

Tradition: The Concept and Its Claim Upon Us

Josef Pieper

ONE WONDERS WHETHER tradition is not actually anti-historical. It stands in stark contrast to the most impressive and most visible strand of the historical process, namely, the ever-advancing scientific investigation of the world and mankind, the ever more deeply technical harnessing of the energy of the cosmos, the revolutionary achievements that each generation must make its own if it wishes to remain at the cutting edge of its time.

Society itself is in constant flux, though the direction of change is not easy to determine. Hegel speaks quite unperturbedly of progress in the consciousness of freedom; however, there are other formulations, such as the one that anticipates the gradual transformation of mankind into an army of workers. Sometimes this societal change accelerates as in an explosion; the revolutionary coup is an ever-recurring historical phenomenon.

Although these strands and forms of historical occurrences differ from one another, they have one thing in common: they are all ordered toward change, transformation, upheaval, revolution; they all, as it were, go with the times. Things ought not to remain as they have been until now.

But tradition is quite specifically not concerned with what is new; it is not concerned with development, or with

change or revolution. It is concerned with what went before, with the already given, with that which can be preserved in its identity throughout all changes, throughout all time—indeed, despite time.

Suddenly we find quite different words to express this. There is talk neither of new advances nor of progress. Instead we hear: "Let the Word stand as it is!" Men fiercely resist, as we read in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, "another Gospel."

Even the Marxists speak of their "doctrines of classical authors." Although these doctrines were formulated more than a century ago, they should, according to the Marxists, still be inviolable today. Even in Marxist circles we hear of "deviation," "orthodoxy," "accommodation," "aggiornamento," "revisionism," "reformation," and "de-mythologization." All of this makes sense only in the context of tradition, where the preservation of something originally given is seen as an elemental task, indeed, as a matter of life or death.

The question arises whether tradition, the concept and the reality, has a legitimate place only in the realms of religious faith, of theology, or of some "*Weltanschauung*." Actually a surprise awaits anyone who is interested simply in "tradition" and, with that interest, turns

to reference works. He will discover in current philosophical dictionaries, for example, that the entry for tradition is simply missing. "Traditionalism" can be found, but not "Tradition." Theological dictionaries speak extensively of tradition, but they proceed directly to a particular theological problem, "Scripture and Tradition." In this case, the concept of tradition is so restricted as to go against its very meaning.

When the debate over the validity of tradition was thoroughly aired for the first time, Pascal formulated the issue in the following terms: one must differentiate between those disciplines that are based on the arguments of reason and experience and those whose basis is tradition and authority. As a major example of the first category he mentions physics and, of the second, theology. So it is not so terribly out of the question to conceive of tradition within the realm of faith, theology, or "*Weltanschauung*." But before we can speak more precisely, the concept of tradition itself—as it is used in living speech and thought—must be clearly grasped and adequately formulated. What, then, are the elements out of which we build the concept of tradition?

It is quite apparent that whenever one speaks of what occurs within the process known as tradition, one necessarily thinks of two "partners": the one who passes something on and the other who receives something. This "something"—which is occasionally understood and designated as tradition, as the permanence of institutions, as traditional formulas of belief, as a "deposit," etc.—can belong to every conceivable realm of existence. It can consist of a song, a custom, a feast, an institution, a norm of behavior (how people address one another, how one greets another, how one introduces oneself, how one acts at a church service, how one receives a guest, and so forth).

The *traditum* can also be a teaching, a

statement about reality, so that we will speak from that point on, not exclusively, to be sure, but with emphasis, of the passing on of truth. And one must be clear that even in a custom, a feast, or an institution, a teaching or doctrine can most certainly be incorporated.

There is still more to be said about the relationship of the partners who in that process known as tradition come to be involved with one another; and it is quite irrelevant whether one is dealing here with individuals or generations. Obviously, one finds that when the "handing on" occurs something quite different from a conversation or a dialogue takes place: one partner speaks, the other listens.

One may want to interject here: Is there no dialogue between generations, between fathers and sons, if they take one another seriously? Indeed, does there not *have to be* dialogue? To which I would respond: naturally! But between generations many things occur in the normal course of events which are not tradition. Also, the working out of tradition itself *in concreto* may sometimes be almost indistinguishable from a discussion or a dialogue. And yet tradition is in principle something quite different from a discussion.

Even in the Platonic dialogues, which can be seen as the classical example of a discussion—Socrates loved to refer to it as a common undertaking ("Let us explore that together")—even in these one can very easily overlook those boundaries where the aggregate condition suddenly changes. And out of the conversation, out of the dialogue, in which all are equally entitled to participate—friends, students, opponents—something unexpectedly different arises, an act of tradition, an act of handing something on.

Towards the end of the dialogue *Gorgias*, when Socrates recounts the myth of judgment after death, we find something quite different—seen in the internal structure of the myth itself—from

what we encountered previously in the dialogue. We are no longer dealing with a discussion, but rather with a "passing on" of something, with tradition in the strict sense. As noted earlier, between generations a great deal more occurs than simply dialogue and the passing on of what is contained within the dynamic of tradition. We encounter something that might be designated as a collective learning process. In fact, it is possible that this collective learning process takes up most of what plays itself out between generations.

But again it must be stressed that learning is one thing, while receiving something which is passed on, embracing something which is given in tradition, is quite another. Similarly, to teach and "to hand something over through tradition" are two completely different acts, even when they can so blend together that they are almost indistinguishable. But it is worthwhile, I believe, when using such basic concepts, to be very exact, even though one may perhaps become a bit impatient with the process of clarification.

What, then, constitutes the difference between teaching and handing something on through tradition? When a researcher communicates his findings and the results of his own research to his students, teaching undoubtedly takes place. Yet, here one could not speak of passing something on through a tradition. The word simply is not used in that manner. We speak of tradition only when something *not* our own, but rather something which we have ourselves already received, is passed on so that it can be received afresh and passed on further still.

In fact, that would almost work as a definition, as a formal conceptualization of tradition: "I have received what I have passed on to you." "I have passed on to you that which I have received." "What they received from their fathers they have passed on to their sons." "*Quod a*

patribus acceperunt, hoc filiis tradiderunt." These three sentences (the first two are from the First Letter to the Corinthians and the third sentence comes from Augustine) formulate almost exactly the inner structure of tradition.

Naturally the process of tradition, of passing something on, is completed when the last in line, the youngest generation at any given time, receives and accepts the *traditum* which at first is still merely a *tradendum*, something to be passed on. When, for whatever reason, that does not occur, then, strictly speaking, the "handing on" simply has not occurred—not yet.

One reason for the lack of receptivity can very probably be the manner in which what is being handed on is offered and given; and it is customary that obstacles of this sort are always being erected by the generation which happens to be at the helm. One can hardly do anything more hopeless than to tell a young man, in response to the critical question as to why something which has been received ought to be passed on, "That is simply tradition."

I was once the guest of a family in Calcutta which daily had the ritual of the orthodox Hindus performed by a Brahman in a room prepared solely for that purpose. The sons of the family, university students whom I knew and who had taken me with them, simply laughed in my face when I asked, "What is the meaning of what the priest is doing?" "It is all idiocy!" was their reply. And when I then turned around and asked the father, he shrugged his shoulders and said, "This has been done for a thousand years." As I shortly thereafter left the house with one of the two sons, he complained vehemently—and, it seemed to me, justifiably—that he never received any other explanation.

Whoever truly wants to hand something on must not speak of tradition. Rather he must take the pains to see to it

that the contents of tradition, the old truths, are made ever present through a living language, through creative translations, through constant confrontation not only directly with the present but above all else with the future. With this it becomes clear that the "act of tradition" itself is an exacting business, and that the living process of handing on a *traditum* is a dynamic matter.

But now a word should be added about the reception of what is to be passed on. How does this actually come about? The last in line should truly receive a share of the tradition. To pose the question more precisely: What kind of act is it in which the *traditum* is received in such a way that the process of tradition, or the process of handing on what has been received, is actually completed or even realized at all? It is clear that this act is different from the matter of merely receiving information. It simply does not occur by the same process by which one receives facts. An individual, a historian for instance, can possess a very exact or a broad knowledge of the *tradita*, of the facts of a tradition, without necessarily having a share in the tradition, without thereby "standing in the tradition."

There is a thought-provoking reflection by Karl Jaspers that perhaps one day all the pertinent documents will be available and known, but that, nonetheless, tradition will have disappeared and will have been destroyed—whereby he brought into the debate the very difficult and many-sided problem of "Tradition and History." Stated briefly, it must be said that the reception of the *tradita*, or facts of the tradition, naturally presupposes that they are known. Still, this accepting of the facts not only is something fundamentally different from tradition, but also in some way actually threatens it. In order to see and understand this, one only need think of the situation that has resulted in Christianity from the historical-critical exegesis of the New

Testament.

The act we are now considering, the act by which the last one in line receives a *traditum*, the act in which the process of "handing on" encloses itself and in which it terminates—this act obviously has the structure of "allowing something to be said"; I receive something offered me and handed over to me. I myself do not simply take it. In fact, I *cannot* simply take it to myself.

On the other hand, I do not accept the tradition simply because it is "tradition," but rather because I am thoroughly convinced that it is true and valid. Now, admittedly, I cannot prove its validity, and here I am fundamentally in the same position Socrates was with the mythical wisdom about a judgment after death. If it were otherwise, then I would not need to receive the message from someone else; then I would already know it myself. What all this means is that the offer and the reception of the tradition have the structure of belief. Indeed, it is belief since in the final analysis, belief means nothing other than to accept something as true and valid, not on the basis of one's own insight and experience, but rather insofar as one trusts someone else. We are not yet dealing with the religious concept. It is rather the quite common concept of belief, as we normally use it.

This is precisely where the acceptance of *traditum* differs from learning, and tradition differs from that collective learning process we call cultural progress. It is true that, according to the famous saying of Aristotle, the students must also have faith ("whoever wants to learn must believe"). But that is true only for the first step of learning. At the beginning of the learning process one finds not critical proof, but rather an act of trust. And without this uncritical beginning one would never achieve critical self-sufficiency, which will later take what was originally received and slowly change

and transform it into something of one's own. Only when one has brought this about can we say that one, in the strict sense, has learned something. One can then take as one's own what has been learned and correct it, augment it, enrich it, and pass it on to those who follow, so that it can be learned once again by them, at first uncritically received and thereafter tested, verified, enlarged, strengthened. Those who learn should not merely receive uncritically what has been given and believe it. That is something we always observe in the so-called developing lands, and we consider it lamentable.

In the realm of tradition the concept of "progress" is almost out of place, as it does not touch the heart of the actual process of tradition. I have already referred to the saying of Saint Augustine: "*Quod a patribus acceperunt, hoc filiis tradiderunt.*" In this sentence the *hoc* is of particular significance. That which they have received from their fathers, *this*, and precisely this, they pass on to their sons. That which is passed on in this "process of tradition" is *precisely* what is received, so that the last recipient receives from his father exactly what the first one in line had passed on to his son. And this is exactly what is intended, that nothing be added to what was first received. And nothing of what was originally given should be left behind, or left out, or forgotten! And so, quite correctly, the concept of "remembrance" has always been closely associated with the concept of tradition. What is common to them both is that something that once occurred or was experienced or was said should be preserved in our consciousness, and as something now present in its full identity.

Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) called tradition "the memory of the human race," and his student Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949) speaks of it as the "ontological memory of cultures." But the act of

remembering means that one not only does not forget anything. It also means that no one adds anything to it. It would be a meaningless use of the word if someone claimed that he remembered something which went beyond what he had actually experienced. This falsification would be almost worse than simply forgetting.

In answer to the question as to why it should be good to maintain in the present something from the past (what is tradition for?), it must be said that, according to the proverb, it is as necessary for man to be reminded as to be educated. Expressed differently, one can come to grief not only by missing out on the ongoing process of learning—by missing one's "train connection," as it were, as mankind moves toward the future. One can come to grief also by forgetting or losing something essential from the past.

Is that which is passed on in tradition truly essential? Is it alone valid and true? We have said that the receiving of what is passed on has the structure of an act of faith. But who is actually believed in this act and on the basis of what? According to what Socrates believed, as he himself said, judgment after death is "*not* merely a story, as they all are." Rather, it is a truth. And it is a fact that through guilt and punishment mankind lost its original perfection; that God holds the beginning, middle, and end of all things in His hands; that the world has come forth from the unrestrained goodness of a Creator and Founder.

On what basis is all this taken as true? Socrates is clear that one cannot prove all this. Experience and rational argumentation hardly go to the very core of the matter. Indeed, Socrates regards all this not only as true but also of such validity that he orders his life and his death in accord with it. But on what basis actually? Merely because it "was said from of old"? This "*palai legetai*"—an ancient Greek saying, "It was said from of

old”—surfaces repeatedly in the Platonic dialogues. But one must believe a *someone* and not this hazy, neutral *palai legetai*.

When one looks more closely, one sees that Socrates actually names a “someone,” or more exactly, he names a number of “someones.” He speaks of “the Ancients,” of the *palaioi* and of the *archaioi*; in fact, not only does Plato call upon them, but so does even the far more critical Aristotle, who is not particularly enamored of myths. These Ancients function as the guarantors of a former wisdom that has been passed on. but who are these Ancients who strikingly remain anonymous?

Let us look first at those who are *not* meant: the old men, the ones laden with years, those who have experienced much, the men with the snow-white hair. The expression refers much more to “the early ones,” to those who stand close to the beginning; and their counterparts are not the young, but rather the latest ones, those who were born after them.

Yet, that is not the entire Platonic answer to the question, Who are the Ancients? The actual answer presses much more deeply and has unbelievably rich consequences. The Ancients, says Plato, are those who “were better than ourselves and dwelt nearer the gods, and who passed on to us who have been lately born this gift in the form of a saying drawn from a divine source.” Here, on the one hand, we see that the Ancients are accorded an authority not only incomparable with any other in the human realm, but also never even encountered there. On the other hand, it is clearly stated that it is not the Ancients themselves whom Socrates believes in the final analysis, insofar as he accepts what is passed on as being true. Rather, what he alone finally trusts is the message in the dialogue *Philebus*, brought down to earth as a gift of the gods through an unknown Prometheus. One can confi-

dently designate as “revelation” only what has been stated by the gods. This message contains the essence of the concept and the reality of tradition.

Basically two ideas are contained within this concept. First of all, not everyone has his own direct access to revelation. In fact, “Everyman”—even if he were so much above average as to be considered a genius—can gain access to this divine message only by binding himself, through hearing, to its first recipients, that is, to the Ancients.

To acknowledge this contradicts the claim to “free subjectivity,” which has justifiably been called the specifically modern form of religion. It is clear that if the individual consciousness can directly gain access to the absolute, then tradition is not needed.

And secondly, there is implied in the Platonic reaching back to the Ancients the trusting certitude that, in the passing of generations and the epochs of historical time, there is a bond, a comradeship with the “Ancients,” with the first recipients of revelation who make possible and indeed validate the passing on of the identical divine message all the way to the last person in line.

But the truly exciting thing about this Platonic concept—and here we are not interested in acting as Platonic exegetes or historians of ideas—is that, when all this is considered in detail, it fits the Christian answer to these questions. It may even be fundamentally identical with it.

For example, when one considers the individual elements of the Platonic characterization of the “Ancients” (closer to the divine sphere than your average person; better than we, by which is meant probably not greater moral integrity but rather a rich, fuller existence; earliest to receive a message drawn from a divine source and pass it on to others)—if one considers these conceptual elements, then it can hardly come as a surprise that

there is at least a profound analogy between this description of the Ancients and the conceptualizations with which Christian theology designates the prophet, the divinely inspired messenger, the charismatic, the inspired—in the strict sense—author of a holy book.

The commonality, for which “analogy” is perhaps too weak a word, consists in the fact that both the Ancients and the Prophets, as the first recipients and transmitters of a *theios logos*, are thought of as dealing with divine speech. It is clear that there is a whole bundle of additional questions hidden here, questions above all of a highly controversial theological nature about which we cannot now appropriately speak at length. Nevertheless, I would like to formulate the thesis that we are both justified and also required to see that the revelation and the promise which came to us in Christ are somehow bound up with the most ancient beginning of the history of mankind believed and preserved as holy by those who have made up pre- and non-Christian humanity.

Finally, the key phrase of *palai legetai*, which forever in human history has meant the resounding speech of God, is found not only in the Platonic dialogues but also in the first verse of the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. And yet the question of the ultimate binding character of tradition cannot be answered any differently today. The answer was given by Socrates and Plato.

That each generation at first calls into question its duty toward tradition is thoroughly comprehensible, as well as normal and proper. But it must be said that the fact that something which was thought, said, and done of old is rethought, re-said, and re-done, is by no means in and of itself praiseworthy. The glory of tradition and of handing on the content of tradition can only be meaningfully glimpsed in the fact that, through the passing of generations, what is truly

worth preserving—and indeed must be preserved—is in truth preserved and continues to be preserved.

But it is precisely with this matter that the radical questions of youthful doubt are most concerned. How is it, the young ask, that culpability is incurred when we simply forget what has been received and can say or think or do as we please, so that we can start with a clean slate?

One can only hope that this radical question may find a hearing and receive a vital, existentially believable, equally radical, and all-inclusive answer. One can only hope that, among the many things which have accumulated as “tradition” and which are more or less worth preserving, there will in the end be only one tradition which alone must be preserved whole and intact, namely that gift or “deposit” which has been received and handed on within *holy* tradition. This is necessary because this particular *datum* of tradition springs from a divine source, because each generation of humanity needs it, and because no people or individual, however gifted, can replace it with something of their own or add to it anything of validity.

Inevitably one expects at this point the objection that there clearly exists more than simply *holy* tradition of which we have just been speaking. This objection is, of course, entirely correct. Tradition occurs wherever there are norms of conduct, customs, ideas, institutions which are handed down through generations, and which are received without being expressly called into question and then passed on again.

When one considers only briefly what was just said, it is immediately clear that such a believing reception and handing on of the content of tradition in certain areas can also be a problematical matter. More clearly stated, the appeal to tradition can occur in the wrong realm, as, for example, in the empirical sciences. With respect to the debate already mentioned,

concerned precisely with this question of the right or wrong place for tradition, Pascal spoke correctly of the “confusion of his century,” which consisted in the fact that in physics the authority of the Ancients held sway while in theology one was always hearing opinions entirely unknown to the Ancients.

Already in the thirteenth century, Albertus Magnus had pointed out that in the area of the empirical sciences the appeal to tradition was inappropriate. If I want to know whether the dolphin is a fish or a mammal, then I do not ask Aristotle, I do not refer to the Ancients, but instead I ask those who have experience in this area. Wherever truths are concerned that can be grasped through empirical observation and reason, there the appeal to tradition is simply no argument—whether this tradition is represented by Aristotle or by the Bible or by Karl Marx; for such an appeal to a canonically established author has the formal structure of an argument from tradition, which in the field of science has exactly as much significance as an appeal to Aristotle. Moreover, it hinders scientific progress no less than does the most arid conservatism of a late scholastic Aristotelian. In this way, tradition, *true* tradition, *legitimate* tradition, is discredited anew. but, as already noted, holy tradition is by no means the only one which is legitimate.

The common life of humanity requires the validity of worldly traditions as well. It needs them for the liberation and the facilitation of social tasks, as well as those of individual consciousness. Human energies can then, unhindered, be directed to their own tasks when the reigning social traditions are simply understood, such as how one greets another on the street, how one thanks another for a little help, how one expresses congratulations or sympathy, how and when one speaks of intimate or private matters.

Hans Georg Gadamer says: “The real-

ity of customs is and remains to a large extent an authority of tradition and custom. They are taken over in freedom but are in no way created by free insight or established thereby as to their validity.” Life would become unbearable if our individual acts in the course of a day had to be decided in each and every case through critical reflection.

Nonetheless, when it comes to the matter of obligation there is an enormous difference between the observance of custom and that of holy tradition—one could even say, between the observance of “traditions” and the observance of “tradition.” This difference, which is quite relevant, can be made clear to some extent even to the most humble intellect.

What is there that we do not call traditional? There are traditional times of eating, traditional dress, colloquialisms, gestures; above all, there are traditional feasts and festivals. The feast is a particularly good example. It has been said that nowhere else does the power of tradition manifest itself so clearly as in the celebration of a feast. However, it is also the case that nowhere else does the problematic inherent within tradition come so clearly to light. One celebrates the new year, one celebrates jubilees, one observes founding dates, birthdays, battles won and lost—and, of course, there is always Mardi Gras. And one observes the first day of the week, one celebrates with festivity Christmas, Easter, and the memorials of martyrs.

Simply by enumerating these observances the differences we are discussing are highlighted. To be sure, there are no objections to the observances of birthdays or national independence days. And, indeed, it would be unthinkable and unloving not to celebrate the silver wedding anniversary of one’s parents or the sixtieth birthday of a friend. Yet, if the times do not permit, these worldly festivities can on occasion be observed only with difficulty. Presumably, in the years

1944-1945, Mardi Gras was not celebrated in Cologne. Indeed, some holidays simply fall into disuse or even are formally abolished without causing any harm. But not to celebrate Easter or Christmas, even in the bombed wreckage of the war—or to abolish these holidays—would clearly be a breach of an incomparably grave obligation. Here we encounter the obligation that inheres only in *holy* tradition. When the sons cease to celebrate the cultic feasts their fathers had celebrated, when the *tradita* of the holy tradition are no longer received and passed on, then one can, in the strict sense of the word, speak of the loss of tradition, or of a break with tradition, or of being without tradition. We sometimes use such words too loosely, but here they would apply precisely.

It is normally the case that the heart of what is to be preserved grows and entwines itself in and through the concrete shapes of historical existence and also in and through the customs of a more random or non-essential kind. And that is the reason—though the matter is very complicated—why a change in externals, in things in and of themselves non-essential, most probably *can* and *will* threaten the true preservation of the essence of tradition, so that one who too quickly cuts away or denigrates the so-called “outer” traditions does something quite problematical.

A researcher of folk customs once told me that when the members of a particular folk group stopped baking their pastries in a particular way, he knew they were no longer going to church. It is difficult to say what is the cause and what the consequence; however, things become intertwined with one another.

On the other hand—and this seems more important to me—the more decisively, consciously, and energetically the will directs itself toward preserving what is finally worth preserving, and must be preserved, then so much greater are the

number of changes in externals, without which there would be the danger of a break, which can be dealt with and endured.

A true tradition-consciousness acts quite freely and independently in the face of a conservatism that frets with disproportionate anxiety about the preservation of “traditions.” Undoubtedly there is a concern for the traditional that is so preoccupied with the non-essential, historical appearance of “tradition” that has attached itself to the true tradition, that it actually hinders a passing on of those things that are worth preserving. There is a conservatism which blocks tradition; and there are types of conservatism that do not recognize a tradition if it occurs under new forms.

However, the re-formulation of tradition is always a new task precisely because the “original text” must be made present in its full integrity. The Biblical account of creation states: “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” What this sentence means in truth must be expressed ever anew and interpreted today with an eye to all we now know from paleontology and from research about the origin of humanity. Otherwise the content of holy tradition cannot even be made present in our own day. That is, if this new formulation does not occur and is not carried out, then exactly that for which *the* tradition exists will be missed, namely, enabling an individual actually to share in the divine message which at one time was spoken in history.

To deal with this neverending task is precisely the business of theology. In fact, this *is* theology: constantly translating and editing the “original” texts of revelation under ever-changing circumstances so that they can be grasped conceptually in the historical moment in order that the tidings from divine sources intended for men—information, a pre-

cept, or even a sacrament—remain as fully identical in the present as when they were given in the past and, so to speak, retain the possibility of being grasped. But a mere reflecting in the present of the religious impulses of the day, or of those impulses that are thought to be religious, has nothing to do with true theology—even when making use of a Biblical terminology or concept.

On the other hand, the concept of tradition is simply too narrowly conceived, as in a famous monograph on the subject, when “holy tradition” is said to be nothing other than “the ecclesiastical proclamation of faith which the apostles initiated and which is carried forth by their successors with the same authority.” Speaking in a quite specifically theological sense, such a narrow definition is questionable. Whoever is convinced that long before the apostles there was something like an “original revelation” cannot well dispute the claim of a mythical tradition in the pre- and non-Christian realm, which likewise preserves through the ages a message from a divine source. The concept of an “original revelation” is somewhat present in contemporary discussions, if at all, but such important theologians as Newman, Scheebén, and Moehler apparently could not leave it out of the picture. Indeed, it has had a place in Christian theology from the earliest time. I am convinced that this concept will always recur in Christian thought.

The concept of “original revelation” means that at the very beginning of human history there stands the event of a divine message directed to humanity as a whole, a message that can be found in the holy tradition of all peoples, in their myths, more or less detectably preserved and present. It is of course correct that the mythical tradition, in order to reach its own truth, requires the cleansing, the purification, and the correction of the power of the definitive appearance

among men of the Logos. Nonetheless, it is not becoming to Christianity to ignore the dignity of the *tradita* that can be found there. In this regard, it is good to recall the Fathers of the early Church. From Justin Martyr to Origen to Augustine they unanimously championed (against the sectarian narrowness already to be found in the likes of Tertullian) the belief in the seminal power of the Word of God and spoke of the seminal grains of truth that from the beginning of the history of mankind had been efficacious in the wisdom of the peoples and in the doctrines of the philosophers.

Above all, one should not forget that the commonality of the holy tradition creates a fundamental unity of all men, which is truly a unity with reference to fundamental realities, and which, through this commonality, attempts and actually makes possible communication among men. It is probably pertinent to the calamities of today’s world that a secular culture that appears to be ready to abandon its own great tradition and betray its own origins now compels all other cultures to surrender their own *tradita* and therefore to eradicate themselves. In consequence, even the most heroic efforts to attain penetrating understanding of human existence will almost necessarily remain futile.

A word, finally, about the meaning of “the” tradition, that is, the holy tradition, for those who philosophize, that is, not the representatives of an academic discipline but rather intellectually active men who consider and methodically reflect on the question of the overall meaning of the world and, above all, of the meaning of one’s own life.

I am convinced that it depends on the authenticity, the depth, the existential drive of such philosophers whether this (as I would like to call it, contrapuntal) relationship, about which it is difficult to be precise, is actualized as holy tradition or not. It seems also to be characteristic

of those who philosophize today that they tend increasingly to leave out of consideration the *tradita* of holy tradition as they reflect on the world and existence.

Nietzsche's diagnosis of a hundred years ago seems to be more and more justified: "What seems to be most aggressively impugned today is the instinct and the will toward tradition. All institutions that owe their origin to this instinct go against the grain of the modern temper."

This quotation is directed beyond the realm of philosophical reflection; it is, however, valid and includes within it the diminishing connection with tradition and the lamentable decline of philosophical reflection on the world; above all it is especially valid where it concerns the meaning of reality in its totality—even in the realm of art. Here it must be again stressed that the rapturous, stirring power of the art of the Muses feeds itself from that same dimension of reality that is enclosed within the holy tradition. Whoever finds that too far-fetched or too "pious" can find the same idea in the aged Goethe. In his correspondence with the musician Carol Friedrich Zelter, one finds this following astonishing passage:

Every true artist is to be seen as one who preserves something that is acknowledged as *holy* and who wants to propagate it with seriousness and deliberation. Every century in its own way presses into the *saeculum* and in common seeks the holy in order to lighten burdens, to cheer the serious, against which there would be nothing at all to say as long as seriousness and merriment thereby do not perish.

In the philosophical enterprise in any event, of which alone we should now speak, it has been for some time now a matter of pressing with tremendous force principally in the *saeculum*; and it is also true that perhaps there would be nothing to say against it if only as a result the philosophical enterprise would not per-

ish—and here we speak not of a specialized academic discipline but of the intellectual life of man itself.

Two important philosophical critics of our time although formerly holding antipodal positions, each independently from the other, have indicated with exactly the same name the mental outlook that produces a willful, consciously traditionless philosophizing, closed in on itself and directed against the *holy* tradition. One of them is Karl Jaspers. He claims, with a view toward a widely accepted approach of contemporary philosophy, that the contents of the great tradition have been allowed to fall by the wayside, without which philosophy will inevitably founder and perish, resulting in a "seriousness that becomes empty." This selfsame word, "empty," resurfaces with the "western Russian" Ivanov, who has already been quoted. To the liberal historian who chooses to immerse himself in the River Lethe (the Greek mythical river of forgetfulness and oblivion), so as to wash away any remembrance of religion, philosophy, and poetry in order to emerge on the bank as naked as the first man, Ivanov offers a very decisive insight: "This freedom, achieved by way of creeping into oblivion, is empty."

One of the last discussions into which my friend Gerhard Krueger entered, before falling into two decades of silence, brings to the fore another aspect of this calamity that threatens the communal spiritual life of a humanity that has become ignorant of the holy tradition. He posits this terrifying thought: "We are living only from our inconsistency, namely, from the fact that we have not truly silenced all tradition. We face the radical fact that meaningful and common existence becomes impossible, even though no one can imagine what this will be like."

Also, and perhaps unexpectedly, one encounters a confirmation of this last thought in the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, who says: "Suppose

that the opposition to tradition would lead to its total denial, which fortunately is rather improbable, then we could rightfully speak of the end of the human world."

I do not believe that these ideas have anything to do with the literary genre of either a non-binding criticism of the present or a vague philosophy of cultural decline. Rather, they point to the unifying power of tradition, and to the fact that the decisive unity of the human race cannot be based on or authenticated by

creating one world political order, or unanimity in the cultural will, or general respect for art and science, or the technical possibilities of worldwide instantaneous communication, or a universal language, or even an international organization for athletic competition. True unity among men must have its roots in the commonality of *the* tradition—in that common participation in the holy tradition reaching back to an utterance of God Himself.

—Translated by John M. Haas

The Inevitability of Tradition

Stephen J. Tonsor

ON THE BEAUTIFUL Beaux Arts façade of the Clements Library at the University of Michigan, a library devoted to manuscripts and rare books in American history, the following inscription establishes the purposes of the library. "In the darkness dwells the people which knows its annals not." The architects did not find the inscription in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* or in *The Oxford Book of Quotations*; rather it was concocted by a local historian. Its obvious truth strengthened its rhetorical resonance.

History, which is objectified tradition, makes possible individual and collective self-awareness; makes the discernment of selfhood possible. We are, indeed, our traditions, the distillation of our experience in the written word. It is for this reason that when the past is lost, when tradition is abrogated, the individual and the collective self are lost or distorted, culture is impoverished, and the humanity of the individual is diminished. The experience of hundreds of millions of human beings living under the domination of ideological totalitarian systems in the last half century bears out this observation. The personal, the political, and the historic past is expunged and ideology presents a substitute reality, a substitute self, and a substitute history to replace the organic cultural tradition which developed over millennia of time. East

and central Europeans often do not know who their ancestors were. They kept no personal papers or correspondence for fear that family connections, personal experience, communal attachment, social and political evaluation might, if known to the political commissar or the secret police, prove fatal to them. The past, cultural tradition, and sense of self were to be buried in the files of the *Stasi* or some other police agency.

As we have observed following the decay and collapse of totalitarian ideological regimes, the surviving culture resembles a clear-cut forest floor, and the restoration of traditional cultural forms and a traditional sense of the self is a slow and difficult development not unlike the restoration of an ecological system. The ultimate destruction of tradition and the emptying of the self as depicted in dystopian novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) have, to date, never succeeded, and that for the very good reason that both nature and culture make nearly impossible the complete destruction of tradition.

As much as modernity respects change and innovation, nature and "nature's God" protect and foster permanence. The genetic code is a living record of the experience of the race. Certainly variety and uniqueness are insured by nearly