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# The Christian Tradition and the Church Historian<sup>1</sup>

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THE FORM AND NATURE of the work that the Commission on Tradition and Traditions might be expected to present to the Faith and Order Commission were open questions from the start. In the North American Section it became increasingly apparent that the openness of these questions reflected the openness of the subject under investigation. Inevitably, of course, the problem of tradition and traditions presented itself to us as a problem of the relation of Scripture and tradition, and some of our work was the fruit of that concern. But, important and perennial though this topic is, other issues to which it is organically related thrust themselves upon us from the start and more and more opened up exciting vistas of enquiry. In the end our project drew to its official close at a time when further work promised the richest rewards.

## SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION AS THE FOCUS OF A LARGER PROBLEM

For this reason the report of the North American Section had to be presented as a parcel with open ends. We could not have been satisfied to produce a nicely rounded volume of systematic theology on the problem of Scripture and tradition, because, laudable though such an achievement would have been, it would have diverted attention from other issues that clamour for attention. These are issues that *prima facie* belong to the church historian rather than to the dogmatician; yet they cannot be handled properly by a church historian unless his theological awareness is well developed, nor can they be evaluated theologically by a dogmatician unless he is strongly imbued with the sense of history.

There is, in short, a region of enquiry, germane to both the theologian and the historian, that extends beyond the standing theological question of the source of authority in the Church. We are now all seeing with increasing clarity that it is impossible for the Church to hark back to the "original" Scripture and the "original" tradition as if these offered pure, easily accessible norms, unaffected by time, that can be "applied" in and to later times by churchmen who supposedly stand above their own times. Scripture and tradition are themselves time-conditioned in their original Judaeo-Hellenistic milieu; our own understanding of that milieu and therefore of Scripture and tradition is forever changing; and churchmen are in

<sup>1</sup>Summary Reflections by the Secretary on the work of the North American Section of the Faith and Order Study Commission on Tradition and Traditions.

all periods the men of their own age as modified by preceding ages. These facts do not lead us to a sceptical relativism, for the time-conditioned language and symbols of Scripture and tradition do nevertheless confront us with the absolute Godhead, and this Godhead is known, loved, and sometimes betrayed in the ongoing history of his people.

The paradox of the unconditioned God making himself known by the relativities of time cannot be resolved by asserting that the creaturely side of the story is reducible to a complex of "non-theological" factors, as if there were no union between the divine and the human but only a stark separation. If the case were so, we should be committed to the absurd view that the creaturely side of Scripture is non-theological also. On the contrary, while granting that the creaturely elements of the apostolic period have a normative theological character, we must say that the elements of other periods are nonetheless theological also. They too, like Scripture, are full of signs, symbols, images, analogies, and myths of the divine. If the events testified to by Scripture and early tradition have a higher, normative value, they nevertheless occurred by a traditioning process like that of subsequent church tradition. Therefore to understand in a truly historical and theological manner the continuing tradition of the Church is as important as to understand its first period. Indeed, neither can be understood without the other. The interest of the North American Section came to fasten more and more upon the theology of continuing tradition.

The same problem may be raised by asking how far the pattern of the Church's witness and life in any age is the pattern of divine revelation for that age. It is certain, since man is a historical, developing or at least changing creature, that the form of proclamation and embodiment of the Gospel must ever be undergoing change. The form of credal confession was not the same after Nicaea as before it. If it be said, *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, the answer is that change there must be if identity is to be preserved. In this situation there can be betrayal of tradition or continuance of it, "fall" or renewal, or even, as one member of the Section liked to put it, *advent*, that is, a new, revelatory access of meaning and power in a challenging crisis; there may be heresy, schism, apostasy, syncretism, reform. These are mostly familiar terms, but their familiarity disguises a problematic nature, for the tradition maintains its authentic identity only by means of modalities of worship, thought, and practice that are themselves ever undergoing modification. Within Scripture itself there is a fluidity among the forms of expression without which it would lack its present richness and capacity for translation into other forms. Without fluidity in its forms, tradition could not survive, but this same fluidity often makes it difficult to say whether a new form is orthodox or heterodox. The theological investigation of what one might call the "adventure" of tradition is as urgent as exploration of the problem of Scripture and tradition, not in order to gratify the appetite of heresy-hunters, but for the reason that we cannot even know the divine revelation save in the modalities of the times

in which it reaches us. In some ways, investigation of this question is more basic than investigation of the Scripture-tradition one, for the latter question is but a highly specialized example of the other, since the Christian revelation occurred in the ongoing mutations of the Hebrew tradition, which in turn had its provenance and setting in ancient religious, social, and political cultures.

For these reasons, the North American Section began to embark upon a series of historical investigations designed to describe the career of Christianity as it moved, to use an inadequate biological metaphor, from environment to environment within the Scripture millennia and beyond them. Conscious that Christianity in North America is not the same as it is in Europe, the Section felt that it had a particular obligation to investigate the course of events in the New World, which it could examine free from a European assumption that only the European modes of Christianity are its authentic modes.

It had been our hope to recruit knowledgeable persons to make similar studies for other parts of the world. The transmission and transmutation of European Christianity as it came to North America and developed there offers questions for study that have their parallels and contrasts with corresponding movements of Christianity to Africa, Asia, and South America. At the same time, a mission of great diversity has moved from North America into these lands. The tradition that had undergone mutation in the New World has nourished its own cuttings far off. Fascinating permutations of tradition in transit invite investigation. Without it there can be no real grappling with the theological issues of the transmission of tradition. No argument should be needed to show that the same problem of history confronts us within Scripture itself. The aim of these investigations is not then the simple-minded one of giving or withholding approval to Christian churches and cultures against the measure of a normative group, even if this group be "the New Testament Church" (which, of course, did not exist save in highly diversified groups), but to analyse and understand theologically the historical modalities and relations by which the divine tradition expresses, maintains, and perhaps develops itself in the plastic forms of time. This is the basic enquiry within the whole complex problem of tradition.

#### THE TASK OF THE CHURCH HISTORIAN

The question might well be asked how such studies differ from church history as it is usually written. It is at once evident that church history is not at present written out of this interest or for the purpose of such understanding. At its worst it is still written with the polemical and partisan motives that are often followed in producing systems of theology, viz., to show that the fathers of the denomination to which the historian belongs were in the right against all others. Or it may be written, more expansively,

as the story of the Church's self-extension in the world. Again it may be written in what many believe to be the only scientific way, even for church historians, that is, from an "objective" viewpoint that regards the Church as a group interest pursuing its human ends like any secular association. Or it may be written out of motives of genuine piety without much penetration of causes by one who is no more than a chronicler of lives and events that appeal to Christian sentiment.

None of these versions can be said to be a real grappling with church history, if in this expression we stress both the term *church*, which denotes a unique phenomenon in time, at once both human and divine, and the term *history*, which must connote in this reference not only the story of human interrelationships as any secular historian might view them but also a special level of temporal existence produced by eschatological grace. To underline a gospel which our Chairman, Dr. A. C. Outler, has for some time been proclaiming wherever he goes, church historians must be summoned to do their work in a new dimension, if it is to be genuine church history. They must depart from both partisan and secular motivations and take up the enterprise of understanding the Church's total existence, theologically and historically, according to its own unique character. So understood, church history will be genuinely *ecumenical* history, and not so understood it will not be church history at all. We cannot ride off from this task by claiming that this aim confuses church history with the philosophy or theology of history, because that will be to claim a liberty for the church historian to which he is not entitled. While historians must work in restricted periods, either long or short, the answer to the question whether they are writing genuine church history or not depends upon whether their presuppositions are derived from the total dimensions of their subject or from alien sources. The major reason why the members of the North American Section feel that their official project has ended when in fact the real investigation has only just begun is that the enterprise is one that must be thrown in the laps of all church historians, as the vocation that alone gives them title to their name. Their true subject is the story of the divine tradition in transit and tension.

#### PROBLEMS IN THE THEOLOGY OF TRADITION OR OF CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Problems abound. They set the work to be done at its deepest level. For one thing it is clear that the demand that has just been made of the church historian is a demand that he be a man of faith. Some would at once retort that this demand is inconsistent with the writing of scientific history. Although this issue is too big to be discussed at this point, it should be evident that, while secular historians may write secular histories of the Church if they care, the Church can no more be content with a secular account of her life than she can be content with a secular account of "the

Jesus of history." Yet how far is it really possible for the church historian to don the prophetic mantle and interpret church history from the key point of the mighty acts of God? How far, for example, can the pattern of the Exodus and the Promised Land, on which Israel's prophets rested in interpreting the present and the future in the many crises of Israel's story, and which in a decisive manner provided articulation for the meaning of Christ's redemption, be applied ever and again in the Church's story as a *serious* account of church history? Is the church historian, perhaps, to agree to such patterns as part of an act of faith in a divine purpose that overarches all church history while at the same time pursuing his enquiries only among second causes as if that faith were unreal? To take an even harder question, when American Christians, pioneering across the New World from east to west, identified themselves with the Israelites as they journeyed to the Promised Land, church history and political history became one, just as they became one much earlier when the Pilgrim Fathers crossed the Atlantic to erect their new church states. To dismiss this vision in either case as pious delusion or perverted religious nationalism is an insufferable affront to Christian belief in divine Providence and a repudiation of the relevance of the kingdom of God to the kingdoms of this world. It should not be necessary to defend these fathers against the charge of confusing the heavenly kingdom with an earthly one. They were well aware of the difference. The real question is how far church history may be construed under eschatological patterns. Undoubtedly, in such a situation a Christian people may, like Israel, pervert its election in an earthbound way. But does it follow that, because in such a case there can be a "fall" rather than a renewal of the tradition, there never can be any genuine mode of fulfilment, no new "advent" of tradition? May it not be that in fact "American Christianity"—and Indian, and African, and European—along with deformations of tradition reveals also authentic modes of it that are new? The still further question cannot be evaded whether the pattern of revelation-history does not supply modes for the interpretation of events even outside the history of the Church, though perhaps directly or indirectly in relation to it, as it did for the ancient prophets' understanding of the careers of pagan empires.

#### CHURCH HISTORY OR CHURCH TRADITION AND UNIVERSAL HISTORY

However such questions may be answered, the fact remains that the Christian tradition raises the question of the meaning and nature of history as a whole. What is the purpose of the Gospel if it is not to challenge *all* human history—indeed, even cosmic history—and so to remake all history? It is not for nothing that the Old Testament tradition of redemption led to the articulation of a history of creation, or that the Christ of the Cross is seen in the New Testament as the divine agent in all creation. These truths mean that the temporal dimension of the created universe cannot be left to the metaphysician, or the secular historian, or the natural scientist alone,

as if the true being of time and history can be discerned only within the perspective of such disciplines. No temporal factor is in the end a merely "non-theological" factor. The church historian must not blindly adopt the historical perspectives of the secular metaphysician or natural scientist or secular *historian*, valid though these are in their own limited spheres, as if these presuppositions should determine his own concept of history. He must know how to be in converse with them and how in the right relationships to use their methods without being under their dominion. It is the easiest thing in the world for the historian, sacred or secular, under the delusion that his work is essentially factual, to be under the control of assumptions that are alien to his material. The secular historian, determined to be scientific, may badly distort his "facts" by treating the personal order of history as if it were an impersonal order of nature, and the church historian, under the same determination to be scientific, may reduce his facts to facts of mere nature or of mere sociology impersonally conceived. Such errors are the reverse of scientific. The church historian must win the battle for his own integrity—precisely for his "scientific" integrity—unafraid to claim anew that theological thought is scientific only when it follows the laws of its own being. He must establish the integrity of his own discipline as genuinely *sui generis*, analogously with any other. To do this he must work with the special categories, theological and historical, that belong to him alone, for his special task is the historiography of the divine tradition in time. The rubric *Tradition and Traditions* prescribes the vocation and only justification of the church historian.

We may come to the same conclusion by another road. Human events in any group are always traditionary in character. The Church can no more escape her "secularity" than any human institution can. The term *secularity* is unfortunate in this connection because what we really mean is that by God's appointment the Church belongs to the order of creation as well as to the order of redemption. Study of traditionary factors as they operate throughout human society is indispensable for a proper theology of tradition, not least because churchmen at times accept the operation of these factors as if it were one and the same thing as the operation of the divine tradition. In such a case, supernature is falsely naturalized. More deeply, such study is necessary because metaphysical ideas of the time process, derived from this sphere, are often used in an uncritical manner in speaking of the Church's nature, existence, and doctrines. For example, notions of timeless eternity over against time and the corresponding idea of the spiritual over against the material are allowed to displace the more dimensional and dynamical biblical notions of divine and human time and the correspondingly more personal doctrine of the body. Since all men, Christian or not, are aware that human society is essentially traditionary in the mode of its existence and since this common experience furnishes us with its own concepts of tradition, valid and invalid, it is necessary to be critically aware of these things, if only that we may be alive to the fact that tradition

in the Christian sense is something different and so that we do not corrupt this Christian sense by equating it with notions that come from the other realm.

In addition to living in the common realm of the traditionary human process, the Church has a traditionary existence in another dimension, complexly related to the common one, and inaugurated by the entry of the Godhead into time by the Incarnation. How the power of this "traditioning" of the Son from the Father to the world continues, through the unique existence of the Church in the Holy Spirit, to be operative transformingly in the dimension of common tradition is the question of the special Christian tradition. The uniqueness of the Church is that it lives in both dimensions of tradition. The historiography of this unique life is a distinctive theological-historical task that must be done with its own categories. The church historian will at this deep level have his own metaphysics of time, which will be unintelligible if not properly related to time as otherwise understood. A true doctrine of the nature of Christian tradition will therefore not fail to be challengingly relevant to all philosophy of history.

#### TRADITION AS DESTINY

The problem of tradition and traditions has reference both to the past and to the future. The Lund Conference assumed that there is a common history, shared by all Christians, that can provide resources for the solution of differences. Much debate took place within the North American Section upon the question whether the extreme diversification of Christianity in our time has not rendered the notion of a common history meaningless and invalid. He would be a bold man who would attempt to argue that the plurality of modern churches and sects represents but the species and subspecies of one genus. Where would he find his norms or see them satisfactorily operative? It is clear that the notion of a common history is not a merely empirical notion.

It does not follow that the assumption of the Lund Conference was simply false, for historical studies are revealing elements of common history that became unnecessarily obscured by a divisive factiousness. A striking example of this misfortune is being made known and corrected within the very field that we are now discussing. On the issue of Scripture and tradition Protestant and Roman Catholic disputants were much closer at heart than they knew and their formulations expressed more their desire to oppose one another than their concern for the verities at stake. It is an important part of the task of the church historian to attempt to descry how far Christians have shared or failed to share a common history.

Two considerations have to be kept in view. One is that all Christians seek the source of their history in the divine history of the Word made flesh, so that they cannot fail to have a life in common while they draw it from this source. The other is that the history of Christians is a history that is still

in the making. The great inspiring feature of the ecumenical movement is its exemplification of the truth that this is so. It is making Christian history *common* history in a quite miraculous way. As the report to Montreal of the Commission on Tradition and Traditions says, incorporating a phrase from the New Delhi Assembly, "Our concern for the widespread renewal of interest in the traditionary process in the Christian community is a function of our concern for *the renewal of the Church* in 'the unity which is both God's will for and his gift to his Church. . . .'" The ambition of the Faith and Order Commission is not only to assist in repairing inherited breaches of fellowship and in finding a common doctrine and usage but to come to grips with the whole question of the Church's one vocation to make one history in one world. Tradition in transit and tension, manifold yet one, is the mode by which this is done. In its Christian meaning, tradition is not only a heritage but also a destiny. It is that new thing which is to be received at God's hands in the days to come, until in the consummation what the Father "handed down" in the Son is handed back and over to him by the same Son in the perfected kingdom (1 Cor. 15: 24ff.).