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## Tradition and Innovation in Christianity

Beginning with its roots in Judaism, Christianity has always had an ambivalent relationship to the authority of the past, and to the forms of tradition through which such authority is expressed. Accordingly, it is a mistake to regard the traditions of Christianity as an inherently conservative force, or as an inherently transformational one. Both understandings may be valid and illuminating, particularly when a properly supple and capacious understanding of “tradition” is employed.

Ought religion to be understood as an inherently conservative force, one that generally inhibits innovation and novelty and stifles fresh thinking rather than stimulating it? Or can it be understood as a dynamic agent of change, a powerful stimulus to social and cultural renewal?

The correct answer of course is: it depends. It is very perilous to generalize about “religion,” and hard enough even if one restricts oneself to writing about only one religion, given how subject to variability in time and space, as well as lively and consequential internal debates, nearly any established form of religion is likely to be. There is enormous danger of flattening, simplifying, and misunderstanding the religion in question. As George Santayana cautioned, “Every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in.”<sup>1</sup> Comparing worlds is not an enterprise to be undertaken casually.

But the questions asked above nevertheless retain their force, and the answers we give to them may affect the ways in which we are to regard religion in the present day. There can be no doubt, for example, that there have been plentiful instances in which dogmatically held religious tenets have blocked advances in science, and impeded the adoption of scientifically derived

innovations (in medicine, for example) that would enhance the lives of a great many individuals. There can be no doubt that religion has often served primarily as an agent of social control and an opponent of disruptive change. But these assertions, which amount to conventional wisdom among a great many educated people in the West, do not justify the larger presumption so often made that religion has invariably proven to be the enemy of cultural or scientific innovation.

For one thing, the opposition between stasis and change is sometimes more apparent than real. Both must be present if innovation is to be meaningful and enduring, rather than a flash of novelty that comes and goes like the light of a firefly. In some other well-known words of Santayana,

Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.<sup>2</sup>

Like the stabilizing keel of a steadily advancing sailing craft, religion and other forms of traditional culture can provide just that steadying influence, that baseline and countervailing force against which progress can be reckoned.

But that is not the only reason to question the adequacy of the conventional wisdom. Donald A. Yerxa's recently published collection *Religion and Innovation: Antagonists or Partners* offers a rich feast of contributions which forcefully challenge that presumption.<sup>3</sup> In instances ranging from archeological studies of pre-Columbian societies of the western hemisphere to the rise of modern science, and the emergence of modern ideas of individual liberty, including the movement for the abolition of slavery and the development of universal human-rights norms, Yerxa's contributors make a strong case for religion's historic role in fostering and even generating significant social and moral change. Sometimes this role is played through the reverent cultivation of tradition, and sometimes it is played by means of religiously inspired disruption. Both of these can be found with particular abundance in Christianity, but entwined in complicated ways.

### Tradition as Delivery, Tradition as Betrayal

To begin with, Christian faith requires its adherents to take account of the past as something real, as something in which one is unavoidably embedded, and to which one is profoundly connected – indeed, as something that has a certain measure of authority over the present and future. The extent to which it does so varies, depending on the individual's theological or confessional position. And there are important countervailing forces, both in the Christian faith itself and in contemporary culture more generally, that work against such accounting. But the fact remains that a religion that asks its adherents to walk by faith and not sight, and to order their lives around revelations and events that occurred at least two millennia ago, or that mysteriously await in a prophesied future, is a religion that places an enormous value upon the authority of the past. Christians do not turn to the past only out of curiosity, or out of a desire to recast it in a mold more to their liking, or to make of it a suitable background for whatever they propose to do next. They believe in the irreducible authority of certain past historical events and texts. For Christians, then, the past has something absolutely essential to teach, something to be learned in no other way. In that respect, it resembles every known religion; so reliance upon the past's authority is something they all have in common.

Yet looking for wisdom in the past turns out to be a very complicated matter. Consider the very word “tradition”. The English term is an enormously rich and complex one, with a complicated lineage. It contains worlds within itself, and manages to retain a profound ambivalence toward the very thing it signifies. That ambivalence is evident early in the word's history. The word “tradition” comes from the Latin *traditio*, and before that from the past participle of the verb *tradere*, which means “to deliver”, in the sense of carrying something across, from one place to another. But it also means, and this seems to be the more primary meaning, “to surrender” or “to betray”. In other words, although the word seems consistently to refer to the act of “carrying across”, it can convey more than one sense of the concept. It not only means “to hand down”, but also “to hand over”.

Indeed, the more negative meaning of “tradition” as a “surrender” or “betrayal” seems to have come earliest in the word's history, and the more benign meaning of “handing down” customs, stories, and beliefs – the meaning that now seems our chief association with the word – seems to have been a later modification. There are other words deriving from the

same root that are still in circulation, and have retained elements of the more negative meaning. For example, we still may use the verb “to traduce” to complain of an act of verbal defamation, or to call someone a “traitor”. This amazingly versatile common root is what made possible the famous Italian pun, *Traduttore, traditore!* – literally, “Translator, Betrayer!” – the translator, meaning one who takes it as his or her task to “carry across” the linguistic lines, is a traitor to, or betrayer of, the thing he translates.

So, although there is a certain warm and comfortable feeling that attaches to the word “tradition”, the word also contains many negative countercurrents. The notion that tradition may be an enemy of human potential is especially strong in American culture, and has been for most of American history. Think, for example, of the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who began his 1836 *Nature* with the following cry:

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? [. . .] The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.<sup>4</sup>

When Emerson later divided America’s intellectual history between “the party of memory” and “the party of hope”, there was little doubt which he believed was to be preferred.

Emerson, of course, was far from being an orthodox Christian. But the ambivalence about tradition that is so prominent in his work is not his alone; it is just as much a feature of the highly evangelical Christian faith as it manifested itself in his own time. Evangelicals emphasized that the Christian gospel offers the prospect of a new birth, about the making of a new man in the crucible of conversion – about the washing away of sin, the canceling of debt, the negating of the weight of the past, the annulling of the condemning power of the Law in favor of the redeeming and renewing power of the Holy Spirit. Whatever is hidebound and traditional, ossified and formulaic, formalistic and inherited, is held suspect.

Such sentiments were especially strong in certain strains of Protestantism, such as the line of dissenting Calvinist sects that eventuated in the Unitarianism in which Emerson was raised, and those sentiments were sometimes informed by an explicit or implicit anti-Catholic polemic, which

distrusted the institutional Church's tendency to be shaped by the historical accruals of the past, and which often looked back to the simplicity of the apostolic church as a model for renewal. The "old rugged cross" of Protestant hymnody was not thought to be venerable because it was old – that is, because of its traditional or historical meaning – but because the truth it embodied was imperishable. There is nothing, in the extreme version of this view, that the Church can "carry over" from one generation to the next. As evangelical Protestants sometimes say, there are no grandchildren in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is a way of saying that the fundamental insight of the Christian gospel must be freshly reappropriated by each person individually – person by person, and generation by generation. It cannot be passed along traditionally, familiarly or sacramentally.

Yet the antitraditional radicalism of Christianity is not exclusive to Protestants. It is intrinsic to the Christian faith. One of the chief elements of Jesus' radicalism was his constant criticism of the religious establishment of his day, not only for its pride and impiety, and its self-serving disregard for the plain meaning of Scripture, but for its exaggerated reverence for its own traditions. Again and again he defied social convention, often by showing concern for the very people who were normally despised or marginalized by respectable society. He spoke to women in public. He showed special solicitude for children, a countercultural gesture in a Roman-dominated world that calmly accepted such horrors as infanticide and the deliberate abandonment of unwanted children. He associated with prostitutes and lepers, and even allowed them to touch him. He demonstrated repeatedly his disdain for particular human customs, and he did so because he wanted to expose those who mistook the authority of tradition for the authority of the word and will of God. "Why," asked the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, "do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?" Jesus fires back with a question of his own: "Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:2) No matter how venerable, the traditions had no authority of their own, unless they were clearly in line with the more primary authority that was attributed to the Bible as God's "word".

### Reliance on Tradition

The weakness of tradition is only reinforced by the fact of Americans' living in a technologically, socially, and economically dynamic society, where the rhythm of constant change, institutionalized in what is interestingly

called “the fashion industry”, is often the only constant. It is the inevitable tendency of consumer capitalism, with its relentless drive toward fluidity and mutability, to encourage the constant erasure of memory to make room for new desires, new markets, new purchases. The result is that memory itself, always a mutable thing, is lost or debased in the process. Tradition is thought not only to cramp the human spirit, but to be bad for the economy.

So suspicion of tradition is, as it were, overdetermined in American life, both in terms of the general culture and in so many of the particulars of that culture. But suspicion of tradition is very strongly present in Christianity itself, and especially in the particular forms of Christianity that have been prominent and influential in American society.

And yet, for Christians, all the modern world’s accumulated suspicion of tradition and memory has to yield and bow its knee before Jesus’ singular command, which accompany his establishment of the ritual of the Eucharist: *Do this in remembrance of me*. This is the only regular ritual act that Jesus instituted, and it is central to Christian practice, albeit in many variants. Jesus’ body given, his blood shed, his suffering, his death, his resurrection, the prospect of his return – all of these things, and more, are to be *remembered*. Denominational and confessional traditions within Christianity differ in the respective emphases given to each of these. But they are united in contending that the remembrance of Christ is to be kept fresh and vital, to be placed before the eyes of believers regularly, day after day, week after week, generation after generation. This is a principal aim of Christian worship, to make Christ’s death present for Christian worshippers – to make it, in the best sense of that much-abused word, *contemporary*, meaning that it is something from the past which is being made fully manifest in the present time. This is a very profound application of tradition.

When Christians speak of “the faith once *delivered* to the saints” (Jude 1:3) – that “delivery” is precisely *traditional*, in one of that word’s most elemental senses. When they speak of “remembering” Jesus’s death, they speak of something they did not experience firsthand, but something that they came to “know” through *traditional* means. Evangelicals tend to speak of “knowing the Lord,” a manner of speaking that is meant to convey a relationship of personal immediacy – in the strict sense of not needing the mediation of history or culture or tradition or a priestly class. But this search for the authenticity of the immediate must rely upon traditional means of knowledge – the telling of the story, the “delivery” of the faith, the canon of Scripture, and any number of other things – without which it would not know

where to turn. Despite the antitraditional elements in their faith, Christians are highly reliant upon tradition, and indeed, whether they realize it or not, they could not do without it.

### Tradition versus Traditionalism

But we have to think with care about what is meant here by “tradition”, and about the ways and forms in which tradition can enhance and enable innovation rather than smother it. T. S. Eliot’s famous essay on “Tradition and the Individual Talent” was an early effort to make the case for tradition as an aid to creativity rather than a damper.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that much of the intellectual activity that we value is constituted by tradition – meaning that it exists within discursive traditions that are no less indispensable for being unacknowledged as such. The most vital traditions, in this view, are traditions of *argument*, in which a whole series of debates, disagreements, visions, and revisions are constituted around a certain set of assertions, perspectives, and questions. It is a misunderstanding, in this view, to see tradition as an inert body of propositions and customs passed along intact from one generation to the next. Tradition is the necessary medium – institutional, linguistic, social, cultural – within which fruitful intellectual and cultural activity is rendered possible. It is not just an inert chest of treasures, but also an electric web of disputation.

For MacIntyre, then, radical antitraditionalism is just as unintelligible as radical individualism, and for exactly the same reasons. Just as a baby cannot rear itself in isolation, so an argument cannot find voice without drawing on an enormous armory of precedents and resources that are ultimately the gift of the past. And this understanding of tradition is not static. Even the faith “once delivered to the saints” is to be expressed again and again, in fresh ways, with fresh words and fresh metaphors, to be made vital, compelling, and contemporary. It is useful in this regard to distinguish between tradition and traditionalism, a distinction that the historian of religion Jaroslav Pelikan expressed memorably in his book *The Vindication of Tradition*: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name”.<sup>6</sup>

In Pelikan’s view, the distinction between “tradition” and “insight” that Emerson made is not sustainable.

A “leap of progress” is not a standing broad jump, which begins at the line of where we are now; it is a running broad jump through where we have been to where we go next. The growth of insight – in science, in the arts, in philosophy and theology – has not come through progressively sloughing off more and more of tradition, as though insight would be purest and deepest when it has finally freed itself of the dead past. It simply has not worked that way in the history of the tradition, and it does not work that way now. By including the dead in the circle of discourse, we enrich the quality of the conversation. Of course we do not listen only to the dead, nor are we a tape recording of the tradition. That really would be the dead faith of the living, not the living faith of the dead. But we do acquire the insight for which Emerson was pleading when we learn to interact creatively with the tradition which he was denouncing.<sup>7</sup>

He could just as easily have said that Emerson was speaking *within* the tradition that he was denouncing, given the more capacious understanding of tradition that he is proposing. Which is reinforced when he concludes his book with a charge, taken from Goethe: “What you have as heritage, Take now as task; For thus you will make it your own.”<sup>8</sup>

His chief point is that the acknowledgment of tradition does not absolve us of the need to think for ourselves, and build things of our own. It does not stifle innovation. Instead, it spurs innovation, because it helps us to recognize the work we are meant to do. In this view, our heritage *is* our task. We cannot undertake the task, we cannot know what the task is, without the benefit of the heritage. But it is by doing that task that we can come into the full possession of that heritage – thereby perpetuating the tradition as something living, rather than something moribund – and thereby making it possible for us to have a free and full relationship with the heritage, like that of children who have fully grown up.

Let me close with a single discrete example of the kind of relationship with tradition of which I am speaking. It is a poem by the American poet Dana Gioia, called “Planting a Sequoia”, and it describes an enactment of a tradition, with the very kind of twist and adaptation that makes traditions live, and makes them even more vital. Gioia is of Sicilian descent, and relates in the poem a Sicilian custom, followed by his own father, of planting an olive or fig tree upon the birth of a first son, along with a piece of the discarded umbilical cord. The poem depicts a reenactment of that tradition – but with a difference. For Gioia’s own son had died tragically of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. It was to be a different kind of planting altogether.



All afternoon my brothers and I have worked in the orchard,  
Digging this hole, laying you into it, carefully packing the soil.  
Rain blackened the horizon, but cold winds kept it over the Pacific,  
And the sky above us stayed the dull gray  
Of an old year coming to an end.

In Sicily a father plants a tree to celebrate his first son's birth –  
An olive or a fig tree – a sign that the earth has one more life to bear.  
I would have done the same, proudly laying new stock into my father's  
orchard.  
A green sapling rising among the twisted apple boughs,  
A promise of new fruit in other autumns.

But today we kneel in the cold planting you, our native giant,  
Defying the practical custom of our fathers,  
Wrapping in your roots a lock of hair, a piece of an infant's birth cord,  
All that remains above earth of a first-born son,  
A few stray atoms brought back to the elements.

We will give you what we can – our labor and our soil,  
Water drawn from the earth when the skies fail,  
Nights scented with the ocean fog, days softened by the circuit of bees,  
We plant you in the corner of the grove, bathed in western light,  
A slender shoot against the sunset.

And when our family is no more, all of his unborn brothers dead,  
Every niece and nephew scattered, the house torn down,  
His mother's beauty ashes in the air,  
I want you to stand among strangers, all young and ephemeral to you,  
Silently keeping the secret of your birth.<sup>9</sup>

There are many things to be said about this remarkable poem. I offer a single observation. What Gioia has done here, both in the poem itself and in the act that the poem describes, is a luminous and haunting lesson in both the permanence and the adaptability of tradition. He has kept faith with his heritage. But he also has made it his own. And instead of planting a “practical” tree that will be productive within the range of his lifetime, he chose to plant a thin slip of a mighty tree, a tree whose lifetime will be

measured in millennia – and whose full majesty and mature fruitfulness will never be seen by anyone now alive, or in any context that we can now imagine.

It is an audacious act. But that is not all. In thereby adapting one tradition, the poet is also clearly recalling and alluding to another, more explicitly Biblical one, expressed in the soaring words of the prophet Isaiah:

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth; the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. . . . I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years. . . . They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. (Isaiah 65:17-23)

The messianic vision promises the world restored to what it should be, in which each lives in safety, under his own vine and fig tree, with the full complement of offspring. But the poet lives in a broken world, which has fallen bitterly short of that promise, and so must pay its respects obliquely. For him that means planting a different kind of tree, whose value is not in the fruit it bears or the shade it provides, but in the austere distance it marks between the promise and the poet's circumstances. He stands between the two, remembering the messianic hope, but not forgetting the former things. And in so doing, he creates something new, out of the unexpected materials that have become his heritage, and that he has made his own.

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## Notes

1. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, vol. 3 (New York: Prometheus Books, [1905-06] 1998), 24.
2. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, vol. 1 (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1905), 284.
3. Donald Yerxa, ed., *Religion and Innovation: Antagonists or Partners?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1940), 3.
5. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 37-44. Accessible at <http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>.
  6. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.
  7. Idem, 81-82.
  8. Ibid.
  9. Dana Gioia, *99 Poems: New and Selected* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016), 61. The poem can also be found more readily on Gioia's website, at <http://danagioia.com/planting-a-sequoia>.