

An Open Letter on Tradition

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A traditionalist asked to write about tradition is faced with a daunting task. Not only must he find fresh words for a familiar topic in order to say something new about something old. Any writer on any important subject must do the same if he wishes to capture attention and sustain concentration. But the traditionalist must go further. If he intends to be true to his principles, he must insist in this case that the old actually *is* the new—that the antiquity and continuity of tradition are the best of all possible means for authentic transformation.

Reminding my fellow traditionalists of what is meant by this paradox is one part of my aim in what follows. But in order not to be accused of preaching only to the converted, as I often am by liberal academics, my hope is to dig somewhat deeper than the familiar political, moral, and even theological expositions of conservative theorists. Little will be said explicitly about religious doctrine as such, and nothing at all about social theory or culture. I leave it to others to cover these bases. The approach here will be strictly metaphysical. I use this word knowing, of course, that it may be misunderstood. Some will see it and suppose I intend to engage in remote and rarified speculation, when in fact I shall be raising some very down-to-earth, practical questions: What exactly is the point of tradition? What is to be gained from tradition in contemporary life?

Before going any further I should explain that I have a very specific audience in mind. I mentioned my liberal professional colleagues. This article is something of an open letter to them. It represents yet another attempt on my part to break through all the hackneyed responses to the dinosaur in their midst. A traditionalist publication may seem an odd forum in which to continue that conversation, and yet the method has three advantages. By speaking indirectly to those who take a very different position from our own, it may help to keep my fellow authors and me from merely talking shop with each other. It may also prove a useful aid to conservatives and traditionalists in their own real life conversations with liberal academics. And who knows? I might actually get through to a few of my modernist and postmodernist colleagues and help them to begin seeing old things anew.

Contributors to this discussion will no doubt construe my key term, “tradition”, in somewhat different ways. My own definition requires that this word be paired with “revelation”. The former, we might say, is horizontal, while the latter is vertical. Where revelation is the projection of God into space, tradition is the extension of revelation through time. A stone is dropped into a quiet pool of water. Its descent toward the pool and its contact with the surface provide an image of what I mean by revelation. The centrifugal movement of concentric waves radiating from the point of impact is an image of tradition. The distinction of space from time is too simplistic, of course. In entering space, God also enters time. And in their extension through time, the modes by which tradition carries the force of revelation—words, gestures, symbols, saints, shrines—take up a certain space. But however one pictures it, revelation and tradition are to be seen as two parts of a single movement from God to man.

This way of looking at the matter is consistent with the etymological meaning of “tradition”. Tradition is the action or result of handing down or transmitting. It is important to clarify, however, that not everything handed down is traditional in the sense at stake here. The passing along of a thing received also accounts for mere custom and habit. This is the concern, or at least one concern, of the liberal critic: that the conservative is simply nostalgic for the way things were done in the past, irrespective of their truth or adequacy. Some traditionalists might reply to this criticism by pointing out that the antiquity of a given usage almost certainly implies a correspondingly deep human need. But this is not my response here. I prefer instead to admit that a greater precision is called for than is afforded by etymology, and that our liberal colleagues are right in demanding it. The Thessalonians were exhorted to stand fast in holding to the tradition they received from Saint Paul (2 Thess. 2:5), but the Colossians were warned against subscribing to the mere traditions of men (Col. 2:8). It appears that not every giving and receiving is good for us. The fact of a transmission itself, let alone its duration or the number of its successive receptions, is not the point. Any given human custom may be older than any given divine tradition. The only essential is a contact with revelation and thus with God.

But wait just a minute. My university colleagues are impatient to speak. It will be objected that I am begging the question. For all I have done is to deflect attention from one idea to another. The difference between true tradition and false, I am claiming, is the difference between what *is* and what is *not* revelation. But where does that get us? How are we supposed to know a revelation when we see one, even supposing such a thing and its Source really exist?

Does it come labeled as such? Anyone can claim a revealed authority. This in fact is precisely what the history of human thought is all about. It is a history of competing and mutually exclusive claims to Truth, a history of men seeking to dignify their passions and their struggles for power by calling them divine. “We too,” the liberal admits of himself and his confrères, “are subject to such passions and struggles, but at least we know we are, and this knowledge affords us a critical distance on the past. It permits—in fact requires—us to recognize the ideological roots of tradition. All tradition is in fact the tradition of men, Saint Paul’s included, men whose opinions were shaped, not only by their individual psychological needs, but by the social structures and other relativities of their time. Some of their claims to divine inspiration may well have been sincere, so we may forgive them in part for their presumption. But we are certainly *not* obliged to perpetuate their opinions, or to force our own thinking and acting into the molds they bequeathed. And in many cases, we must reject their views outright, apostles or not, as inappropriate for contemporary egalitarian life. Those alone cling to past forms who have an interest in maintaining the power and privileges which the forms were designed to promote and protect. In short, only white males and those of their victims who have internalized their oppression are traditionalists.”

I covered a lot of ground in that paragraph and may have skipped a step or two. But this, in broad strokes, is what I am constantly hearing from the majority of the academics I work with. What is the traditionalist to say in response to such charges? Surely the first thing is to agree that traditional forms can be abused and too often have been. Religion in particular has in many cases been the means for perpetuating the very attachment to self-interest and enlargement of ego that it purports to oppose. One must admit that asseverations as to divine inspiration and spiritual insight have sometimes been used for purely political purposes. But these historical facts, however odious, are irrelevant to the existence of that insight itself and hence to the true significance of revealed tradition. The fact that my claim to have seen something may be used to shore up my privileges and bolster my power is no proof against the existence of eyesight, even my own, nor does it follow that we should all deliberately blind ourselves to prevent such exploitation. The critics are correct to a point, but this merely shows that men are fallen, not that there is no revelation. Whether we call their criticism a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater or not seeing the forest for the trees, the sad fact remains that too many so-called intellectuals no longer seem to be using their intellects. So distracted are they by the accidents of

the many data they study, and so intent on putting forward certain partisan theses, that they no longer seem capable of thinking metaphysically with respect to essentials. For if they were, they would be obliged to concede that even *if* all tradition were the tradition of men—if, in the whole of our human past, authentic revelation had never once broken through the barriers of pride, greed, indifference, and hatred—it had nevertheless finally done so in their case. This is a very important point. Let me circle round and come at it this way.

We are often told that traditionalists are romantics. They idealize and idolize the past. They speak in terms of broad generalities and neglect the complexity and concrete messiness of real life. The picture they paint of their ancestors is a fiction of their own imagining. They should wake up and come to grips with the fact that human beings are just human beings. Socrates, for example, was merely another academic—not in his disciple's but in our sense of the term. He claimed, among other things, that the soul is divine and inwardly free from the bonds of becoming, and he may have even believed it. But like any scholar, he was basically in the business of solving various mental puzzles and problems. Even when he said he was doing something other and higher—even when he maintained that it is possible for a man to discern the eternal forms with a disciplined intellect—this was simply another stratagem to circumvent certain conceptual difficulties, which were themselves rooted in the existential need he shared with all of us to cope with “real” life. The same must be said of all the other so-called sages, saints, and prophets, whose teachings are keys to tradition. None were any better than we are. In fact, if you think about it, they must have been worse. Insofar as they were sincere in their claims, they were naïve and unself-critical, and therefore intellectually our inferiors. Insofar as they were not sincere, they were demagogues and petty tyrants, and therefore morally deficient and worthy of censure.

I am going a little too far with this, I realize! I have not actually heard a liberal categorically state that all earlier thinkers were beneath him. But consistency demands that he suppose they were—if not all the time or in all particulars, then to the extent at least that they took revelation seriously, which means on that one point that was for them most important. For all tradition, remember, is the tradition of men. And all men, according to my postmodernist colleagues, are inevitably conditioned by their situation in history, whatever the claims to the contrary. What we can know is necessarily colored and restricted: inwardly by our psychological make-up, and outwardly by the environment we occupy. Absolutes are therefore out of reach,

and those who purport to transmit a teaching of unconditional value—who suppose themselves links in some “true” tradition—are either simpletons or frauds. My fellow contributors are almost certainly in the latter category. For unlike the ancient thinkers they laud, they have plenty of eager colleagues who are eager to diminish their foolishness by reciting any number of skeptical mantras about what it means to be caught in the web of relativity. We traditionalists are therefore without excuse. I am perhaps especially blameworthy. It would be rather different if I spoke only about the concept or the problem of God, or if I stopped short with the observation that such-and-such a historical figure had *alleged* that revelation is a divine descent into space and that tradition is its radiation through time. But no. Not content with historical or phenomenological description, I have gone and played the metaphysician and talked as though certain things can be said that just can’t be. A single movement of God to man? What extraordinary pretension!

The reader will observe that I have thus far carefully avoided making use of the various technical terms that might have otherwise facilitated these descriptions of my critics’ position. If, nonetheless, he has discerned the empiricism, nominalism, pragmatism, and evolutionism implicit in their commentary, so much the better. But I have found through long experience that it does no good to employ such words if one really wants to get somewhere in arguing about these issues. Names for schools of thought or philosophical positions are simply too unwieldy, too fuzzy around the edges. No one is going to accept a label which he is convinced is the name for an error, and if he is not yet convinced, the label itself will not help. The metaphysician must therefore go beneath all the party loyalties, all the likes and dislikes, all the historical associations and influences and eponyms, in order to get directly at the error, and thereby the corresponding truth, itself. By briefly recounting some of the arguments I hear against the traditionalist point of view, my aim is to encourage if possible a more precise assessment of the essential problems we face than a mere listing of –isms allows for. And I hope by this means to help in exposing the fundamental illogic at the root of the liberals’ position.

Take a quick look back at the last page or so. The illogic or the contradiction I refer to may not be immediately obvious. I have left it embedded, for the most part, in the ambiguities and half-truths in which it usually comes packaged. There is one sentence, however, where it was allowed to emerge into the clear light of day. According to the critics, I reported, “all men are inevitably conditioned by their situation in history.” This report is hardly surprising. We have all been force-fed this maxim hundreds of times. But I suspect its very repetition may have dulled us

to its full enormity. *All men are inevitably conditioned by their situation in history.* When all the competing slogans are put to one side, it is this more than any other that seems to typify the contemporary academic mentality, whatever the peripheral nuances. And it is this that accounts for the liberal scholar's sometimes patronizing, sometimes hostile attitude toward those who put stock in revealed tradition. Quite apart from all the rhetoric about abuse and injustice, and leaving aside all the lamentations about our need for pluralistic perspectives, the bottom line has to do with a complete misunderstanding as to the nature of man himself and about what can and cannot be known. And here, of course, is where the contradiction comes in. Who is there to know what the rest of us can't?

An image may be helpful. What we are dealing with basically are crabs in a barrel. The experienced chef is confident that he has nothing to fear in leaving the barrel uncovered as he goes about preparing to cook the creatures. For as soon as one of them gets close to the rim, the others are sure to pull him back. And so it seems with the liberal critics. Let anyone try to get past the rim of history and contingency—let anyone even take seriously the possibility that some have succeeded—and they are sure to cry foul. Certain members of the cognitive police would pull us down sooner. The world is a construction of language! All theory is ideology! Others would allow us to crawl a bit higher. All ideas follow from impressions of sense! Concepts without percepts are empty! But, either way, what these particular crabs do not seem to realize is that in their efforts to bring everybody else back down into the domain of the relative, they are themselves obliged to create leverage by reaching over the edge.

In order meaningfully to claim that men are inevitably conditioned by their situation in history, the critics must for a split second at least have escaped their own law of gravity. Either they have ceased to be men altogether, or as men they have ceased to be subject to the conditions in question. If the first were true, if these apparent men were gods, then their dictum could be salvaged. Presumably, however, they will admit they are not. If, on the other hand, the second and only other possibility obtains, then the rule collapses, the possibility of revelation is vindicated, and Socrates and company are free once again to teach the Truth. This is what I had in mind earlier when I accused the naysayers of tradition of not using their intellects and not thinking consistently. Even if they suppose all tradition to be the tradition of men, they are compelled to make an exception in favor of their own assertions. Even if there were no revelation before, and therefore no contact with something higher than the rim of the barrel, there

must be so now in their case. And this, of course, is the illogic I speak of. For if no one can know anything more than the relative, no one would be left to say that “no one can know anything more than the relative”.

There is, admittedly, nothing new in these observations. I myself have been over much the same ground countless times, as I am sure other traditionalists have. And like me, they will doubtless have heard the many excuses for the unthinking at work here, some more and some less sophisticated. We are told about tricks of language, performative contradictions, the subtleties of self-reference, and incompleteness theorems, while distinctions within distinctions are drawn between various degrees of relativism, as if a man could be “somewhat” dead or a woman “rather” pregnant. I used to try arguing against these dodges, but I have come to believe that the real problem is not a lack of proof or clarity, but a lack of attention. The only other, even less charitable, hypothesis is sheer perversity. It seems there are minds, otherwise fairly supple and clever, which are unable to sustain a thought long enough to ponder its implications. I do not know why, but there are many highly credentialed and seemingly intelligent people who simply cannot look at their looking so as to see what conclusions must be drawn from their seeing. Try as one might by the grip of sound logic to pin their gaze and to keep their heads from twisting and turning, they are still going to blink.

But the point of this essay is not to engage in more wrestling. I return to this illogic only because I think it is crucial to the whole question of tradition in contemporary life. In fact, diagnosing this malady can help us understand what is decisive about tradition in any period, past or present. For the role of tradition is today no different from what it ever was. In season and out, the extension or radiation of revelation through time always serves the same essential function, which is to recall men from their attachment to time itself. In the midst of all the many changes both within us and out, the point of tradition is to provide human beings with openings onto the eternal—moments in which all movement is taken into itself, places where all of space becomes centered, and where we are brought face to face with what truly abides beneath the shifting surface of contingency. A ritual gesture, the implacable face in an icon, the poise of a spiritual master, a place of pilgrimage, the chanted words of a sacred text, a flower. These are all modes of tradition. These are the echoes and reflections of God.

Conceived in this way, tradition is there to remind us of who we are. Created in the image of God, man is meant to be pontifex. Made of both the real and the unreal, he is fashioned as a

bridge between the infinite and the finite, the absolute and the relative. He himself is a projection of God into space, a kind of living, breathing revelation, from whose touch there should flow forth to all creatures the reverberations of their origin. But man constantly falls away from this high calling. Taking his definition from the creatures beneath him, he spends his whole life resisting the fact that he is made for eternity. He gives way to what changes and is drawn further and further into its sphere. What fails to abide also fails to demand, and man is soft. He finds it so much easier to flow with the shifting currents around him than to resist and be broken. So much the better, of course, if he can manage to convince himself that everything flows, that everything is relative, that all is woven from the threads of contingency. For then he has no cause to feel deficient or inadequate. His torpor excused as if it were a consequence of the very nature of things, he feels free to turn the tables on those who would speak of the gods, charging them with fantasy.

Of course, men have always cherished their excuses. I certainly do. There is nothing novel in our desire to avoid the discipline that must accompany all contact with God. The absolute by its very nature requires all that I am. It is satisfied with nothing less than the complete and continual conformity of my entire being. And in this sense human beings really are just human beings. No one likes to have his ego killed. Sanctity has never been easy, and those who think otherwise are romantics indeed, not traditionalists. What is new about the liberal mentality is not its weakness but its smug complacency. The position which contemporary academic liberals espouse is unprecedented, not because men never made excuses before, but because they never dreamed of elevating individual laziness to the level of a universal fatality. What is unique in our day is the fact that man's failures have become an occasion for applause and are taken, absurdly, as signs of maturity and strength. Ignorance has given way to agnosticism, sin to sickness, and "virtue itself of vice must pardon beg". And this is why any serious acceptance of tradition is bound to provoke the reactions it does, whether quiet amusement or smoldering indignation, or at best a feigned interest in the psychology or phenomenology of old-fashioned ways of thinking. Whatever else they may tolerate, those for whom everything changes and change is everything simply cannot abide the thought that there was something in the beginning, which is now, and which ever shall be, unto the ages of ages. It cramps their style.

Let us remind ourselves, however, that age in itself is not the issue. Tradition, as I have been using the word, occupies an altogether different dimension from the chronologically old. This is why I was at pains early on to insist that we focus only on a specific set of transmissions, those beginning in God. My metaphysical definition of tradition as such, as distinct from a doctrinal exposition of any given tradition, was meant to underscore the fact that antiquity alone is irrelevant, and to encourage us to prescind from all the many interminable historical arguments about local apostolic successions.

Needless to say, what I am calling tradition as such cannot but be old, nor would it be possible to discover an era without its expression. But this is simply owing to the nature of the God who reveals Himself, who cannot but be infinite, and whose infinitude means both originality and perpetuity on the plane of becoming. To put the point otherwise, there has never been a time without God, nor a place into which He has failed to descend. His “eternal power and Godhead” have always been “manifest in the things that are made” (Rom. 1:20), and the particular traditions are but so many palimpsests of a script written into the substance of creation itself. It is not surprising, therefore, if we find signs of tradition wherever and whenever we look. But the universality and antiquity are accidental from the metaphysical point of view. They are the results of tradition, not its causes. This is what accounts for my opening paradox, and it is this that makes the traditionalist’s task so difficult, so easily confused at first glance with exclusivist dogmatism or reactionary fundamentalism. He must defend what is old, not as old but as true, as the temporal expression of something which is always springing fresh from eternity, “without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life, but made like unto the Son of God” (Heb. 7:3).

As I approach my conclusion, I should probably back off just a bit. Satirical appearances to the contrary, I do not mean to suggest that we traditionalists are alone in our quest for the Truth, though I do believe we are *conscious* as to what we are doing in a way that the liberal is not, and one hopes conscientious as well. Had they eyes to see, the liberals would realize that our innate nobility as men obliges all of us to think metaphysically, for no one can escape his nature, not even by denying he has one. There is no avoiding the fact that we are made for the absolute, or else we are nothing, and that to be a man in the fullest sense of the word is to know it. Even in their duckings and dodgings, the modernists and the postmodernists must attempt to speak truly. They must say what they suppose to be so, not only here and now, but as such. And they cannot

therefore avoid being metaphysicians, whether they like it or not, and be they good ones or bad. The illogic of their supposals stands as indirect proof that this is so. It is precisely when their position implodes that they attest, quite in spite of themselves, to the underlying point of tradition, which is to transmit what we need in order to become what we are. They confess with us all that in abdicating his vocation as a projection of God, man has rendered himself dependent on revealed symbols of the Truth now buried in his heart.

Naturally, most of my university colleagues will still resist my talking this way. They will object that this letter has ignored their demands for criteria, their protests that revelation is far from self-evident. They will complain that my approach remains too abstract, too pretentious, too out of touch with the times. They will say, in short, that I am still preaching to the converted and not taking them seriously. And perhaps they are right. But throughout this additional rhetorical flurry, they will not have changed either. They will still be necessarily speaking as men—fallen men who, like me, continue to long for the Truth that makes free, whom tradition in contemporary life may yet make whole.