What is Tradition? From Pre-Modern to Postmodern

Brian Johnstone CSsR

Abstract: Of particular importance to clarifying the meaning of Tradition is the notion of Tradition as a collection of truths requiring external approval by Church authority. A notable advance was made due to the influence of Möhler, Blondel and Newman, whose influence can be seen in Vatican II where a communicative-critical model emerges. The human element of Tradition may be understood as "argument" following MacIntyre and some recent work in postmodern anthropological theory. Drawing on suggestions by Nicholas Boyle and Paul Ricoeur, it is suggested that some Traditions have a special status, namely those that begin with an experience of real evil and its overcoming. The Christian Tradition is of this kind. It begins with the testimony of the disciples to the experience of the confrontation with real evil in the death of Jesus and its overcoming in the resurrection. It is here that its truth and authority are manifest.

C atholic theology, as it is presented in official Church statements and in scholarly and popular writing, consistently appeals to "tradition." However, the meaning of tradition and the bases of its claim to be true and authoritative have not been adequately explained. This article offers a contribution to the task of clarifying these points.

In both official Catholic documents and the writings of Catholic theologians, the word is now often written with a capital and in the singular as "Tradition."[1] This usage seems to be intended to distinguish authoritative "Tradition" from other tradition(s) which may exist or have existed in the Church, but which are not acknowledged as authoritative, or perhaps from those many local traditions which Vatican II recognized as valid, but whose precise status is not determined.[2] "Authoritative" here means, of course, approved by institutionalized Church authority. There is another kind of authority deriving from the intrinsic truth of tradition and this will be a major theme in this article. Traditions lacking authoritative status, in the first sense, are designated as "tradition" with a lower case ' t.'

For example, Eamon Duffy in his *Faith of Our Fathers: Reflections on Catholic Tradition*[3] provides a popular account of this latter kind of tradition. Aidan Nichols has described this as "the burgeoning, ramifying, overgrown garden of the Christian, and even or especially of the Catholic past."[4] Nichols distinguishes this from "what theologians mean

---

[1] On the origin of the usage (in the nineteenth century, it seems), see Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions:* II *Essai théologique* (Paris: Fayard, 1963), 55.

[2] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 17.

[3] Eamon Duffy, Faith of Our Fathers: Reflections on Catholic Tradition (New York: Continuum: 2004).

[4] Review of Duffy, *Faith*, in *The Tablet*, 22 February 2005.

by 'Tradition' which is Revelation in its transmission through time."[5] The characteristic feature of the latter he takes to be authority, which is needed to distinguish Tradition (the wood) from the tradition (trees). However, as this article will seek to show there were considerable differences among theologians as to what was meant by Tradition and how it was related to authority. The notion that "authority" is the distinctive characteristic of Tradition, as will be shown in the historical account which follows, needs to be examined closely.

A further distinction, not adverted to by the authors just cited, is between Tradition and traditions, as bodies of content, and tradition as the processes by which that content is communicated. Tradition as process can be analyzed as a cultural reality, with its own internal rules and structures, analogous to those of a language. Just as it is not possible to communicate the Gospel unless one follows the basic rules of language, so it is not possible to hand on the content of Tradition (or traditions) unless the basic rules of tradition as process are observed. Where these internal rules are not followed, the tradition will loose its capacity to fulfil its role. A major point of interest, therefore, is what are these rules? One of the aims of this article is to suggest what they might be.

Tradition, understood as the Catholic Tradition, can also be considered in terms of processes of a juridic kind, by which particular doctrines and practices are declared to belong to Tradition and so are binding on believers. At least in the Catholic Church, official teaching statements always invoke Tradition to support the particular propositions which they present, whether doctrinal or moral. At the same time, it is the role of authority (the Magisterium) to declare whether a particular element of content belongs in the Tradition or not. However, it is not the authoritative declaration which constitutes this element as belonging to the Tradition. It must be possible to show that this element belongs in the Tradition according to the intrinsic rules or structures of tradition. For example, the doctrine of the Resurrection belongs to the Catholic Tradition not simply because Church authority has declared that it does, but because the Catholic Tradition without the Resurrection would not be the Catholic Tradition. In this article, I will not deal with the juridic processes and will limit my analysis to the more fundamental question of the intrinsic structures of tradition and Tradition.

This article will adopt the hypothesis that the internal processes that are followed in formally approved Tradition are basically the same as those in small 't' traditions and that it is the presence of such processes which enables us to identify a cultural phenomenon as "tradition." Just what these processes are will be the subject of inquiry in the following sections.

A first step is to show that particular elements belong to the tradition and Tradition as required by the intrinsic structures of tradition. But there is a further question, namely why the tradition and Tradition and their constitutive elements are true; this requires a point of reference beyond the tradition itself. Church authority can decree that a proposition about belief and practice is to be recognized as an authentic part of the content of the Tradition and that it is true. But it is not the declaration by Church authority itself that makes it true. Such a proposition must be verifiable independently of the formal declaration. There are two distinct but related questions: why are particular items in Tradition true, and why is Tradition itself true? As we will see theologians over the centuries have provided different account of what makes Tradition true.

Since tradition has some basic structures, it must be possible to discern some criteria or rules for determining whether a tradition is in good order or not, and whether

---

[5] Ibid.

one tradition is better, as a tradition, than others. If there are no such rules then there would seem to be no grounds for regarding a tradition as a "good" tradition or for choosing one tradition in preference to another or indeed for choosing to accept a tradition at all. Perhaps, in postmodern fashion we could say that it is just a matter of free play and we select traditions or reject them simply on the basis of free choice. However, the notion of tradition seems to include the idea that it has some kind of objective status and authority such that choosing it makes sense. In the course of the argument to be developed here, it will be suggested what that objective status might be. It will be argued that there are objective grounds for choosing and following small 't' traditions and grounds for choosing Traditions. The argument will be concerned with establishing the basis for the truth of the respective traditions. Thus far, the discussion has dealt with aspects of tradition as a cultural phenomenon and in a general sense. The following sections investigate the meanings of the concept in Catholic theology.

THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION OF TRADITION

In 1985, Walter Kasper acknowledged that there was a lack of clarity concerning the meaning of tradition. He found that, while the Magisterium of the Church and theology stress the fact of tradition, they provide little help when we want to know precisely what tradition is. Siegfried Wiedenhofer, writing in 1990, acknowledged that, while the meaning of tradition was one of the most significant questions for the Church today, it was still largely unclear.[6] In 1997, the same author published a review of the current literature on the topic, summing up the state of the debate in Europe; at this point the discussion was still inconclusive.[7] The research continues.[8]

Theological Models of Tradition

In the early Church, the criterion of authoritative doctrine was the unbroken connection with the "teaching of the Apostles." We could call this the historical criterion of authority. Difficulties emerged in this regard, when, with the progress of historical studies, it became evident that some of doctrines and practices upheld by the Church in the present did not seem to have a basis, or at least an explicit foundation in the "doctrine of the apostles" as it was presented in the early Church. This raised the question of the "development of doctrine." It is not possible within the limits of this article to deal with this complex issue.

　　While Christians accept that continuity with the teaching of the early Church is a criterion for assessing the authority of a doctrine or practice, there still remains the question as to why the original teaching itself and later teachings in continuity with that are to be considered true. Thus what we could call the "ontological" question emerges beyond the historical issue. As the doctrine and way of life was handed on through history, theologians constructed theories linking doctrine and practice to a transcendent source,

---

[6] Siegfried Wiedenhofer, "Grundprobleme des theologischen Traditionsbegriffs," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 112 (1990): 18-29.

[7] Siegfried Wiedenhofer, "Zum gegenwärtigen Stand von Traditionstheorie und Traditionstheologie," *Theologische Revue* 93.6 (1997): 443-468.

[8] The series, "Studies in tradition theory" edited by Wiedenhofer, pursues the theme. See Barbara Schoppelreich, *Zeichen und Zeugnis: Zum sakramentalen Verständnis kirchlicher Tradition* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2000). Cf. also *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (2001) s.v. "Tradition: Theologie-und dogmengeschictlich; Systematisch-theologisch" by Joachim Drumm.

namely God. In this way they sought to provide the grounds for the truth and so for the authority of Tradition.

Within the history of the Catholic Tradition itself, I suggest that we can distinguish three models, each of which provides a distinct account of the authority of Tradition. The first could be called the participative model: Tradition participates in the divine truth and draws its authority from this transcendent reality. This model correlates with the view that Tradition carries "timeless" ideas which transcend history, but manifest themselves in history. The second might be named the extrinsic authority model. Tradition here is envisioned as if it were an entity external to the Church community and imposed on it by authority. This model is correlated with the view that Tradition carries law-like propositions enunciating "truths" to be believed or practices to be followed. Tradition was assumed to be something which went on within the Church; the Tradition once settled, was then to be communicated to others, as it was through worldwide missionary activity.

The third, which emerged within official documents at Vatican II, we could perhaps call the communicative-critical model. The communication is conceived in terms of a goal or purpose, for example to make people holy, to guide them to salvation or to lead the community of the Church towards eschatological fulfilment in the Kingdom. The role of Tradition is seen here as communication within the Church and beyond it and thus embraces dialogue. The question then arises as to whether this dialogue should be considered as communicating what is already in itself fixed, or whether the dialogue might contribute to the process of Tradition itself. In short, what, if anything can be accepted into the Tradition "from outside"?

The third model is critical, first of all in being self-critical; its exponents seek to examine certain accepted beliefs in order to establish whether they are, indeed, genuine expressions of the Tradition. It is also critical in the sense that it is prepared to listen to others and to engage in constructive dialogue rather than simply asserting its own positions. To adopt a convenient, if over-simplified summary schema, we could say that for model 1, Tradition participates in divine truth and so is authoritative; for model 2, Tradition is authoritative because it is decreed to be so by the Church, which has divinely given authority. For model 3, Tradition is authoritative on "teleological" grounds because it has and does lead those who commit themselves to it, to a goal, namely to salvation. In the account which follows I will provide examples of these different types. These models are not necessarily mutually exclusive and elements of them may sometimes be combined,

Historical Contexts

To explain the different models, it is necessary to give an account of the historical contexts in which they emerged. It is generally acknowledged that there was a significant change in "word view" between the so called "pre-modern" period and the modern. According to Charles Taylor, in the change to modernity in western thinking and culture, there occurred a major shift, which he describes as the disengagement of subject and object.[9] The essential change is from an account of knowing and willing to another that is markedly different. In the first, true knowledge and true valuation come from connecting ourselves rightly to reality.[10] If we might use the rather technical language of subject and object, in this view, reality or the "world" is something we are connected with, and we affirm that connection when we know and will reality. This is not to say that there would not be a

---

[9] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 186.

[10] Taylor, *Sources*, 186.

world unless there were someone to know it, for it would not make any sense to ask whether there could be such a separate world. The given reality is that we are related to the world, and this is the case before we start to think about it. In this period, according to some of the great thinkers like St. Thomas, subject and object were inherently related because they both participated in the all-embracing reason of God.

1) The Participative Model

St. Thomas Aquinas thinking may be situated, at least in a general sense, within this "pre-modern" period. St. Thomas did not deal with Tradition in our modern sense of the word, however it is possible to discern his views on the topic, keeping in mind that he treats the issue in a way which is different from that adopted by later theology. We might say that for St. Thomas the framework is one in which divine truth is participated in the community of the Church and in particular in Scripture and the doctrine of the Church (*doctrina ecclesiae*.)[11]

However, if we are to understand St. Thomas's approach it is important to probe how he understands participation. A vaguely "platonic" understanding of participation would have us thinking that St. Thomas conceives it in terms of timeless ideas, above history and time, and "participated in" by earthly realities such as the Church, the Scriptures and the Teaching of the Church. However, if Hans Urs von Balthasar is correct, St. Thomas view is not specifically Platonic but, "his own constant and fundamental position."[12] St. Thomas writes of, "The procession of existence from the divine principle into all existing things: the name of being designates the procession of existence from God into all beings."[13] This procession is best described, not in terms of a emanation, which could obscure the distinction between God as divine principle and finite created being, but in terms of "gift" which clearly expresses the distinction between giver and receiver. It is in relation, not to a concept, but to being that every essence and every concept can be united. What counts, if we may put it this way, is the energy or act of giving being, not a system of concepts. Thus the notion of an all-embracing framework would mislead, if it were taken to mean a system of concepts.

Since our fundamental metaphysical notions influence the way in which we conceive other notions, a metaphysics of the procession of being will shape the way in which we think of the procession which is entailed in the historical tradition of the Church. A concept dominated metaphysics, for example, one in which being was a most general concept, would tend to sustain a concept of tradition as the passing on of a system of concepts. A metaphysics of the procession of existence, or, we might say, of the giving of being, will lead to a notion of the historical tradition conceived in terms of the giving of being; or, in more concrete terms, the giving of life. The human giving that is central to tradition, will be thought of as a participation in the divine giving of being. Since Thomas's notion was not sustained and was replaced by a concept-based system of metaphysics, we might expect that the notion of tradition will be thought of in terms of the transmission of concepts. Something like this seems to have happened, as will be indicated in due course. For the present, I will continue with the analysis of St. Thomas. Since being is conceived as the procession of *esse* from God, truth will be thought of in a way that is coherent with this.

---

[11] Étienne Ménard, *La Tradition: révélation - écriture - église selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Montréal: Desclée De Brower, 1964), 148-151.

[12] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 4, The *Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity,* ed. John Riches, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 401.

[13] *In* Div*. Nom. 5, lect.* 1 (Mandonnet 479-480); Cited in von Balthasar, *The Glory,* 401.

St. Thomas holds that the one divine truth seeks to realize the unity of all in the one economy of revelation and salvation. This truth attains the end to which it is ordered by God, only when it is assimilated by believers, and becomes in them an active principle of unity in the knowledge of divine truth. The congregation of the faithful is thus ordered to the manifestation of divine truth. The one divine truth is manifested in the Scriptures and in the community of faith, which is formed into a community by a shared, authentic knowledge of divine revelation present in Scripture and in the doctrine of the Church.

We might say that the community as believing subject is inherently related to divine revelation as object, expressed in Scripture and the doctrine of the Church. The link between the subject and object here is further explained by St Thomas in the context of the virtue of faith: faith in the subject, the believing community, has as its "object" divine truth manifested in Scripture and the doctrine of the Church.[14]

According to St. Thomas, the authority of the Scripture and the authority of the teaching of the Church are both based on one and the same divine manifestation of truth. Thus, the doctrine of the Church and Scripture are both means for the manifestation of that truth. Or, we might say, divine truth as authority is participated in by the Scriptures and by the doctrine of the Church. Tradition, as we now understand it, corresponds to what is called here the doctrine of the Church. In this unified way of thinking, the Tradition is inherently related to the believing community of the Church; it an element of its life, and not separate from and above it. Tradition is an element of the plenitude of being of the Church. It has inherent truth and authority and does not derive this from external approval by God or by Church authority.

2) The Extrinsic Authority Model

This unified vision was lost, I suggest, together with the unifying notion of the procession of being. So, the unifying framework, embracing the subject and the object, is also lost. The subject and object are separated, and the latter left without any source of value in itself, a change often linked to Ockham (d. 1347).[15] The problem is how to supply a source of value in the now separate object, a role which Ockham attributed to the external will of God. We can perhaps find the same separation occurring in his views of what he called "the catholic truths," which correspond to what we now call "Tradition." According to Congar, for Ockham the Church (subject) is now separated from and subordinate to the "objective" sources of its faith.[16] Thus, "the catholic truths" (Tradition) now has authority as an external entity, imposed on the Church by the divine will. It has ceased to be an inner principle of the being and life of the Church.

According to Piet Fransen, the very influential Jesuit theologian Francesco Suarez (d. 1617) had a key transitional role in reshaping other elements of the theological understanding of tradition.[17] Although Suarez did not accept the voluntarist position of Ockham, his ontology seems to have accepted an inherent meaning in realities, but also required an act of the will of God to give those realities binding, authoritative status.

This ontological framework would seem to be discernible in Francesco Suarez's understanding of Tradition. For example, for Suarez a custom, which, in earlier theology

---

[14] Ménard, *La Tradition*, 151.

[15] Taylor, *Sources,* 161.

[16] Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions*, 130.

[17] Piet Fransen, "A Short History of the Meaning of the Formula 'Fides et Mores,'" originally published in *Louvain Studies* 7 (1978-1979): 270-301; cited in David Stagman, "Piet Fransens's Research on *Fides et Mores,*" *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 74.

and canon law, had value because of its apostolicity, antiquity and content, now needs the approval of an authority which gave it the force of law.[18] Similarly, the truths of faith communicated by tradition, need the approval of authority to become the rule of faith.[19] We can see emerging here an important difference between two ways of understanding Tradition. In the first case, Tradition is considered as an element of the life of the Church as the community of believers: in the second case, Tradition is considered as separated from that community and imposed on it by an act of authority.

This way of dealing with tradition can be seen, for example, in the work of those nineteenth century theologians who established the theology of Tradition which became standard in the nineteenth century and subsequently. They used the word "object" in regard to tradition, by which they meant that which is handed on, namely doctrine or institution,[20] something to be believed, but which needed the obligatory status which only Church authority could give them

Some theologians were aware that there was more to Tradition than the "objective" element; Franzelin, for example, distinguished the "objective" sense of tradition, that which is transmitted, from the "active" sense, which refers to the whole process by which the objective content is transmitted to us.[21] But even in the process the principal role is that of the Magisterium.[22] There is no mention here of a "subjective" aspect of tradition, in the sense of a positive, active role for the believing community. Further, as was the case with the objectivist style of theology, the objective elements were given value by reference to an external will, fundamentally the will of God, and then the will of Church authority.

Thus tradition came to mean an objective body of doctrine or institutions imposed by the authority of the Church. Indeed sometimes Tradition was simply identified with the authoritative teaching of the Church, or the Magisterium.[23] Scheeben held that the authoritative laying down of the teaching of the faith, is, in the proper sense, Tradition.[24] He also recognized, however, a role for the whole Church, that is, all the members of the Church who can and should, in their own particular way, participate in the communication of the teaching. But the authoritative laying out of the teaching is the role of the authority which stands both in and over the Church.

In his strongly polemical critique of Modernism, Louis Billot presents a paradigm instance of this "objective" model. The truths which are communicated by Tradition, that is Tradition in the "objective" sense, are imposed by extrinsic authority. These truths, are the object of faith, but there is needed the official proclamation of these truths by ecclesiastical authority to make them obligatory as the rule of faith. The latter constitutes

---

[18] Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions,* 237, (on the influence of Suarez). The ontological interpretation is my own.

[19] Thus, a change in ontology is accompanied by a change in the way tradition is understood. A similar point is made by John Montag, "Revelation: The False Legacy of Suarez," in *Radical Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 47.

[20] J. B. Franzelin, *Tractatus de Divina Tradizione et Scriptura,* 4th. ed. (Rome: S.C. de Propoganda Fide , 1896), 11.

[21] Franzelin, *Tractatus*, 12.

[22] Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions,*252.

[23] August Deneffe, *Der Traditionsbegriff* (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931), 160.

[24] "Es [the witness of all the Bishops together] ist darum auch ein in sich und durch sich vollgütiges und unfehlbares Zeugnis der Tradition, oder vielmehr recht eigentlich diese selbst." J. Scheeben, *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, I. (Freiburg: Herder, 1873) 153. Deneffe, *Der Traditionsbegriff*, 99.

tradition in the formal sense. Thus, in this view, tradition fuses with the magisterium as the proximate and authentic rule of faith.[25]

Modernism itself may be considered as a reaction against this objectivist position. However, Modernism itself still accepted the separation between subject and object and made the separate subject, in particular the inner experience of that subject, the source of truth.[26]

3) The Communicative-Critical Model

Another philosophical and theological current had begun to emerge in the nineteenth century. The new movement, was represented independently by Möhler, Blondel and Newman. This may be interpreted as, in part, a recovery of the role of the subject, namely, of the Church community, and the recognition of the genuine role of human subjectivity. It was a reaction to and corrective of the hitherto prevailing objectivist view. Möhler in his *Die Einheit der Kirche*, while not setting aside the objective element of the "living preaching" of Christ and the Apostles, gives a more significant place to the Spirit, and to the inner religious life, that is to the place of the subject, than did the alternative view.[27]

Tradition According to Vatican II

The relevant documents of the Council, in particular the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (Dei Verbum)* show the influence of the new philosophical and theological current mentioned earlier and, in general, reflect the third model. In this document, the Tradition of the Church is a goal-directed or teleological process aimed at the growth in holiness and faith of the whole community. As the Constitution states: "what has been handed down from the apostles includes everything that helps the people of God to live a holy life and to grow in faith." The document recognizes the reality of "growth in understanding"; indeed, the whole process of transmission is described as one by which "the church constantly holds its course towards the fullness of divine truth". The words are not merely to be fully understood but fulfilled, that is, realized in a way of life. Further, it is clearly stated in the text that growth, "comes about through contemplation and study by believers… through the intimate understanding of spiritual things which they experience, and through the preaching of those who, on succeeding to the office of bishop, receive the true charism of truth."[28] The language reflects a change from the older objectivist mode of understanding tradition, which, as has been shown, had difficulty in recognizing an active role of the subject. This is now affirmed, but, at the same time the individual subject is closely related to the whole Church, which is itself an active subject.

The Theological Literature after Vatican II

An article by Walter Kasper to which reference has already been made, although written some years ago, still provides a valuable outline of the major issues and provides a useful framework for future development. It may serve as an outline of the communicative-critical model. Kasper frames the debate in these terms: What is tradition: is it a fixed body

---

[25] Louis Billot, *De immutabilité traditionis contra modernam heresim evolutionismi* (Roma: Pontif. Inst. Pii IX, 1907), 11. Congar, I, 254, 266.

[26] Cf. J.G. Boeglin, *La question*, 87. The interpretation in terms of subject and object is mine.

[27] Johann Adam Möhler, *Die Einheit in der Kirche oder das Prinzip des Katholizismus,* ed. Josef Rupert Geiselmann (Cologne and Olten: Jakob Hegner, 1956), 251.

[28] *Dei Verbum*, no. 8, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Sheed and Ward & Georgetown University Press, 1990), 974.

of teaching and disciplines or a living, historical process of communication? He defines tradition, in the terms of philosophical anthropologically, as "the experience of earlier generations, stored in a symbol system, that makes human life as human, possible, in that it enables us to orientate ourselves in the world, and sustains us in finding our identity."[29] Concern for tradition typically emerges under certain social and historical conditions, namely in periods of crisis, like our own, where tradition can no longer be taken for granted as providing the true account of life. Seeking some stable reality in the midst of change, Kasper finds this in "life" which he argues is deeper than any particular tradition, and in the human spirit, in its search for truth which transcends every given tradition.[30] The argument here, if I understand it correctly, is that despite the breakdown of tradition, there remain two constants: life itself and the search for truth, which make it possible for us to manage this crisis and so construct a replacement for the broken tradition. However, the reconstructed tradition cannot take the form of a mere repetition of established truths; it can be communicated and received only in a critical way.[31] This, typically European insistence on critique would not sit well with many in the Church today, who seem to value security and clarity through obedience to authority. Kasper himself, recognizing the importance of these values, defined the functions of tradition, anthropologically, as providing us with a place to stand in the world and securing our identity.

But these functions will inevitably be in some tension with the other basic function of tradition, namely to communicate the beliefs and practices. Communication will require, of course, an identity of belief, otherwise there will be nothing to communicate. It will also require a stable community, which can sustain the tradition and receive those who commit themselves to it. But communication will also call for a capacity to change and adapt, and thus an element of critique. The inevitable tension between the values of identity and communication marks, I suggest, the present situation of the Tradition; how to negotiate this is perhaps the most important question facing the Church today.

During and after the Second Vatican Council, the value of communication, to other Churches, to non-Christian religions and to non-believers, had a certain priority. This is very evident, for example, when Pope John Paul II invited representatives of many different religions to pray together at Assisi on October 27th, 1986. Pope Benedict XVI, in his inaugural homily, on April 14th, 2005, specifically mentioned such wide ranging dialogue as one of his own projects. There are, however, those in the Church who regard such inter-religious activity as a danger to Catholic identity.[32] Evidently for some it is the identity supporting role of Tradition which has paramount importance. Indeed it could be suggested that a major source of tension in the Church today is between those who give priority to the identity sustaining role of Tradition and those who give first place to communication.

In the European context, it is impossible to discuss Tradition, on the philosophical level, without reference to the Enlightenment and its challenge to tradition. Kasper, accordingly, in his endeavour to interpret tradition seeks to deal with this historical reality. Of particular importance for the author is the profound change in the understanding of authority, tradition and truth which came about with the Enlightenment. The word "truth" appears very frequently in Church teaching documents are present, no

---

[29] Kasper, "Tradition," 384.

[30] Ibid, 385.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Sandro Magister, 'John Paul II and the Other Religions: From Assisi to "Dominus Iesus,"'; http://tcrnews2.com/Magister.html; accessed 3 April 2005.

doubt in response to the need to emphasize identity of belief. However, it is rare to find an explanation of what this word means, and Kasper's analysis is a useful contribution.

He points out that, whereas in Patristic and High-Scholastic thought, the truth was something pre-given and mediated by Tradition: that is ontological truth, present in the "vertical" relationship between the transcendent ideas and the created reality of the world. For modernity, truth emerges from the process of history. According to this view, truth is not mediated by history, but is history.[33] Kasper interprets Hegel's project as an endeavour to link the two notions of tradition, the old, where truth is a given, and the new, where truth emerges historically, in a higher synthesis. Thus, part of the European problem with tradition is dealing with Hegel. In outlining a response to this new conception of truth, Kasper offers an account of how truth, and with it authority, can be found in Tradition.[34]

There emerges at this point, again, the theme of the relationship between subject and object, which is an important key in understanding how tradition was interpreted within the history of theology. The process of discovering truth in tradition requires the activity of the subject. According to Kasper, we do not possess the content of tradition as an object, as if it were something detached from the subject, but only through the mediation of our subjective knowing, which is itself an essential element in the process of transmission.[35] However, this subjective knowledge is not empty of content. It is the content which engenders the act of knowing, and which determines it as an act of knowing something. Thus, the key point in Kasper's theory of truth in Tradition is the unity of act (of knowing) and being (content).[36] This would seem to reflect the Thomistic conception of knowledge, according to which the mind, in knowing, participates in the being of the object known.[37] The presence of this analysis in a study of tradition shows clearly that we cannot elaborate a theory of tradition as a way of knowing, without also clarifying our theory of knowledge itself.

However, Kasper, rather than considering simply the act of knowing, introduces the act of communicating knowledge. The act is the communication (the *actus tradiendi*) through which the content (the *traditum*) is known. This enables him to understand the communication and acquiring of knowledge as a process; the act-being unity unfolds as a process in which tradition and interpretation belong inseparably together. Finally, the community is the subject of this transmission and lives by engaging itself in it.

While, according to Kasper, Hegel's thought helps us to understand the process of communication, as this takes place in history, but the Hegelian notion of truth as the product of history cannot be accepted.[38] The significance of this move, it would seem, is to interpret the act of knowing, in tradition, as communication. We do not simply have a fixed tradition, identify with it, and then communicate it; communication is of the essence of tradition. Since it is only through communication that we know the subject who communicates, the process of tradition and its content.

Having proposed an account of the meaning of tradition in a philosophical general philosophical sense, Kasper then provides tradition with a specifically Christian, theological interpretation. Theology must begin with the givenness of the divine truth

---

[33] Kasper, "Tradition," 389.

[34] Ibid, 383.

[35] Ibid, 392.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Cf. Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 29.

[38] Kasper, "Tradition," 391.

manifest in Jesus.[39] Christian Tradition has an eschatological orientation; the event of Jesus Christ is the "fullness of time". However, this event is not an end with no future, but rather the definitive new beginning. Tradition, therefore, is oriented towards a fulfilment yet to come.[40] The various witnesses to the Tradition include not only those which are "official", but also the witness of daily Christian living and especially the witness of the saints.

But, however important they are, these witnesses are not identical with the Tradition itself. They are only the making present of that Tradition by way of sign-sacrament.[41] We might call this, with Kasper, the sacramental, or quasi-sacramental,[42] structure of the Tradition. The notion of sacrament makes it possible to link the transcendent theological reality with the historical process of Tradition; it enables us to link the permanent unchanging element beyond history, with the historicalprocess and thus avoid historicism and relativism in doctrine. We can note in passing that the "sacramental" theory seems to be another version of the "participative" model described earlier.

Johannes Bunnenburg's study of Yves Congar's understanding of Tradition, provides a useful overview and clarification of the important contributions of that author.[43] Congar's work embodies many of the themes which shaped the subsequent theological analysis of Tradition, for example, the historical approach, the recognition of the experience of the faithful community as a source and the interpretation of tradition as sacrament.[44] We might note, in particular, Congar's views concerning the truth in Tradition. He proposed a short formula for tradition: "'Reference to the past,' he writes, is not exact. There is rather a presence of the past in the present; a presence of the events that are constitutive of the religious relationship at each moment of time, laid open, situated and constituted; a presence of the Principle at all the moments of its development."[45]

This may seem to envisage a Platonic conception of a timeless idea above history and embodied in particular instances. There is an important issue here, which has been noted previously. Should tradition be regarded as a continuous, historical process over which presides an eternal, timeless idea, which manifests itself in the diverse moments of history? Or should it be understood as a process, through which truth emerges, to show itself fully at the end of the process?

There are some statements of Congar's which seem to have an Hegelian flavor: the truth is eschatological, that is the full truth appears at the end of the process of becoming, at the fulfilment,[46] and again, the truth is totality, where totality means the totality of being a Christian.[47] He also saw truth in Tradition as interpersonal communication, ultimately

---

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid, 394.

[41] Ibid, 397.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Johannes Bunnenburg, *Lebendige True zum Ursprung* : *Das Traditionsverständnis Yves Congars* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1989).

[44] Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions*, 161.

[45] See Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions*, 37-38; cf. Bunnenburg, *Lebendige True*, 270

[46] Bunnenburg, *Lebendige Treue,* 329.

[47] Bunnenburg, *Lebendige Treue,* 332; Yves Congar, "Die Normen für die Ursprungstreue und Identität der Kirche in Verlauf ihrer Geschichte," Concilium (German) 9 (1973): 156-163, 162.

grounded in the communication within the Trinity.[48] Finally, the truth of Tradition is practical truth.[49] This I would understand to suggest that the activity that constitutes the Tradition and the reflection that guides it is a form of practical reasoning. It guides the practice of communication—which could itself be understood as a giving and receiving of gifts. Though Congar does not seem to have worked out a synthesis of these ideas, he does provide, it would seem, a good account of the elements of such a synthesis.

Barbara Schoppelreich provides an account of the rich and varied treatment of the theme in contemporary German theological literature,[50] and in particular the interpretation of Tradition as "sacramental." This idea of Tradition as sacrament, already proposed by earlier theologians, such as Congar, has been further developed by Siegfried Wiedenhofer. Understood as a sacrament, Tradition is not merely the passing on of objects, but the active presence of the Gospel, and the time-transcending activity of the saving act of Jesus Christ. It is through the witness or testimony of men and women that the reality of God is made present and active. That is, Tradition is a purposeful or teleological reality; it is aimed at the salvation of human beings, and in this sense can be said to be the transmission of life. Tradition is the transmission of life and salvation, and on the basis of this purpose true and false tradition can be distinguished. As has been noted earlier, the model here is teleological.

The results of the inquiry as to how tradition was understood in the Catholic tradition, can be summed up as follows: Tradition is not a collection of unchanging, timeless teachings but a process of communication in history. What is communicated is described variously as doctrine, practices, or, in general terms, as life. There is a certain tension between the values of communication and identity. The legitimation of Tradition as true has been expressed in terms of three models: participation, (juridic) authority, and teleological order. The link between historical tradition and its divine source is described in terms of sacramentality. Various philosophies have been suggested as way of articulating the meaning of tradition, but there is no well worked out or generally accepted philosophical account.

PROPOSALS FOR A SOLUTION: WHAT THEN IS TRADITION?

We can begin by considering tradition as cultural process abstracting from the kind of theological interpretations of tradition that have been developed within the Catholic Tradition. In a recent article entitled "Postmodern Challenges to Tradition," Kathryn Tanner has analyzed tradition from the perspective of cultural studies. She discusses the ways in which tradition could be thought about, and, in particular, how these ways need to be modified in order to deal with the challenge of postmodern cultural theory.[51] Traditions may be regarded as a kind of artefact; that is, as something invented, an aspect to which Tanner gives particular importance.

Traditions have been constructed, for example, to serve economic interests or to create and sustain a sense of identity.[52] Even a national identity or a religious identity may

---

[48] Bunnenburg, *Lebendige Treue*, 331. Congar, *La Parole et le Souffle,* Paris: 1984, 79. This text was not available to me.

[49] Bunnenburg, *Lebendige Treue,* 330.

[50] Barbara Schoppelreich, *Zeichen und Zeugnis: Zum sakramentalen verständnis kirchlicher Tradition* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2000).

[51] Kathryn Tanner, "Postmodern Challenges to 'Tradition'," *Louvain Studies* 28 (2003): 183.

[52] Tanner, "Postmodern Challenges," 183.

be invented. But traditions cannot be created out of nothing. If a tradition is to be recognizable as a tradition, it must have a certain "form," and without this form what is invented will not be able to do what traditions do. What then is the essential form of tradition and what do traditions do? To answer this, we need to move from anthropological analysis to philosophy.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre defines the term tradition thus: "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute the tradition."[53] Tanner proposes, similarly, that, "[I]nstead of a process of transmission, tradition amounts to a process of argument."[54] In MacIntyre's account of tradition, "when a tradition is in good order, it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose."[55] MacIntyre would concur with Tanner that tradition is best interpreted as "argument," while specifying that what the argument is about are the constitutive goods of the tradition.

From the historical data that has been provided earlier, it is clear that the Catholic Tradition has included argument for centuries, and indeed argument about the meaning of tradition itself. What is needed is a continuation of that argument and a sharpening of it in regard to certain key issues. In particular, for an adequate notion of tradition, I suggest that we need to give attention to the kind and historical form of the goods which, according to MacIntyre, are the major topic of the argument of tradition. This, of course MacIntyre himself has done in his reflection on certain historical instances of tradition.[56]

I propose to sharpen this point somewhat so as to be able to say something more about tradition in the hope of providing criteria for an "authentic" tradition. The issue is the kind of goods to which the tradition is directed and in which it finds its purpose and unity. The fact that some particular tradition includes argument about its constitutive goods does not, by itself, provide grounds for judging this tradition better than other traditions; nor does it give us grounds for adopting that tradition. Those that commit themselves to a tradition are concerned more with the goods that the tradition proposes, than arguments about them.

Traditions, accordingly, must have some purpose and that purpose must be attractive; otherwise they will be unable to find adherents. Those attracted by this purpose commit themselves to the tradition. Such commitment is essential to a tradition, since without it there would be no tradition, but merely a collection of symbols, banners, distinctive garments, rule books, etc., together with arguments. When we examine the kinds of goods to which the communities who sustained traditions were committed we find at least four. For examples, we could draw on the rather ironical collection of essays edited by Eric Hobsbaum and Terence Ranger.[57]

The first kind is purely instrumental; for example, the "traditional" Scottish kilt was invented to make work in mills safer and hence more productive. The second kind is the good of identity, which seems to become a good for all traditions, whether they were constructed to promote this or not. The kilt from being industrial clothing becomes a

---

[53] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.

[54] Tanner, "Postmodern Challenges," 192.

[55] MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 222.

[56] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

[57] Eric Hobsbaum and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15-41.

symbol of Scottish highland identity. The third kind consists in moral goals. The community initiates and sustains the tradition, for example, the highland workers accept and follow the tradition to protect their own life and well-being and to earn what is needed to feed and educate their families.

Traditions of the first and second kind are the product of technical reason: the third is formed by practical (moral) reason. We would need to add, of course, religious goods. In this case, the tradition is interpreted as a way of expressing the community's relation to God and the commitment to the tradition is subsumed into a commitment to God.

To clarify further the relationships between these different kinds of goods, a reconsideration of the contribution to the understanding of tradition by Hans-Georg Gadamer will be helpful.[58] According to Gadamer, we do not know as subjects removed from our communities and from time; nor are we god-like creatures regarding human affairs from on high. Our knowing begins steeped in the "pre-judgments" they we have from our friends, our families and our communities, that is, within our traditions. Indeed, it is only because we have these "given" notions that we are able to make sense of our living and our thinking. Time, which was once thought of as constituting a gulf between our present and the original sources, making it extremely difficult to access those sources, has rather a positive role, as the process of transmission and interpretation, by which those sources illumine our understanding now. In being so illumined, we are affected by the history (of the tradition) which determines what is worth inquiring about and provides the object of our inquiries. Gadamer's contribution to a contemporary appreciation of the meaning and importance of tradition has been very influential.

Nicholas Boyle, however, claims to find a significant lack in Gadamer's theory, namely the absence of a moral element.[59] This would seem to need qualification: Gadamer himself understands the engagement with tradition as a moral phenomenon.[60] However, Boyle's notion of the moral element is somewhat different from that given by Gadamer. This he believes can be supplied by the notion of testimony as developed by Paul Ricoeur.[61] Testimony conveys the experience of contingent events, rather than rational theories, and in particular it conveys the experience of the overcoming of a real evil.[62] We note that the element of real evil does not appear so clearly in Gadamer's analysis. The initiation of tradition in the experience of a real, contingent event of the kind described is a key feature of the account of tradition I wish to propose.

Drawing on these insights, I would argue that the overcoming of real evil and the testimony to that, have a fundamental role in the historical constitution of at least some traditions. One who testifies to the presence of real evil and its overcoming, presents to those who receive the testimony, positive possibilities of promoting good. Without such positive testimony, the "overcoming of evil" would be meaningless. The testifying and the reception of testimony presupposes and develops a community which is the social basis of a tradition. The promotion of these positive goods, goods specified by the evil which is overcome, becomes the goal of the tradition.

---

[58] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994).

[59] Nicholas Boyle, *Sacred and Secular: A Catholic Approach to Literature* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 62.

[60] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 358.

[61] Boyle cites Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutique de l'idée de Révelation," in Paul Ricoeur et al., *La Révelation* (Brussels: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 1977), 15-54. See Boyle, *Sacred and Secular,* 71.

[62] Boyle, Sacred and Secular, 62.

A tradition which has its origin in testimony to the overcoming of real evil is the kind of tradition in regard to which one could reasonably judge: "I ought to adopt this tradition". Thus, a moral commitment on the part of its adherents is an essential structure of the kind of tradition being discussed here. Similarly, a tradition which has this kind of origin and which adopts as its good the continued overcoming of evil and the promotion of good through the course of its historical unfolding, is the kind of tradition which I ought to prefer to other traditions which do not aim at such goods at all, or which do not manage to pursue them effectively

Testimony is "sedimented" in tradition, which carries it on and encodes it in the forms of stories, poetry, ritual and theoretical reason or metaphysics, which emerges as needed to make sense of overcoming evil and promoting good. Here arises the relevance of the notion that tradition is not merely the communication of doctrines, but of a way of life; or, in a more general sense, simply "life". Thus, tradition is a goal-oriented or teleological process; the purpose of which is to foster the goods of life. Nor is tradition merely an intellectual argument about goods, it is lived in a pattern of actions by which the overcoming of evil and the promotion of good is sought and sometimes achieved. It is the overcoming of real evil which is the original source of a genuine tradition. The superiority of a particular tradition, I would argue, perhaps going beyond MacIntyre, is established not simply by its having superior arguments, but by its capacity to overcome real evil and to promote good and to continue to do so.

In the light of the above reflections, I would now suggest answers to some of the questions which have been raised above. We might call the kind of tradition being described here as a "primary" tradition; this tradition makes possible and guides life. The basic element of such a tradition is its inherent capacity to identify real evil, based on experience, and to give sense to, guide and promote the overcoming of evil and the promotion of the corresponding good. A tradition is in "good order" when it engages these capacities in effective action in history. Tradition then includes not only the consciousness of being affected by history, as Gadamer held, but the conscious commitment to affect history. The interpretation of tradition is the making sense and guiding of action to overcome evil and promote good. Thus, the basic rule for an authentic tradition is: identify and overcome real evil and promote good.

The real evil which a tradition seeks to overcome may be, for example, the danger of serious physical injury, to avoid which the workers adopted the tradition of the kilt. Or it may be death through starvation which the traditions of farming communities are constructed to deal with. Or the real evil might include that which is experienced in the inner distortions of the self which dispose one to hatred and murder. But it is the identification of real evil, the experience of overcoming that evil and testimony to that experience which is the mark of "primary" traditions.

Such "primary" traditions have shown themselves capable of gaining large numbers of followers, of sustaining themselves over long periods of time and of supporting a very strong sense of identity. Examples would be the Jewish tradition, Christianity and Islam. Marxism might well qualify as a primary tradition; it discerned and confronted a real evil, and promised to provide a way of overcoming it. It would seem that Marxism, in some form, also provided a strong sense of identity for some persons, and still does so, even though the effective capacity of this tradition to overcome real evil has largely been refuted by history.

Identity as a Good of Tradition

What is the place of the good of identity in a primary tradition? One of the purposes which traditions have served is, undoubtedly, sustaining group and personal identity. It was noted earlier that some authors, in particular Walter Kasper, see a primary role of tradition in enabling us to find and sustain our identity. It can be accepted that one of the goods of a tradition is the sustaining of a sense of identity. A community which has no identity of belief cannot provide the stable meanings needed to make sense of the process of defeating evil and fostering good. It cannot promote good, if it does not know what its goods are.

In other words, the community of the tradition cannot fulfil its fundamental purpose unless it has an identifiable moral doctrine and the equivalent "metaphysical" doctrine to make sense of that. Or again, unless it has such a doctrine, it simply does not know what to communicate to others, so as to enable them to participate in the process of overcoming evil and promoting good. But the primary good of authentic tradition is not to provide a sense of identity, but to overcome evil and promote good. Where identity becomes the primary good of a tradition, there can emerge intense conflict with other traditions so that the commitment to overcoming evil and promoting good is set aside. This issue will need to be taken up again in the subsequent discussion of religious tradition.

Tradition and Evil

From what has been said, it emerges that there are certain structures which tradition must have if it is to be a tradition and fulfil the basic task of a tradition as this has been described. A tradition which is not in good order will not be capable of overcoming evil. However, there have been traditions which were believed by their inhabitants to be aimed at overcoming evil, but where the evil was misconceived. A clear example would be the anti-Semitic sub-tradition within the Catholic tradition. I would propose that we can say that a tradition is in basic good order, when it can, perhaps only after it has become aware of its culpable participation in a crime, discern the evil and seek to eliminate it. A sign of moral authenticity is when a tradition can detect evil within itself, and, without collapsing, find the capacity to the overcome that evil and promote the good which had been damaged. It might well be necessary to incorporate resources from outside the tradition, but the capacity to do this is an indication of the genuineness of the tradition. For example, it may damage Catholics' sense of identity to have to call on external help to deal with the problem of paedophilia, but where the tradition can effectively incorporate such resources, this is an indication of its inherent capacity to deal with and overcome evil.

Grounds for Selecting Tradition

Are there rational grounds for choosing one tradition rather than another? It is being proposed that there are such grounds and they are the capacity of a tradition to identify and overcome evil and promote good. The identifying of evil must include not only physical evil, for example, death, but the morally culpable causing of that death. If a tradition has no resources for grasping and dealing with that aspect of evil, it cannot be said to be capable of overcoming evil. If a tradition does not have such capacities then there would be no fundamental, moral reason for committing oneself to that tradition.

When a person engages in a tradition of this kind, and participates in the shared practical reasoning which forms its substance, he becomes aware of the evil, of the attractiveness of overcoming of that evil and the affirmation of good. But, at the same time,

he becomes aware of the impossibility of achieving this. But if the tradition shows itself capable at least to some degree of overcoming of evil and promoting good, then the task reveals itself as an impossible possibility. It is not that a person realizes that he has an "idea" of the infinite, which he could not have produced and which must come from God: it is rather that he finds the capacity to overcome evil, which he does not come from himself and therefore must come from "God." The "rational proof" for the existence of God, emerges in the engagement of practical reason in the overcoming of evil, which would be utterly impossible where there no God, God being thought of as one who is actively engaged in overcoming evil. This "proof", or rather "intimation", does not require that all evil be overcome, but that we find within ourselves a capacity to overcome evil, which is only explicable if it comes from God.

The Christian Tradition

It is such a primary tradition, in the sense described above, that has been adopted as its historical embodiment by the Christian Tradition. The Christian tradition began with the testimony of the disciples to the overcoming of real evil, that is, the historical, real death of Jesus of Nazareth. From their testimony there emerged the doctrine of the Resurrection. In the Resurrection, God in Christ overcomes evil by transforming its historical embodiment, as made concrete in the wounded and dead body of Jesus, into the resurrected body. Jesus gives himself in accepting voluntarily his death and thus transforming it from being simply an effect of evil into a mode of self-giving.

This is the first mode of overcoming evil: it does not allow the physical reality of death and suffering to negate his giving of himself for others. This giving continues after his physical death through those who have received from him the capacity to give to others. This is the human dimension of the Catholic tradition. But in faith, those who take up that tradition, see it as the expression of a personal victory over death on the part of Jesus. His self-giving is continued through his risen body as the "instrument," as St. Thomas would say, of his giving. Jesus' self-giving is accepted by the Father, so that he now becomes totally one with God whose very nature is self-giving and so he, Christ, becomes the source of gifted good for all. But that giving, again, expresses itself in the human tradition in history. The overcoming of evil which is made actual in the risen body of the Lord, is, through that body, actualised further in the self-giving of Christians in the effort to overcome evil and give life.

Christ risen overcomes "objective" real evil, both in the form of physical death, and in the inner death we call sin, present, not in Christ himself, but in all other human beings. His obedience in accepting real death, negates the disobedience of Adam by which the real inner death entered the history of humankind (cf. Philippians 2:6-11). God's action in Christ thus negates the inner, subject-based evil embedded in the "self" which refuses both to receive and to give and so cannot be open to others and cannot participate in the process of overcoming evil and promoting good. Thus, the overcoming of evil and the promotion of good was achieved consummately in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Where "good" meant the overcoming of the real evil of death, it now has a new, positive sense as the gift of new life given by God.

The human tradition which is taken up by the Christian tradition, thus entails the confrontation and unveiling of evil in its most virulent form: violent death as the expression of hatred. Thus, this Tradition, considered in its human, social structures, is a true tradition because it emerged from the real overcoming of evil and continues to overcome evil through the propagation of good. This is its human truth. It is a "human"

truth in the sense that it identifies a real evil and seeks to overcome that evil. Thus, the tradition verifies itself, as human processes, insofar as it continues to overcome real evil and promote good. This human good does not consist in the actual overcoming of all evil within history; to claim such would be to put forward an utopian illusion. But to verify itself the tradition must continually engage in seeking to overcome evil.

In doing this it can claim to offer reasonable grounds why people can commit themselves to it. On the other hand, it is only if does continue to seek to overcome evil, that it can claim to be an historical embodiment of that overcoming of evil and triumph of good, which is expressed in the doctrine of the Resurrection. As the historical embodiment of God's overcoming evil in the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead, the Tradition becomes an expression of divine truth as actively engaged in history. But the human truth is not separate from this divine truth; it is its expression in concrete historical form.

The suggestion, noted above, that the Tradition has a "sacramental" element can be interpreted in the light of these reflections. Tradition, as explained here, is not simply a participation in a kind of neo-Platonic idea transcending history, it is an active embodiment of the divine saving activity in history, overcoming evil and realizing good, in the act of raising Jesus from the dead. This can be linked to St. Thomas's metaphysics of the process of being, or the giving of being which was described above. The divine saving act in history may be interpreted as an extension, by the free act of God, of the procession of being. Understood in this way the rather weak philosophical notion of "participation," as the participation of ideas in ideas, acquires historical meaning and actuality. But it does so in the actual encounter of Jesus with real evil, as death caused by hatred, and the overcoming of that in resurrection.

The uniqueness of the Christian Tradition is that it can accept the ultimate demand of a genuine human tradition, overcoming real evil, and join that to a transcendent faith in the overcoming of evil by divine action. The overcoming of evil in the person of Christ, is, at the same time, both a transcendent reality and the overcoming of a real historical evil, real, that is, in the form of a real, historical death.

We can have a human "faith" in the truth of the human tradition of the Catholic community because it has shown the capacity to overcome real evil. This faith finds its supporting evidence for example, in the active engagement of Christians in the care of AIDS patients. But this human faith is taken up by transcendent faith in God who, in Christ, has overcome evil at a fundamental level. Faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead becomes faith in a God in whom there is no trace of evil in any form; who is pure good. But such faith is in a God who actively overcomes evil and communicates good, it is not faith in an "idea," but in a person.

Truth is to be understood not in terms of a "platonic" ontological truth, of participation in an idea, truth is made actual in the overcoming of evil as death and sin, in the resurrection as the giving of life, both physical and spiritual. Meaning in tradition is the interpretation of such action as the gift of God as self-giver, whose self-giving is made historical in the self-giving of Jesus in death, and in his resurrection, by which he becomes mysteriously fully one with the source of all giving, the Father. Truth is not the "product" of history as Hegelian thought would have it; it is enacted in the history of actions which overcome evil and promote good, in accord with the teleological structure of tradition. That teleology will be fulfilled in the eschatological completion, which will not be a product of human history, but its completion through the completion by divine gift.

We believe the truth of God, because it is revealed in the conquest of evil, which is the Resurrection, which is the actualization of the giving of good. We can then believe in

the human project itself in a new way, namely as the embodiment of that divine project. Such a transcendent faith can sustain a human faith, even when evil may seem for a time to be triumphant.

At this point it is possible to suggest links with the more recent philosophies of the gift and givenness.[63] I would propose that it is within tradition, so understood, that the self is constituted. The "me" is passively constituted as Marion proposes, but it is passive in receiving from the tradition. But what it receives, is not just any kind of gift, but the capacity to overcome evil and to do good. The doing of good is concretely expressed in the giving of gifts to others, so as to capacitate them to overcome evil and do good, or give gifts. The self and others together sustain and promote the tradition. "Self" or identity is received as a gift, and affirmed in the giving of gifts, so that the "self" takes on meaning as being a unique receiver and giver, who contributes to the goals of the tradition.

The philosophies of gift thus expand the notion of tradition. They, the philosophies of gift, also bring us to the borders of religious awareness. The awareness of the nothingness which stands beyond the limit of being and of the evil deep within us, brings us to an awareness of the "impossible." We must face the reality that giving genuinely to others is impossible for us. From this emerges an awareness of the need to which the divine gift responds. What is impossible to us, becomes possible through God's gift. But there is always another dimension of evil, the inner evil which makes it impossible for us to want to receive and give gifts, and which makes the self unwilling even to acknowledge the gift of creation. This is what Christians call sin. Here emerges the necessity of another kind of receptivity and another kind of gift; this Christians call "grace." Thus, the testimony which gives rise to Tradition begins as testimony to the gift of being which overcomes nothingness and as testimony to the gift of grace, which overcomes inner evil.

The Catholic tradition, because it seeks to develop a humanly effective process for overcoming evil, can therefore accept the strategies for overcoming real evil developed by other traditions. In this respect we cannot fail to respect, for example, the Enlightenment tradition's efforts to overcome some real evils, for example, the practice of torture and the death penalty. The acceptance of these gains into the Catholic tradition, was, I suggest, often hindered by a quite inauthentic concern to insist on the secondary, instrumental good of the identity of the Catholic tradition. Those who oppose the rejection of the death penalty may argue that the Church cannot accept that it should be rejected, because the Catholic Tradition has accepted it for centuries, while the opposite view is the product of "pagan" Enlightenment. This is, in fact, an argument based on the good of affirming identity; this is our doctrine and if we abandon it we will lose our identity. As has been show above, identity cannot be the fundamental good of tradition: to make it so is to subvert the Tradition.

The criterion for discerning which moral structures of can and should be incorporated into the Catholic tradition, is to be found in the basic rule of genuine human tradition: what overcomes real evil and promotes real good is to be accepted into the Tradition. On the other hand, this becomes the rule for discerning what should be excluded from the Christian tradition even though it may have endured in some form as part of the content of that Tradition for a long time. It is not the long term presence of certain moral ideas, doctrines or practices in the Tradition which is the ultimate and decisive criteria for their belonging in the Tradition. To claim this would be, once more, to make identity, in the sense of unchanging, same doctrine, a fundamental good of Tradition.

---

[63] Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: A Beginners Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 144.

Thus, when questions arise about certain items in the Tradition, we should not argue that we are obliged to continue to accept this because we have always believed it, meaning that continued acceptance of this is needed to sustain our sense of identity. Rather we should ask, will preserving this enable us to continue to pursue effectively the goals of the Tradition, as described, or will it impede the realization of those goals? It has become clearer, for example, that maintaining the death penalty no longer serves the overcoming of evil. So far, these reflections have concerned doctrines more directly related to morality. What might be said of "doctrines" in the sense of teachings which are proposed to be believed?

It used by said that believing certain doctrine was "necessary for salvation" as if the failure to believe would be an act of disobedience to God, and so merit damnation. However, it would seem better to say that these doctrines are necessary for salvation, because only if we live these doctrines, will we be saved. Such doctrines are sustained within the Tradition, fundamentally to give meaning to and to support the process of overcoming death in resurrection; they express both the divine reality of that process and its human realization, but never without reference to the concrete, historical overcoming of evil. I will seek to illustrate the connection between doctrine and action to overcome evil by giving some examples.

In the Eucharist, the sacramental changing of the species is not merely a change of the "substance" of bread into the "substance" of the body of Christ. The process of change which is made sacramentally present is that by which the body of Jesus as the bearer of the effects of real evil, becomes the risen body in which the effects of real evil are overcome and which is the source of the capacity to give life, physical and spiritual. It is this process of change which is carried on in the social commitment of the Church, that is, the continuation of the real change of the broken bleeding, dead body into the whole, living body of the Risen one, in concrete works of caring for the suffering.

The doctrines of the Tradition serve to specify the real evil to be overcome. This is clearly the case with the doctrine of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ as a saving event. The actual historical element of that doctrine specifies the real evil as death. But the full understanding of that doctrine also specifies the real evil as the inner death of sin which is the fruit of the refusal to accept God's gifts. The evil overcome in the event of Jesus self-giving includes real death, but also the inner evil of sin. Thus the overcoming of evil and the promotion of good, which are the goals of the tradition, requires both the overcoming of real death and of the inner death. Without the meaning-giving, directive role of doctrine the "moral" engagement required by the Tradition would remain obscure and so ineffective.

There are other examples where the expressions of belief point to the real evil to be overcome and how it is to be overcome. For example, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception expresses a process of overcoming real evil, namely that evil we discover deep within us, the assertion of our own ego in its refusal to receive the divine gift and to give it to others, resulting in the will to dominate others, which we call original sin. This is overcome in Mary and the same process can be continued in us, if, like her, we are prepared to accept the gift from God which makes this possible. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is true because it expresses the inherent meaning and teleology of the Tradition. This is "made true" by the action of God in history in the person of Mary. It is made true in a derived sense by the same action in the "spiritual" lives of believers.

The doctrine of the Assumption expresses the overcoming of the effects of evil, death and corruption, wrought first in the person of Jesus in his death and Resurrection

and now extended to Mary as the first of the community to be taken up into that process. The doctrine of the Assumption has its historically effective meaning and truth when we engage with the Tradition in overcoming the evil of death.

Doctrines are never merely "ideas" to be faithfully preserved and communicated: they give meaning and direction to action to overcome evil, and unless that connection is maintained they become mere abstractions. This is not to reduce doctrine to ethics; it is simply to argue that a doctrine which no longer gives meaning and direction to the process of overcoming evil and promoting good, has becomes an abstraction. As such it is no longer a part of the real Tradition.

The view of tradition and Tradition which has been offered here, would no doubt, be challenged by those who insist that, to be acceptable, a notion of tradition must conform to the norms of "postmodern" theory. Postmodernism does not necessarily require a rejection of tradition. It is worth noting that Jacques Derrida, often considered a key proponent of the postmodern (although he wanted nothing to do with the word) did not at all reject tradition. But he did not want traditions which tie our hands and wall us in.[64] I have argued in this article that in accepting and committing ourselves to a tradition we necessarily accept binding norms, otherwise we have not committed ourselves to the tradition. Further, if our commitment is to a primary tradition we are committed to a process of overcoming evil and promoting good, which requires a unity and stability of purpose and binding moral rules. Derrida himself with his program of "deconstruction" required that we carefully examine all concepts to see whether they confine our vision and exclude the "other." The same laser-beam of deconstruction could be turned on theories of the post-modern which require that the notion of tradition must conform to their preconceived concepts and exclude the rich and complex "otherness" of traditions, some features of which I have sought to bring to light in this article.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to develop a notion of Tradition, its truth and authority, which takes seriously both the past understanding of the term and contemporary insights. It includes a critical correction of some forms of the participation model. It can be said to be true not in a rather facile "platonic" sense of a participation in ideas, but in the actual sense of St. Thomas's metaphysics of the process or giving of being. But this itself needs to be supplemented by connecting it with concrete history, that is what actually happened in the death and resurrection of Christ. The metaphysics is an interpretation of this historical reality. Thus, we bypass the postmodern critique of metaphysics which was aimed at a conceptual metaphysics, a concept which claimed to enclose reality within itself. Here, on the contrary, metaphysics emerges as an interpretation, giving meaning to the particular, contingent even of death and resurrection.

Our conclusions also imply a critique of the juridic, authority based notion of Tradition. This is not to say that there is no place for authority and no role for the Magisterium in regard to the Tradition. Tradition, as an historical process cannot do without an authoritative instance. It is the proper role of the Magisterium to declare what belongs to the Tradition and what does not. But there is a need to clarify the intrinsic grounds for acceptance or refusal: this has been the purpose of this article.

---

[64] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1997), 181.

A critique of the communicative-critical model is also needed. In some of its formulations this model may give the impression that what is at stake is the communication of conceptual propositions of belief or practice and arguments about them. The Christian Tradition, it has been suggested here, is primarily goal directed action in history, which however, requires conceptual notions to express its meaning and so guide its course.

Author: *Brian Johstone CSsR, is a widely published Moral Theologian and is currently a Professor at the Alfonsian Academy in Rome. Previously he taught at the Catholic University of America, and at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne.*

Email: *bjohnstone@alfonsiana.edu*