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Tradition

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In this section of the book, we turn our attention to 'tradition', and to the ways in which the practice of Christian theology involves engagement with tradition. The word 'tradition', however can be used in several different ways.

The most obvious way in which the word 'tradition' is used is to name a pattern of belief and practice that has been preserved over a long period of time, often over many generations, by a particular community or society. In popular usage, the word most easily refers to

1. the exotic customs of a group or community isolated from what we take to be the mainstream of modern life,
2. the oppressive habits of mind and action that drive some community's resistance to the development of progressive and enlightened behaviour, or to

3. patterns of established practice and belief that help protect some community against the onset of various forms of chaos.

In other words, we take ‘tradition’ to refer to what some community has always done, the presence of the past in their lives, which goes largely without saying and almost entirely without question.

In theological contexts, some uses of the word ‘tradition’ retain this sense of a sacred deposit, carefully preserved and handed down. The decrees of the First Vatican Council in 1870, for instance, speak of ‘unwritten traditions, which were received by the apostles from the lips of Christ himself, or came to the apostles by the dictation of the holy Spirit, and were passed on as it were from hand to hand until they reached us.’[1]

In other theological contexts, however, the word can be used with a different nuance. The word can name an *activity* – the activity of handing on a message. The focus in this case falls less on a static content (even if there is still a consistent message to be handed on), and more on the process by which that message is passed from hand to hand, or generation to generation. The emphasis can even fall on the ingenuity and creativity required to enable this handing on – the translations of the message from

[1] N. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London: Sheed and Ward; Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990, Session 3, ch. 2, §5.

medium to medium, the different ways in which it needs to be packaged for different environments, and the different modes of transport by which it has been conveyed.

TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Theological discussions of tradition often involve, therefore, questions about continuity and change, or preservation and innovation. In some contexts, the two are presented as opposing poles, and the question asked is how the Christian good news can be preserved from change, or protected in a changing environment. Think, for instance, of Revelation 22: 18–19:

> I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

In other contexts, however, the relationship between continuity and change is more complex. The theologian Karl Rahner, for instance, acknowledged that Christianity involves a consistent saving truth that remains the same throughout history,

> but while remaining the same, it has had and still has a history of its own. This 'sameness' communicates itself to us continually, but never in such a way that we could detach it adequately from its historical forms, in order thus to step out of the constant movement of the flow of history on to the bank of eternity, at least in the matter of our knowledge of truth. We possess this eternal quality of truth in history, and hence can only appropriate it by entrusting ourselves to its further course. If we refuse to take this risk, the formulations of dogma wrongly claimed to be 'perennial' will become unintelligible, like opaque glass which God's light can no longer penetrate.[2]

In other words, the 'same' Christian message, according to Rahner, always appears to us in a form appropriate to a particular place and time. And it is only if the form in which it appears is truly appropriate to that place and time that it can communicate fully in that context. It is only then that God's light can penetrate the glass. That means, however, that if the form appropriate to one place and time is preserved too inflexibly into another place and time, it will become incapable of communicating the message, or

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[2] K. Rahner, 'The Historicity of Theology', trans. G. Harrison, in *Theological Investigations IX: Writings of 1965–1967, 1*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, pp. 64–82: p. 71.

letting the same light through. What was clear glass in one context will become opaque in another. The act of 'handing on', for Rahner, has to involve the search for new forms in which to communicate the same Christian message, forms that will be adequate to new contexts.

If something like Rahner's picture is correct, then there is a sense in which all tradition – precisely in order to be tradition, a geniuine handing on – will constantly involve innovation. It will involve creative re-tellings of the story that is being passed on. Given that the contexts into which the Christian message is being handed on are constantly changing, any attempt at handing on (any attempt at tradition) will always, therefore, be a proposal for a new way of telling the Christian story. Any such proposal will need to be scrutinised to see whether it is indeed faithful (whether the same message is recognisably being passed on in this re-telling) but it will also need to be scrutinised about whether it is creative enough. Is the message truly being passed on to a new audience, in a new context? Has it been rendered in a form that is genuinely audible in this new place and time?

CONTINUITY AND REPAIR

Another way of thinking about tradition as an activity connects back to the discussion of reason in Chapter 2. This is a way of thinking about tradition

that doesn't allow us quite so easily to talk about an unchanging substance carried within a changing form; it doesn't divide tradition up into substance and form in quite that way, as if the form were a mere 'container' of, and thus neutral with respect to, the content. Chapter 2 described the process of on-going, iterative, unpredictable 'settling' by which a community might seek to do justice both to what it has inherited, and to what it has discovered in its present context. If we turn back to that image, we could use the word 'tradition' to refer either to the collection of material that is inherited from the past, or we could use it more broadly to refer to the whole history of this on-going process of settling. (This would, of course, have the consequence of making 'tradition' more or less synonymous with 'the history of Christian reasoning'.)

Think back to the metaphor of the toy train track, and picture someone with a roughly coherent track layout in front of him or her. It is only 'roughly' coherent because it is not completely free from loose ends, or joints with rather too much strain on them – but it is coherent enough that it can be used for a good game of train driving. That person is heir to the process of reasoning (of on-going, iterative, unpredictable negotiation) that went in to the making of this layout; he or she has inherited not only the raw materials (the pieces of track), but an ordering of those materials into a layout.

Now picture again what happens when something changes. It might be that the strain on one of the joints turns out to be too great as more and more trains are run over it. It might turn out that one of the loose ends, which had seemed so peripheral as to be easy to ignore, turns out to be an awkward hazard as trains are moved around faster. It may be that some new piece is discovered (or perhaps even 'rediscovered' after a long time under the sofa) that demands to be found a space in the network. It may be that something subtly shifts in the context – the carpet at one end of the room slides slowly sideways– so that connections that used to work cease to make any sense.

As we saw in Chapter 2, any such change will demand a response, and the response will be to continue the very activity of reasoning that produced the layout that has now been disturbed. The response will be another round of on-going, iterative, unpredictable negotiation. The change will demand, in other words, that the track-builder enter into and continue the same activity of tradition that generated the track.

It is possible to imagine two quite different strategies that the track-builder might use. One would be to throw up his or her hands in despair, and to attempt to start again from scratch. The existing layout would be dismantled until all that was left was the collection of raw materials, and then a completely fresh layout could be constructed using those materials. The

builder in this case would be turning his or her back on the tradition – the ongoing history of negotiation – that had gone before. The analogy here might be to a theologian who thought it possible, or even necessary, to return to the 'raw material' of scripture (or of religious experience, or of some other preferred source for theology) and to set aside all the ways in which it had hitherto been read, discussed, and handed on by intervening generations – as if that were possible.

The alternative approach is not to start from scratch, but to attempt to repair the existing layout. In this case, the builder begins with what is in front of him or her, and then explores the level and kind of alterations that might be required in order to solve the specific problems that have arisen in that layout. Those alterations might end up being quite small-scale – or they might eventually require rather dramatic reworking. They may in time amount to transformations of the whole layout sufficient to make a casual observer think that the builder had adopted the 'start from scratch' strategy after all. But a reparative approach remains fundamentally different in its approach from a 'start from scratch' approach.

If the analogue of the 'start from scratch' strategy was an approach to theology that tried to step back behind the history of settling activity, the analogue of the reparative strategy would be an approach to theology that

explicitly situates itself within a particular community and that community's history. It might, for instance, be a theology that acknowledges in its approach to scripture that all its ways of reading have been ineradicably shaped by the reading of past generations, and that even the form of the texts it now reads has been shaped by that history. That does not mean that such theology will simply regard itself as stuck with any or every aspect of that inherited settlement, though, because any component of that settlement can be examined, and this community may learn to think differently about that component as a result. But the practitioners of reparative approaches to theology do not believe themselves capable of starting again, with a completely blank sheet of paper.

All the tools and the skills that theologians use to repair problems – the making of a clarification or distinction there, the imagining of a new institutional form or the envisioning of a new way to tell an old story there – don't come from nowhere. Theologians are not restricted to the repetition of things they already know, or of moves they have already made, but the creativity available to them is not an ability to create new things out of nothing. It is an ability to improvise upon what they have already received.

To switch metaphors, repair of a settlement can be compared to the process of repairing the raft on which one is floating. All the materials available to

plug the leaks, and the tools that one can use to manipulate those materials, have to be taken from the material of the raft itself.

TRADITION AND IRREFORMABILITY

When repairing the raft, however, it is probably important not to untie the rope holding the main structure together, simply in order to improvise a fender around the edges. Any attempt at repair therefore involves taking some view of the structure of the raft – or, if not of the whole raft, at least of the parts of the raft surrounding one's attempted repair. Similarly, to seek a new settlement within a tradition, in response to problems or changed circumstances, involves taking some view of the structure of that tradition. Repair or the pursuit of a new settlement cannot take place if every part of what one has inherited is regarded as equally important, and equally inviolable. Only if one is able to construe the tradition as having some kind of articulated structure, with more peripheral and less peripheral elements, shallower and deeper reasons, will it be possible to propose developments or alterations, and participate in the dynamic of tradition.

The picture I painted in the previous section was of tradition as a process of ongoing settlement, driven by a reparative rather than a 'start from scratch' strategy. Within any given iteration of reparative activity, one cannot know

in advance how deep the reconstruction might need to go – how wide-ranging and thorough-going the changes might be that cascade from the initial alterations one makes. You begin by wondering whether, for purely pragmatic reasons, it makes sense to switch from hymn books to a digital projector, and end up re-examining the whole way in which your community thinks about literacy, which leads into a re-consideration of the practices of communal and individual reading of scripture that you advocate, which then leads into questions about your community's operative understanding of scripture's authority – and so on. It is not that communities can or do remake the whole of Christian faith every time they make an apparently simple decision, but it is true that communities can't necessarily see in advance how far the rippling effects of one butterfly-flap of discussion might spread through their practice and belief.

For some Christian communities, it is possible for it to emerge through the ongoing process of re-negotiation that some particular beliefs or practices have such centrality and stability that they can be corporately recognised as immovable – as givens around which other elements of the tradition can be rearranged, but which cannot themselves be moved. Every time someone has tried untying this rope in order to repair some other part of the raft, the whole raft has started to drift apart, and the rope has been hastily retied. After the first few occasions on which this has happened, we begin to realise

just how central to the structure this rope is. It begins to become clearer and clearer that, whatever one does to remake the raft, one should not untie that rope.

To use a different metaphor, these elements are a little like the save points in a computer game. Once one has reached them, one knows one will never need to go back behind them – one may always, if the way ahead becomes obscure, return to this point and find a new way forward.

Other Christians think about these matters differently. In some Christian contexts, it is primarily the scriptures that are thought of this way. Yes, there was a complex process of development behind their emergence. Yes, there was an equally complex process of discernment behind the recognition of their authority. But once they had emerged, and once their authority had been recognised, they became fixed points – the bedrock upon which the rest of the tradition was built (insofar as it was built well), and the ultimate reference point in any new attempt at repair.

In other Christian contexts, the great ecumenical councils also play a similar role: they represent fixed points in the church's communal discernment of authoritative truth, and can have unstinting reliance placed upon them.

In still other Christian contexts, there are institutional structures put in place for the official recognition of the church's corporate on-going discernment of such fixed points, and their naming as infallible reference points for all future development.

For still other Christian contexts, there might be other elements of the tradition that appear to have this kind of centrality: the confession 'Jesus is Lord', or baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, or some other set of beliefs or practices or commitments.

You will, as you study theology, almost certainly come across debates between theologians who think about these matters differently. For some, the ongoing, iterative, unpredictable negotiations involved in the process of tradition can only be saved from their tendency to wander off into error or chaos if there are God-given, rock-solid anchors, revealed through the Spirit's on-going work, holding the whole process in place. For others, these anchors cannot be exempted from possible reconsideration without dulling the potentially disruptive and transformative power of the scriptures or of God's Spirit – and even if some deep elements of the Christian life have such weight and importance that an extraordinarily high burden of proof would be required from any who wanted to revise or reformulate them, still those elements remain reformable in principle.

These are different ways of construing the structure of the tradition – identifying what is deeper (and how deep it runs) and what is shallower; discerning what possibilities of reconstruction there might be, as the on-going work of settlement continues.

MAPPING TRADITIONS

I have started to shift towards a third use of the word 'tradition'. If the first usage named the original content that was passed down by a community, and the second named the activity of passing on, the third names the community in which the passing on takes place – a community stretched out in time, engaged together in the long process of settling. One fruitful way to think of a tradition in this third sense is as a sustained corporate conversation – a community discussing or arguing about its proper development.

Such conversations provide the context for theological work – and whether it is acknowledged or not, nearly all theology is written in and for specific traditions. That does not mean that all theologians are acting as spokespersons for their traditions. It means, however, that wittingly or unwittingly – and even if they wrongly take themselves to be writing for

any rational human being – theologians always draw upon resources and pursue forms of argument that are only going to be quickly recognisable to a particular community of practice and discourse. They speak most directly to some specific community because they have, through various forms of apprenticeship, become acclimatised to that community's patterns of conversation.

It is a mistake, however, to speak as if there were a single, monolithic Christian tradition, or as if there were a neat set of discrete Christian traditions lying alongside one another – each one a coherent and evolving process of settlement, with clear boundaries. Our picture needs to be much messier and more complex than that. Any attempt to identify 'a tradition' can only be an identification for some particular purpose. For some purposes, as when we talk about the whole Body of Christ gathered under Christ as its one head, there might be a certain degree of plausibility in speaking about 'the Christian tradition'; in another context, as when we are focusing on characteristic patterns of worship, it might make more sense to speak about 'the Anglican tradition' or 'the Russian Orthodox tradition'; in another context, as when our focus is more on recognisable intellectual styles, it might make sense to talk about 'the Barthian tradition' or 'the tradition of open evangelicalism'; in still other contexts one might need to talk instead about specific local traditions. None of these identifications

provides the single natural scale at which the word ‘tradition’ in this third sense really belongs, because any such identification is an inevitably artificial classification for the sake of some broader intellectual project.

One could think of a map of traditions and sub-traditions as taking the form of a fractal – that is, as an image in which the large-scale structure holding together various components in a recognisable pattern is repeated as a whole at ever-smaller scales in each of those components. To get an idea of what such a map might look like, imagine harvesting data from Facebook and from Twitter and other online social networks to identify relationships between people in the church. The picture that emerged would not consist of monolithic and isolated blobs of community, each consisting of a web of uniformly and densely interconnected people only very sparsely connected to people in other blobs. The map would, rather, be much more of a mess than this, and identifying traditions would be a matter of identifying relatively tighter tangles in an insane cat’s cradle of connections. How many traditions one saw would depend on how far one sat from the screen.

Any given theologian is unavoidably entangled in multiple traditions, at whatever scale one chooses to look – a messy patchwork of overlaps and inclusions, of frayed edges and patches. This inevitably complicates the picture I painted earlier: a tradition is not an isolated raft, and the process of

a tradition's development cannot be confined to materials drawn from that one context. Just as there can be no return to the sources of a tradition that is not shaped by the history of that tradition, so there are no developments in any tradition that are not affected by the whole complex surrounding patchwork of traditions. The work of settling and of repair within one tradition might involve the adoption of a distinction from another; the improvisation of an institutional structure inspired by models found in another; the acceptance of a reading of a key text from another – or any of a thousand kinds of border crossing and borrowing. No tradition can be understood in isolation – even at the broadest level where we are thinking about the Christian tradition alongside the traditions of other religions: we can only make sense of their histories when we see them together.

WORKING WITH TRADITION

Any real attempt at settlement or repair – any active participation in the process of tradition – is always ultimately a proposal to a particular community (however fuzzy-edged, internally complex and hard to delimit that community might be). It is a contribution to a conversation, and (as with contributing to any conversation), it is likely to be more fruitful as a contribution the more it has been shaped by familiarity with way that conversation has been going.

Engagement with tradition is therefore a key component of theological work. It involves learning the tenor and flow of a community's conversation over time, learning to recognise key voices within it, becoming familiar enough with it to be able to construe its structure, and recognise its fixed points. It involves becoming familiar with the variety of voices in play, and with their ongoing arguments – and it involves learning what is at stake in those arguments. It involves learning to anticipate the kinds of question that might be asked by this community of any proposal that one wishes to make.

The community with which one needs to engage can exist at very different scales. If one is simply making pragmatic proposals for the clearing up of a little local difficulty, the conversation that one is entering will probably be correspondingly small, and the acquisition of the necessary familiarity with its rhythms and constraints might be quite informal and undemanding (though anyone who has had to negotiate the use of the bathroom in a shared student house will know how rapidly the labour involved might escalate). As soon as one starts asking questions about deeper matters, however, the community with which one needs to engage begins to expand – and it expands in both space and time. It expands in space, because the community of people with a stake in the matter one is discussing, the community who might question or critique one's proposals, and whose

responses one needs to learn to some extent to anticipate, quickly grows. It expands in time, however, because one is proposing a rearrangement of a carefully evolved settlement, and one therefore needs to learn about the emergence of that settlement, the nature of the decisions that have underpinned it, the nature of the connections joining it to other elements of the Christian life, the nature of the issues that are at stake in the current structure. One needs, in other words, a deepening familiarity with the extended history of conversation that one is seeking to join.

Just as when one is trying to understand the participants in the church's contemporary conversation, so when one is trying to understand the history of Christian conversation on any matter, it is important to do justice to the other participants. One will not understand the structure of the tradition within which one stands, or understand what might be at stake in any proposed reformulation, revision or extension of that tradition, until one begins to learn what was at stake for earlier participants: why they argued as they did, what tools and skills they drew on for the sake of their work, what was the tenor and tendency of their conversations. Even if one is reading the Christian tradition for the sake of a debate today, one needs to learn to read each part of it in its own integrity, in the light of it own context and questions – even if that means losing sight for a time of the connections

with one’s own concerns. There is, in other words, a proper demand for an appreciation of the tradition *as history*.

The other side of the equation, however, is put well by Karl Barth.

> [T]he theology of past periods, classical and less classical, also plays a part and demands a hearing. It demands a hearing as surely as it occupies a place with us in the context of the Church . . . We have to remember the communion of saints, bearing and being borne by each other, asking and being asked, having to take mutual responsibility for and among the sinners gathered together in Christ. As regards theology also, we cannot be in the Church without taking as much responsibility for the theology of the past, as for the theology of our present. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher, and all the rest are not dead but living. They still speak and demand a hearing as living voices, as surely as we know that they and we belong together in the Church. They made in their time the same contribution to the task of the Church that is required of us today. As we make our contribution, they join in with theirs, and we cannot play our part today without allowing them to play theirs. Our responsibility is not only to God, to ourselves, to the men of today, to other living

> theologians, but to them. There is no past in the Church, so there is no past in theology.[3]

‘There is no past in the Church’, Barth says. The voices from the past, which we need to understand in their own historical integrity – which means, in part, in their difference from us – are part of the one conversation of the Body of Christ. We listen to their specificity and difference in order to hear more clearly what contribution they might make to that ongoing conversation – what challenge to our proposals, what questions of our current settlements. Engagement with tradition is not an antiquarian pastime, therefore, because to engage with tradition is to enter into the cut and thrust of the one conversation of the Church.

LOOKING AHEAD

The chapters in this section of the book explore various ways in which theologians engage with tradition – how they learn the shape and flow of the Christian community’s conversation well enough to join in.

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[3] K. Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*, London: SCM Press, 1972, p. 17.

Jason Byassee's chapter explores what it means for theology to be done in service of a community that worships. Given that much of this section concentrates on engagement with the Christian tradition as represented in its texts, this chapter is an important reminder that those texts are not the whole story – because they come from and reflect back upon the life of a community that is engaged in praise, in baptising and celebrating the Eucharist, in blessing and praying. The goal of theology, he suggests, is not simply to think correctly, it is to worship more truly and deeply.

Morwenna Ludlow's chapter asks how and why theologians devote their time to reading and re-reading classic texts – texts (other than Scripture) that have played important roles in shaping a Christian community or communities over some considerable period of time in ways that are largely thought to be positive, and which go on being fruitful for that community's thinking or practice as its members continue re-reading them. She describes the practice of reading such classic texts as an ascetic discipline, effortful and attentive, but open to surprises.

John Bradbury provides a guide to theological engagement with two very specific kinds of classic texts: formal creeds and confessions, documents accepted as authoritative summaries of belief by some Christian communities. He explores the many different roles that the classic creeds

(the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, for instance) have played in shaping the whole theological enterprise, and the different ways in which the authority of such creeds – and of the more recent formal confessions of faith produced by some churches – has been understood in theology since the Reformation. He also describes what it might mean for a particular church to find itself in a position where a new formal statement of belief – a new confession – is needed to rule out decisively some pressing form of corruption.

Rachel Muers tackles a question that has been in the background of all of the chapters in this section. What are theologians to do with the fact that many of the texts that have shaped their tradition are, to one extent or another, problematic – and some of them are deeply damaging? She describes how theological readers can identify and expose the ways in which a text is wrong, and can search in that text and in the wider tradition of which it is a part for resources to overcome that wrong – not in order to exonerate the author in question, but in order to participate in the ongoing practice of seeking justice.

Stephen Plant's chapter explores what it means for theologians to spend a good deal of their time reading texts written fairly recently by other theologians – texts of modern theology. He shows that 'modern' theology is

not just theology that has been written recently, but theology that engages with deep questions that have come to the fore in the modern period. The point of engaging with the modern theologians is not that they are authorities whose ideas we are meant to repeat, but that they provide a kind of apprenticeship that trains new theologians to explore and answer these questions for themselves.

With Paul Murray's chapter, we return to the life of the church as the context for the practice of Christian theology. He shows how theology follows up problems that arise in the life of the church – including mismatches that arise between the church's ideas about itself and its actual practice. It is an activity, therefore, that requires both attentiveness to the church's traditions of thinking, and attentiveness to the actual lived reality of the church's life in the world. He finishes by asking what it means to do theology in a context of divided churches – multiple Christian traditions in some degree of conflict with one another – and advocates the practice of 'receptive ecumenism' as an appropriate and fruitful way forward.