

Tradition

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The possibility and the difficulty of tolerance is captured in the word tradition. Tradition seems to many people the main obstacle to tolerance, dialogue and progress. It is often invoked that way. However, tradition can be the chief support for the religious reformer, a source for looking at things in a new way without rejecting the past. A judgment as to which religious diversity is acceptable and which is not requires criteria. Each religion has limits of tolerance set by what its tradition can bear.

The word and the idea for tradition seem to have originated from a reform in Jewish history. The Pharisees who were the reformers wisely chose not to directly take on priestly authority. The priestly class, having control of the texts, were the only ones who could say what God wanted. The Pharisees, instead of engaging in ineffective rebellion, professed equal devotion to the written word but laid claim to a second source: what was not written. To call this second source !oral tradition! would have been redundant. Tradition was the name for what was passed on orally.

This brilliant stroke liberalized the community but it had its own dangers. Officials who wield authoritative texts can be narrow-minded, but they are constrained by what is written. Tradition, as a separate source, secrets whispered

in the ear, so to speak, has few restraints. What saves tradition is that it eventually produces its own written record before again breaking out orally. Tradition becomes not an entirely separate stream but the context for interpreting the written. Commentary is followed by commentary on the commentary, and tradition becomes a layering of interpretation and inevitable debate.

!Tradition! begins as a verb, the act of handing on. It can include writing but connotes in addition the oral, aural and tactile. There is a tendency in human life, exacerbated in the English language, for verbs to become nouns. That happens with the word faith, the act of believing in. This tendency has especially affected !tradition! which becomes equated with things left by tradition rather than the continuing process of handing on. Martin Luther was careful to distinguish between misguided accretions in Christian history that were called traditions and the living process of tradition. As the Lutheran historian Jaroslav Pelikan phrases it, !tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.! Or as H.G. Gadamer paradoxically states, !tradition exists only in constantly becoming other than it is.!

In our day the term tradition is used as a general term, not restricted to religion.

Still, it is prominent in referring to religions as in Christian tradition, Buddhist tradition, Jewish tradition, and so forth. And when tradition is used in reference to politics, ethics, or education, a religious shadow is likely to be in the background. When the boundaries for any particular tradition are too vague, the term loses its usefulness. The existence of intense differences within a group of people does not mean that the tradition does not exist. Abstracting from differences creates a single tradition only in name. Is there a Christian tradition? Perhaps, although at times it is necessary to refer to a Lutheran, Calvinist or Roman Catholic tradition. Is there an Abrahamic tradition? The differences seem to me too great to be a tradition, though of course the family relations of Jewish, Christian and Muslim histories are important.

The term !Judeo-Christian tradition,! invented in the 1890s, is a particularly suspect phrase. Why !Judeo! rather than !Jewish? Does !Judeo! modify Christian or tradition? Right wing groups in the United States now prominently display the term; it proves they are ecumenical while they are trying to force nineteenth-century morality on the rest of us. !Judeo-Christian tradition! was invented by people who were not especially knowledgeable about either Jewish or Christian traditions. They thought that some support for individualism and unfettered capitalism could be derived from abstracting an individualistic ethic from the Bible. In environmental literature today, the enemy is constantly said to be !Judeo-

Christian tradition.! Perhaps it is but that says nothing about the relation of either Jewish or Christian traditions to environmental issues. Environmentalists are missing allies and insight in not exploring the complex traditions of Jews and Christians, the continuities and discontinuities of those two traditions.

For many people, !traditional! is simply another word for conservative, a quite logical connection. Traditions are undeniably conservative. Unfortunately, !conservative! is a rather abused term. In the United States today, !conservative! is used in a bizarre way; we call politicians conservative who have no respect for the past and no appreciation for the frailty of the human institutions they cavalierly use to further their own schemes. Today we have people called economic conservatives and others called social conservatives; neither group would be recognizable to the conservatives of 1950. These two groups of !conservatives! agree on little except that nineteenth-century economics and morality would be good for all of us. Our !religious conservatives! are adept at citing Leviticus on the abomination of men lying with men but they seem unacquainted with the extensive material in the biblical tradition about hospitality to strangers or taking care of the poor. They do not seem well acquainted with the biblical tradition and its interpretations.

The educational language we have been saddled with for over a century opposes traditional and progressive. Progressive, as the name for nineteenth-

century social reform, was imported into the United States from France, Germany, New Zealand and other countries. Supported by evangelical fervor, progressivism became a major force in the United States until the First World War. Then the term receded except in educational discussions where it has tenuously held on up to the present.

Nobody in the United States is going to vote against progress. The unfortunate thing is that progressive, especially when applied to education, is thought to be the opposite of traditional. John Dewey is most often invoked for this contrast and he is in large part responsible for the rhetoric. His opposition to all things traditional veils his own rebellion against the Protestant Christianity he was immersed in as a child. Dewey constantly complained that his would-be disciples misunderstood his call for progressive reform. His last book on education, *Experience and Education*, is a severe criticism of progressive schools. He even begins and ends the book with a proposal to get rid of the term progressive as a modifier of education. He did not succeed in that; and the reason, I would argue, is that he utterly failed to rethink the word traditional in the book. You cannot transcend the opposition of progressive and traditional unless you are willing to rethink their relation, which in turn requires examining both the good and the bad in the schools that Dewey caricatured as !traditional.!

Dewey and other self-proclaimed progressives dismissed all other educational

forms except the school. In the 1890s, after saying that the home, the work site and the church can no longer educate, Dewey asserted that the school is the chief agency of social reform. By the 1930s, Dewey had become more realistic about the economic and political problems of the country. But his reversal went too far in saying that the school cannot be a force of social reform. If he had said it could not be *the* force instead of *a* force he might have been on the way to discovering one of the strengths of traditional education, traditional here referring not to the nineteenth century but to human experience over a few millennia. In the absence of that traditional context of a multiplicity of educational forms, the school goes from a demand that it be everything to its being attacked as impotent.

Education in a tradition cannot be done wholly in a classroom. One has to be apprenticed into the practices of a tradition. That stubborn fact presents an almost insuperable obstacle to an outsider's understanding the tradition. That does not mean it is not worth trying but one should be modest about claiming to understand someone else's tradition. It is almost impossible to simply step outside one's own tradition. Some people do gradually shed their upbringing, but quick conversions often leave the converted with the same obsessions, except now they are pounding on the wall from the outside instead of the inside. Better to examine one's prejudices and decide which ones are worth keeping.

Prejudice, as Edmund Burke affirmed, are indispensable to a religious tradition.

A child absorbs judgments that are being handed down. Eventually, such pre-judgments have to be submitted to rational examination but not condemned wholesale. Those who thought themselves enlightened in the eighteenth century described the aim of education as freeing the child from the prejudices of the father. As Gadamer has written, !the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment was the prejudice against prejudice.! Recently in the United States there has been a lot of complaining that university professors are too liberal. I think there is a problem there but that formulation does not get at it. The job of a university professor is to liberate the mind, but professors have to accept the fact that they too work out of a tradition and not just pure rationality.

Reform of traditions is carried out mainly by the insider who knows not only what to reform but how to do it. !The great advantage of tradition which is as long as that of any of the historic religions is that it gives the chance to appeal to more than one strand in it; it may at times be the reformer!s strongest ally.! Every religious tradition has such disparate strands; the richer the tradition, the closer these strands come to self-contradiction. The citing of a few sentences out of context can be misleading about any tradition. Liberalizing reform has to come from reformers who are deeply not superficially conservative.

Who speaks for a religious tradition? Who says what is minor and what is major? Mark Gopin asks whether the assumption today that the more genuine

religious tradition is violent is our prejudice? Most well-formed traditions have officials who are appointed, ordained, chosen to re-present the tradition. But unless one believes that such officials have a direct line to the deity, they are dependent on the most thoughtful and well-informed advisors within the tradition. The main job of the official may be to assure that a wide range of views can be heard and that debates are not ended prematurely. Dialogue between traditions presupposes serious dialogue within a tradition. Throughout the centuries Jews have been better at agreeing to disagree than have Christians. The minority in the Jewish community could later become a majority; no declarations of heresy or *anathema sit*.

Christians have done better since the sixteenth century although I think it is only very recently that Roman Catholics and Protestants have engaged in serious dialogue. Such dialogue does not lead to the inclusion of every kind of diversity. Some groups that claim a Christian heritage should be declared beyond the pale. A pope cannot do that; not even Roman Catholics would put all their trust in Vatican decrees. Responsible spokespersons in every part of the Christian tradition have to search for consensus that, for example, the white Aryan nation has no legitimacy within the meaning of Christian tradition today. There will continue to be disagreements about the exact place where the intolerable begins. But a group narrowly based on an ideology of hatred and violence ought not to be given the

respect that is due to a group that draws on rich and diverse streams of Christian tradition.

Religion based on tradition may seem incompatible with modern liberal democracies. But paradoxically, it is the religious groups that have tried to be most liberal that have often found themselves in trouble. People look for a stability in religion as a balance to the flux and uncertainties of today's secular democracies. Of course, the reaction against uncertainty can produce corrupt versions of religion that claim to be conservative. The fundamentalist mentality is actually a modern rationalism that does little to protect the fundamentals of the religious tradition. The world is in a precarious position, having survived the cold war's standoff of two fundamentalisms, we now have more fundamentalism and more conflicts.

Transformation

In the past, people believed that religious conflicts could be easily solved. If those other people would just stay where they belong, there would be peace. We no longer have the luxury of believing in that illusion. The interaction of religions is now inevitable, and we are probably only at the threshold of how widely and how deeply the exchanges will become in this century.

Most educated people recognize that not everything in their tradition is true, good and final. They are aware that there have to be continuing efforts to improve what the past has given us to work with. Every reform is in the direction of the one true religion but to claim that my tradition has arrived there is not a credible position. People rightly resist what is offered as the alternative to one's own religion as true, which is that all religions are equal. That premise implies that we just have to scrape off the words and we will find that all religions are basically alike. But the only ways that all religious traditions could be equal is either if they are equally false or if having scraped off the words what is left are a few generalities discoverable elsewhere.

The real alternative to equality is for religious people to stand by the truth as they know it and be willing to listen to people who have a different experience of the world. A dialogue based on religious education does not begin with skepticism about other people's beliefs and a supposed bracketing of one's own beliefs. Instead of methodical doubt, it begins, in Peter Elbow's phrase, with methodical belief.ⁱ Methodical doubt settles comfortably into one view; methodical belief forces us into unfamiliar and threatening ideas. The religious educator has to sleep around with a multiplicity of beliefs while not renouncing his or her own beliefs.

W. Cantwell Smith uses the example of a Christian reading the Quran. If the Christian is looking for why Muslims believe the words are from God, that would miss the point. Instead, the Christian has to ask! what would the sentences convey if I believed them to be God's word!? This demand on the Christian scholar may seem unfair unless the Muslim is willing to reciprocate. For a variety of reasons, that may not happen. However, the imbalance is not peculiarly Muslim. Between religious traditions or between individual scholars, there are sure to be differences in the degree and the kind of openness to others.

One has to believe that no one is one-hundred-percent closed or one-hundred-percent open. We do not need agreement on universal principles before we can begin nor can we begin with a demand for unconditional openness. A conversation might begin about anything and lead to the trust which is the prerequisite to serious religious dialogue. Western scholars have to be especially wary of what William Placher calls the Horton-Popper Preemptive Strike: I will be totally open about my religion if you will do the same. But since you are not willing to be totally open, I don't have to take your religion seriously.

The first aim of religious dialogue is to find places within each tradition where people can meet one another in mutual respect. This step requires

detailed knowledge of the language within the tradition that can be an obstacle. An intermediate aim, therefore, is to transform contradictory statements into different but not contradictory ones. For example, if Christians say Jesus is the messiah and Jews say Jesus is not the messiah, one statement is true, one is false. If Christians say Jesus is the Christ and Jews say Jesus is not the messiah, both statements could be true. That step would lead to helpful inquiry into the ways that Jesus did and did not fulfill the messianic expectations of his time, how the term Christ, originally a translation of 'messiah,' acquired other meaning in history, and how Christians can look forward with Jews to the coming of a messianic era while believing in Christ.

Both religious traditions can be helped by that conversation. The ultimate aim of religious dialogue is mutual transformation. The Jew becomes more Jewish, the Christian more Christian. Instead of deadly conflict, the Jew and the Christian become partners in fighting against the injustice that conflicts with the better world that Jews and Christians articulate in related but different ways.

One cannot deny, however, that religious dialogue is a minefield of possible misunderstandings. Religious traditions offer a cornucopia of possibilities for reform and transformation. They are also a storehouse of

slights, grudges, misunderstandings and animosities. Academic announcements of agreement are suspect without gestures of accord in the non-schooling parts of education. Social, cultural and political interactions need to provide a context for linguistic interpretations in the classroom.

Religious traditions do not confront one another as equals. Which one is the younger and which is the older is an especially important issue when they are within the same family. Some of the dynamics in a Christian-Jewish dialogue are reversed in a Christian-Muslim dialogue. The younger tradition has to be careful of not seeming to claim that it has taken the best of the older tradition and improved on it. Where something universal is at stake, the younger tradition may claim a legitimate share but not claim ownership. If Jewish tradition uses !covenant! as a way to point to the divine-human bond, then Christians, Muslims, and others have a right to stake a share of participation in the idea. The claim is not to a Christian covenant as opposed to a Jewish covenant but to a Christian interpretation of the meaning of covenant.

Another imbalance in religious dialogue is size, and the oppression that minority status usually entails. A religious tradition with hundreds of millions of followers has to engage in dialogue with self-imposed restraints; in contrast, a small group just trying to be heard at all can act differently.

Large and powerful institutions can cause havoc simply by making a quick turn in a crowded space. Gestures intended to be friendly can be experienced as co-opting or assimilative.

I agree with John Cobb that !true openness to other traditions will require that we make their history our own.! I would add that this appropriating of history must be done very carefully with recognition that it might be misunderstood. Haven't Christians always practiced this openness with what the Jews call the Bible and Christians call the Old Testament? Cobb uses as an example that !we Christians will view Muhammad as our prophet as well.! That possibility could be an interesting topic of conversation between Muslims and Christians but probably not something that Christians should immediately assert. I see no problem in an individual Christian affirming Muhammad as a prophet. For the Christian tradition to say he is !our prophet as well! could be a presumptuous appropriation.
