

Re-Thinking Tradition

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Albert Outler, widely named “Mr. Methodism” in his day, identified what he called the Wesleyan quadrilateral. According to Wesley, he said, the four authorities for Christian thinking are scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. I find that many Christians who do not acknowledge any special influence of Wesley share in affirming something like this.

Of course, agreeing thus far settles very few of the real issues that divide us. This is true among United Methodists as well as in the Christian community as a whole. Some years ago after the Methodist Church united with the Evangelical United Brethren, I was a member of a General Conference Commission chaired by Outler and directed to formulate material for the Discipline that dealt with the differences between the stated positions of the two denominations.

For many reasons we had no thought of coming up with a new doctrinal statement. We wanted to preserve the doctrinal statements of both the uniting denominations in a context that made clear both their importance and the lack of binding authority of their formulations. In this context the quadrilateral played a considerable role in our discussions. In the first half of the twentieth century “Boston personalism.” as taught by Bowne, Knudson, Brightman, and others, had provided a center for Methodist theological reflection. But its influence had drastically declined. Outler hoped to strengthen the influence of Wesley, but not in such a way as to dampen participation in the ongoing ecumenical discussion. He hoped he could encourage serious theological discussion among United Methodists by showing how the quadrilateral could guide this discussion without committing the denomination to any of the then most influential theologians, such as: Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Niebuhr, or Tillich. United Methodists should be free to engage all such theologies but to evaluate them in terms of their faithfulness to scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The commission as a whole wanted to follow his lead.

We tried to give some guidance about how these authorities should function in a denomination that was neither creedal nor confessional. On one occasion I suggested that we reverse the order. I proposed that we point out that authentic thinking must begin where we find ourselves, that is, with our actual experience. We should then recognize that if we are thinking seriously, we will aim to be self-critical, that is, to test the beliefs that happen to be present. In this testing we will strive to be rational.

As we extend this testing, we will need to become aware of what has shaped us and led us to think as we do. Chiefly we will recognize that most of our beliefs are the internalization of what is believed by others in our environment and that this in turn is the result of a long history. Basically, we are all formed by traditions. In so far as the traditions that have shaped us are, or intend to be, Christian, they point to the scriptures as their normative sources.

I developed this formulation in a few pages, and I still think it would have given a more realistic basis for theological reflection than the traditional sequence can provide. Subsequently I wrote a book, *Becoming a Thinking Christian*, which developed this proposal much further. Of course, my approach was shaped by process thinking, but since the proposal makes sense for many people who do not, at least consciously, share a process metaphysics, I made no explicit use of that philosophy. Today, on the other hand, I am speaking explicitly as a process theologian; so I will explain how the process model calls for an approach of this general sort.

The process model affirms that the world is made up of events rather than of enduring substances. The type of event that is most illuminating of the whole, and is certainly the most relevant to our topic here, is a moment of human experience, including its nonconscious depths. There are complex events composed of many unitary events, and these are the ones that first come to mind: an election, a conversation, a birth, or a war. But for our purposes, we will give primary attention to unit events, those that cannot be divided further into smaller events. A moment of human experience is, again, our example. Whitehead called these indivisible or “atomic” events “actual occasions” or “occasions of experience.”

Every unit event or actual occasion, according to Whitehead, is an instance of the many becoming one and being increased by one. That is, each event is primarily the fresh incorporation of what has been in its immediate past. Of course this incorporation is selective, and the many events in the past must be integrated in the new event. Just how this assimilation and integration occur is not settled until they do occur. That is, it is finally decided in the act of becoming of the new event. In all actual occasions the exact nature of the past plays the dominant role; so the efficient causality of the past insures enormous continuity. But the causality of the past does not exclude some role for the new event as it comes to be. We do not live in what William James called “a block universe.” Novelty, spontaneity, and self-determination also play a role. In any individual occasion this role is small, but cumulatively, especially in the case of human beings, the element of freedom or self-determination has enormous importance.

If our conversation today were about God, I would spend much of my time on what I have just said. For Whitehead the reason that the present is not *simply* the outcome of the past is that God also plays a role. But for the topic of tradition, the major focus is on the transmission of the past into the present and the decision of the present about just how to re-enact, modify, and synthesize that past.

We should not suppose that the larger the role of the past in the present, the smaller the degree of novelty and self-determination. In the Whiteheadian di-polar mode of thinking, we emphasize not “the more of A the less of B,” but rather “the more of A the more of B.” In this case, the basic point is that the greater the capacity for novelty and self-determination the more richly the past can be internalized. But we can also say, the more complex and varied the world out of which a new occasion of human experience emerges, the greater will be its capacity for novelty and self-determination.

No doubt these statements require qualification, for variety can become an unmanageable chaos, but they point to the basic approach of Whiteheadian thinkers.

In one sense we can say that the totality of what enters into an occasion constitutes the tradition that it inherits and transmits. This makes sense for communities that are relatively isolated, such as hunting and gathering societies. They have inherited patterns of action in regard to a wide range of their activities and they have stories transmitted from generation to generation that explain or justify these actions and transmit beliefs about themselves and their world.

But in a world like ours, this inclusive use of “tradition” would change the usual meaning too much and not help in identifying the particular importance of the Christian tradition for Christians. Within our heritage there are many traditions, and in addition there are elements that are not organized into traditions. These statements are meaningful only if we can distinguish traditions from other parts of our heritage. I should make clear that Whitehead did not use the term “tradition,” at least not in any technical sense; so I am using his basic conceptuality to propose a way of understanding it.

A tradition is distinguished from other parts of the total heritage first by its continuity through considerable periods of time. Further, the continuity must be important to the events that participate in it. Events that do not participate in considerable continuity of this sort, or for whom such participation is unimportant, are not part of any tradition. This does not make them better or worse.

Among traditions we can distinguish two types or, perhaps better, we can view traditions as lying along a continuum between two poles. One type of tradition is characterized by the effort to repeat inherited patterns as exactly as possible. The other type is engaged in assimilating new elements into the continuing thought and practice.

This distinction can be undergirded by technical Whiteheadian concepts. For Whitehead causal feelings or pure physical feelings transmit what was into what is becoming. Throughout most of the universe this maintains the predictable order that is studied by the natural sciences and is so important also for human beings.

But life introduces another possibility. In addition to feeling only the physical feelings of past occasions, it is possible also to feel the elements of novelty or spontaneity in them. Whitehead calls these elements the mental pole of the occasion. The feeling of elements in the mental pole of a past occasion can reenact in the becoming occasion what was new in the past one. Thus the new occasion introduces this novel element into the ongoing continuity of the succession of occasions. Whitehead called this “the canalization of novelty.” The tradition changes while clearly remaining continuous with the past.

In the contemporary world we are all products of many traditions. Being an American or an Englishman or a German or a Chinese involves us in particular traditions. Each family has its own traditions. Ideologies and political parties have their traditions.

Universities have theirs. Sometimes multiple traditions operate in our lives noncompetitively. Sometimes the demands they make on us conflict.

In this discussion, of course, our interest is not in traditions in general but in the Christian tradition. For some church people today, only quite limited parts of this tradition are allowed to play any significant role. In this way their Christianity cannot be a threat to other traditions that are in fact more important to them. Again and again in recent centuries we have seen that in time of war national traditions trump the Christian one even in the churches. This fact is sociologically important, but for a theological discussion of the Christian tradition, it is less so. The Christian tradition inherently lays claim to provide the point of view and overarching framework for the whole of life and thought.

Of course, to speak of “*the* Christian tradition” is already problematic. There are many Christian traditions and the differences among them are quite important. Nevertheless, I want to focus on what makes them all Christian and to identify, from my process perspective, what is normative for all of them. This means, of course, that I will disagree with many advocates of many traditions. This disagreement will also be, no doubt, with other process theologians. There is not a one-to-one relation between being influenced by process thought and formulation of a particular theological doctrine.

For me, then, to be a Christian is to recognize the role of the Christian tradition in forming me as normative for my existence. This does not mean that other traditions have no valid, even important, role in that process, but it does mean that the validity and importance is to be decided from the point of view of the Christian tradition.

That this is so does not mean that the form in which beliefs and practices have been mediated to me in my actual reception of this tradition have this normative character. Quite the contrary. The Christian tradition calls for the relativization of every form that it takes. It teaches that we are finite creatures with strong tendencies to distort and rationalize. To be a faithful participant in the tradition is to reject every claim to finality and to be open to critical reflection about every aspect of it. More than any other tradition it aims always to transcend itself.

The principle of this transcending has two poles. One is the monotheism inherited from Israel that makes fundamental the distinction between God and creature. Idolatry is the most fundamental mistake, and human beings are especially likely to idolize or sacralize in the area of religion. Catholics are in danger of idolizing the church and papal pronouncements; Protestants, the Bible. Both are in danger of sacralizing the ecumenical creeds, that is, of placing these products of political compromise beyond criticism.

The second pole is the Bible. The Christian tradition as a whole judges itself in light of the normative account of its origins. Although it prizes the Hebrew scriptures along with the New Testament, it reads the Bible as a whole in light of Jesus’ message, actions, death, and resurrection and of the early church’s interpretation of this. That there are four different accounts of Jesus blocks the attempt to absolutize any single picture of

him. The fact that the epistles interpret the Jesus event diversely inhibits any claim to finality of doctrine about him. Thus there is no fixed reference for the tradition. From the beginning it was multifold and developed through interaction among various communities that sought to live from this event. To be a Christian, therefore, is to live in a fluid context, seeking to be faithful to God as one has come to know the God of Israel in the Christi event, informed by the many achievements of the tradition, but critical of every attempt to treat any of these as fixed or final.

The emphasis on fluidity and on the relative character of every achievement and of every formulation should not in any way inhibit or discourage such achievements or such formulations. I am troubled today by the tendency among those who understand the relativity of all formulations to abandon the theological task altogether. We are largely leaving serious theology to those who take the tradition or the Bible or the church, or some part of these too much as fixed and final authority.

So many of the best and brightest move to the task of describing what others have done and do or studying faith and practice as objective phenomena. We need to attract more able persons to the task of reformulating the tradition in light of all that we know in a way that encourages faithfulness to God in our day. In the most literal sense I am convinced that the salvation of the earth cannot occur apart from far more of such faithfulness.

The reference to “all that we know” points to a particular issue about tradition. Thus far I have written as though the dynamic changes of the tradition occurred out of reasons internal to the tradition. In fact, of course, the Christian tradition always operates in interaction with other traditions. In the first centuries of the church’s life, these other traditions were primarily Hellenistic. Some Jews were already reformulating their teachings in relation to what they judged best in Hellenistic culture, especially its brilliant philosophical achievements. Early Christians joined in this process.

In my view the inherent Christian claim of universal relevance could not express itself without this theological work. While retaining the primarily historical overview, and especially the decisive importance of the Christ event, the theologians of the early church were able to assimilate much of the wisdom of the Greeks. It was an amazing achievement and may well account for the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

Nevertheless, the price was very high. Greek categories focused attention on what remained the same through time rather than on events, whether personal or historical. When these categories were employed in reflecting about Jesus, the resulting picture changed the New Testament understanding of Jesus and was not intelligible even in its own terms.

Furthermore, the use of Greek philosophy entailed Greek values. For example, the Greeks prized invulnerability, whereas the Bible, and especially Jesus, Paul, and John, prized love. The loving God of the New Testament became the invulnerable God of classical philosophical theology.

One characteristic of tradition is that we all begin with a situation in which its immediately present form represents the tradition as a whole. The task of discovering that there is a difference is a difficult one for most people. Hence distortions of biblical teaching by the tradition are read back into the Bible. It takes great insight and strength to reverse this relationship, to examine the Bible on its own terms, and from that perspective to critique the form the tradition has taken in one's time. Renaissance humanism prepared a context in which this was possible, and the magisterial Reformers undertook this task.

Of course, their work was incomplete and imperfect. Even today we are not able to free ourselves from the power of tradition when we seek to identify the scriptural message. For example Jerome's rather arbitrary replacement of *Shaddai* by "omnipotent" still leads most Christians to assume that the Bible identifies God as omnipotent or almighty. Nevertheless, the achievements of biblical scholarship have been immense. We owe a great debt to the Reformers.

On the other hand, their rejection of any systematic use of philosophy has tended to isolate the Christian tradition from the wider course of history. Their work was in the early stages of the scientific revolution. The Reformers took no account of this, and they offered their followers little guidance as to how to relate to it. Biblicist theology provided no basis for responding to the dualism of mind and body that Descartes employed in order to give natural science a free hand while preserving a sphere for religion. It rendered the churches of the Reformation largely helpless before the progressive narrowing of the sphere in which the dominant culture allowed them to operate.

Theologically, the Reformers' move has led in our time to a negative use of philosophy. I mean by that that philosophy is shown to be unable to support any knowledge about the real world. Indeed it shows that our statements cannot be about a real world or a real God at all. They can only function to shape the use of language for particular purposes. This is a dead end for the tradition and can only speed the decline of those churches that try to think of their message in this way.

The Roman Catholic Church held onto its claim to deal with the whole of reality better by using the Thomistic synthesis of Christian teaching and Aristotelian philosophy. But it could not influence the actual course of science and was forced into opposition to some of its findings. As the science that rejected Aristotle became more and more inclusive in its claim to explain the world, the Catholic Church was forced to accept ghettoization of a kind somewhat different from that of Protestantism. Today it can only gain credence for its claim to universal relevance by drastically modifying the philosophy it employs to show it. But it knows that if it uses the philosophical beliefs on which modern science rests, it will destroy the meaningfulness of its deepest religious and ethical affirmations.

My point here is to indicate a difficult choice in the tradition. The first instinct of the church was to choose the best that the host culture offered and to integrate that into itself. In the early church, and also in the Medieval period, this involved deep changes in the content of the tradition itself. Further, the philosophy through which the church undertook to do this, a philosophy that related effectively to the best thought and science at the time it was chosen, no longer serves this role.

On the other hand, the Reformers' choice was to seek to develop the tradition as it came from its earliest sources without making systematic use of other traditions. At the time this decision was made it was still possible to suppose that thinking in this way could be relevant to the range of issues most important at the time. But as time passed and philosophy and science developed separately from the biblical vision, Christians in this tradition were forced to retreat from the wider world of thought and theory-influenced action.

My judgment is that the resulting loss of universal relevance is so critical today that the tradition needs once again to risk incorporating philosophy. My judgment is that it should incorporate a philosophy that is more congenial to its distinctive origins than were the Hellenistic and Hellenic philosophies to which it was earlier restricted. It is my view that a philosophy that gives priority to events and emphasizes the fundamental role of relationships, while grounding itself in cutting edge science, can prove helpful in the future development of the Christian tradition.

I have discussed Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in terms of their dominant approaches to one of the great divisions in the tradition. I will comment on this relationship in another way. Because of the deep wounds left by the Reformation on both sides, selection from the whole tradition was quite different in the two communities. Even after World War II, in a progressive seminary, we still learned about our tradition in a quite narrow way. We studied Israel until the rise of Christianity, and then it disappeared from our view. We studied Christianity fairly inclusively until East and West parted ways. After that, the East disappeared. We studied Western Christianity through the Reformation period. Then Roman Catholicism disappeared. Although this was never said, we were left with the impression the Judaism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism survived only as historical relics in backward places.

I am glad to say that in recent decades the situation has changed. We Protestant Christians are coming to view ourselves as one branch of the Abrahamic family, which has many branches each with its own developing traditions but all also related in a common tradition. Obviously Islam is also part of the Abrahamic tradition, an extremely important part in today's world. The task before us is daunting, but of great historical importance: to clarify and celebrate our own particular traditions, as well as to criticize and develop them, in a context of appreciating and learning from, while also criticizing, the many forms the Abrahamic tradition has taken.

Christianity confronts another kind of relativization as well. Whether we are Christians or not, we now recognize that there are other well-developed religious

traditions outside the Abrahamic family, and that these form other people who understand the world in ways different from ours. Religious pluralism was recognized by philosophers and theologians from early in the nineteenth century. Today it has become part of the common sense of the average citizen.

In so far as the Christian tradition is healthy, the encounter with those formed by these very different traditions is an opportunity for faithful change, or what I like to call “creative transformation” of our own tradition. Given its limited health in the twentieth century, I think it remarkable that it has in general responded well. Thoughtful Christians have in fact been engaged in rich dialogue with representatives of various forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese traditions, and even primal religions. They have learned much. This learning has not been only about the others but about ourselves as well. It has led to repentance for our slowness to listen to others and to re-thinking of both our teaching and our practice. My view is that in these relationships we are called, not to recognize or develop a common tradition, but to appreciate the depth of difference and also to explore the wisdom of those who have experienced the world so differently. It has been my experience that in conversations with representatives of these very different communities, we have also come to appreciate more deeply features of our own traditions that we have previously taken for granted.

A final comment. In the fluid situation I have described, it is understandable that many Christians want to know what the essence of Christianity is. While so much changes, what is the Christian obliged to hold unchanged? This was a popular topic among liberal theologians early in this century. They thought that the establishment of the essence of Christianity would give them freedom to modify everything else. But in the process they impoverished the rich complexity of what we can learn from our tradition, and they ended up absolutizing ideas that were justifiably central for them but have not played the same role in subsequent generations.

My view is that there is no essence, at least in the sense that it was sought by those theologians and is generally sought today. We live out of a great richness of teachings and practices all of which are subject to criticism and change. But this does not mean that we have no criteria for deciding whether a tradition is Christian. It is not Christian if it does not look back to the Bible as its normative source or fails to give the central place to the Christ event.

Of course, criteria of this sort can lead to vague boundaries. Are Unitarians Christian? By my standards they certainly were in their origin. Trinitarian teaching is not essential to Christianity. The Universalists with whom they merged were certainly Christian. But over time many Unitarian-Universalists have rejected Christianity in so far as being Christian means favoring the biblically-rooted tradition over others.

In conclusion, I have made no claim here that the Christian tradition is better than others. In my lifetime, we have become vividly aware of the vast harm that is done by those who stand in one branch or another of the Christian tradition. My view is that much of the worst of human history has been inspired or justified by it, but that it has also

motivated much of the best. I believe it has greater ability to repent of its many crimes and errors and to assimilate the wisdom of other traditions than has any of these other traditions. For myself, I cannot imagine abandoning its Christocentrism. Where would I turn?