

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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UNIT ONE SESSION SIX: Tradition and culture



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Every tradition is always also an enduring system with its own traits that transcend those of its individual adherents. As a result of such traits, each tradition has its own inherent orientation and dynamism. I call this the fundamental tradition direction. For example, one basic trait of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Episcopalian faith traditions is the sacramental life and its liturgical celebration. Their corresponding formation traditions created over the centuries numerous forms by which to live and celebrate congenially and compatibly this sacramental direction. No matter what happens in new situations, no matter how much dissent individual adherents may express, the fundamental tradition direction will ultimately find new ways of sacramental celebration because this direction transcends the inclinations of individual adherents.¹



The cultural and psychological insight that it is important for people to accept is that denying culture can be as destructive as denying evil. We must come to terms with both. It is our powerlessness in the face of culture and the limitations placed on the development of self that result in aggression. Paradoxically the only way that we can escape the hidden constraints of covert culture is to involve ourselves actively and quite consciously in those parts of our lives that we take most for granted.²



'Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one, the only Yahweh. You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.'³



While Jesus was speaking a Pharisee invited Jesus to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. Then the Lord said to him: 'Now you Pharisees clean the outside of cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? So give for alms those things within; and see, everything will be clean for you.'⁴



¹ Adrian van Kaam, *Formative Spirituality, Volume V: Traditional Formation*, Crossroad, 1992, 62.

² Edward T Hall, *Beyond Culture*, Anchor Books, 1977, 7.

³ Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

⁴ Luke 11:27-41.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- * *Successive formation fields shared by a group of human beings inevitably engenders tradition which will normally be expressed in a culture – a more or less dense web of symbols, rituals, customs, modes of dress, ways of celebrating – such as dancing and singing – specific communication patterns, authority structures and so on.⁵*
- * *Typically all human life formation takes place in the context of at least one tradition.*
- * *In all traditions there are two fundamental questions at work: “What do we believe?” and “How shall we concretise what we believe?”*
- * *A tradition must promote change and adaptation if it is to continue as a vital reality for its adherents.*



Where do all the structures of daily living come from?

Students of human development emphasize the importance of consistency with little children. School teachers and people in charge of nurseries will tell you that children can become quite disturbed when their routines are interfered with. Something of this also applies to adults. For example, recall what it is like:

- To be with someone who is entirely unpredictable;
- To be in a work environment where you do not know what is expected of you;
- To be driving in unfamiliar traffic that seems to be chaotic;
- To be awaiting a serious medical diagnosis;
- To be in an utterly alien culture, on your own.

Reflect on your own life. There is probably a lot more pattern, routine and habit in your days than you realise. From the moment you get up in the morning until the moment you retire, your life is actually driven by a whole web of expectations and assumptions and predictions that you only become aware of when they are frustrated.

While there can be a positive edge of excitement and challenge about the unpredictable and the chaotic, typically most human beings do not choose to live

⁵ The primary focus in the discussion that follows will be on tradition. What is said of tradition may also be applied, in essence, to culture. Culture may be understood as a concrete expression of tradition.

permanently – probably *cannot* live permanently – in such a state of unpredictability and heightened awareness. Being on the *qui vive* gets wearing! Being around individuals who are constantly on the *qui vive* is also wearing! And so we act to build defences against such situations. We are not only herd animals, we are habit-forming animals. We implicitly and explicitly structure our lives in a multitude of ways. The predictability of these structures allows us to rely on habits and routines which greatly reduce the amount of energy we must expend to simply survive. These structures also help us to remain sane.⁶

We can see this tension being played out in the Catholic Church at this time. For example, the sociologist, Peter Berger, writes:

*In 1961, and certainly all through the 1950's there was, to be sure, a certain malaise in American Protestantism. It was limited to relatively small circles within the churches. The situation could not be more different today. Mainline Protestantism is marked by a widespread demoralisation that has been called a general failure of nerve. Its expressions range from masochistic self-laceration to hysterical defensiveness. The Catholics, who back in 1961, still seemed to be sitting pretty on the rock of Peter, are now looking for plausible lifeboats with the rest of us. Christians, like other men are creatures of habit. I think that many in our churches today can be described as being in search of a culture with which to identify.*⁷

Apart from the need for predictability, we can detect another, deeper and related force at work here. We are, by nature, anxious animals and we develop little areas of control in our lives to prevent the anxiety taking over. And where are you personally most likely to have control in your life, in an unpredictable environment or a predictable environment? Clearly the latter situation promises more possibility of control and with it less anxiety.⁸ Of course, an utterly controlled, routinised life can bring its own problems. But those problems – such as tedium and lack of creativity (“The only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth”) – are tangential to our discussion here.

So what are we anxious about? Again, listen to Peter Berger:

Every socially defined reality, remains threatened by lurking ‘irrealities.’ Every socially constructed ‘nomos’ is an area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness, a small clearing of lucidity, in a formless, dark, always ominous jungle. Seen in the perspective of the individual, every ‘nomos’

⁶ One of the strategies used by those who wish to break down the resistance of opponents – eg agents of a police state – is to subject the individual to inconsistencies and unpredictability. Sleep deprivation can assist the breakdown of the individual for the same reason – the individual tends to lose all sense of form potency conviction.

⁷ Peter Berger, *Facing Up To Modernity*, Penguin, 1979, 227f.

⁸ Recall our earlier discussion on form potency conviction. See Unit One: Session 5.

represents the bright ‘dayside’ of life, tenuously held onto against the sinister shadows of the ‘night.’ In both perspectives every ‘nomos’ is an edifice erected in the face of the potent and alien force of chaos. This chaos must be kept at bay at all cost.⁹

In other words, habits and routines, social structures and cultural customs, make the world manageable. They give us a place to stand before the mystery of it all without being totally overwhelmed. Without those structures we would be overwhelmed. And at the heart of all this is the hoped for blossoming of the human person through participation in the ongoing human story. Both tradition and culture are born of this mysterious and paradoxical process.

We should sound a warning here. Our need for structures raises a significant challenge for us in life formation: How do we keep from believing that those structures – habits and routines, social institutions and cultural customs – are anything more than relative means to providing a place for us to encounter the Absolute, the Great Mystery? We are all in constant danger of turning those relative means into absolute ends in themselves, and this is fatal. When we absolutize the relative, we tend at the same time to relativize the Absolute.¹⁰

The experience of tradition

The English word *tradition* comes from the Latin word *tradere* meaning *to hand over* or *to give up* or *to surrender*. It shares an etymology with English words carrying a generally positive connotation (such as *trade*) and words carrying a generally negative connotation (such as *betray*). In its most authentic use, our English word “tradition” has a positive, life-enhancing sense to it.

Tradition has at least four closely interrelated but distinct aspects to it. You may be able to think of others. In each of these aspects, tradition can be life-giving or life-sapping. You will typically find each of these aspects present in every human life formation process, for better or worse. The four aspects are:

- “Something” is passed on and an identity is generated;
- A certain power to participate comes from being part of a tradition;
- I find a certain place and meaning in the world through tradition;
- Tradition is a blessing and a curse.

⁹ Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, Faber & Faber, 1969, 24. See also Ernest Becker, “Character as Vital Lie,” chapter 4 in his *The Denial of Death*, Free Press, 1972.

¹⁰ This may in fact be one of the primary manifestations of what we, in the Christian tradition, have called “original sin.” As such it is one of the primary obstacles to healthy life formation as such. We will return to this theme more than once. In our discussion of “Idealization” in Unit Four, Session Two we will pay especially close attention to it.

a. “Something” is passed on and an identity is generated

Perhaps the first thing our experience tells us is that tradition, as the etymology suggests, is concerned with passing on “something.” And if it is genuine life-giving tradition, that “something” is worth having or doing or being. The human group – whatever that might be (eg a family, a school, a village, a parish, a tribe, a nation, an organization etc) – develops, through successive shared formation fields, a group “identity” that is more than just the gathering of the individuals. The group has a “way” or “style” or “manner” of going about life or some aspect of life, and a consequent “ethos” or “spirit” is generated. This “ethos” or “spirit” may be more or less life-giving or more or less life-sapping. “Something” is “caught” by the members of the group – for better or worse – and passed on to others through successively shared formation fields. Which leads us to the second aspect.

b. A certain power to participate comes with being part of a tradition

We do not have to stretch our imaginations too much to see that the members of the group gain and maintain some sense of form potency conviction in this way.¹¹ It seems that we appreciate belonging to a group of other human beings when that group satisfies something of our need to participate in life. It seems, further, that a sense of belonging supports a sense of identity.¹² It also seems that most people feel better when they experience themselves connected with other human beings in doing something worthwhile or something they believe to be noble or good. Tradition is, among other things, about generating and maintaining connections – with one’s contemporaries, with one’s ancestors and with the fount of life that brought them together in the first place, and with those who are yet to come on the scene. Tradition meets our personal needs for generativity because it is about keeping a story alive. At this point we could note the importance of legends and story-telling in the history of the human family down through the ages. Which leads us to the third aspect.

c. I find a certain place and meaning in the world through a tradition

Perhaps we could say that, being part of this group process gives us a “place” in the cosmos or a “role” in a story bigger than ourselves. And who am I if I do not have

¹¹ See Unit One, Session Five of this Course – “Power to Participate”.

¹² Perhaps this is why many societies over the years have used exile as a potent weapon to punish citizens who refused to conform to what were perceived as essential features of the life of the group. In ancient Greek society, for example, a person could be punished by having their name written on an *ostrakon* – a piece of potsherd – and that would be ritually cast over the wall of the town. The individual was thus “ostracized”. You can also see from this that the group can exercise a deformative influence in the life of the individual. The individual may, for example, depend too much for his or her identity on the group. See the fourth aspect, (d) below.

a “place,” if I belong nowhere, if I have no role to play?¹³ I find a “place,” a meaning for my life and a certain role in life, by participating in a group reality, central to which is the actual process of tradition – the handing over of “something,” keeping a story alive.¹⁴ What the cultural anthropologist, Edward T Hall says of culture applies to what we are saying of tradition:

*What gives people their identity no matter where they are born, is their culture, the total communication framework: words, actions, postures, gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions, the way they handle time, space and materials, and the way they work, play, make love, and defend themselves. All these things and more are complete communication systems with meanings that can be read correctly only if one is familiar with the behavior in its historical, social and cultural context. Everything we are and do is modified by learning and is therefore malleable. But once learned, these behavior patterns, these habitual responses, these ways of interacting gradually sink below the surface of the mind and, like the admiral of a submerged submarine fleet, control from the depths. The hidden controls are usually experienced as though they were innate simply because they are not only ubiquitous but habitual as well.*¹⁵

I become part of a generative process, my life becomes a life-giving event. I become increasingly aware through this, that tradition is more than just a set of “things we used to do/have.” Tradition, at its best, goes to the heart of being fully alive as a human being. Which leads to the fourth aspect.

¹³ Is it possible, that in this time of transition, when many traditions are being challenged to change or they will cease to attract adherents and therefore probably die out, many people in Australia are forming chosen groupings and developing their own mini-traditions? The all-encompassing traditions of religion and culture we have inherited do not seem to exercise the same hold or attraction they once did.

¹⁴ Below we will take up the issue of whether or not the “something” that is passed on is good or bad. It can, in fact be either, more generally, both. Let us assume, for the moment, that the “something” is substantially good and life-giving. We might note here that this process will only continue as long as enough people believe in the “something”. And the believing may be implicit or explicit. It could be argued, for example, that many people who called themselves Catholics before the Second Vatican Council, had stopped believing and only became aware of their lack of belief when the sanctions were lifted. For them, the tradition was no longer alive.

¹⁵ Edward T Hall, *op cit*, 42.

d. Tradition is a blessing and a curse

While we might gain and maintain a conviction of the power to participate within the context of a group, this exacts a certain price. We must negotiate our unique part in the story. That negotiating is never perfectly carried out. There is always tension, always the distinct prospect that we will lose something of our individuality. Compromises must be made. The group provides us with support and a “place” in the cosmos alright, but the group also demands that we limit our own felt needs and wishes for the sake of the common good. Indeed, our own originality demands that we seek the common good. The involvement in the group is necessarily an exercise in self-limitation even as it enables me to grow and get on with the business of living. Furthermore, the security and comfort of the group might seduce me away from my essential vocation as a pilgrim, one who is always restless, always searching and questioning, always affirming the goodness of human structures while proclaiming their limited value for any life that longs for “the more than.” Tradition and culture are both curse and blessing. This uneasy tension between the individual and the group is a recurring theme in the writings of cultural anthropologists, social psychologists, sociologists and mystics.¹⁶

What are we passing on?

The “something” that is passed on, in and by the members of the group, is essentially intangible. That “something” may in fact be either more or less good or more or less bad. Probably, it is mostly a mixture of both. Human beings, however, typically like to think that they are part of “something” good.¹⁷

Sometimes we speak of functional things – like habits of work or efficient ways of getting a job done – as constituting a tradition. Or sometimes we speak of certain customs – routines, rituals, symbols and so on – as tradition. Thus we might hear someone say: “This is the way we do it around here” or “There is a tradition of efficiency in this firm” or “It is our tradition to wear a suit and tie” and so on. In each of these cases – with regard to the functional things and the customs – the word “tradition” is being used in a fairly loose and limited sense.

We are nearer the deepest meaning of tradition when we refer to that “something” we are keen to pass on as “spirit” or “ethos.” It is “something” more than a merely a way of functioning or a custom. We talk of the “spirit” of a school

¹⁶ See, for example, Ernest Becker, “Character as Vital Lie” in his *The Denial of Death*, The Free Press, 1973, 47-66; reproduced in *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume I*, 92-102.

¹⁷ No tradition is ever simply good – or simply bad, for that matter. See “The Parable of the Darnel” in Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43. This may be a useful parable to meditate when we are reflecting on the Christian tradition. Our frustration and anger at the failures of that tradition might lead us to act in a way that will do more harm than good. We must never let the better be the enemy of the good. We should note in passing, however, that some traditions are primarily passing on “something” bad – eg Nazism.

or a hospital or a parish or a workplace or a social group or a family, and so on. Even if it is “something” very elusive and impossible to accurately name, we nonetheless know it to be very real. We know this most particularly when it is missing or when it is “bad.”

Precisely because “spirit” is something intangible, it needs to be embodied in the tangible. Thus we develop particular ways of doing things, written or spoken statements, rituals and customs that express it and become mechanisms that enable newcomers to “catch” it. These expressions and mechanisms should not be mistaken for the tradition as such anymore than they are, in themselves, the “spirit”. The functional things and the customary things and the symbolic things and the ritual things are – for better or for worse – bearers of the tradition and the “spirit.” They are, if you like, the vehicles or instruments of the tradition rather than the tradition itself – or they are not! If it is the former, the tradition lives, if the latter the tradition dies.

Our human experience of this dynamism of tradition suggests some paradoxes:

- Firstly, we keep a “spiritual” reality – a world view, a moral vision, a set of values, a style or manner of being in the world – alive by embodying it. We embody the “ethos” or “spirit” primarily in our *beings*, in our *presence* and this becomes manifest in the ways we do things, in the way we enact rituals and appreciate symbols and so on.
- Secondly, we keep this spiritual essence of the tradition alive by *passing it on*, by *handing it over in trust*. And the passing over is essentially experiential, a process primarily of osmosis. It is caught rather than taught. And this will be more likely to happen if the “spiritual” reality is embodied in vibrant and life-giving ways by people who are obviously and happily imbued with that “spirit.” Only when others “catch” that “something” and are prepared to accept it and assimilate it in some substantial way, is the tradition likely to live on. We have all probably experienced the opposite reality – where someone is not prepared or able to be part of the group’s “spirit,” even though they may do all that is required of them externally in the group. Depending on how influential they are, such individuals may be more or less of an obstacle to the tradition living on in that group. Clearly, there has to be a critical mass of those willing and able to commit themselves to the tradition and actually embody the “something” of the tradition, or it will die. Occasionally, a group may have to expel a person or persons who are unwilling or unable to become effective members of the tradition because they just cannot embody the spirit of that tradition.
- Thirdly, our experience tells us that we keep a tradition alive by *adaptation and change*. Life is a conversation, it is always interactive. We must never confuse tradition with mere repetition. Mere repetition actually focuses on the vehicles of tradition – the customs, rituals, symbols and so on – rather

than the essence of the tradition. It is a fair bet that those whose focus is merely repetition have missed the point of the tradition. You would also have to wonder what role anxiety is playing in their lives.¹⁸

Tradition and the Transcendent

Our experience of tradition also suggests to us that our lives are lived in the context of “the more than.” That very elusive, indefinable “something” that constitutes the heart of any tradition and makes it worth living and perhaps dying for, bespeaks “the more than.” Tradition reminds me that my life is about more than ego fulfillment. It is rather about finding myself by going beyond myself. Tradition is evocative. It reminds me that, in the end, life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived. The fact of tradition in human experience also reminds me that life is a journey, full of partings, leavings, pitching my tent for a while then moving on. Life’s journey is a constant linking of hellos and goodbyes.

Tradition, as a dynamic process of life formation, emerging from successive shared formation fields, is an expression of the inherent relatedness of all life formation. Our wish to avoid relationship is exposed as a deformative tendency. By a positive engagement in a tradition we can minimize the deforming effects of self-absorption and egotistical claims. One sure way to a healthy life formation process, for ourselves and our children, is to actively engage in the development of life-giving traditions. Life-giving traditions are life-giving because they are made up of good relationships and connections and healthy community. Such things demand self-transcendence and self-transcendence is at the heart of healthy life formation.

Occasionally in history an individual arises who becomes the major generator of a tradition. The founders of religious congregations are often these sorts of people. Great thinkers like Plato and Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas similarly generated traditions. However, that is rare. Most of us find traditions ready-made, through various associations, through a parish, a school community, through social clubs and so on. In every instance there is probably a general principle that applies: We get as much out of such an experience as we put into it.¹⁹

¹⁸ We ought not underestimate the capacity and inclination we have for turning means into ends, relative things into absolute things and accidental things into essential things. If we do not constantly monitor ourselves in regard to this tendency, we can easily become the enemies of a tradition we may protest we are struggling to preserve.

¹⁹ It might be worth reflecting on why the notion of tradition has taken on something of a pejorative connotation in our culture. Clearly it is not seen as a formative dynamic but a more or less deformative one. Undoubtedly, what is sometimes represented as tradition is merely repetition of seemingly irrelevant beliefs, rituals, symbols and so on. Probably we need to do a lot of work on recovering the authentic meaning of tradition as a dynamic of life formation. We could ask whether, for example, the rising rate of suicide amongst the young, has anything to do with the loss of a healthy sense of tradition – of roots and connectedness.

Tradition gives birth to culture

The tradition of a group, over time, gives birth to a *culture*. We understand culture here as:

the process whereby a group develops, manifests and maintains a more or less comprehensive meaning structure for human existence and embodies this meaning structure in symbols, rituals, customs, myths, roles, modes of dress and speech and a variety of other human expressions and actions.

Culture is a most complex and deep-seated human reality. It may embrace a whole ethnic or national group, as well as sub-groups within a larger group, so that you can have cultures within cultures. People born into a culture of long-standing – especially if they have little or no contact with people of other cultures – may be inclined to think that their culture quite simply represents the way human beings are.²⁰ Again, the cultural anthropologist, Edward T Hall, reminds us of the complexity of culture:

The human nervous system is structured in such a way that the patterns that govern behavior and perception come into consciousness only when there is a deviation from plan. That is why the most important paradigms or rules governing human behavior, the ones that control our lives, function below the level of conscious awareness and are not generally available for analysis. This is an important point, one that is often overlooked or denied. The cultural unconscious, like Freud's unconscious, not only controls our actions but can be understood only by painstaking processes of detailed analysis. Hence, human beings automatically treat what is most characteristically their own (the culture of their youth) as though it were innate. We are forced into the position of thinking and feeling that anyone whose behavior is not

²⁰ This could perhaps have been said, generally, of Australia fifty or more years ago. The mix of cultures can do much to expand the human horizons and consciousness. It can also be extremely threatening as it might look like – and might in fact be – the death of one or more of the cultures being mixed. One way to understand what is happening throughout the human family at this time is to think of it as a massive “culture shock.” Our taken-for-granted worlds, so much the product of culture – with their taken-for-granted meaning structures – are being challenged and in many cases eroded. This represents a crisis of some considerable proportions and is bound to provoke strong feelings – especially feelings of anxiety. It is not surprising, for example, if some members of cultural or sub-cultural groups, experiencing the rage of impotence (cf Unit One, Session Five of this Course – “The Power to Participate”) become violent, others deeply depressed and discouraged while others just feel very confused and uprooted. We might be able to get some insight into the struggles within the worlds, for example of Roman Catholicism and Islam, if we think of it in this way. In this regard, Anwar Sadat’s autobiography is revealing – *In Search of Identity*, Harper Colophon, 1979. See also, for example, John Carroll’s provocative books, *Humanism: The Wreck of Western Culture*, Fontana Press, 1993 and *Terror: A Meditation on the Meaning of September 11*, Scribe Publications, 2002.

*predictable or is peculiar in any way is slightly out of his mind, improperly brought up, irresponsible, psychopathic, politically motivated to a point beyond all redemption, or just plain inferior.*²¹

The two streams in tradition

Every tradition is driven by two fundamental questions:

- What do we believe? Which question gives birth to the stream of a tradition we could call *faith tradition*.
- How do we give concrete form to what we believe? Which question gives birth to the stream of a tradition we could call *form tradition*.

These questions, of course, arise from some shared experience which has generated a significant bond between the participants. That might be the fairly obvious and common experience of being part of the one family or being part of a school community. It might be the experience of being part of a centuries-old culture or being part of a group that has been oppressed, and so on. It might also be the experience of being part of – or at least believing you are part of – some special revelation or insight or divine intervention.

The more complex and significant the tradition, the more complex and significant will each of these questionings be. And the participants might be more or less aware or more or less unaware of the complexities involved in the faith and form traditions.

In Australia, for example, we look back to the events – particularly in England – that give birth to democracy and the parliamentary processes;²² we believe in the democratic processes of government. We can say this is part of our *faith tradition*. We give concrete form to this belief in and through the mechanisms of the Westminster system of parliament. Several years ago we held a referendum to decide whether we wanted to declare ourselves a republic. That process implied certain beliefs about the political and social system. It also required us to think critically about questions of belief and related forms: Do we believe the current governmental system, grounded in a foreign monarchy is better suited to the present time than a new system grounded in some form of republic and presidency?

In Australia today we are much more conscious of asking questions of our (secular) *faith tradition* – What do we believe? – and also much more aware of the

²¹ Edward T Hall, *op cit*, 43.

²² One of the debates that we are having in Australia at this time – implicitly and explicitly, deliberately and accidentally – concerns the “founding events.” For example, in what sense is the landing at Botany Bay a “founding event” and is it appropriate therefore, to have a public holiday on that anniversary? In what sense is the history of England to be determinant of the specifically Australian tradition? These are essentially questions of “faith” – “What do we believe?” In turn they are also questions of “form” – “How do we concretize what we believe?”

need to develop new forms for embodying and expressing old beliefs and giving shape to new beliefs.²³ Thus, the “white Australia policy” – which exemplified both a set of beliefs and forms of laws and governmental structures to match – has been deliberately replaced by beliefs and forms of social structure that befit a more enlightened society.²⁴

In human activities, there is always the possibility that the means will subvert the ends. The form tradition is a means of expressing, celebrating, fostering and protecting the faith tradition. The faith tradition is a means for expressing a founding event and its energy for life. Very easily, forms can assume an immovable and unchangeable quality in the life of a tradition. Similarly, expressions of the belief system can become entrenched.



²³ It is probably fair to say that the future vitality – perhaps even the very life – of a society depends on its ability to stay critically attuned to a belief system of substance and continue to develop and adapt forms that manifest, foster and defend that belief system. This process depends on the people who espouse the tradition. It also seems to depend fairly significantly on the kind of leadership they get. It may also, of course, depend one day on forces outside its control, the forces for example, of a counter-tradition that might overwhelm and replace it. That is substantially what happened when white settlement arrived in Australia and largely overwhelmed the culture of the indigenous peoples.

²⁴ It is difficult to comprehend the “white Australia policy” while living in Australia at the beginning of the third millennium. We would do well to remember it, however. In his Boyer Lectures of 1998, David Malouf notes: “As for those other changes – of attitudes, ways of seeing ourselves in relation to one another and to the world – I shall mention only two. Both were once so deeply embedded in all our ways of thinking here they might have seemed essential to what we were. We could scarcely have imagined an Australia without them. The first was that belief in racial superiority and exclusiveness that went under the name of the White Australia Policy, but was really, until the end of the Second World War, an exclusively British Policy. As the *Bulletin* put it with its usual brutal candour: ‘Australia for the Australians – the cheap Chinese, the cheap Nigger, and the cheap European pauper to be absolutely excluded’. These sentiments, this sort of language, which was common to the *Bulletin* and to later popular papers like *Smith’s Weekly* right up to the early 1950s, expressed the policy of *all* political parties, left and right, and seemed not only acceptable but unremarkable. Both the attitudes and the language were inextricably tied in with our concept of nationhood. Or so it seemed. Yet the White Australia Policy, when it disappeared in the 1960s, did so almost without argument. This great tenet of the Australian dream, of a single superior race on the continent, had grown so weak and theoretical by the 1960s that it simply vanished as if it had never been, and, despite recent rumblings, seems to me to show no signs of revival.” Malouf goes on to refer to the second change of attitude as being that of religious tolerance. David Malouf, *A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness*, ABC Books, 1998, 105-6.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- * *To be baptized into Christ is to be part of a tradition that is born of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and is vivified and guided by the Holy Spirit of God.*
- * *The Christian tradition lives more or less creatively within a multiplicity of human traditions and cultures throughout the world but is identified with none of them.*
- * *The Christian tradition has a formative role within the various traditions and cultures of the human family and should be constantly in conversation with those traditions and cultures, always seeking to confirm what is good and challenge what is not good.*



The origins of the Christian tradition

Traditions typically begin with an *event* or *events*. The English word *event* comes from the Latin words *e* meaning *out* and *venire* meaning *to come*. In the strict sense of the word *event* means *a coming out (of reality)*. A person or group discovers “something” – perhaps in some kind of sudden way or over time – and their response and repeated actions arising from that discovery set in train a tradition.²⁵

The Christian Event in which our tradition is grounded is the Incarnation, or more specifically, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – sometimes referred to more specifically as the Paschal Mystery or Jesus’ Passover or the Christ Event.

This event is also understood within salvation history as the New Exodus Event for the entire cosmos, foreshadowed by the first Exodus Event in which the Hebrews were liberated from Egypt and brought towards freedom through the desert, the place of death. Jesus Christ, the New Moses, went to the desert of Calvary and passed through death to life. Baptized into Christ, we too pass through death to life. In essence this is the Christian story, the *raison d'être* of the tradition. Through Him, with Him and in Him the daily rhythm of life becomes a liberating paschal rhythm. It brings about a new way of being, the Kingdom of God. In our lives we are constantly dying with Him and rising with Him so that Kingdom might come. Our literal death will be the end of death not the end of life.

²⁵ Recall the parable of the treasure in the field – Matthew 13:44.

How the Christian tradition lives

What Christians intend to keep alive in and through the tradition is the work of the Incarnation, or, more particularly, the work of the Paschal Mystery. This is the “something” of our tradition. The Holy Spirit of God enables this to go on happening, bearing united witness with our spirits that we are indeed God’s children.²⁶ The living and life-giving heart of the Christian tradition is the Holy Spirit of God. Concretely, however, the Christian tradition lives because people live it – people who have embarked upon a life of surrender to, and cooperation with, the Spirit of God. People who have been “taken hold of” by Christ Jesus.²⁷ In their *beings* they remember, they know their Paschal Lord; they see themselves, others and the world, through the eyes of Christ. It affects, more or less, implicitly or explicitly, all they do and are.

Implicitly and explicitly the two foundational questionings go on: “What do we believe?” and “How do we best concretize in our world what we believe?” Theologians ask these questions in a particularly deliberate and scholarly sort of way. But each and every believer must be alert and open to the same questioning. In the Catholic tradition, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was an event that reminded us of the need to ask these questions. Catholics had largely ceased asking those questions or had become some blinkered in asking them that their force had been greatly diminished.

Through custom, symbol, ritual, worship, iconography, pilgrimage, reading, thinking, speaking, working , architecture, institutional structures, and so on, Christians express, foster, celebrate and maintain the Christian tradition. In this way, the Spirit lives in the tradition and the tradition lives on in the world. Where this does not happen – or to the extent that this does not happen – the tradition may quite simply die.²⁸

Paradoxically, the Christian tradition may seem to be dying when it is in fact being reborn. To the contrary also, the Christian tradition in certain times and places may seem to be thriving when it is in fact slowly dying. The “thriving” may come from the spirit of the world rather than the Spirit of God.

²⁶ Romans 8:16.

²⁷ Cf Philippians 3:13; also Romans 8:16.

²⁸ It is possible for a tradition to apparently “live on,” when in fact it has long since lost its dynamism. Walker Percy points to this when he writes: “One sign that the world has ended, the world we knew, the world by which we understood ourselves, an age which began some three hundred year ago with the scientific revolution, is the dawn of the discovery that its world view no longer works, and we find ourselves without the means of understanding ourselves. There is a lag time between the end of an age and the discovery of the end. The denizens of such a time are like the cartoon cat that runs off a cliff and for a time is suspended, still running, in mid-air, but sooner or later looks down and sees there is nothing under him.” (Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor” in Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981, 19)

Christian faith and form traditions

Both elements of faith and form are relative to, and servants of, the seminal event – the Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery provides the *raison d'être* for everything within the tradition. Everything in the tradition is oriented towards keeping alive in the consciousness and behaviour of the human community, the reality of that event, the liberating death and resurrection of Jesus. The Christian tradition, like any other tradition is about living relationships – through the tradition we are connected to Christ and to one another in Him and to the world of people, events and things through Him. For the one who embodies the Christian tradition, the world is one through Him, with Him and in Him.

The *faith tradition* will address the question: What do we believe? It will endeavor to do this by trying to express what happened in salvation history, especially in this originating event of Good Friday and Easter Day; it will try to interpret it, put it down in statements of belief and generally try to articulate what we believe about our existence in the light of God's definitive action in Christ.²⁹

The *form tradition* will address the question: How should we give concrete form to what we believe so that it enables the victory of the Cross to be manifest in every moment of every day? It will endeavor to do this by symbols and ritual actions, by organizational structures and customs, by various patterns of behavior and modes of dress and so on. It will develop and – ideally – constantly critique rituals, modes of dress, customs, lifestyles, ways of using language and so on. The question must never be far from the consciousness of the community: Do the forms actually express the faith in this place at this time?³⁰

There is a paradox in the way we experience the faith and form traditions: They are both absolutely necessary and both ultimately relative. That we express our faith in some way, that we give form to it concretely, is absolutely necessary. Whether it be *this* or *that* way of articulating the faith or *this* or *that concrete form*, is generally negotiable. For example, Eucharist is central to the Christian tradition.³¹ Keeping alive the tradition includes, as an absolute necessity, keeping alive our faith in the Eucharist. Just *how* we do that is subject to negotiation and debate.³²

²⁹ We must not forget the time bound manner in which the faith tradition is expressed. Pope John XXIII, in his Opening Speech to the Second Vatican Council (October 11, 1962), made a helpful practical distinction between *what* we believe and *how* we express it. In our ongoing efforts to understand the former, we must constantly re-shape the latter.

³⁰ Consider for example the struggles of the New Testament communities as recorded in the Book of Acts. It may seem trivial to us from this distance to argue over circumcision or meat offered to idols, yet to those early Christians – many of whom had been Jews – it was clearly a significant issue. The community had to ask the questions: What do we believe and how can we best give form to that belief? This in fact meant leaving behind some cherished customs.

³¹ See for example: John 6:32-66; Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:20-25; Luke 22:14-20.

³² Tradition, like culture, runs deep. People become disoriented without it and may even literally die. And you cannot just re-invent a tradition by deciding to do that. It takes time, it is subtle and

The Christian community must be constantly willing to critique both the forms and the expressions of faith. Without such a critique, we may mistake the ends for means. A sad irony of Christianity has been the tendency of institutional agents and Church institutions themselves, to become obstacles standing between the baptized and the Living God. Thus, various forms of dogmatism, legalism, institutionalism and authoritarianism over the ages – all instances of the absolutization of the relative, of means becoming ends – have given birth to some horrible outcomes. One example of this can be found in the burning of heretics, another in the various wars of religion.

The Catholic Church and tradition

The Catholic Church coming into the middle of the 20th century had in some measure fallen into the above mentioned trap. It did tend to think of itself in static terms – as if it had “arrived” at some point of completion. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) challenged this view, choosing very deliberately to speak of the Church in terms of people rather than structures, favouring the biblical term, “the people of God” and speaking of “a pilgrim people” and the Church as “communion.” It clearly was not the purpose of the Council to have us see the Church as primarily a legal entity. It was rather an attempt to redress the heavy emphasis on law and structure, and promote what is, in fact, a vision full of necessary tension between the structural and institutional dimensions on the one hand, and the charismatic and personal dimensions on the other. The Church is both/and, not either/or. The following text from *Lumen Gentium* (“The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”) is one instance of the changing sense of the Church and tradition emerging from the Council:

Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which he communicated truth and grace to all. But the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to him serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church

complex and will not submit to any quick fix. Consider how symbols come into being and gain their power for a group. Perhaps part of the challenge for our generation is to remain faithful, deeply committed to living out the Paschal Mystery, without the clear support of symbols, rituals and the other forms of tradition that normally work well to support us but are problematic at this time?

serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body (cf. Eph 4:16).

This is the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Savior, after his resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd (Jn 21:17), and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority (cf. Mt 28:18:f.), which he erected for all ages as "the pillar and mainstay of the truth" (1 Tm 3:15). This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the Successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.

Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to all. Christ Jesus, "though he was by nature God...emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave" (Phil 2:6), and "being rich, became poor" (2 Cor 8:9) for our sakes. Thus, the Church, although it needs human resources to carry out its mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, even by its own example, humility and self-sacrifice. Christ was sent by the Father "to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart" (Lk 4:18), "to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10). Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ. While Christ, holy, innocent and undefiled (Heb 7:26) knew nothing of sin (2 Cor 5:21), but came to expiate only the sins of the people (cf. Heb 2:17), the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal. The Church, "like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God"(St Augustine), announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes (cf. 1 Cor 11:26). By the power of the risen Lord it is given strength that it might, in patience and in love, overcome its sorrows and its challenges, both within itself and from without, and that it might reveal to the world, faithfully though darkly, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it will be manifested in full light. (8)

The Second Vatican Council struggled with the following sorts of questions: What must we do to keep the tradition alive? What changes must be made to the way we express and live our faith to make it more clearly an expression of the life and teaching of Jesus? What steps must we take to enable the tradition to live

effectively in and for our world, in all its cultural, social, political and religious diversity, so that the Kingdom may come? Obviously, the Council could not come up with a clear and unambiguous blueprint for the next generations. It rather indicated critical themes and set a mood or disposition. John O’Malley SJ offers a helpful overview:

- to end the stance of cultural isolation that the Church was now seen as having maintained;
- to initiate a new freedom of expression and action within the Church that certain Vatican institutions were now interpreted as having previously curtailed;
- to distribute more broadly the exercise of pastoral authority, especially by strengthening the role of the episcopacy and local churches vis-à-vis the Holy See;
- to modify in people’s consciousness and in the actual functioning of the Church the predominantly clerical, institutional and hierarchical model that had prevailed;
- to affirm the dignity of the laity in the Church;
- to establish through a more conciliatory attitude, through some new theological insights and through effective mechanisms a better relationship with other religious bodies, looking ultimately to the healing of the divisions in Christianity and the fruitful ‘dialogue’ with non-Christian religions;
- to change the teaching of the Church on ‘religious liberty’ and give new support to the principle of ‘freedom of conscience’;
- to base theology and biblical studies more firmly on historical principles;
- to foster new styles of piety (such as Bible study groups, directed retreats, and liturgical workshops);
- to affirm clearly that the Church was and should be affected by the cultures in which it exists;
- finally, to promote a more positive appreciation of ‘the world’ and the relationship of the Church to it, with a concomitant assumption of clearer responsibility for the fate of the world in ‘the new era’ that the Council saw opening up before its eyes.³³

Common to all these movements promoted by the Council, and characteristic of the very manner by which the Council itself proceeded, was a particular mood and disposition, expressed in the Latin word, *colloquium* – generally translated in English as either “conversation” or “dialogue.”³⁴ Pope John XXIII had prayed for a “new Pentecost.”

³³ See John O’Malley, “Vatican II: Historical Perspectives on its Uniqueness and Interpretation”, page 26 of Lucien Richard, editor, *Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda*, Paulist Press, 1987, 22-32.

³⁴ Leo F Stelten, *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, gives

When Pope Paul VI took up the work of his predecessor in 1963, he laid particular and explicit emphasis on *colloquium salutis* (“the conversation of salvation”)³⁵ and the consequent *colloquia* (“conversations”) that must give expression to this primary conversation, nurture it, submit to it, be imbued and enlivened by it. The whole life of the disciple is to become increasingly a life of “conversation.” In Paul VI’s view, the Church must become a Church of conversation, within and without.³⁶

The documents of the Council that best manifest this mood and disposition are *Gaudium et Spes* (“The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”), *Unitatis Redintegration* (“The Decree on Ecumenism”), *Ad Gentes* (“The Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church”), *Dignitatis Humanae* (“Declaration on Religious Freedom”) and *Nostra Aetate* (“Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions”). The Council was not so much a place where the work was done for us. It was rather a place where a vision was born. The work remains to be done.



“conversation, conference, discourse” as the meanings for *colloquium*.

³⁵ See *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 1964).

³⁶ See, for example: “*colloquium* ought to characterize our Apostolic Office.” (Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) 67.) See also his “circles of conversation,” op cit, 96-117. John Paul II’s “spirituality of communion” complements this well – see John Paul II’s *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (January 6 2001).

Snippets for meditation

(1) “*The fundamental polarity of human life between what is and what ought to be, between lack and fulfillment, between determination and freedom, is not abnormal; it is the norm. Every person is exposed to it because of the inescapable structure of human formation.*”³⁷



(2) “*Let me read with open eyes the book my days are writing – and learn.*”³⁸



(3) “*Nothing is ever completed ... Incompleteness is a part of nature and it takes great art or great wisdom to know when to lay down the brush ... we should always avoid perfectionism.*”³⁹



(4) A PARABLE: *Once upon a time, twin boys were conceived in the same womb. Seconds, minutes, hours passed as the two dormant lives developed. The spark of life glowed until it fanned fire with the formation of their embryonic brains. With their simple brains came feeling, and with feeling, perception; a perception of surroundings, of each other, of self.*

When they perceived the life of each other and their own life, they knew that life was good, and they laughed and rejoiced, the one saying, “Lucky are we to have been conceived and to have this world”, and the other chiming, “Blessed be the Mother who gave us this life and each other.”

Each budded and grew arms and fingers, lean legs and stubby toes. They stretched their lungs, churned and turned in their new-found world. They explored their world, and in it found the life cord which gave them life from the precious Mother’s blood. So they sang, “How great is the love of the Mother that she shares all she has with us! And they were pleased and satisfied with their lot.

Weeks passed into months, and with the advent of each new month, they noticed a change in each other and each began to see change in himself. “We are changing,” said the one, “What can it mean?”

“It means,” replied the other, “that we are drawing near to birth.”

An unsettling chill crept over the two, and they both feared, for they knew that birth meant leaving all their world behind.

Said the one, “Were it up to me, I would live here forever.”

³⁷ Adrian van Kaam. *The Transcendent Self*, Dimension 1979, 172.

³⁸ Dag Hammarskjold, *Markings*, trans Leif Sjoberg and W. H. Auden, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, 131.

³⁹ Jean Monnet, *Memoirs*, trans Richard Mayne, Doubleday, 1978), 521.

"We must be born," said the other. "It has happened to all others who were here." For indeed there was evidence of life there before, as the Mother had borne others.

"But will there be a life after birth?"

"How can there be life after birth?", cried the one. "Do we not shed our life cord and also the blood tissues? And have you ever talked to one that has been born? Has any one ever re-entered the womb after birth? NO!" He fell into despair, and in his despair he moaned, "If the purpose of conception and all our growth is that it be ended in birth, then truly our life is absurd." Resigned to despair, the one stabbed the darkness with his unseeing eyes and as he clutched his precious life cord to his chest said, "If this is so, and life is absurd, then there really can be no Mother."

"Out there is a Mother," protested the other. "Who else gave us nourishment and our world?"

"We get our own nourishment, and our world has always been here. And if there is a Mother, where is she? Have you ever seen her? Does she ever talk to you? No! We invented the Mother because it satisfied a need in us. It made us feel secure and happy."

Thus while one raved and despaired, the other resigned himself to birth, and placed his trust in the hands of the Mother. And together they feared what they did not know.

*Hours ached into days, and days fell into weeks. And it came to pass that they were born into light. They coughed out fluid and gasped the dry air, and when they were sure that they had been born, they opened their eyes, seeing for the first time, and found themselves cradled in the warm love of the Mother! They lay open-mouthed, awe-struck before the great beauty and truth they could not have hoped to have known."*⁴⁰



(5) *"Life is not so much beginnings and endings as it is middles, middles that don't measure up -- and our happiness depends on how we come to terms with the pale reflections of our dreams."*⁴¹



(6) *"One of the functions of culture is to provide a highly selective screen between human beings and the outside world. In its many forms culture therefore designates what we pay attention to and what we ignore. This screening function provides structure for the world and protects the nervous system from 'information*

⁴⁰ Source unknown.

⁴¹ Paul D Zimmerman, "Middles and Muddles," review of film "Sunday Bloody Sunday," Newsweek, September 27, 1971, 106.

overload. ”⁴²

¶¶¶

(7) *”All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yea, to the end of time!.”⁴³*

¶¶¶

(8) *”Culture is more than mere custom that can be shed or changed like a suit of clothes. The people we were advising kept bumping their heads against an invisible barrier, but they didn't know what it was. We knew that what they were up against was a completely different way of organizing life, of thinking, and of conceiving the underlying assumptions about the family and the state, the economic system, and even of man himself. ... culture controls behaviour in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and therefore beyond conscious control of the individual.”⁴⁴*

¶¶¶

(9) *”What matters is to evangelize man's culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way as it were applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth, and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in Gaudium et Spes (cf. n.53), always taking the person as one's starting point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God.”⁴⁵*

¶¶¶

(10) *”Why are most people so unnecessarily hard on themselves? Why do they not make better use of their talents? It is as though we nurtured the child that is in all of us and, in being childish, were afraid of each other. This is not a simple problem, and it may be worldwide. Certainly the human species has not begun to tap its potential and half-suspecting this deficiency we blame everyone and everything except the real culprit. Man's goal from this point should be to rediscover that lost, alienated natural self. We are not nearly enough in awe of ourselves, possibly because we know so little and have nothing to*

⁴² Edward T Hall, *op cit*, 84.

⁴³ Mt. 28:19f.

⁴⁴ Edward T Hall, *The Silent Language*, Anchor Books, 1973, 23-25.

⁴⁵ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20.

measure ourselves against."⁴⁶

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(11) "*Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses!*"⁴⁷

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(12) "*The further back you can look, the further in the future you can see.*"⁴⁸

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⁴⁶ Edward T Hall, *Beyond Culture*, Anchor Books, 1976/1977, 3-5. In the context of our explorations of Merton's thought and spirit, this whole essay by Hall that is the Introduction to his book is worth reading.

⁴⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.

⁴⁸ Queen Elizabeth, Christmas Message, 1999.

Suggestions for further study

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- *Formative Spirituality, Vol. I-IV* (See Index under "Cultural" and "Culture", "Faith Traditions", "Form Traditions" and "Traditions")



Suggested exercises

1. You certainly participate in several traditions. What is the most important tradition in your life? State some of the faith (What do you believe?) and form (How do you give concrete form to what you believe?) elements of that tradition. How much impact – whether positive or negative – do they have on your life? How much of your time, energy and talent goes in to maintaining that tradition as life force within the community?
2. Reflect on your experience of Australian tradition and culture. What do you appreciate about it? What concerns you about it? How has your attitude changed over your lifetime? What do you think might be the foundational event or events of the Australian tradition?
3. Next time you celebrate – say, the Eucharist or a birthday party – observe closely one or more of the forms that are enacted there. What do they imply?