their creations – the Blade Runners are the final attempt to control the Replicants (unaffectionately known as ‘skin-jobs’)
- Replicants are denied their humanity by being *denied a past, denied memory*
  - Consequently, the Replicants collect old photos – need memory
  - Yet old photos freeze the past – cannot live off old photos
  - In the case of the Replicant Rachel, these are actually memories that are manipulated and manufactured.

So corporeality, and even the type of corporeality we possess, does not determine ‘the human’ – that we share with other types of beings, some closer to ‘human’ forms of embodiment than others (e.g., apes). Corporeality may even, in certain circumstances, hinder human development, hence the desire for ‘supplementation’ (e.g., bionic prostheses) or escape (e.g., cyberspace).

- But, equally, rationality and self-consciousness may not make us uniquely human either – these can be replicated: hence the cyborg tradition as developing artificial intelligence (or good, as in much of the *Star Wars* saga; or for ill, as in the broad perspective of the *Terminator* trilogy; or more ambiguously, as in the *Alien* quadrilogy), hence the Nexus 6 Replicant (Pris) utters Descartes’ famous “I think therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*) claim.

Crucially, however, unlike the Enlightenment tradition, there is the worry that rationality cannot function without the tradition acquired through memory. In this regard it is worth considering one of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* short stories, 'Reason'.

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Memory, therefore, is not a burden to our freedom, as is often the implication of post-Cartesian epistemologies, but the necessary condition for there being a self at all.

Let us put this to the test with a few examples involving the relation between the following: memory and knowledge, memory and sociality, memory and self-identification, memory and expectation/planning.

## The General Nature of Memory

### *Memory and Knowledge*

One can distinguish between the *invisible* and the *unseen*.

- The *invisible* is that which cannot ever be seen – e.g., the beginning of our world; tomorrow (since when tomorrow comes it is no longer tomorrow but today); God.
- The *unseen* is that which can be potentially seen but which does not for the moment present itself to sight (e.g., the biological origins of AIDS; the 'back' of the box I am presently perceiving the front of).

According to the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, the unseen is a crucial component in ordinary perception since much of what we 'see' contains a strong element of the unseen (*The Phenomenology of Perception*). Our field of vision is always limited by the three-dimensionality of the objects we see – a cube, for instance, has sides which present themselves to us and we construct in our imaginations the sides which are hidden from us. But we construct them in such a way that they appear to be integral to our perception of the cube.

For example, I presently see my computer screen, but not the back of the monitor, yet I know a back to the monitor is integral to my understanding of what I am presently perceiving.

So we integrate the presently unseen into the overall image of the object as presented to us in the surfaces we can see. We can do this in one of 2 ways:

- *Imagination* – there may be things we cannot see but which we construct imaginatively. E.g., Buckingham Palace’s rear gardens (and I cannot imagine I will ever get the opportunity to see them) – I can, nonetheless, imaginatively construct what they might look like. How do I do that?
- *Memory* – by collating memories of other British stately homes’ gardens. Memory enables us to understand something of the unseen:
  - Cube – the unseen sides are constructed in our imaginations by our memories of having seen them earlier.
  - Monitor’s back – I can remember looking at it some time ago.

Thus objects which are outside the present range of our perceptions can still be present to us as either remembered or imagined forms (and note the connection between the presence of the thing unseen and memory/imagination). We do not cease to believe in the continuing existence of objects which we no longer perceive.

- For instance, I do not believe that my wife no longer exists because I am presently not perceiving her.

### *Memory and Sociality*

There is something else worth mentioning with regard to perception, understanding and memory that we need to recognise at this point – the social extension of one’s memory, perhaps best spoken of as *witness* or *testimony*. There is much that is not present to our immediate perception which is also not present to my memory of what I have perceived.

For example, I have never been to Australia, but it is present to my *imagination* through the *testimony* of others:

- Map-makers – I can consequently remember where it is located on the map;
- Explorers – I can have memory of it in certain ways because others have ‘discovered’ (although there is a politics of talk of ‘discovery’ of the lands of the so-called ‘New World’ given that they were never lost but had their own native peoples), and described their time there.
- Tourists and inhabitants – I can imagine what the place is like because of the testimony (in conversation, through TV programmes, or through written forms) of my contemporaries who have been there. And so on...

Notice what has happened here – I have never directly perceived Australia, but can imagine it through the testifying perceptions of others.

- 2<sup>nd</sup> hand quality of imagination
- Crucial learning through others – knowing as mediated
- Shapes my performance – I can plan to visit because of the stories of its excellence from others.

That all suggests that there is a sociality of perception – a memory shaped by the testimony or witness of others. Without just such a memory that is socially formed our ability to understand and live in the world would be seriously curtailed, and our ability to form and sustain relations with other persons would be impossible (I would not be able to know anything about someone without their self-revelation).

### *Memory and Self-Identity*

As mentioned, without memory, without a knowledge of past events, we would not be able to form and sustain relationships.

**Clip – Memento** – needs to be able to provide traces, enough to be able to make the briefest of connections with people, and enough to be able to live, even if that is in the barest of ways.

Our past, our memory shapes who we are:

- Nations, for example, are a collective memory – appeals to the national past to tell us who we are in the present (America's appeal to the Founding Fathers; France's appeal to C18th Revolutionary principles; Britain's appeal to democratic monarchy).
- Without memory we become different persons, discontinuous with our past [see, e.g., *Regarding Henry*].
- Numerous contemporary theorists regard the human life narratively – without some sense of narratability identity becomes confused and difficult to maintain.

### *Memory and Expectation/Planning*

Without memory we have no way of deciding how to act, how to plan, etc.

- A farmer whose ground becomes infertile would be unable to plan well and expect appropriately if he had no recollection of that fact.

- Example of Assimov's *I, Robot*.

What we have suggested is that memory is crucial to what it means to be human, involving the ability to know and plan, but also of the interdependency of human persons as remembering agents. But before we move on to connect this with theology there are two further things we need to note:

- Stories make the past present
- The darkness or problems of memory
  - Invented memory (e.g., Nazis' Aryan myth)
  - Distorted memory (e.g., *Braveheart*)
  - Forgetfulness (e.g., modern myths of progress)

Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* 11

## **Theological Memory: Tradition**

### *Detraditioned Theologies*

Often for many groups of Christians, especially many Protestant communities, 'tradition' is a word with negative associations. This is not helped by the way the Council of Trent (1545-63) came to speak of traditions forming a second, independent, original, authentic source of information and doctrine alongside of scripture, capable of supplementing it, though never contradicting it.

[T]his truth and this discipline are contained in written books and  
unwritten tradition. [Session IV, April 1546]

The supposed rejection of tradition is detectable especially in the kinds of churches that sought to free themselves from prevailing traditions in order to accord to themselves, and subsequently justify their, existence.

- E.g., C16th Protestant England – Roman Catholicism is distorted and distorting tradition.
  - On saying that, however, Henry VIII's theological construct of ecclesial English nationalism generated an alternative and competing set of traditions.

- Protestant Reformation – the Westminster Confession (1646) rejects all human traditions in preference for scripture
  - Yet has scripture as its authoritative tradition
  - And itself operates as a tradition, as a Confession of faith to be confessed by Reformed churches
  - And even reproduces approvingly the words of the Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian Confession.

So the ‘mainline’ Reformation traditions were not opposed to tradition as such, merely a certain type and understanding of tradition. As Kevin Vanhoozer argues,

From one perspective, the Reformation was a victory of the Scripture principle over ecclesial tradition. The reality, however, is more complex, for the Reformers did not object to the use of the church fathers or deny that the Bible ought to be interpreted in the life of the ongoing church. What they rejected was rather the elevation of noncanonical, and hence human [‘purely’ human, we should say], traditions that were thought to supplement the revelation given in Scripture.<sup>14</sup>

Much more radical and significant for much of the modern understanding of tradition is both the so-called ‘Radical Reformation’ and post-Reformation Pietism.<sup>15</sup>

- The first generation of the Radical Reformation, for instance, desired to ‘get-back-to-the-Bible’ uncontaminated by tradition – *ad fontes* (Renaissance), *sola scriptura* (Reformation).

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<sup>14</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘Scripture and Tradition’, in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 149-169 (10). 167: “If *sola scriptura* means ‘the Bible alone apart from the church and tradition,’ it has no future. But this is not what *sola scriptura* means. *Sola scriptura* is a protest not against tradition as such but against the presumption that church tradition (interpretation) and Scripture (text) necessarily coincide. The testimony of the prophets and apostles fixed in biblical discourse thus guards against the hardening of human tradition into totalizing metanarrative.”

<sup>15</sup> Vanhoozer, 150: “Whereas the Reformation individual appealed to the illumination of the Holy Spirit, a source of light available only to some, the modern individual appeals to the illumination of reason, a source of light available, at least in principle, to all.”

- *Pietism* – Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), ‘the father of pietism’, founded Halle University in Germany.
  - Emphasises inwardness, personal bliss and private salvation
  - sense of directness and immediacy of the experience God – Holy Spirit as God’s fresh ongoing presence.
  - ‘Tradition’ is often interpreted as human made as opposed to being a divine gift.

Whenever evangelicals have an experience of direct, personal access to God, we are tempted to think or act as if we can dispense with doctrine, sacraments, history and all the other ‘superfluous paraphernalia’ of the Church – and make our experience the sum and soul of our faith.<sup>16</sup>

- But danger of subjectivism here – as Lash recognises, if we appeal too exclusively to internal, material criteria of authority, then we shall be in danger of substituting our standards and our experience for the authority of God; and thus in danger of reducing Christianity to no more than another variant of liberal humanism.<sup>17</sup>

- Moreover, it is too individualistically grounded, being concerned with the individual’s experience of God
- And bypasses the irreducible mediatedness of God’s grace in the incarnation
- Moreover, it has little ability, in and of itself, to deal with different experiences other than by (1) an assertion of power (‘my experience and that of others like me is not like that’),<sup>18</sup> (2) reluctant to take differences seriously (‘my experience is my experience is my experience, yours is yours’)

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<sup>16</sup> Guinness, 39f.

<sup>17</sup> Lash, *Voices of Authority*, 12. See Guinness on Pietism: “Above all, the urgent question, ‘How do I know I am saved?’ was increasingly answered in purely subjective terms – either as ‘Have you decided to be saved?’ or ‘Have you gone through the experience of being saved?’” [38]

<sup>18</sup> Volf, 249: “When opinions clash, weapons must ultimately decide because arguments are impotent.”

- The general apoliticality of Pietist faith, among other things, meant it was difficult for German churches to theologically resist Nazism. In contrast, the Barmen Declaration proclaims

We reject the false doctrine that there are areas of our life in which we do not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords. [Barmen Declaration, Article 2]

- Largely a response to subjectivist directions taken by modern thinking.<sup>19</sup>

The fear that these ‘alternative traditions’, whether they would want to conceive of themselves as traditions or not, is that tradition is an absolutely binding past that resists the freshness of God’s creative presence, a memory that keeps us in thrall to a temporally reverse gaze and that will consequently stifle creativity, change and progress. And note, indeed, how these 3 features do not tend to feature in certain accounts of faithfulness to the past, even in Protestant accounts of faithfulness to the scriptures. Change comes to be identified with slippage and progress instead with loss. Instead, the past is absolutely binding, a deposit to be guarded at all costs on which there can be no creative improvement.<sup>20</sup> It is, given this understanding of the tradition of the past, unsurprising that very books of almost identical format, style, and argument are published on the same topic (for example, on biblical inerrancy, the deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity) with little sense of development, change or critical engagement with each other. At most the differences, in this scheme, can only be at the level of form or rhetoric and not at the level of matter or substance.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Guinness argues that Pietism is something of a last-ditch attempt to preserve Protestantism as a religion, an instrument for the self-actualisation of those who had been squeezed out of the centers of cultural power. With all else gone, pietists still had their ‘stop-gap God’ in a little spiritual niche on the sidelines of the world. Consequently it becomes an ‘escapist church’, a community of ‘salvation-egotists’ that was no longer the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

<sup>20</sup> This suggests that appeal to tradition can become an authoritative substitute for argument, conversation, and self-critical reasoning together and understanding.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Holmes’ recent book *Listening to the Past* is a useful indicator that something has gone wrong here for Protestantism, with its purity of the unmediated Word (that scripture is referred to often as the Word of God only serves to confuse the issues of the problems with pure presence). What is ironic about Holmes book, however, is that while it rightly implies that the time of the living community is more extensive than the temporality of the ‘now’ (the physically living) would allow, not only is a large part of his community scythed from consideration (the medieval church, apart from Anselm, and Roman Catholics among others). There is something odd in calling for listening on the part of the readers and yet emphasising the *Reformed* nature of the task, as if being Reformed is an exclusionary device that renders catholicity a notion only serviceable elsewhere.

But notice what has happened here – the past and present are understood in competitive terms, an either/or system in which it is either the past or the present. Temporality is constrained – a present without a past, and vice versa. Also, crucially, the originating (and retrievable) past becomes pure and unsullied while all that comes after is regarded as distorting and corrupting, something to be retrieved and preserved<sup>22</sup> (or in liberal terms, present experience is pure while reflection becomes distorting).<sup>23</sup> But is this what we are to be left with, a Scylla and Charabdis to be carefully navigated? Or is there another way of approaching the notion of the authority of the traditions of the past?

The difficulty is suggested even by the ambiguous meaning of the word *traditio* itself, deriving from *tradere*. The Latin has 2 senses:

- a handing *on* (as in faithful passing on)
- a handing *over* (as in a betrayal)

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<sup>22</sup> Many Protestants want to return to a pure apostolic past before the distorting effects of the Roman Catholic church, which is little different in ethos from the ‘liberal lives of Jesus’ approaches that proclaimed the original Jesus to have been lost in the fog of Hellenistic theological development.

<sup>23</sup> According to Guinness, this notion of purity is not only an illusion but a dangerous one: “When a nation or group within a nation identified itself with the purity of the first times it was liable to fall prey to the illusion of its own innocence. It therefore would be blind to its own shortcomings. Primitivism, in short, is an ingredient of evangelical hypocrisy.” [Guinness, 42f.] It is this ‘primitivism’ (the supposed identification, and exaltation, of the original texts, the primitive Christian message and community, and so on) that is responsible for simplistic Christian, and for Guinness Evangelical in particular, thinking: “the impulse of primitivism has contributed to the evangelical bias towards the simplistic. Because the primitive is the pure, the original and the desirable by definition, all that is developed, settled and institutionalised is obviously questionable. Evangelicals characteristically display an impatience with the difficult, an intolerance of complexity and a poor appreciation of the long-term and disciplined. Correspondingly we often demonstrate a tendency towards the simplistic, especially in the form of slogans or over-simple either/or solutions.” [43]. Concomitantly this involves something of an escape from history: “Because beginnings are always pure and a return is always possible by definition, the intervening history is seen as a matter of corruption and decline. We create the illusion that we can easily build anew and escape history and historical forces at will.” [43] Christians suffering under this delusion tend to forget or ignore their embeddedness within traditions of understanding, and thus fail to acknowledge, identify, and test their presuppositions. So we find Alexander Campbell, founder of the Disciples of Christ, claiming: “I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them today, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatsoever.” A further effect is that the very process of testing becomes something other than a virtue: “Christians fairly suddenly become uncommonly difficult to rebuke and impatient of criticism. A necessary accompaniment of this prevailing notion that if anybody criticizes you, or if you disagree with your co-religionists, you found your own church down the street, is the collapse of any doctrine of disciplines with[in] the Church, and indeed the suspension of thought concerning the nature of the Church.” [Guinness, 68] “What is always prized [in dogmatic populism] ... is charismatic certainty.” [Guinness, 47] “Above all, populism rejected educated leadership and put a boundless trust in the common person. The result was a populist style of interpretation in which the right to personal judgement became ‘the Magna Carta of the Common Man’. Under the rallying cry ‘No creed but the Bible’, each man or woman became his or her own interpreter.” [Guinness, 60f.]

Thus suggestively written into the very meaning of *traditio* is a series of ambiguities:

- the handing on is inseparable from reception<sup>24</sup> and also that handing on can involve a breaking of the content concerned
- handing over is an act of betrayal, so the very act of passing on can involve a distortion of the content – a bad gift

### *Remembering Our Memories*

So we have just argued that there are 2 broad approaches to tradition – modernity, building on some of Protestant Pietism’s sensibilities (recall that the Enlightenment was a Protestant feature), dislocating the self from memory; and other Protestant traditions that keep us bound to a perfect and pristinely pure past, a given to be defended and maintained. As Lash observes,

If ‘learning theology’ is conceived of as a process similar to learning the data in a geography text-book, teaching theology is conceived of on the same pattern. The *tradition fidei* becomes, not ‘sharing faith’, but something known as ‘handing on *the* faith’ (there it is, out there on the table, in the book)....<sup>25</sup>

It might be tempting to attempt to sail between them and develop a mediating third way. But that would be a hazardous activity, an uncomfortable fusion of 2 very different approaches. And yet both understand past and present as competing and, in some sense, exclusive to each other – the past securely binds the present (Protestant orthodoxy), or the present moves away from the binding past (modernity). But what if we take a different strategy, one that refuses to contrast past and present in this fashion?

We have already found suggestions of how we might proceed by considering the nature and role of memory:

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<sup>24</sup> McGrath, 186: “It will thus become clear that the word ‘tradition’ implies not merely something that is handed down, but an active process of reflection by which theological or spiritual insights are valued, assessed, and transmitted from one generation to another.”

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Lash, *His Presence in the World*, 9.

- All have a memory of the past, and are defined/shaped by the *particularity* of it – consequently, all are in one way or another *traditioned*. As Herbert McCabe argues, this is

the sense in which tradition is a matter of identity, so that to have lost touch with tradition in this sense is to be as crippled as an amnesiac who just doesn't remember who he is.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, the Enlightenment celebration of the free and unsituated self is predicated on something of an illusory self, and is therefore impractical.

- Given objectivity of the world – we can never simply impose our meaning on the world, but our creativity responds to and follows in many respects what is available to us.
- Context of our learning – even the questions we ask depend on what we have already learned.

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, the society and the state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror.<sup>27</sup>

This entails that the ideal of a pure 'objectivity' between a knower and a known is simply not true to life – it is not true to the ways in which we

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<sup>26</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, 199. Colin E. Gunton: "The renunciation of a positive relation to tradition is a futile attempt at evasion of who and what we are: of our human spatial and temporal placedness. To proclaim the salutary nature of tradition, and in particular the possibility of conversation with the past, is not the same as traditionalism, which is the assertion of one sector of time, the past, *against* the present." [*The One, The Three and The Many*, 171]

<sup>27</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, 1975), 245. Vanhoozer sums up Gadamer's basic argument: "Neither individuals nor cultures enjoy a God's-eye point of view from within the world. Human beings always and only hold points of view from within particular histories, languages, and traditions, from within what Gadamer calls 'horizons.' Not even the scientific method can free us from our particular, and limited, historical horizons. Yet it is precisely these horizons that connect us to the past, for it is the past that shapes who we are today. ... Gadamer rehabilitates tradition by arguing that prejudices are conditions of understanding.... Consciousness is not sovereign, but 'historically effected.' We belong to history before history belongs to us. Thinking is not autonomous, but conditioned by one's place and time." [152f.]

actually learn to think and live. “[O]ur experience is always mediated.”<sup>28</sup>

Nicholas Lash explains that

The European and North American thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were no wrong to be suspicious of ‘tradition specific’ or “sectarian” religious discourse. Nor was it dishonourable to seek, beyond the obscenity of violence perpetrated in the name of God, for reasoned peace. Their mistake lay in the expectation that the human grasp of truth could ever be other than tradition-constituted. We are not incapable, as human beings, of making sense of things, of speaking truth and acting with integrity. But all these things we do from somewhere, shaped by some set of memories and expectations, bearing some sense of duty borne and gifts that have been given. All sense, and truth, and goodness, are carried and constituted by some story, some pattern of experience, some tradition.<sup>29</sup>

This is even true of any reading of the scriptures:

Consequently, Christian ‘tradition’ *is never pure*; it always represents a merging of streams coming from the Scriptures and from given cultures that a particular church inhabits.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion*, 107. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 17: “commitment to some particular theoretical or doctrinal standpoint may be a prerequisite for – rather than a barrier to – an ability to characterize data in a way that will enable enquiry to proceed.” “What are taken to be the relevant data and how they are identified, characterized, and classified will depend on who is performing these tasks and what his or her theological and moral standpoint and perspective is.”

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 19.

<sup>30</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 208. Mark Noll claims that antitrationalism does not free evangelicals from tradition, for they have their own tradition, however unspoken: “It is a problem arising from the universal human need for traditions that exists even among those who profess to be without traditions. The problem is analogous to Chesterton’s dictum that where God has died, the demons prevail. American evangelicals who profess to live without ecclesiastical, denominational, and theological traditions do in fact sustain a virile ideological traditionalism in its place. That is, they have oriented their thinking around a set of principles, ideas, and assumptions that serve evangelicals much as institutions, creeds, or denominations have served the church in the past.” [‘Evangelicals and the Study of the Bible’, in George Marsden (ed.), *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 118]

But it is not merely a case of a simple factual mistake – that many modern thinkers imagine that we are free from tradition when we are not – and more obviously moral. By this I do not mean what might be called the ethics of intellectual honesty, that it is incumbent upon thinkers to perceive things as clearly and as truly as they can, but rather the fact that their failure to perceive correctly is curtailed by their inability to recognise their traditionedness.

A person who imagines that he is free of prejudices, basing his knowledge on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself influenced by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him as a *vis a tergo*. A person who does not accept that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what is shown in their light.<sup>31</sup>

Thus recognising that we are shaped by cultures and their assumptions case is crucial, and vital to a healthy reading of scripture as well as performative understanding of the world. This means, among many other things, that engagement in understanding the past

is a process of revising our preconceptions, not seeking to escape from them. It is a growing into what we learn from tradition.<sup>32</sup>

The problem was that modernity had largely come to understand the human in *individualistic* terms, as an autonomous self who is free as a self-determined and self-constituted moral subject. “Tradition ... involves a personal relatedness to others in both past and future time. ... To deny the salutary character of tradition is to say that we can only be ourselves by freeing ourselves *from* others – by suppressing the other – rather than being set free by them. ... [I]f I come to believe that I have nothing to receive [from others], I am denying something central to their humanity and mine.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, 324.

<sup>32</sup> Louth, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 95. A positive theological reason for listening (to both those in the present and the past) is that of *createdness*. Createdness and dependence on others are

Given that we cannot conceive of the self in such indeterministic or individualistic ways, the question then properly shifts from ‘are we free without tradition?’ to ‘which tradition(s) is appropriate or true to our learning how things are?’ Walter Brueggemann’s lament on our blindness to our own ideologies is illustrative of what is at stake here:

A consideration of ideology [the ways in which we misinterpret through our usually unacknowledged vested interests] is difficult among us, precisely because U.S. church people are largely innocent about our own interpretive work, and not often aware of or honest about the ways in which our own work is shot through with distorting interest. But it is so, even if we are innocent about it. There is no interpretation of Scripture (or interpretation of anything else, for that matter) that is unaffected by the passions, convictions, and perceptions of the interpreter. Ideology is the self-deceiving practice of taking a part for the whole, of taking ‘my truth’ for *the* truth, of running truth through a prism of the particular and palming off the particular as a universal.<sup>34</sup>

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often considered to be bays rather than blessings, and Christianity has not been immune from this depreciation of the body and the body’s dependence on others for its existence and wellbeing (the strict separation of soul and body, with the latter being both what is theologically important and made eternal is an instance of this). But the blessing of God on that which he had created is a stinging theological indictment of this disdain of createdness. And one of the things that makes us human is our *dependence* upon others, and this not merely for our physical needs but also for our cognition (our knowledge).

<sup>34</sup> Brueggemann, 20. Trevor Hart makes a broadly similar kind of complaint in a British context: “Naïve appeals to ‘what the Bible says’ fail to take seriously the impact of the historical and social location of every act of interpretation. Far from safeguarding or respecting the authority of Scripture, such appeals threaten finally to erode it, and to replace it with the authority of particular interpretations. Since these interpretations are often rival and conflicting ones, this mistake can quickly lead to a factional Christianity and a divided Church. To protect ourselves from it, we need not to retreat into crude attempts to isolate our interpretations from outside the text itself, but rather to recognize the way in which our interpretations are and will always be shaped by other factors, taking full account of these, and thereby being better equipped to identify and deal with those influences that are pathological rather than healthy and beneficial.” [Trevor Hart, ... in Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 184] To these John Goldingay’s comment might be rightly added: “theologians’ being able to use scriptural terms may obscure the fact that their framework of thinking is that of another culture.” [John Goldingay, ‘Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology’, in Green and Turner (eds.), 123-142 (128)]

- Also, given that this is so, being traditioned and embodied as such is *not a burden* in and of itself, but rather as part of what is meant by human freedom.
  - After all, this particularity is grounded theologically in *God's creativity*;
  - And *incarnation* has to do with God's ongoing commitment to embodiment – we are redeemed as embodied creatures, not saved by being extracted from embodiment (hence the eschatological images of the resurrection *body*, and the embodiment of the *new heavens and earth*);
  - Jesus Christ, for all our talk of his universality, is *irreducibly particular*;
  - And Christian witness is an enacted witness to that saving event, performed crucially as *remembrance* (the eucharist).
- The past is *socially mediated* – we have memory of, because of, and with others. So Barth recognises the social grounding of theology:

When theology confronts the Word of God and witnesses, its place is very concretely in the *community*, not somewhere in empty space.<sup>35</sup>

- Memories are fragile and prone to error – thus we need the *corrective memory of others*. Now this suggests that whatever is meant by our talk of tradition, it cannot unproblematically mean that tradition is some stable element that can remain substantially pure – traditions are fragile and for their purification we need to hear the witness of similar traditions.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> To claim in a traditionalist way that traditions cannot be transformed is to appeal to an authoritarianism that involves, in the end, little more than a politics of power – the power of the past. There is a sense of what is wrong with this in the recent movie *Luther*. In a scene in which Martin Luther's growing influence is being challenged by Tetzel, the Saxon Reformer Luther is declared a 'heretic' simply because he opposes the party-line. In this the powerful assert themselves without discussion, proper debate or adequate self-critical conversation. Tetzel is heard to declare, "You, Martin Luther, will not draw into doubt those things which the Catholic Church has judged already, things that have passed into usage, rite and observance. The faith that Christ, the most perfect lawgiver ordained; the faith the martyrs strengthened with their blood. You wait for a disputation over things you are obligated to believe. Now give your answer. Yes or no."

- No ‘tradition’ of itself remains stable and unchanging, and can be held now in the same way as in the past. Traditions develop, and people often cross ‘boundaries’ with some fluidity.
- The notion of unchanging and eternal ideas is largely a modern one, an example being Adam Gifford’s claim that “that there is an eternal and unchallengeable system scheme of morality and ethics, founded not on the will, on the devices, or in the ingenuity of man, but on the nature and essence of the unchangeable God.”<sup>37</sup> But, as Gunton argues,

According a place to human particularity, fallibility and sin allows historical and cultural particularity to be friends rather than foes of an appropriate rationality.<sup>38</sup>

- In memory, the *past becomes contemporaneous*. There is, in this sense, no dead past as such, but rather a past that lives.
  - That means that theology is involved in conversing with past and present generations (see Heb. 12:1 on the “great cloud of witnesses)
  - We become the contemporaries and fellows of those gone before us even as they become contemporaries of us.

To study theology means not so much to examine exhaustively the work of earlier students of theology as to become *their* fellow student. It means to become and to remain receptive, for they still speak, even though they may have died long ago. ... But above all, theological study means to follow in their footsteps and to turn to the source from which they were nourished, to the norm to which they had already, properly, and unqualifiedly subjected themselves.<sup>39</sup>

### *Person-Making Conversation*

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<sup>37</sup> Cited in MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 25. MacIntyre, 28: “All cultures are of course ethnocentric and few are genuinely aware of the degree of their own ethnocentricity.”

<sup>38</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and The Many*, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 161.

Let us pause briefly for a moment and appreciate this shift in metaphor from memory to conversation. Conversation, in this sense, is

- Person-engaging
- Relation-making
- Provisional and modest
- Focused on *what is conversed about*

This takes us a little closer to a theological understanding of tradition:

- Not a dead past captivating us in its deadly grip, from which we need to be liberated
- But a conversation with those who have gone before us, guided by them and shaped through them
- Yet a conversation, and therefore critical at that. As MacIntyre argues,

When a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose. So when an institution – a university, say... – is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be .... Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover,

all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic.<sup>41</sup>

Consequently, ‘tradition’ is best understood as the environment within which we learn to think, move, speak, and live – in other words, it is the ethos within which

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<sup>40</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 206.

<sup>41</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 206.

we becomes selves. As MacIntyre argues, “it is central to the conception of such a tradition that the past is never something merely to be discarded, but rather that the present is intelligible only as its commentary upon and response to the past in which the past, if necessary and possible, is corrected and transcended, yet corrected and transcended in a way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some yet more adequate future point of view.”<sup>42</sup>

[Nevertheless, we should remember the limitations of the metaphor since those in the past cannot speak against our understandings of what they have said, unlike those we converse with in the present – thus there is a particular danger of imposing our image and concerns onto those past.]<sup>43</sup>

This last set of comments by MacIntyre is particularly intriguing. ‘Tradition’ is often imagined to be something of a static affair – that it is a stable and unchangeable aspect of human conduct, an inviolable set of rules. Hence, talk of defending tradition or escaping from it.<sup>44</sup> If MacIntyre is right, and I think he is, then tradition is something much more fluid, dynamic and open-ended, and this we will return to later with regard to the so-called Christian tradition.

In this sense, then, a tradition is not a binding delivery of unassailable facts that can be appealed to over against others as “a substitute for understanding or argument”,<sup>45</sup> an accumulated body of propositional truths, faithfulness to which is constituted by simple repetition of the insights of the past. On the contrary, according to McCabe, “a tradition is not there first of all to be *appealed* to, but to be *lived*.”<sup>46</sup> It is something dynamic and freshly creative rather than inert and stably static. Consequently, “the comparison of sentences uttered in the C20th with superficially similar sentences from the 16<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries is not necessarily the best way of living in a continuing tradition.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, as Rowan Williams indicates,

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<sup>42</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 137.

<sup>43</sup> See Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM, 1988), 6

<sup>44</sup> What seems to underlie Packer’s critique of what he calls ‘the Traditionalist View’ is the ability of the church to control the scriptures. “The work of the Holy Spirit as Giver and Interpreter of revelation is thus equated with the pronouncements of the teaching Church. ... Faith is primarily a matter of believing what the Church lays down.” [Packer, 49]

<sup>45</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 199.

<sup>46</sup> McCabe, 200.

<sup>47</sup> McCabe, 200. After all, times change and understandings develop so that the same word in different contexts rarely functions in identical fashion. Simply put, meanings change – simple confession of the same words does not guarantee the confession of the same meaning (e.g., word ‘person’, *prōsopon*). The fathers at Nicaea faced some significant opposition to introducing the unbiblical word *homoousios*

It is not a theologian's business first and foremost to defend this or that dogmatic formula, but to keep alive the impulse that animates such formula – the need to keep the Church attentive to the judgement it faces, and the mission committed to it.<sup>48</sup>

McCabe uses a different analogy from that of conversation to make the point. He argues that learning to live within a tradition is rather like being initiated into learning a musical instrument – one learns the skills from those who themselves had been trained in the necessary skills, but once one is fully immersed in the *technē* one is “ready to depart sometimes from the recognized rules in some respect”, adding to the tradition, even transforming it.<sup>49</sup> In this way, then, participating in a tradition has the feel of “the authority of radical democracy that invites debate, risk, vision, empowerment, and transformation rather than [simple] obedience and submission.”<sup>50</sup>

### *Theology of Tradition*

Now let us apply these thoughts to Christianity. First, there is no learning outwith some kind of tradition. Indeed, a Christianity that is shaped by this abstract ideal will itself become abstract – abstracted from the real ways in which Christians actually learn how to worship. This is no simple practical point that can be passed over quietly with an ‘I suppose that's true’ type comment – it is very demanding – it directs Christians back to their traditions in such a way as to perceive distortions occurring in conceiving the human knower and divine Known in the post-Enlightenment accounts. This, in other words, is a question of idolatry – the modern ‘God’ or ‘gods’ outwith Christian tradition are in Christian terms idols. According to William Placher,

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in order to describe the Son's relation to the Father – yet they argued that a change of words here enabled them to keep the ancient meaning. There is intentionally the difference between proper elaboration of the original story and addition to it. [Lash makes this distinction in *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 16]. As Denys Turner declares, “one reason why an appeal to tradition could never consist in a simple obvious, and well-rehearsed reason, namely that such repetitions are in any case always ‘non-identical’.... [T]he *only* way to rehearse the ancient is by doing something new, because the tradition has never argued, or been argued with, in quite that way before.” [Denys Turner, ‘Tradition and Faith’, 22] Instead, the appeal to tradition is more open-ended (conversing in the present with the ‘wisdom’ of the past) and therefore provisional (unable to secure eschatological presence in view of the ‘not yet’), providing a set of limiting conditions on contemporary theological argument and the manner of its conduct.

<sup>48</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘The Incarnation as the Basis of Dogma’, in Robert Morgan (ed.), *The Religion of the Incarnation*, 91.

<sup>49</sup> McCabe, 201.

<sup>50</sup> Fiorenza, 179.

seventeenth theology tended to go wrong, as Christians concerned about the intellectual and social order domesticated an earlier awe in the face of divine mystery and boldness in envisioning the possibilities of grace. ... [B]efore the seventeenth century, most Christian theologians were struck by the mystery, the wholly otherness of God, and the inadequacy of any human categories as applied to God. That earlier view never entirely disappeared, but in the seventeenth century philosophers increasingly thought they could talk clearly about God.<sup>51</sup>

I mentioned before the important role of the ecumenical Creeds in Christian worship.<sup>52</sup> These traditions became the context of Christian talk of God – the word God cannot be given abstract meaning, but is given meaning through confessing the God of the creed. Worshipping through the Creeds, moreover, directs us to the way tradition functions in Christian theology, life and practice.

For instance, confessing, or worshipping, God through the Creeds directs us to the *necessity of tradition* in Christian life and practice. The theological implications of this are far-reaching, since the question of tradition, then, becomes a *theological* question. Subsequently, it opposes conceptions of faith that are:

- subjectivised – instead, we confess *God* and not ourselves
- individualised – instead, we confess God *together*

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<sup>51</sup> William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, 6. Placher, Milbank and others claim that “we can even derive resources for correcting some of the errors of modernity [in epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, and so on] by learning from some earlier theology.” [Placher, 7]

<sup>52</sup> Certain creeds are important links also between local churches and the church universal, since the earliest creeds were perceived to have been, to varying degrees, composed with ecumenical consent. Their importance can also be gauged by the fact that many of the C20th’s most influential theologians have written commentaries on the creeds – usually the Apostles’ Creed in the western traditions: Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Helmut Thielicke, Hans Küng, Henri De Lubac, Wolfhart Pannenberg; also noteworthy are the contributions made by Nicholas Lash, and Jan Milič Lochman. A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England in 1976 argued that “It is, therefore, their [the official organs of church life] duty to make certain that the creeds, like the scriptures, remain in the bloodstream, so to speak, of the Christian body.” [Faith and Order Paper, 41] “Although the historical context of the formulation of the Nicene Creed is different from our present context, nevertheless the Nicene Creed remains a most appropriate text to help every church to recognize, in the particular situation of its own time and circumstance, the unchanging faith of the Church.” The Methodist Rupert Davies expresses it like this, and suggests a number of important reasons for the continuing significance of the creeds: “The creeds occupy a position of almost unquestioned sanctity in the life of the Christian church. They ... are among the foundation-documents of almost every denomination; they are taught as an essential part of preparation for confirmation or its equivalent in a great number of churches; and if a non-Christian ask for a summary of the principal tenets of the Christian Faith, where can he be sent for information except to the creeds?” [Davies, 1]

- immediate – instead, we confess God together in the context of the *Church*
- wholly present – instead, we confess God together in the context of the Church extended over time. Aidan Nichols claims that

tradition, as the accumulated wisdom of the past, the record, as we may think, of previous conversations initiating new discussion in the present, was uncongenial to a radically homogeneous world, which looks to the present rather than the past for its truth. In such a world – as conceived, for example, by René Descartes – knowledge rests upon the consciousness of the present moment: the ‘I am’ built upon the ‘I think’. ... Present experience has the inestimable value of being of the moment. It has no need of the past (scripture and tradition), and is indubitable in the face of rational argument.<sup>53</sup>

- finalised 1 – instead, we confess God together in the context of the Church extended over time as it ‘hands on’ its *witness to the free and unpossessable God*
- finalised 2 – instead, we confess God together in the context of the Church extended over time that is *fallible and fallen*. Yet, even when recognising that and aiming to move beyond past affirmations, we need to be careful and generous:

There is no justification for sneering at the theology and liturgy of other eras: we needn’t always endorse it, but we *do* need to have some imaginative sense of why and how it mattered, and how it transmitted the gospel.<sup>54</sup>

The very structure of Christian traditionedness, then, enables something of “the recovery of narrative, of the primacy of practice, and the rediscovery of the

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<sup>53</sup> Gerard Loughlin, ‘The Basis and Authority of Doctrine’, in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 41-64 (48f.).

<sup>54</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Teaching the Truth’, in Jeffrey John (ed.), *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 29-43 (32).

tradition-constituted character of truth”.<sup>55</sup> Tradition is vital to the very theological shape and form of the Christian life of faith. The very fact that Christianity pays homage to its traditions is firstly, a refusal to ignore the complex ways in which we do *actually learn from others*, and consequently, an enacted resistance to the illusions of much of modernity, but, secondly, a recognition of the form in which God actually is present with God’s people.<sup>56</sup>

There is something else that we need to note about the function of the Creeds – their relation to the making of identity.

### *The Creedal Tradition and Identity*

We have already seen that tradition, as extended memory or conversation with the past, is crucial for the identification and making of identity of human beings. Let us look briefly at these two aspects.

- Identity markers

The Creed of Nicaea, the Nicene Creed, and the Chalcedonian Definition, among others, had their origins in situations of controversy and dispute. Consequently, they became identity-markers, badges of identity, provisional ways of defining what makes this group, and who the God is who is confessed to be truly God. As Lash observes, they are

the declaration, acknowledged by the community as communally authoritative, of identity-sustaining rules of discourse and behaviour governing Christian uses of the word ‘God’.<sup>57</sup>

By defining what identity is (what might be called ‘orthodoxy’, or right belief – i.e., the belief that is right and appropriate in this context) they implicitly distinguish it from what would distort and subvert Christian identity (what might be called ‘heterodoxy’ or ‘heresy’, wrong or inappropriate belief in this theological context).

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<sup>55</sup> Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion*, 23.

<sup>56</sup> But why the creedal traditions? Why not, for instance, the various Gnostic traditions that have become increasingly popular in recent years (Dan Brown’s literary and cinematic phenomenon *The Da Vinci Code* is a good example of that renewal of interest in these ancient traditions). To answer this one would do well to consult the arguments of Irenaeus of Lyon against the Gnostics – herein one receives a flavour of why this particular set of traditions is of vital importance in the history of Christian faith.

<sup>57</sup> Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 8.

Creeds are partly drawn up in controversy for restraint in, or correction of, or abuse of their talk of God (I say ‘partly’ for they have several functions and, of course, the origins of the Apostles’ Creed was not in controversy – it was rather a credal development of an old Roman baptismal rite).<sup>58</sup> The Latin word used as an early Christian name for the creeds, *symbolum*, according to Rufinus in the early 5th, signifies that the Apostles’ Creed was seen as the Christian ‘password’ to distinguish friend from foe [cf. Kelly, 52-61]. It was, then, Lampe argues, that which enabled the Christian churches “to acquire [and maintain] an identity of its own, and to feel itself to be marked out and differentiated from the rest of society” [Lampe, in the Doctrine Commission of the C. of E., 52]. Alasdair MacIntyre makes clear what is involved here:

A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice. Practices of course ... have a history: games, sciences and arts all have histories. Thus the standards themselves are not themselves immune from criticism, but none the less we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realised so far.<sup>59</sup>

Christians have a particular identity that they are committed to, an identity that has to do with confessing faith in the God of Jesus Christ. As Rowan Williams declares,

If it [viz., the Christian tradition] is aware of a heavy responsibility for maintaining and transmitting some of the forms of past ages – a

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<sup>58</sup> The way things hang together, in the Christian scheme of things, is through this ceaseless labour of mutual correction. [Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 7] As G.W. Lampe writes, “The polemical aspect of ‘proto-credal’ and credal affirmations persists. ... To mark off the distinctively Christian position against its opponents was not, however, by any means the only purpose of credal formulas. They were required for catechetical instruction and for the solemn profession of faith made by converts at their baptism” [Lampe, in *Doctrine Commission of the C. of E.*, 55].

<sup>59</sup> MacIntyre, 177. However, “Creeds”, Maurice Wiles notes, “are a particularly Christian phenomenon.” [Wiles, 144]

responsibility that can make a would-be Catholic language look fussily antiquarian and tribal at its worst – it is surely because of a conviction that this is that way of speaking of and to God has done something substantial for the healing and maturing of human beings.<sup>60</sup> ■■■■■■

Because this is so, outlawing certain forms of doctrinal claims has to do with rejecting that which performs a witness to a different kind of God. The Creeds are intended to enable appropriate confession of faith in God, the true God, and therefore exclude the idols we create.<sup>61</sup>

What is rejected is, pretty consistently, any teaching that leaves God only provisionally or partially involved in the communicating of the new life of grace and communion.<sup>62</sup>

Theology has largely to do with asking “how we can least stupidly talk of God in the light of all this” [i.e., in Jesus Christ].<sup>63</sup> Among other things, this means that the commitment to tradition has

to do at heart with maintaining the possibility of speaking about a God who becomes unreservedly accessible in the person of Jesus Christ and the life of Christ’s community.<sup>64</sup>

Yet we must recall again that this commitment is appropriately tentative as well as, paradoxically, whole-hearted, given the fragility of human response to God’s Self-giving. Consequently, doctrinal debate and controversy is necessary to test the ability of doctrinal claims to adequately, or at least as adequately as is possible in any given circumstance, witness to that generative event.

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<sup>60</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Teaching the Truth’, in Jeffrey John (ed.), *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 29-43 (31f.).

<sup>61</sup> Young, 99: “Loyalty to the one God was inherited from Judaism, and very quickly the community had to define its loyalty in response to accounts of the way the world is which challenged the sovereignty, the goodness and the unity of the Creator. So the issue of truth became paramount ....”

<sup>62</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Teaching the Truth’, in Jeffrey John (ed.), *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 29-43 (32).

<sup>63</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Teaching the Truth’, in Jeffrey John (ed.), *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 29-43 (33).

<sup>64</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Teaching the Truth’, in Jeffrey John (ed.), *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 29-43 (32).

- Identity makers

There are several features of the identity that the Creeds assume and generate:

- Identity in worshipful confession – the Creeds refer to God and not to ourselves, providing the shaping of our identity in the story of the Triune God with the world,
- Oneness of all things – the Creeds have to do with the story of the oneness of all things from creation to redemption, a story with a plot. Thus the Creeds are not a sample of the things Christians are to believe – but plot points in the story of God into which the world is drawn:

There may be many things which, as Christians, we believe, but we seriously misunderstand the grammar of the Creed if we suppose its primary purpose to be that of furnishing a list of them. To say the Creed is to say, not many things, but one. To say the Creed is to perform an act which has one object: right worship of the mystery of God. To say the Creed is to confess, beyond all conflict and confusion, our trust in One who makes and heals the world and who makes all things one.<sup>65</sup>

- Making unity – all confess together, ecumenically
  - “We believe” = identity *together*<sup>66</sup>
  - “We believe in one holy and apostolic Church” – not an assertion to be believed, but in performance together the oneness happens
  - Church context for our learning of God – not what I claim to be religiously and spiritually satisfying for myself

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<sup>65</sup> Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Even the fact that the style of the Creeds is easily memorisable is an important testimony to their unifying function – they are able to shape and to guide even the illiterate. This is something of a profound democratisation of knowing, hence Irenaeus appeals to the ‘Rules of Faith’, among other things, against the so-called ‘secret knowledge’ of the elitist and exclusive Gnostic sects. According to Irenaeus, writing against ‘Gnostic’ groups who claimed to savingly possess the secret teachings of Jesus, a tradition handed down immediately to them without recourse to the Christian churches, that which is authoritative in Christianity has to exhibit several features: antiquity, universality, apostolicity. “The Church, though dispersed through our the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: ....” [*Against Heresies*, Bk I ch 10.1]

- Church's past as historically extended context or body – being one with all of God's people, past and present. Creedal meaning is something that emerges in the engagement of confessors today and confessors then (the Creeds' framers and its history of confessors).
- Finally, oneness is patterned on the oneness of God since the Creeds make confession not of ourselves but of the identity of God. This has the significant implication that oneness is not an undifferentiated unity or homogeneity but rather the oneness given by the *Triune* God (the *three-in-one*, or the *diversity-in-unity*)
  - Liturgical setting of life – Christian 'knowing' as self-involving or personally participative – "We believe" cannot be taken vicariously, but involves the dynamic of personal participation in the confession of belief in God

The Creed does not say what someone else believes but what I (or we) believe. It does not simply say where the *world* comes from and where it is being brought, but where I come from and hope to go. If it is a story, then, it is not only the story of the world, but is also autobiographical in character. It is profoundly personal testimony, or it is misused.<sup>67</sup>

### *Tradition and Scripture*

The Reformed traditions have frequently been regarded as opponents to the notion of the authority of tradition. Themes of *sola scriptura*, *sola christus*, *sola fide* are taken to exclude 'human' sources from the knowing of God, standing in contrast to the Roman Catholic traditions which opposed these *solas*, as Aidan Nichols argues:

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<sup>67</sup> Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 9.

The Catholic Church does not regard revelation as adequately presented in Scripture alone – if the word ‘alone’ there is taken to mean the Scriptures divorced from their setting in the life of the Church.<sup>68</sup>

J.I. Packer, for instance, complains that this negates the sense of the *sufficiency* and *perspicuity* of scripture, that it is “neither self-contained nor self-interpreting, as an account of God’s revelation. The Bible alone, therefore, is no safe nor adequate guide for anyone.”<sup>69</sup> He interprets it in terms of “The Traditionalist View”, a perspective he claims that maintains that

tradition, which is also God-given and therefore authoritative, supplies what is lacking in Scripture; it augments its contents and declares its (alleged) meaning.

It is noticeable that Packer does not interpret tradition as an alternative source of authority to the scriptures, but rather an augmenting of, or a building on them.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, he does not lift persons out of their formative traditions:

we are all in fact children of tradition in our religion. We do not start our Christian lives by working out our faith for ourselves; it is mediated to us by Christian tradition, in the form of sermons, books and established patterns of church life and fellowship. We read our Bibles in the light of what we have learned from these sources; we approach Scripture with minds already formed by the mass of accepted opinions and viewpoints with which we have come into contact, in both the Church and the world. Inevitably, we grow up children of our own age, reflecting in our outlook the mental environment in which we were reared.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Aidan Nicholas, 165.

<sup>69</sup> J.I. Packer, *‘Fundamentalism’ and the Word of God* (London: IVF, 1958), 49.

<sup>70</sup> George Tavard, however, argues that an opposition of scripture and tradition arose in the later Middle Ages [*Holy Writ or Holy Church* (London, 1959)].

<sup>71</sup> Packer, 69. Alister McGrath places his discussion of tradition in the context of *Sources of Theology*, which may give the impression that tradition is an independent basis for knowing God, and this the Reformed churches would oppose [Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 183-189]. Yet he rightly declares, reflecting on the 1994 *Catechism of the*

Nonetheless, he does not adequately clarify the relationship of scripture and tradition. The problem usually, however, is the way this conjunctive ‘and’ is understood as being a rigid one, expressing addition. Scripture and tradition are presented as *two different sources* of knowledge of God.

The difficulty with this assumption is that in this perspective the knowledge that scripture and tradition give are broadly factual – it has to do with imparting information. Tradition is the ‘handing on’ of formulatable truths that can be confessed. But, as already suggested, this is a problematic way of understanding God’s ‘revelation’ and its relation to scripture and tradition. As Andrew Louth argues,

Participation in the tradition [of the Church] is indeed a *moral* activity: it implies a growing likeness to him.<sup>72</sup>

Tradition has, then, to do with *paideia*, making us receptive to God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, that is a constantly renewed engagement that has no end, no definitive solution.

So if tradition is understood in this dynamic way performatively, then what if tradition’s relation to the scriptures? According to Roman Catholic theologian Aidan Nichols,

Though tradition has its own *loci*, it is more an environment or context or atmosphere in which we read Scripture than an object set side by side with Scripture.<sup>73</sup>

This is a suggestive comment. Not only are scripture and tradition not opposed, when understood well, and tradition ‘adds’ nothing new to the scriptures in an important sense, but they are complementary and integral to one another.<sup>74</sup> Tradition is what enables scripture to be interpreted. In other words, it has to do with

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*Catholic Church*, that “‘Tradition’ here is understood as a living and active process of passing on the Christian faith, rather than as a static source of revelation, independent of Scripture.” [McGrath, 185]

<sup>72</sup> Louth, 65.

<sup>73</sup> Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 22.

<sup>74</sup> There is something of this in Athanasius: “For although the sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth, while there are other works of our blessed teachers compiled for this purpose, if he meet with which a man will gain some knowledge of the interpretation of the Scriptures, and be able to learn what he wishes to know ...” [Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, 1.1, 3]

the training in the interpretation of the scriptures. Tradition has to do, then, with handing on the skills of the business, training in the wisdom of virtue. Without these we would be unable to perform the task of discipleship or knowing God, being in no position to be able to hear or recognise God's Word when it comes to us.

The future of tradition ... appears to be assured, for all forms of inquiry, indeed all forms of life, are tradition-based. To read the Bible as Scripture is always to read it in a particular interpretative tradition. For the church is itself an interpretative tradition, a communally embodied, living, and active commentary on Scripture. Yet tradition, while inevitable, should never become insular or self-contained. On the one hand, tradition ought to remain open to the continuing historical effects, and corrections, of the Spirit-ministered word written. In the second place, church tradition ought to be open to having its interpretation of the Bible (not the divine discourse itself) corrected by insights from the secular world.<sup>75</sup>

On these terms, tradition becomes

- *Independent* of scripture in that it is with persons and texts other than those of the scriptural writers and biblical texts
- And yet it is *dependent* upon the scriptural witness in that it is a conversation with those who themselves are seeking to understand and articulate that witness
- *Authoritative* in that it is the wisdom of those we take to be wise listeners to God's Self-revelation
- *Bound* to the authority of the scriptures that those past were themselves bound by.

Tradition does not, consequently, unlike many common Protestant perceptions of it, stand over against scripture in any autonomous sense – rather, as those conversing with in traditions we learn to hear well the wisdom of the interpretations of scripture of those who have gone before us, and to learn in critical conversation with them how to take our place with them as partners in the reading of the scriptures.

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<sup>75</sup> Vanhoozer, 168.

This is clear from the relation of the Creeds to the scriptures.<sup>76</sup> Listening to others' impressions of a text we have read can provide insight that we would not have got other than through this event of listening. The same goes for the Christian's place within two thousand years of biblical interpretation and reflection. One of the important reasons behind the formation of the early church's rules of faith and creeds was that they helped provide a set of confessional markers, developed from a reading of the scriptures, that enabled one to read the scriptures well. So Lampe argues,

The Church regarded the Bible, interpreted and understood in the light of the various forms of its own continuing tradition, as the source of its belief and of the pattern of its way of life. The Bible, however, rarely offered a direct answer to the questions asked of it by the later Church; the answers had to be inferred. ... This made it extremely easy for all kinds of conflicting teaching to be read out of the Bible and to claim its authority. The 'rule of faith' was an attempt to distil out of the amorphous, unwieldy, and often bewildering diverse mass of Scripture and tradition a basic compendium of Christian belief which could, in turn, provide a key to the interpretation of Scripture and a norm for regulating its use. [Lampe, in the Doctrine Commission of the C. of E.]

Indeed, this summary of the confession of who the God is whom the scriptures proclaim was particularly important in cultures where literacy was far from being a universal skill.

Note that this does not mean that the creeds are understood as being more *important/authoritative* than the scriptures. They are merely (although this is a 'merely' that cannot undermine their significance) a (fallible) way of summarising who it is that the scriptures call us to worship [that is why Barth calls states that the *Credo* "furnishes, as it were, a ground-plan of Dogmatics", *Credo*, 1], shaped by the

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<sup>76</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer: "Theological hermeneutics recognizes that our doctrine of God affects the way we interpret the Scriptures, while simultaneously acknowledging that our interpretation of Scripture affects our doctrine of God." [*First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2002), 10]

forms of the responses to the situations their framers faced, and therefore as a way themselves of aiding our reading of the scriptures.<sup>77</sup>

The affirmations of the Nicene Creed are rooted in the witness of the Holy Scriptures and must be tested against them and explicated in their light, within the context of the Tradition of the Church. Accordingly, the explication will seek to respond to the question as to what degree and in what form the fundamentals of the apostolic faith as witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures, proclaimed in the Tradition of the Church, and expressed in the Creed, can be commonly understood and expressed by churches of different confessional traditions, living in different cultural, social, economical, political and religious contexts [Faith and Order Paper, 5].<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, it does not involve a 'slavish' following of the letter of the creeds.

Lochman:

To take our doctrinal bearings from basic statements of our predecessors in the faith does not mean letting them dictate to us their themes, their positions, their answers. From the moment the dialogue begins we are ourselves present with our own themes, positions, and tentative answers, listening attentively but also joining in the discussion. We inquire into the views of our predecessors but are not engulfed by them. We search testimonies of the tradition because a theology that slips its moorings in the

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<sup>77</sup> Young speaks of the creeds as something other than doctrine: "There is a sense in which the creeds are not themselves a system of doctrine. The variations confirm this observation: the discrete points are perhaps less important than the bearing they have on the whole. It's as though the essential content is indeed a *story*, and as we all know, there are various ways of telling the same story depending on the selection of material, if not the artistry of the narrator. These features are important pointers to the fundamental nature of the creeds: they are summaries of the gospel, digests of the scriptures." 12: "[T]hey are not 'Articles of Belief' or a system of doctrine, but rather 'confessions' summarizing the Christian story, or affirmations of the three 'characters' in the story. They tell who God is and what he has done. They invite the convert to make that story and that affirmation his or her own: the word for 'confess' means also 'acknowledge' and even 'praise'." Cyril of Jerusalem [*Catechetical Lectures*, V.12]: "Since all cannot read the scriptures, some being hindered from knowing them by lack of education, and others by want of leisure, ... we comprise the whole doctrine of the faith in a few lines."

<sup>78</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer: "Theological hermeneutics recognizes that our doctrine of God affects the way we interpret the Scriptures, while simultaneously acknowledging that our interpretation of Scripture affects our doctrine of God." [*First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2002), 10]

history of doctrine soon becomes superficial; sooner or later it loses its staying power and becomes sterile even in its witness to its own time. But we do not succumb to the views of our predecessors because [of] a credally conformist theology ...; it will fail to recognize what is really worth imitating in the witness of our predecessors, what is really essential in their act of confession. ... Our grounding of this outline of Christian doctrine on the Creed, therefore, is understood and tested in open and critical discussion. [Lochman, 4f.]

As Leslie Newbiggin argues,

Tradition is thus in no sense a distinct source for divine truth; it is that continuing activity in which, to quote the Council's text [viz., Vatican II's *Divine Revelation*], 'the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her' (*Verbum Dei*, II.8). Tradition is not a separate source of revelation from Scripture; it is the continuing activity of the Church through the ages in seeking to grasp and express under new conditions that which is given in Scripture. The study of Scripture takes place within the continuing tradition of interpretation.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Leslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 53f.

## Select Reading

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### **Further Reading**

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Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and The Many*