Tradition as Subversion

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Abstract: This article examines two ways in which the theology of tradition might become subversive. First, tradition can become ideology when the hermeneutics of power within a community determines our understanding of tradition. Because of possible tensions between revelation, reason and the community of faith in the 'official' narrative of tradition, there can develop 'hermeneutical distortions'. Second, tradition, can, as 'generative subversion', also resist an ideology, its totalizing discourses and its power claims. It then expresses a community's orientation towards transcendence and its historical consciousness without necessarily lapsing into a destructive historicism. This concept of tradition finds its centre in Christ and in the understanding, and at the same time not fully comprehending, memory of him.

The appeal to tradition usually signals an assertion of continuity, stability and the authority of the past. It rarely seems to be a subversive move. In this article I wish to suggest at least two ways in which 'tradition' becomes subversive. The first part examines the conversion of the theology of tradition into an ideology. In this form it is used to legitimate and advance the power of groups by subverting the truth claims of other groups within and outside the church. In the second part I shall argue that the way in which we allow 'tradition' to be the historical consciousness of the community resists an ideology and shows it to be the community's orientation to transcendence. This carries with it what I shall call a dynamic of generative subversion which must characterize any attempt to live authentically from the event of revelation. The focus of my attention is not so much upon the content of tradition as such – its form as dogmas and practices and the like. Instead, I shall be concerned with the idea of tradition as it comes to be deployed by the church. In this sense I take my lead from Congar, 'tradition is not to be defined by a particular material object, but by the act of transmission, and its content is simply *id quod traditum est, id quod traditur*'.[1] Of course, the act of transmission is an act of judgement about what it is important to hand on. This is not just a question of what constitutes

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1   Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), p. 296.

the essential truth or deposit of faith; it is also a question of power. It is my thesis that this aspect of the question has not been adequately addressed and it is the purpose of this article to present a preliminary exploration of these complex questions.

Theology of tradition as the subversion of history and the transfer of power

> The preaching of the Church is everywhere consistent, and continues in an even course and receives testimony from the prophets, the apostles and all the disciples, through the beginning, the middle and the end, and through the entire dispensation of God, which effects a man's salvation and dwells at the heart of our faith . . . received from the Church, which we preserve, and which always by the Spirit of God, renewing its youth as if it were some precious liquid in a fine vessel, causes the vessel which contains it to renew its youth also.[2]

This statement by Irenaeus serves very well as a summary of all that is intended in the notion of tradition. It continues to find echoes throughout the Fathers, reaffirmed in major councils up to Vatican II.[3] In the struggle against Gnosticism and other alternative interpretations of the *mysterium fidei* it was essential to identify sources and establish criteria for judgement and authentication. The notion of tradition developed in Irenaeus is not just descriptive; it contains an insight about the historical and ecclesial nature of revelation and the responsibility it lays upon the church. The notion of 'tradition' shapes the structures and self-understanding of the community that appeals to it as an authority.[4] To this extent, it enshrines an understanding about truth, its social construction and the continuity of transmission that becomes an important weapon against adversaries in any dispute. In the second thesis on history, Walter Benjamin proposes that the past carries a 'temporal index' by which it is referred to redemption.[5] Tradition is, in some sense, the way we have to open that index. For the Christian community, however, tradition has its source and rationale in the event of revelation and it is this fact that distinguishes it from a reading which is purely sociological. Its 'messianism' does not lie within the future of historical progress or transformation through human agency, but comes from the eschatological character of the truth that it already carries. Tradition does not make

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2 Irenaeus, *AH* III, 24. 1.
3 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 7–8. Cf. Council of Nicaea II, D 303; Constantinople, IV, session 10, Canon 1: D336. Trent, First Decree, 'Acceptance of Sacred Books and Apostolic Traditions'; Vatican I, *De Filius* 2, 4.
4 Cf. Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp. 216ff.; Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), p. 81; Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 77ff.
5 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on History II', in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (London: Fontana Press, 1973), p. 245.

revelation true, rather, it is the truth of revelation that creates the tradition and imparts to it a soteriological significance.

The account given by Irenaeus of the process of transmission which constitutes tradition is not a purely descriptive one. It is the construction of a narrative which ensures that the community is part of the economy of salvation. It therefore matters which community one is part of and how that community understands its task. Like the Lucan account of the church's expansion, Irenaeus's account of tradition presents a construct of the Spirit's presence in the community, the proof of which can be seen in the structures of the community's life. These set up a hermeneutic of transmission in which the structures are validated by the narrative they produce. I propose that this 'official' narrative of tradition sets up a series of tensions between revelation, tradition, and the community that appropriates the Spirit to the structures of legitimation, that is, office. These tensions produce what I shall call 'hermeneutical distortions' inscribed within the narrative, leaving the notion of tradition vulnerable to use as an ideology. I propose to examine three hermeneutical distortions, though others may detect more.

Overcoming distance

The 'narrative construction' of tradition is designed to resolve a series of problems, the first of which is the problem of 'distance'. Distance, here, has several determinative dimensions: it is not just 'temporal' distance in time, but metaphysical distance or the absolute otherness of God. If history is experienced as a matter of distance from the source, then the task of the community is to place itself as near the source as possible. The question of truth becomes a question, therefore, of preservation – continuity over distance. Hence, as Congar points out, truth and authenticity are questions of origin, '*auctoritatis* is precisely the normative value that a reality – affirmation, regulation, responsibility or function – derives from its origin'.[6] This has a double purpose: on the one hand it sets up a criterion for truth; on the other, it turns the problem of distance, both temporal and spatial, into a mark of authenticity. The governing notion of tradition, therefore, becomes one of maintaining closeness to the source. This is achieved in part by overcoming the perceived distance which the progression of time generates, in part by trying to defend the 'source' from corruption. The idea of *paradosis* is critical: it is predicated upon the notion of distance which is overcome in the recognition that the truth is something that is given. In this sense, 'distance' is not just a temporal effect; it is something metaphysical and reinforces both the supernatural character of the truth and its objectivity which is part of its ability to be given. It can then be maintained that 'the deposit of faith' is not something constructed by the community, but something that it 'holds'. Thus the foundation of the community's gnosis/faith is

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6 Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 26.

established in a way which protects the community from the charge of generating its own story. Both temporal and metaphysical distance are overcome in revelation which changes the character of transmission. It is no longer only a human historical act but a participation in the Divine self-communication. It becomes part of the structure of the economy.

Resolution of the problem of transmission also resolves the question of continuity which it contains. Continuity is now not only a result of the unchanging nature of divine truth, it is also the result of the structures of transmission. Both work together to produce a hermeneutic of transmission/continuity given in the event of revelation and thus immune from the corruption of history. They are assigned the character of permanence (unchanging) that effectively removes them to an ahistorical category. The structures take on a necessary character as opposed to contingent cultural and pragmatic forms that respond to the historical moment and its demands. Although this 'ontologizing' movement is rooted in the presuppositions of a particular philosophical culture, it also acquires a theological form. These structures are reliable or faithful agents of *paradosis* because they are guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. If the problem of history has appeared in the form of 'distance', it has now been overcome by the substitution of the privileged structure of office in the community for history. The narrative of tradition has become the means by which a community achieves control over its own foundation.

The ahistorical and the ontology of power

The second distortion operates in the way in which the narrative of tradition is used to support the claims of universality. Universality is a quality of the truth and the community which can demonstrate it legitimates its claim. It is an extraordinary construct but it is only possible and effective because it presupposes the ahistorical character of the truth and the participation of the structures of transmission in it. Vincent of Lerins gives it its most familiar formulation. The sign of the community which possesses this truth is that its teaching will be always and everywhere the same.[7] This, of course, is also an ecclesiological programme. It introduces the principle of 'sameness' into the community's criteria for judging the authenticity and truth of its statements. This principle becomes a key weapon in the Ultramontanist position that has shaped modern Catholicism. It finds expression in Vatican I,

> May understanding, knowledge and wisdom increase as ages and centuries roll along, and greatly and vigorously flourish, in each and all, in the individual and

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7   The famous formulation, 'quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est', *Commonitorium*, ch. II. The criteria are formulated against schism, hence universality of belief and consent, and antiquity which is intended to counter novelty. The only reason that novelty is permitted is to test and sift the community. However, this is not intended to produce a static version of the faith; development is distinguished from innovation, 'sed ita tamen, ut vere profectus sit ille fidei, non permutatio'.

> in the whole church: but this only in its own proper kind, that is to say, in the
> same doctrine, the same sense, and the same understanding.[8]

Although the point is to rule out historicism, it works with the classical notion of
an immutable God whose relations with creation are necessarily accidental not
essential: we may change, indeed we must change, but God does not. Its effect
is twofold: it reads tradition as the organ of immutability, thus transforming
its historical character into something ahistorical. It produces a hermeneutic of
distortion whereby the community is constantly forced to read its periodic
articulation of revelation in terms of consistency or sameness. Indeed, 'sameness'
becomes the mark of its authenticity.[9]

In distorting the historical nature of tradition as a hermeneutical task into
something that prescinds from history it effectively converts tradition into the
instrument of one particular group within the church, namely the Magisterium. This
occurs because the possession of the truth is also the possession of power; hence
the keeper of the tradition is the keeper of the authority. As truth is essential to the
foundation and mission of the community, the keeper of the tradition moves to the
centre of its self-understanding as the essential organ of preservation of its identity.
The authority or power of the keeper becomes rooted in the ontology of the
community. Thus tradition, or the hermeneutic of continuity-consistency within the
life of the community becomes the preserve of one agent: it becomes the reader and
interpreter of history for it controls the narrative of the community. The result is a
transfer of power from the tradition to the agent who keeps it. In modern times it is
Ultramontanist theology that defends this move.

For a highly effective and influential statement of a full-blooded
Ultramontanism we need look no further than England. In 1865, Cardinal Edward
Manning in his polemical work, *The Temporal Mission of the Holy Ghost*, effectively
removes the church from historical process:

> But that the relation between the body and the Spirit is absolute and indissoluble,
> the Theologians, Fathers, Scriptures, and the universal Church, as we have seen
> above, declare. And therefore the infallibility of the Church is perpetual, and

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8   Vatican I, *De Filius* 4. A strange, complex phrase which seems to accept development
    but deny change, 'sed in suo dumtaxat genere, in eodem scilicet dogmatem eodem sensu,
    eademque sentential'.
9   On the hermeneutic problem of historicism cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*
    (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), pp. 267ff. Of course, if the flaw is that historicism
    forgets its own historicality, the rationalist solution is also guilty of this. For a modern
    discussion of the problem cf. Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (London: Harvard
    University Press, 2002), pp. 51ff. The problem is while attending to the 'situation' of
    knowledge also to understand its effect which is not bound by a particular historical-
    cultural moment.

the truths of revelation are so enunciated by the Church as to anticipate all research, and to exclude from their sphere all human criticism.[10]

As we have seen, the basis of this lies in the fact that God does not change. To the extent that the church carries the ever-present light of divine truth (revelation), it too must be exempt. With Manning there seems to be no eschatological reserve:

I may say in strict truth that the Church has no antiquity. It rests upon its own supernatural and perpetual consciousness. Its past is present with it, for both are one to a mind that is immutable. Primitive and modern are predicates, not of truth, but of ourselves.[11]

Manning does allow for growth, however; it is organic development but it does not imply a change of substance, 'All corruption is change but not all change is corruption: there is a change which destroys and a change which perfects the identity of things.'[12] Again, the principle of 'sameness' is grounded in an ontology that legitimates the office of those who control the transmission. When pushed to its logical conclusion Manning's thesis tends to assimilate the Holy Spirit to the Papal Magisterium and there is no hint of irony when he asks, 'Do I seem to be making a large claim in behalf of the vicar of Jesus Christ?'[13] Of course, it was no larger a claim than that made by Pius IX when he declared himself to be the tradition.[14]

The formal appropriation of the theology of tradition to that of the Magisterium can be seen most clearly in the work of J.B. Franzelin, 'whose *De Divina Traditione et Scriptura* (1870) became almost a classic and largely determined modern theology on the question'.[15] Although the complete agent of tradition is understood as the 'profession and life of the whole Church'[16] it is resolved into the Magisterium: in

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10   Henry Edward Manning, *The Temporal Mission of the Holy Ghost or Reason and Revelation* (London, Burns & Oates, 1909), p. 92.

11   Manning, *The Temporal Mission*, p. 239.

12   Manning, *The Temporal Mission*, p. 235.

13   Manning, *The Temporal Mission*, p. 203. Also, p. 205: 'Such then is the assertion with which I set out. This is among us now, as there was in the beginning, a Divine Person, the author and teacher of the whole revelation of Christianity, the guardian of the Sacred Books, the interpreter of their sense: and the Church in all ages, one and undivided, is the perpetual organ of His voice.'

14   Cf. J.R. Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition*, Questiones Disputatae 15 (Freiburg: Herder, 1966), pp. 113–14, n. 9. Geiselmann also cites sources.

15   Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 197. It is important to recognize the extent to which the theology of tradition is still conditioned by an anti-Protestant apologetics and the need to fine ways of combating the emerging historicism of the nineteenth century and the sceptical philosophies which call the whole premise of religions into question.

16   J.B. Franzelin, *De Divina Traditione* (1896), Thesis XI, p. 90: 'doctrina fidei universa, quatenus sub assistentia Spiritus Sancti, in consensu custodum depositi et doctorum divinitus institutorum continua successione conservatur, atque in professione et vita totius Ecclesiae sese exserit.' Cf. also Thesis XII.

so far as the tradition is the common understanding of the faith, it cannot be grasped apart from the teaching office of the church.[17]

Transference of power

The third aspect of the hermeneutics of distortion arises out of this appropriation of tradition to the Magisterium. It concerns the transference of power. The authenticating power of tradition is transferred to the Magisterium through the logic of tradition/Magisterium: the Magisterium determines the tradition the preservation of which authenticates the Magisterium. The hermeneutic circle is now completed. The nature of the power that is transferred is concealed through the theology that the Magisterium constructs about itself: it does not place itself in the position of control but of service. Specifically, this is described in terms of 'preservation'.

Claiming such a role has significant consequences for the relationship of the Magisterium to the whole *congregatio fidelium.* For Franzelin and his school, it is the Magisterium that takes the active role in this preservation thereby establishing the participation of the faithful in terms of passive obedience. When the understanding of service qua 'preservation' is determined by the ontology of 'sameness', the Magisterium is also forced to resist innovation and maintain that when it does occur it is not really anything new. This has several consequences for the way in which the Magisterium understands its role and performs it. In the first place, 'preservation' becomes a warrant for policing the tradition. Second, it forces the Magisterium to perform two problematic procedures: (a) Magisterium/tradition discourse must always construe interpretations such that they are never innovations. This implicit procedure of denial produces its own hermeneutic of distortion: the tradition/Magisterium is unchanging and therefore claims for itself an ahistorical character that makes it foundational; (b) it generates a solipsistic discourse. The Magisterium becomes self-referential in order to demonstrate that it is consistent and unchanging. Third, although a close analysis of its statements frequently reveal the opposite, not only is the Magisterium required to contort its relation to the history of its own discourse, it is also engaged in a suppression of the experience of tradition as historical, disjunctive and dynamic. This can be seen most clearly in the 'development' of social teaching under the present Papal Magisterium.

In a fine analysis of the move away from a commitment to the historical and partial nature of the church's social reflection, Mary Elsbernd shows in some detail how the thinking of John Paul II has reversed the stance of Paul VI:

> This approach (John Paul II) is a departure from *Octogesima Adveniens*, which held that catholic social teaching has been worked out in history i.e., that

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17   Franzelin, *De Divina Traditione* (1896), p. 272. Mackey argues that it is Franzelin who is the first exponent of the 'tradition-Magisterium' concept which comes to dominate the Catholic understanding of tradition until Vatican II.

catholic social teachings are historically constituted, that the local Christian community contributed to the development of Catholic social teachings, and that a single universal message is not the papal mission.[18]

Paul VI, following the lead of *Gaudium et spes*, recognized the necessity for a historically conscious methodology in the church's approach to social teaching and action.[19] In the writings of John Paul II, however, this is reinterpreted to minimize a historically conscious methodology in favour of the 'permanently valid principles determined by the Magisterium'.[20] In a sense, the community is required to live a version of tradition that alienates it from its own historical experience.[21] In this theology the Magisterium is the sole authentic interpreter of the community's experience.

The concept of development is often proposed as a corrective to the sort of distorting we have traced. Development is necessarily grounded in the continuity of revelation and also in the continuous unfolding of meaning which historical existence must produce. We will return to this aspect of tradition in the second part of the article, but here we should note that development can mask the displacement that has taken place. As we have seen in the case of Manning, development is made to work with a dualism of an unchanging truth mediated through the language and symbols that the community creates in order to express that truth. This mediatorial activity of the community is controlled by the charism of office in the community. Development is thus in the hands of the office which shapes it and becomes part of its power-narrative. If we ask, 'Who controls development and who adjudicates about its results?' we see that it is a concept which accommodates 'change' but preserves the distribution of power.[22]

The declaration on revelation, *Dei Verbum*, which must rank as one of the most significant achievements of Vatican II, did much to restore a proper theological balance. It insists on the dynamic soteriological character of revelation that is set within an eschatological context, thus reminding us that a complete grasp of the truth

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18 Mary Elsbernd, 'Whatever happened to *Octogesima Adveniens*?', *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), pp. 39–60; p. 40. Elsbernd shows how Paul VI is consistent in his appreciation of the historical nature of social questions and the way in which responses emerge out of this context and the experience of the local community.

19 Cf. Norman Tanner, 'The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of Today (*Gaudium et Spes*)', in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. II (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), pp. 1069–1135. *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes* together constitute two major and quite radical transformations in Catholic ecclesiology. Both deal in their respective ways with the historical and social constitution of the church.

20 Elsbernd, 'Whatever happened to *Octogesima Adveniens*?', p. 59. She also lists eight consequences of the shift away from *Octogesima Adveniens*.

21 Elsbernd argues that the role of the local communities and their experience of social problems are consistently reduced to one of applying solutions or principles determined by the Magisterium. Cf. 'Whatever happened to *Octogesima Adveniens*?' pp. 49, 52–6.

22 Yves Congar, 'The Magisterium and Theologians – a Short History', *Theology Digest* 25 (1977), pp. 18–19.

can only come at the end of history.[23] All our understanding is marked by the
provisional nature of human knowledge on the one hand, and, on the other, the
epistemological privilege of the revelation of Jesus Christ.[24] Tradition and scripture
are not two independent sources but integral modes or expressions of the one
unfolding and effective dynamic of the Spirit who 'brings all things to mind'.[25]
The task of 'transmission', therefore, must always be one of interpretation.[26] It
even establishes the proper hierarchy or order aimed at preventing the tradition/
Magisterium distortion we have described, 'This ministry of teaching is not above
the word of God but stands at its service, teaching nothing but what is handed down
as it devoutly listens, reverently preserves and faithfully transmits the word of God,
by divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit.'[27] Although *Dei Verbum*
here establishes the right order of the Magisterium to revelation, and subtly places
it with the whole 'listening' community of the faithful, the tension is not resolved:
it still maintains the Magisterium as the principle interpreter of the community's
experience. The tension can be seen more starkly in other texts of Vatican II.[28]

   This brief sketch of three hermeneutical distortions serves to indicate how the
hermeneutics of power within the community can determine our understanding
of tradition. They serve to alert us to the way in which tradition can be used
subversively to deny, conceal or restrict the claims of other parts of the community
to carry insight, knowledge or authority.[29] Only those claims sanctioned by 'the

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23   *Dei Verbum* 2.8.
24   *Dei Verbum* 4.12; 5.
25   *Dei Verbum* 9.
26   *Dei Verbum* 2.10; 3.
27   *Dei Verbum* 2.10. The formula here is a traditional one, aspects of which we have been
     discussing. It is important, however, that it is governed by the strong assertion of the
     supremacy of revelation. It is reinforced by the role assigned to the Magisterium of
     listening, *pie audit*, which is the condition of its ministry. In general I have followed the
     translation in Tanner. In this instance I have translated *Magisterium* as 'teaching ministry'
     rather than Tanner's 'teaching function'. I think the sense intended by the text is that of
     Pauline gifts given by the Spirit for the service and building up of the community. It
     seems to me to be an important part of the ecclesiology of *Dei Verbum* that it gives
     priority to a scriptural understanding of office (ministry) as a corrective to a juridical
     one. In so far as translations entail choices they are also interpretations. On why the
     establishment of doctrine is always secondary to the proclamation of the Word, cf.
     Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 295.
28   Cf. *Dei Verbum* 2.7 where the emphasis is less on the whole *congregatio fidelium* than
     on the apostolic Magisterium. The tension is particularly evident in *Lumen gentium* and
     the different ecclesiologies of chs 3, 4, 1 and 2.
29   Here, the creation of the narrative of tradition can serve to create and maintain the power
     of the community vis-à-vis the culture or it can be the power of a particular group or
     agent within the community. Part of what I have called the creation of the narrative of
     tradition is necessary for the group to transform its values. In this respect Allen Brent's
     thesis is illuminating. Brent argues that the early church may be conceived in terms of
     a subculture, 'A group deprived of status and significance by the wider culture, sets up

keepers' are admitted to the tradition and given its protection, thereby 'preserved'. They are allowed to enter the future. We have also noticed how they can be used to subvert history by creating tradition as the community's version of history, based upon the ahistorical nature of revelation. The genuine historical consciousness of the community and its experience which it represents is suppressed. At this point tradition displays the features of an ideology. It establishes a dominant orthodoxy that represents the ideas and interests of a particular group who have the power to control knowledge and discipline. Hannah Arendt observes the capacity of ideologies to impose their interpretation upon history; they 'pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process'. Ideologies represent totalizing visions that claim the right to adjudicate on what may or may not pass as truth.[30]

Part of this strategy of power to dominate is the creation of the 'other' who is to be condemned. In its most extreme form it creates a category of the 'subhuman', those who inhabit the shadowy realm outside the boundaries determined by the ideology. We see this most clearly in apartheid or anti-Semitism, both of which have sought theological legitimation. Ideologies become embodied in the life of the community, setting and shaping its horizon of understanding, identity and its way of relating to the surrounding community. In so far as a 'tradition' is an encoding of a community's memory, it can also encode a memory of the other as alien; it can be a process of the 'falsification of memory' that serves the power objectives of the dominant group. It can, as Heidegger reminds us, entail a 'concealment' or induce a forgetfulness; in such a case it becomes the instantiation of a pre-judgement which closes off access to the 'other' for it will not admit the possibility of a different experience or voice.[31]

This can be seen in the long history of polemical theology, not least in the way in which Catholics and Protestants have defined each as 'other'. In its most classical form the use of 'anathema' in conciliar statements is the assassination and silencing

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its own countra-culture that mirrors and reverses the values of the former, granting status and significance to its members that the former has denied them.' Allen Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order: Concepts and Images of Authority in Paganism and Early Christianity before the Age of Cyprian* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. xxi. Hence, early Christian theology and church order reflects the Imperial Cult. In order to achieve this transformation the community needs to create its own apologetic narratives which encode its values.

30 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 167. According to McCarthy another function of 'ideology' is to mask a group's 'will to power and its accompanying strategies of action'. E. Doyle McCarthy, *Knowledge as Culture* (London, Routledge, 1996), p. 30. Of course, one can also apply this to the emergence of 'fundamentalism'.

31 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), Introduction II. Heidegger uses phenomenology as both a deconstruction of the tradition which conceals or 'forgets' the question of Being (*Dasein*) and as a reconstructive method for disclosing it.

of the other.[32] When it serves such a function, 'tradition' as a force shaping the history of a community may subvert the redemptive movements and opportunities that arise in history. To develop and support this thesis would require a much more comprehensive and detailed treatment that can be presented here, though we need only look to Northern Ireland or the Middle East for potential initial sources.

Exploring the relationship between truth and power, Michel Foucault argues that 'truth is a thing of this world; it is produced by multiple forms of constraint'.[33] Much of Foucault's work is devoted to the ways in which truth is a product of power enshrined in cultural structures such as language. I have sketched the way in which the theology of tradition despite its claims to be above history tends to become an ideology and function very much as a 'politics of power' in this world. In this form it effectively subverts the experience of the community in its historical existence. However, there is another sense in which 'tradition' itself can subvert this ideological tendency, constantly freeing the creative energy of Christian life. It is to this second form of subversion that we must now turn.

The theology of tradition as generative subversion

As ideology, the truth that the theology of tradition is intent on suppressing is its own historicity. Tradition is not just a historical record of the pronouncements that the Magisterium of the church has made in various centuries, nor is it only the customs and habits of life and worship enshrined in its liturgy and praxis. There is only a 'tradition' because the community recognizes the historical nature of its life and thought. For Christian thought, tradition cannot be an escape from history for it is, first and foremost, the historical consciousness of the community: its search in time to grasp the meaning of salvific self-communication of the Triune God. The hermeneutical task is only possible because it stands within a narrative, itself constituted by many voices and discourses. All theology which is true to its source must, therefore, understand itself to stand within a history of which it is product. Indeed, if it seeks the truth at all, then it must allow its own historical nature to become explicit or as Gadamer puts it, 'true historical thinking must take account of its own historicality'.[34] In this sense, tradition is the constant subversion of totalizing discourses of ideologies and the power they enshrine.

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32 We should not underestimate the significance of Vatican II to eschew this form and thereby prescind from the ideological dynamics of apologetics. In this regard, we can see the ecclesiology of the *ecclesia docens* and the *ecclesia dicens* as serving the concept of tradition and its location of power that informs Catholic life and thought from 1870 to Vatican II.

33 Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, vol. 3, ed. James Faubion (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 131.

34 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 267.

Although somewhat artificial, for the sake of clarity and succinctness, it will be helpful to explore the nature of tradition as a 'generative subversion' in terms of the three strategies of the 'ideological subversion' we have outlined.

Subversion of ahistoricism

The problem for us is to grasp how tradition keeps us in history and conscious of the historical existence without lapsing into a destructive historicism. Indeed, the concept of tradition blocks off this possibility. While it places us within a history it also carries with it recognition of continuity. This means that tradition is about change.[35] The continuity that is carried in tradition, however, is not that of 'sameness' which sets up the problem of transmission in terms of a logic of repetition. As we have seen, this approach can only lend itself to the denial of history and the creation of an ideology. Not only does it undermine the historical nature of the community's existence, it risks converting revelation into an object so that theology is modelled on the natural sciences.[36] This distorts its hermeneutical task for it misreads the relationship between the event of revelation and the event of the community. Revelation cannot not occur without understanding; it does not occur, therefore, without the community.[37] God does not will to be God without Israel nor Christ will to be the Saviour without his church. Indeed, history is presupposed not only as the medium in which the event of the incarnation-resurrection occurs but through which is it is operative. The community is not something apart from the economy of revelation but is already its effect and presence within the world. Thus history becomes part of the economy as the process of the community's understanding and witness. In this sense, revelation not only has a history it creates it.

Within this context, continuity is not the consequence of immutability but the product of the hermeneutical action of the community in and through its historical consciousness. Tradition, as the record of this hermeneutical action, then becomes the record of the decisions that the community takes in order to remain faithful to its task. It is these decisions mediated in the tradition which continue to transmit the task and ground its possibility. There is a moral dimension to this also. In so far as understanding entails decision, it involves an act of responsibility. Tradition is the way in which the community takes up its responsibility for all other generations and is responsible to them for the truth that it carries or conceals. Tradition carries the memory of other generations past and future. It completes the community and calls it to responsibility. For this reason tradition is the overcoming of historicism.

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35 Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition*, p. 41.
36 Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 252–3.
37 Aquinas, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* 12.1.422. 'quando cum visione habetur significando intellectus eorum quae videntur, tunc est revelatio'.

It also presents a different solution to the problem of distance. A radical reordering of the temporal structure takes place in the economy of tradition. There are two dimensions to this: The first is the reordering of the epistemological situation of each generation. Here, the notion of 'insight' is perhaps more appropriate than that of development. The latter tends to place one epoch in an epistemologically superior position to another, implying that there is some evolutionary trajectory of knowledge through time. We know, however, that the monuments or insights of previous generations, whether in their formulations of the content of faith or in the life-structures which they generate, for example, the charisms of religious life and movements, are not left behind but remain permanently generative in the life of the community. They constitute insights or moments of profound understanding that remain permanently valid and generative modes of access to the economy of revelation and its mediation. They are the 'texts' to which we continually return for they so reorder our understanding of the world that they effect a 'creative dislocation'. As such, they continue to shape and be active sources of discursivity so that in returning to them they are not exhausted but inspire new insights.[38]

Gadamer speaks of the movement of distance and recognition which forms part of the hermeneutical process of history.[39] This process is surely part of any attempts we undertake to understanding something which is produced by another era. Knowledge, skill and imagination and judgement in learning how to read an ancient text or site is clearly needed. Yet the mediation of understanding and responsibility which is conveyed in the Christian tradition does not simply present us with the problem of distance and recognition, it presents us with the reality of 'otherness' which is present. Living in the tradition does not present us with 'distance' but with the permanent disjunction of a new reality. The question of continuity is transformed from one of the temporal relations between generations to the fidelity of their response to the event. The problem is not so much one of continuity therefore, but of conversion, the freedom to make and sustain the hermeneutical task that it requires.[40] The disjunctive character of revelation is also a transference of meaning and power; the shift from an anthropocentic perspective to a theocentric one. Hence, the way in which we come to understand and live in our history is also changed. Tradition becomes the space of the 'kairos' where past, present and future do not retain their linear order but are present to each other as a convergence of horizons.[41] Joseph Ratzinger identifies the christological form of this space in his discussion of

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38   Cf. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 116.

39   Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Hermeneutical Significance of Temporal Distance', *Truth and Method*, pp. 258–67.

40   Lonergan identifies conversion as taking place in three movements: intellectual, moral and religious. *Method in Theology*, pp. 238–44. It is, pp. 130ff., 'a transformation of the subject and his world' – a proper hermeneutical task, for it is foundational to the theological activity of the community.

41   I am obviously indebted to Gadamer for some of the concepts which underpin my approach. He speaks of the 'fusion of horizons' (*Truth and Method*, p. 273). I have chosen

the three sources of tradition, 'the character of the Christ-event as the present and the authoritative enduring presence of Christ's Spirit in his Body the Church and, connected with this, the authority to interpret Christ yesterday in relation to Christ today'.[42] Likewise, the community also possesses, through the eschatological character of the event of revelation, a hermeneutic obligation to place its present within and under the horizon of the future. We do not simply interpret the past, but are also interpreted by it, hence the voices of the Prophets and the Gospels can become a voice, present and immediate in our discourse, for they also took responsibility for it and for us. Through living within the tradition, every generation in the church lives already within the horizon of the past and future generations and is accountable to them.[43] We cannot, therefore, claim an epistemological superiority. While we may claim 'progress' in material and scientific fields we cannot claim progress in *insight* or *sapientia*. What now governs knowledge is not distance or nearness to the origin but love, as the Johannine tradition testifies.[44]

It is clear then, that tradition carries many voices, which gives it the power to resist the totalizing discourses. In this way it is the memory of the community, for although the presence of these witness and their voices may be concealed and suppressed they cannot be forgotten or lost. It is in the capacity of tradition to be the place from which we may recover such voices that it becomes a subversive memory and the source of truth.

Transfer of power reversed

If tradition denies us an epistemological superiority because all participate in the epistemological privilege of revelation, it requires an epistemological humility. In it we are disposed to hear and receive other discourses and truths that they desire to communicate to us. It requires us to allow ourselves to be interrogated by it as well as inspired and confirmed. At the level of knowledge, epistemological humility contains a self-knowledge which is made accessible to us through tradition. It teaches us that our knowledge is bound up with our finitude; not only is it always partial but it is unstable. The very fact that our understanding always takes place within a tradition, makes us aware of the inherent limitation of our knowing,

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'convergence' to suggest that there is no dissolution of one in the other. The kairos of revelation changes the epistemological relationship but it does not destroy their sequence, in fact it requires it. On how the church lives out of the 'kairos' or 'fulfilled time' cf. also Vatican II, *Lumen gentium* 1.5. There is also an important discussion of the 'time of sacred history' and the tradition as a pneumatological event in Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, pp. 257–70, and also of the sacramental nature of the Word of God, pp. 402–6.

42 Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, Questiones Disputatae 17 (Freiburg: Herder, 1966), p. 45.

43 'Effective-historical consciousness is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation.' Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 268.

44 Cf. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, pp. 79ff.

what Newman calls the principle of disproportionality – the whole university of knowledge that can never be comprehended in our finite field.[45] At this level, tradition does not provide us with any panoptic view of the historical process, though it does give us knowledge of its purpose in the salvific will of the Triune God. Rather, it teaches us that we live as a *viator* not a *comprehensor*, or, in the words of Michel De Certeau, we are pedestrians (*voyeurs*) in the city.[46]

Yet, when tradition is grasped in its theological form as part of the economy of revelation, then it opens to us another perspective. There is, of course, the eschatological reservation that stands over all knowledge and underlines the radically historical nature of our knowing. However, its very finitude becomes the point at which we meet God's self-communication. It comes to us as the impossible gift which opens up for us new ways of being and knowing. So, tradition becomes the way in which history is a redemptive journey. It is one to which we are awakened and summoned; it is not one that we can map out for ourselves. Tradition teaches us that gratitude is not simply an emotion or virtue but an epistemological act that is the condition of all genuine knowledge.

We began our second part with a question about the nature and source of continuity in the tradition. It is now possible to see that this resides both in the self-communication of God, the abiding presence of Christ in history, and the way in which this is encountered within the understanding of the community through time. It is the historical consciousness of the community formed in its decisions in each generation. Tradition is, therefore, the product of the *congregatio fidelium*. Here we come to the subversive memory which lies at its heart: sociologically and historically it cannot sustain itself, it is only a community because it lives out of knowledge of its own giveness – the *paradosis* of the Spirit.[47] In

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45 Edward J. Miller, *John Henry Newman On the Idea of the Church* (Shepherdstown: Patmos Press, 1987), pp. 83ff.; also the *Idea of a University*, p. 47. Theology comes under this as well – the religious mystery constantly outstrips our reflection. But 'a religious doctrine, which is a conception of the mystery expressed in human language, is still truthful even though it is partial. Partiality is not falsification provided it does not claim to articulate more than it in fact grasps.' Second, and more germane to the matter of theological freedom, 'every doctrine has aspects and relations yet to be investigated but necessary to complement what is now known . . .'. Miller, *John Henry Newman On the Idea of the Church*, p. 84. Newman's epistemological principle of disproportion is the justification for the need for theological freedom of enquiry and is developed to counter the Ultramontanists who confuse their own opinion with what is defined. Disproportion works to establish due proportion from the maximalising tendency of an Ultramontanist approach. Cf. Newman's letter to Pusey, *Certain difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching, Vol II. Letter to Pusey and the Letter to the Duke of Norfolk 1833*, 2:29.

46 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 92ff.

47 Cf. Vatican I Decree, *De Fide* 3; Vatican II Decree, *Lumen gentium* 1 is a profound meditation on the pneumatological character of the church within the salvific economy which it also expresses.

conclusion we turn to some of the principal features of this reality which tradition carries.

The sensus fidelium

One of the most urgent tasks for Catholic ecclesiology and for a theology of tradition in particular is the development of a well-grounded theology of the *sensus fidelium*. If we see this as part of the theology of the laity, then we are already engaged in an ideological tendency which, I have argued, a theology of tradition as the hermeneutic task of the community resists. In this article it is not possible to do anything more than make suggestions for a theology of *sensus fidelium* in the light of the concept of tradition we have been presenting.

We have seen that our understanding of tradition as the 'kairos space' not only reorders the relations of generations but discloses the responsibility that each has to the other. The question of transmission and preservation becomes less a matter of maintaining formulae as holding to the hermeneutical task. Tradition allows the community to constantly encounter itself as the *congregatio fidelium* that can only be sustained through the continuous *paradosis* of the Holy Spirit. In this way the church knows itself to be part of the economy and the place of encounter with the *Mysterium salutis*.[48] This means that the *congregatio* contains an epistemology of which tradition is the objective record. The community itself is part of what is known as well as the mediation. The *sensus fidelium* is a continuous active realization of the knowledge which the *congregatio* possesses and of which the formal teachings of the church are only a small, though indispensable, part. The distinction is sometimes made between the external tradition in the form of *martyria* – or witness – and interior tradition which is represented by the *sensus fidelium*.[49] This is a rather

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48 The most systematic discussion of this from the point of view of the meaning of Christian existence as existence 'in Christ' is Jean Mouroux's discussion in *L'expérience chrétienne: introduction à une théologie* (Paris: Aubier, 1952) which also forms the basis of H.U. von Balthasar's treatment in *Herrlichkeit*, vol. I (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961), II B.

49 Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition*, pp. 15–23. Cf. Newman's defence of the *sensus fidelium*: That the faithful are a theological resource. He does not attribute to them the explicit judgement about correct doctrine. That belongs to the Magisterium. It is a form of testimony: there are five ways in which it is mediated: 1: as a witness to an apostolic doctrine; 2: as a sort of instinct deep in the heart of the church itself (phronema); 3: as an impulse of the Holy Spirit; 4: as an answer to the laity's own prayers; 5: as a jealousy of error, an error the laity at once feels is a scandal. E.g. Arians. Cf. J.H. Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, ed. John Coulson (London: Chapman, 1961), pp. 75–6. Also Miller, *John Henry Newman On the Idea of the Church*, pp. 69–75. While Newman can provide the basis for the 'faithful' being a theological resource, his approach to it remains too passive. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, pp. 92–5, also tends to a reading that develops the notion of 'receptivity' and contemplation, though it comes out of the liturgy and the prayerful appropriation of scripture. In a sense, it is the tacit

dangerous and artificial distinction. It is dangerous because it tends to downgrade the epistemological value of the *sensus fidelium* and, as we have seen, assimilate it to the active witness of the Magisterium. It is artificial because, if our argument is correct, the *sensus fidelium* is the continuously confessing charism of the Spirit that manifests itself in and through all the activities of the community's life. Even in its most inner reality, it remains an ecclesial act.[50] If tradition is 'memory' it is an epistemology that carries the community's experience and understanding of the truth and the responsibility of its mission. It also determines the relationship of the structures of the community's life in keeping with this reality. Tradition, therefore, is the activity of the whole community bearing the fruit of the Spirit in its life and understanding. It preserves an order between the different structures which are developed to sustain this task, and thereby resists the claims of any one for hegemony in the communty's life.

Understood in this way, 'tradition' is not an object over which one group or office within the church can claim control. It is precisely the consciousness of the whole *congregatio* and it is the whole *congregatio* that holds the *sensus fidelium* of which tradition is the product. The Magisterium is not something separate from the tradition but is already part of it and subject to it. The division of an *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia dicens* is deprived of its epistemic justification; it is purely functional and somewhat artificial. The Magisterium is an organ of the *sensus fidelium*; it has no access to knowledge or understanding of revelation apart from that which is held by the whole *congregatio* and is the fruit of its understanding. Nor is it valid to assign one an active voice and the other a passive voice, for this imports an epistemological hierarchy into the life of the community which is in tension with the *paradosis* of the Spirit to the whole *congregatio*.[51] This is the point of the Pauline teaching on the church as the Body of Christ.

The relocation of truth or understanding is also a reordering of power. The Magisterium cannot claim power 'over' the *congregatio* without distorting the order

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wisdom with which the church lives. But 'tacit' should not be simply about consent or assent; it has an active epistemological status as shown by Michael Polanyi.

50 Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 348, develops the idea of the Fathers that the Spirit writes in the texts of our hearts. This is also the important principle of the 'inner testimony of the Spirit' central to Calvin's epistemology of faith (*Institutes*, 1.7.4.). This is often read in an 'personalist' way, but it is an ecclesial act in so far as there can be no testimony which is not also the testimony of the church and which comes through the church (the Gospels are the work of the community and vice versa). Moreover, the very testimony creates the person a member of the ecclesia, cf. Acts 2:37ff.; 1 Cor. 12:3.

51 The 'submission of intellect and will' spoken of by Vatican I, *De Fide* 3, makes it clear that this is owed to God and it is itself the gift of faith which marks our new relationship to God in Christ through the Spirit. It is therefore a charismatic act, the life of the Spirit in us, something akin to the 'interior witness of the Spirit' although the decree also maintains that it will be in accordance with reason. In other words, human reason can never claim sovereignty over divine truth ('et ratio creata increatae veritati penitus subiecta sit').

of the Spirit's *paradosis*. It can, however, speak in the name of community. As it has no independent access to revelation, its epistemological ground is firmly within the faith of the community. It cannot, therefore, exercise its function or charism without learning from the whole church. This does not undermine the episcopal or Papal Magisterium but it does relocate it.[52] Primacy of witness does not confer an epistemological primacy. This is a position which has been re-established in the theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar in the form of the 'Marian principle' which is central to his theology.[53] The *sensus fidelium* is expressed in the active life of the whole community: its liturgy, Fathers, the schools of theology, the Magisterium, the witness of the saints and the ordinary daily witness of Christian life. All of these are evidence of the continuous *paradosis* of the Spirit, and they have a christological form. Together they are carried, shaped and ordered by the tradition that they also form. Indeed, tradition is the nexus that emerges out of the interplay of their relationships that it also sustains. Each characterizes the dynamic interplay of hermeneutic structures and insights constituting the process of the community's understanding. Together they constitute the practice of the life of faith that resists ideology.[54]

The subversive ontology of transcendence

We spoke of the 'ontology of power' but tradition presents us with the ontology of transcendence. In its subversive relocation of our epistemological claims, in its carrying of the multiple voices of witness, and in its resistance to any attempts to forget that the community lives out of the *paradosis* of the Spirit, tradition is permanent openness of the community for the world. It is far from being a monument of the past, for the Christian community tradition is the presence of transcendence. In the words of Edward Farley, the church is always self-surpassing.[55] He sees this

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52 A complete theology of the *sensus fidelium* would also provide a renewed understanding of the epistemology that informs the exercise of the charism of the Magisterium. It has been consistently defended in the grounds of an apostolic succession whereby the original apostolic witness is actively preserved in the community. But this should not be envisaged as exercised on the basis of some privileged access to revelation, rather it is the charism of preserving what is already given to the community. It is exercised always within the context of the whole community and on behalf of the whole community that is the bearer of the witness. The strong claims of Vatican I on the primacy of Peter, *De ecclesia Christi*, with its anathemas need now to be read within the context of Vatican II and the fruits of ecumenical dialogue. This recontextualizing is itself a testimony to the dynamic of tradition.

53 This is a theme that runs throughout Von Balthasar's work, but cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3 (San Francisco: St Ignatius Press, 1992), III.B.

54 Cf. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 95–7.

55 Cf. Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 'The Self-surpassing nature of Ecclesia's Intersubjectivity', pp. 165ff.

in terms of the church, readiness for the 'stranger' that comes about through the discontinuity or the creative rupture of revelation that we have discussed. As well as relocating the church in time it frees it from geography and ethnicity. (The concerns of Israel.) This freedom opens the community to the stranger whose status is transformed: no longer a threat and potential enemy but the one in whom the church sees a fellow traveller:

> For in ecclesia the stranger is constituted as one who embodies the transcendental refusals and the suffering of historical existence. Since interest, delight, and compassion for the other are marks of freedom for the other, the stranger's status is that of fellow sufferer and potential participant in redemptive existence.[56]

It is clear that the stranger is identified and recognized christologically: the poor, the weak, the oppressed and marginalized. It is the *memoria* of Christ that the Spirit keeps alive in the church and through which the stranger is recognized, thereby being brought into *koinonia*.

There is, however, another aspect to this that Farley does not make explicit, though, in my opinion it represents the deepest level of tradition as a movement of transcendence. The *memoria* of Christ which constitutes the action of the tradition is the *memoria* of the one who is forever strange to us. This is why tradition represents both our understanding and our incomprehension; it always remains a testimonial of our inarticulacy. We know that we cannot express that which is beyond expression and that so much must remain unsaid before the infinite surplus of meaning that is the Triune God. Yet, this is not the cause of some existential despair or the mark of some noetic failure that invalidates the community's witness, rather, it is the sign of its authenticity; the transcendence out of which it lives. Our understanding of tradition can now take on a new and more complete quality: it is the community's Magnificat; the proclamation that history is redeemed in and through history. If tradition is the historical consciousness of the *congregatio fidelium* within history it carries also the voice of the communio *sanctorum* calling to every generation: *Ambula ergo in Christo et canta gaudens. . . .*[57]

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56   Farley, *Ecclesial Man*, p. 170.
57   Augustine, *Enn. Ps.* 125.4. The context is the ascent, the pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem, *matrem omnium nostrum*. This walking – pilgrimage – is a walking always in the way of Christ who is the Way (the way which is given in the reality of his life, death and resurrection, 125.1. 'Ipse enim Christus factus est via' (Io.14.6), 125.4. Walking in his presence for 'I am with you to the end of time', 125.2. On the ground of the *communio sanctorum* in the communio of the Trinity as a radical openness cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4 (San Francisco: St Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 485–6. This is also effected in the interpenetration of past, present and future of the 'kairos space' or sacramental nature of the church's mediating presence in history.