

Tradition, Old and New

by Harold O.J. Brown



H. Ward Sterett

“Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?” (Matthew 15:3). Jesus had many negative things to say about the dangers of placing excessive emphasis on tradition; in the passage quoted above, he goes on to cite the prophet Isaiah, “In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Isaiah 29:13). Who said anything positive about tradition? The prophet Jeremiah, for one: “Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16). How do we reconcile the warning of Isaiah with the exhortation of Jeremiah?

As a starting point, we must distinguish between tradition as container and tradition as content. This is a difference between the positions of the two great confessional bodies which appear equally devoted to preserving their traditions. Generally speaking, the Eastern Orthodox think of tradition — *paradosis* — literally, the handing down or handing over, as the container that carries the Scripture as its central content. Roman Catholics — and this was the Protestants’ *casus belli* — asserted (or seemed to assert) that tradition stands beside Scripture, presenting a content that supplements Scripture and is equally authoritative. For those who had discovered (or recovered) the principles of *sola scriptura*, a natural reaction was to reject the concept of tradition altogether, without reflecting sufficiently on the fact that they themselves retained old traditions to varying degrees and soon developed new ones for their progeny.

If we simply take the word “tradition” without further qualifi-

cation, Jesus would seem to be saying that all tradition involves transgression. And this, indeed, has been the interpretation of many Protestants, with battle lines drawn up between the camp of those who they think slavishly and uncritically follow whatever has been “*triditum*” (handed down), and who therefore involve themselves in a maze of complex observances, and their own camp, where worship and life are clean and sparse, built only on the Word of God in Scripture. This second camp really does not exist, however, for almost no one attempts to limit teaching and worship to strings of Scripture verses. If we attend a Lutheran or Episcopal service, we see much that reminds us of the Catholic Mass. While repudiating the traditional form of the Mass, even the more austere Reformed and Baptists have their extrabiblical traditions, often taken with extreme seriousness, such as the Sunday evening service and adult Sunday school. No less eminent a Reformer than John Calvin recognized the limits of *sola scriptura* when he warned against limiting theology to collections of Scripture verses strung together.

What then is the Protestant objection to “tradition”? How are we to interpret Jesus’ warning? The problem with the traditionalists is not that Scripture is disregarded, but that it is supplemented. It is not merely that something is added on, but that the additions are deemed necessary for salvation. This was the Protestant charge. Nevertheless, the Protestant Reformers, even the stern John Calvin, preserved much more of the Catholic intellectual tradition than many ostensibly Catholic thinkers do today. They preserved it, but, they would argue, as container, not as content.

When the Protestant Reformation — led by Luther, followed by Calvin and the other Reformers — proclaimed the principle of *sola scriptura*, rejecting tradition as a source of revealed truth,

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the Roman Catholic Church entrenched itself behind tradition, to the point that it formally recognized two sources of revelation, Scripture and tradition. Catholics proclaimed this view with zeal in the 16th and succeeding centuries, although they have somewhat toned it down in our ecumenical age.

This understanding of tradition has been the standard Catholic position from the Counter-Reformation Council of Trent up to the present. The Council did not endorse merely that which had become familiar and habitual in Church life and patterns of worship, but argued that its content either was taught orally by Jesus without being recorded in Scripture, or directly inspired by the Holy Spirit in the centuries after the apostles. The Protestant objection to traditions is not to their existence but to the Catholic contention that they are not merely useful or edifying but necessary for salvation. Recent Catholic participants in ecumenical dialogue have sought to modify the apparent sharpness of this position, bringing it closer to the more literal approach of the Eastern Orthodox, who see *paradosis* as including as its most central element the handing down of the Scripture itself, with the other traditions of the Church to be understood primarily as interpretation.

Despite these contemporary tendencies to reinterpret and soften the contention that tradition is a second source alongside of Scripture, the Catholic position at Trent in 1546 seemed plain indeed. The Council, in its fourth session (April 1546, 29 years into the Reformation), stated unequivocally: “[The Synod], following the example of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety and reverence all of the books both of the Old and of the New Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both—as well as also the said traditions, as well as those appertaining to faith as to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ’s own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.”

The reason that the fathers of Trent virtually began their 17 years of labor with a defense of what they considered the second source of divine revelation is easy to discern: By their insistence on the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, the Reformers were threatening the entire fabric of the Roman Church—its structure, its government, its worship, and its theology. From the beginning, the Protestants’ attack centered on what they considered the Catholic error of requiring belief in, and observance of, things to be found only in tradition. The problem was not the authority of Scripture, for the Roman Catholics fully accepted that, but rather its adequacy, its sufficiency as a guide for faith and life. By labeling Scripture alone as insufficient, Catholicism requires believers to put their trust in something additional, namely tradition.

The Augsburg Confession (1530), the earliest Protestant confession of faith, is very explicit. It denounces Catholic reliance on traditions as denigrating both grace and faith in such a way as to endanger those who accept them; they were condemned in Article V as “obscuring the doctrine of grace . . . and also the righteousness of faith . . . secondly, these traditions obscured the commandments of God . . . thirdly, they brought great danger to men’s consciences.”

It is important to recognize that, for the Reformers, the question was not whether the Scripture is authoritative; what was really at stake was its sufficiency. It is impossible to protest against all tradition as such. This becomes evident as soon as one observes the extent to which Protestants also have tradi-

tions; the difference is that Protestants do not, or at least *should not*, regard their traditions as necessary additions to biblical teaching.

While the concluding sessions of the Council of Trent were still going on, the Church of England agreed on the 39 Articles as its confession of faith. Article Six makes the point about the sufficiency of Scripture very clearly: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” A similar statement is to be found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) almost a century later: “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” For the Protestants, this is precisely what Catholic tradition does.

Perhaps the most striking illustration in recent times of the Catholic belief in tradition as revelation was the papal declaration of the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven, promulgated as *de fide*, an article of faith, in 1950. Even the Orthodox, who celebrate the Assumption (which they call the Dormition of Mary), balk at the idea of making it a doctrine that must be believed for salvation.

The choice between Trent, on the Catholic side, and Augsburg or the 39 Articles, on the Protestant one, is not as clean and simple as it might look. It cannot mean Scripture alone, totally without tradition, or Scripture plus tradition, for the simple reason that Protestants have traditions in addition to Scripture itself. The Bible alone does not give enough information to enable Christians to shape all the aspects of their life and worship. If they make the attempt, as the Swiss Reformation (Zwinglian and Calvinist) did, then the products of that attempt soon become traditions in their own right.

Instead of slucking off and paring down traditions attacked as unscriptural, as Luther sought to do, the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation inaugurated at Trent reaffirmed its understanding of traditional Christianity. Certain recognized abuses were purged, but the structure of tradition was retained.

In contrast, the Reformation argued that Catholic traditions were usurpations and deformations, and that the Reformation was the recovery of the true *paradosis*, of the faith once delivered to the saints, obscured by layers of Catholic *paradosis*, encroachments. Nevertheless, there were edifying traditions, beautiful traditions, valuable traditions, both in worship and in theology, and these could and should be preserved. Thus the Anglicans, particularly the High Church movement, and similar developments in Lutheranism created churches and services that outwardly resembled those of the Catholicism of Trent. Even within the Reformed confession that follows Calvin, there is a kind of “high church” movement. When, after the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church abandoned some of its forms, the Protestants who still held on to them looked a bit outdated.

The openness of Luther and his followers to tradition is evident from the way they reformed Catholic worship, confining their changes in the Catholic liturgy to the elimination of accretions that they considered unscriptural, such as the adoration of the Eucharist. Luther insisted that Christ is really present in the bread and wine, but precisely and only for the

purpose for which he instituted the Supper—for Communion, not adoration. Lutherans preserved or subsequently revived so much Catholic tradition in their liturgical practice that, after the Second Vatican Council, many Lutheran altars look more like traditional Catholic altars than the modified Communion tables the Catholics began to install. Indeed, the willingness of many Lutherans and Anglicans to imitate Catholic liturgical patterns in the effort to preserve continuity with the apostolic tradition has left some feeling rather abandoned as Catholics have done away with them.

While Lutherans and Anglicans often were appreciative or even imitative of many Catholic practices, reformers such as John Calvin and his followers broke more drastically with the past, introducing what is called the “regulative principle.” This principle directs that worship involve only those elements that were commanded, or at least attested to, in Scripture. Intended to restore the worship of the early Church, its purpose was the recovery of the oldest and most authentic traditional patterns to the detriment of the “deforming innovations” of medieval Catholicism. In this effort, the Calvinist reforms rather missed the mark, as more recent studies have shown that, from the early centuries, Christian worship exhibited many of the liturgical features that the Calvinists deemed unacceptable innovations.

Some traditions are very long-lived; others quickly fade. To reject all tradition because it is handed down from the past is to cut oneself off from the past. This is an impossibility for any form of Christianity, even more so than for Judaism, for the Christian faith is based on the historical reality of very significant divine interventions: the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. Traditional observances, whether truly religious (such as the Communion liturgy) or more folkloric (such as the Christmas tree), help bond members of the rising generations to the past on which their faith depends. This is one reason that the banning of all traditional Christian symbols from public schools and facilities is socially destructive even in our “pluralistic” secular society: It promotes the severance of children from their cultural past and contributes to the breakdown of—dare we say it—traditional moral-

ity. Without tradition, we rapidly lose touch with our ancestors, with our fathers and mothers in faith, and soon with our own parents.

The opposition to tradition in religion once centered on Roman Catholic tradition, but today it extends to all Christianity. It stems from the conviction, often a simple presupposition, that the past is bad, the present better, and the future best of all. From this perspective, all that has been handed down from the past is undesirable and should be dismissed, the Mass in Latin as well as the Christmas tree in schools. Forgotten are those words of Jeremiah cited earlier: “Stand ye in the old ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where in is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.” The verse continues with what seems to be the war cry of much of the current society: “But they said, We will not walk therein” (Jeremiah 6:16).

Tradition is ubiquitous; to deny its existence is foolish, and to abolish it altogether is impossible. Driving through any American suburb on a Sunday morning, you are likely to see church signs proclaiming something like this: Traditional Worship, 9:30 A.M., Contemporary, 11 A.M. “Traditional” is for the old, “contemporary” for the young, or for those who want to be thought young. But what does “contemporary” mean? The present quickly becomes the past, and what was once spontaneous becomes ritual. To make it obligatory is wrong, but to prevent it from appearing is impossible. Thirty-odd years ago, when the charismatic movement began, many of the most liturgically conservative groups (Catholics, Lutherans, and Anglicans among them) burst forth in “enthusiastic worship,” with choruses, standing, clapping, and “praise songs” repeated many times. Contemporary services became exciting rather than dull, “the same old thing.” The sign of “spiritually alive” Protestant churches became the overhead projector, with choruses projected onto the front wall. Now, not so very many years later, the novel has become traditional: Staid churches include them, sometimes with the rather strange label, “the worship part of the service.” *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.* Protestants may well affirm the sufficiency of Scripture for eternal salvation, and as a Protestant I agree, but we cannot do away with the necessity of tradition for life in this world. c

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Ethiopia Lifts Her Hands

by Philip Jenkins



H. Ward Streett

In a classic book of humor entitled *The Experts Speak*, we find an impressive collection of failed prophecies and wildly inaccurate predictions: Television would never catch on, nobody needs a personal computer, and so on. I occasionally think there might be a place for a parallel volume of religious forecasts gone stunningly wrong. Such an assemblage of errors would include Thomas Jefferson's belief that America's future was undoubtedly Unitarian and Mark Twain's prediction that, by around 2000, Christian Science would be challenging Roman Catholicism for supremacy in the Christian world. The 1960's produced a singularly rich crop of predictions insisting that liberation theology and theological radicalism would carry the field long before the end of the century. Foretelling the future shape of religion requires, well, a prophet, which most of us are not. All of which is by way of apology for the fact that I intend to engage in exactly the kind of activity that I have disparaged. It would take a fool to try to foretell the religious loyalties of the coming century; I am that fool.

My foolishness, at least, has a strong statistical grounding, based on what today seem like undeniable demographic and religious trends. If these developments unfold as predicted, then the world's religious picture by around 2050 is going to have many features that would delight a modern-day conservative: Christianity will be flourishing, expanding rapidly both in absolute and relative numbers, and religious thought and belief will be highly conservative and traditional. The problem—and some will see it as a problem—is that the traditions in question will not be those of Europe, North America, or the global North: in short, of anything that we currently think of as “traditional Christian culture.” Christianity may be entering one of the most glorious ages in its history, but this age is one with which we Northerners will have precious little connection.

When I tell people that I am researching future trends in

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world religions, they often ask, “So, will Christianity (or the Roman Catholic Church) survive?” They seem stunned when I tell them that both should be expanding apace through the coming century, and that nothing short of a global cataclysm can prevent this. Barring an encounter with an asteroid that has our planet's name on it, the number of Christians worldwide should soar, because the faith is so strong in those regions that are growing at an astounding rate. Moreover, the Christian share of the population in these countries is expanding due to evangelistic efforts that are succeeding to a degree scarcely paralleled in church history. Currently, for instance, about 40 percent of Nigeria's 120 million people are Christian. If the churches can simply maintain that share, then there will be over 120 million Nigerian Christians by 2050. Most observers, however, think that this is a pessimistic scenario and that the proportion of Christians in that country will be even larger by mid-century.

Looking around the world, we can find many similar cases, and we can make a plausible estimate of the countries that should, by the middle of the 21st century, have the largest number of Christians. The list will startle many. The United States should still head the list, with over 300 million members of Christian denominations, but after that, the emphasis shifts dramatically to the global South. The next names on the list, each with between 100 and 200 million believers, would be Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). Trailing these, with 60 to 80 million Christians, are Ethiopia, Russia, China, and—would you believe it!—actually a Western European country, Germany. Don't worry though; this anomaly will soon be corrected: In all probability, Germany will shortly after be overtaken by another African country.

Looking at the top ten Christian nations slightly distorts the overall picture, because it understates the growing African domination of the churches. Quite apart from giant nations such as Nigeria, Christian numbers are expanding across the continent.