THE CONTINUITY OF FAITH

RECORDED EXPERIENCE AND CREATIVE TRADITION

By DAYTON HASKIN

MOST OF THE students who, two and three years ago, came to my lectures on english literature managed to find among the victorians at least one kindred spirit. But nearly all of them would have had to admit surprise, I think, that something victorian could ring so true for them as certain passages from J. S. Mill's classic essay, *On Liberty*. Though much of Mill's enlightened political liberalism sounds like present-day conservative doctrine, his remarks on tradition and individuality come as a surprise to anyone who imagines that our generation was the first to discover the ill-effects of social pressure and mindless conformity. In fact, we are all rather prone to this supposition. Every school-boy grows up hearing that each of us must 'find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character'.[1]

One readily understands how modern canons of economic efficiency and technical progress have discredited traditional humanistic disciplines, labelling them as so many disserviceable anachronisms. But liberal doctrine itself has contributed to its own undoing. As Mill himself put it, 'There is only too great a tendency in the best beliefs and practices to degenerate into the mechanical' and to become 'merely traditional'.[2] The eagerness of Mill's generation to regard self-will as a great offence and to exalt duty as a remedy for human ills has been replaced by an equally great eagerness to indulge in what is personally experiential and to raise individuality to the status of a cardinal virtue. Nor is the newer doctrine less susceptible to mechanical repetition, for all its liberalism.

Happily, there are signs that the opposition between tradition

[1] *On Liberty* (London, 1910), p 116. [2] *Ibid.*, p 122.

and individuality, which Mill's essay fostered and T. S. Eliot tried to dissolve, is being tempered. For one thing, social scientists, who long presumed that tradition is an impediment to modernity, have proved groundless the tacit assumption of popular social theory which supposes less traditional societies more capable of sustained growth. Whether tradition impedes or facilitates a transition to modernity depends upon the nature and quality of the traditions in question.[3] For another, our mere ability to identify and caricature the present antipathy towards tradition, and to recognize its haughty evolutionary assumption that all of the past has been but a preparation for our own generation, indicates that current dogma is not above suspicion.

Now it is a well-known fact of human experience that everything gets stale if it is merely handed down. It is a lesser known fact that the inexhaustible riches left us by our predecessors come to life when we are willing to search for them and to accept what is worthy with a feeling of *tua res agitur*. Here lies the question which faces every succeeding generation and which Mill formulated for mid-victorian England: how do we keep 'the best beliefs and practices' from becoming 'merely traditional'? In a more current idiom, and posing the question the other way round: how is the feeling, whereby someone else's 'thing' becomes 'my thing', induced? Here, I think, we must invoke the hallowed traditional principle of *solvitur ambulando*, which has got not a few people through the door into the next room – despite the paradoxical insistence that one must always keep going halfway between here and the door *before* going through it.

Let us consider that great religious tradition which dates to the figure of Abraham and finds its primary principle of continuity in its reference to the God of Abraham. Here, 'tradition' refers to a patrimony common to christians, jews and moslems. It includes, according to Robert Murray, 'in its reference all the activities by which the believing community responds to God's self-communication and hands on the record of revelation and response'.[4] Now obviously this tradition is so large that trying to consider it whole is like trying to get an overview of the globe. We shall require, there-

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[3] See S. N. Eisenstadt, 'Post-Traditional Societies and the Continuity and Reconstruction of Tradition', in *Daedalus*, 102 (1973): *Post-Traditional Societies*, pp 1-27.

[4] Father Murray offers both a penetrating discussion of this tradition and a provocative parable for understanding traditions within it in 'Tradition as Criterion of Unity', in *Intercommunion and Church Membership*, eds. John Kent & Robert Murray (London, 1973), pp 251–80.

fore, an attempt to distance ourselves like the astronauts, so that we can see the great peaks, though the bushes and ponds disappear. At this distance we note such crucial features as the coming of Jesus and the rise of the prophet Mohammed. But we can also see, within ancient Israel itself, the radical re-evaluations of the earlier tradition fostered by the deuteronomic historian, by Ezekiel, and by deutero-Isaiah, each in his turn. Even if we limit ourselves to a specifically christian vantagepoint, we must admit that the destruction of Jerusalem and the babylonian exile demanded of our spiritual ancestors a critical review of their history and a re-evaluation of their traditions in the light of new experience. This the prophets and the historians provided.

The re-evaluation of the great tradition which took place, then, in apostolic times – inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus – was by no means the first revolution in the tradition's history. But formulated as it was on the basis of the impact of Jesus and (as christians believe) under the inspiration of the Spirit by the writers of the New Testament, it was even more radical and thoroughgoing than the breakthrough to universalism witnessed by deutero-Isaiah.

This revolution of apostolic times has always seemed to christians a special case – a revolution warranted by unique circumstances, although it entailed the rejection of much that had been considered important, even essential, in the past; for God himself initiated it and through his instruments carried it out. The christian belief in the ultimacy of this divine revelation in Christ has been enshrined in the idea of a 'deposit of faith', which was closed with the death of the last apostle. Not a few christians have pictured this deposit in rather crude 'reified' terms, and have emphasized the 'once-for-all' character of this revolution, seeing the events of apostolic times as the end of God's work in the world. By the late middle ages christians were debating, often more heatedly than learnedly, whether revelation rests in a single source – holy scripture – or a twofold source – scripture and tradition. Those who supported the sole sufficiency of scripture pitted the bible against contemporary church practices, 'mere human traditions', in order to reform the Church after the model of a primitive apostolic ideal. Those who wanted to add tradition to the 'deposit' tended to think of it less as a justification for ongoing change or development than as a body of beliefs and practices handed on from apostolic times alongside scripture. These latter made out the former to be irresponsible heretics, who had reduced the accumulated wisdom of the centuries

to what could be found between the covers of a book.[5]

Neither of these views recommends itself very well to anyone with a modicum of sophistication in his knowledge of the bible or of history. Both views tend to place ideal christian belief and practice safely above and beyond the vagaries of the world, to the detriment of belief in the incarnation. Both envisage a situation whereby whatever is divine and eternal in christianity does not submit to human process: it is as if the Word had come to us full-grown and never experienced the changes entailed in maturing into adulthood; or, as if the scriptural language could always and everywhere be understood in its original hebrew or *koinē* glory.[6] Since both views envisage a timeless ideal formulation of christian doctrine and practice, whether enshrining it in scripture and tradition or in scripture alone, they fail to come to grips with the very real human problem of how faith is passed on from one generation to the next. At their worst, they reduce the idea of faith to something crudely mechanical or, in Mill's phrase, 'merely traditional'.

Thus a significant feature of the re-evaluation of the christian tradition which is represented in the documents of the second Council of the Vatican is the recognition that 'scripture is indeed uniquely normative, but precisely because the total tradition of faith is normative'.[7] In fact, this recent council, as the dramatic events of recent years have made clear, actually fosters in its concept of *aggiornamento* a decisive departure from an earlier concept of reform which had seemed sacred to catholics since the counter-reformation. Vatican II, in a spirit akin to Mill's, has actually challenged christians in general (and members of religious orders in particular) to return to the scriptures (and the writing of their founders), to find out which aspects of recorded experience are applicable to present circumstances. This challenge not only denies that slavish imitation of the past is a value in itself, but actually enjoins the disposal of worn-out traditions that we find are still valid, according to responsible human decisions.[8] In short, Vatican

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[5] See C. A. Patrides, *Milton and the Christian Tradition* (Oxford, 1966), pp 1–6.

[6] An extremely grotesque version of this error is to be found in Wyclif, who is therefore wrongly supposed a champion of reform. See Beryl Smalley, 'The Bible and Eternity: John Wyclif's Dilemma', in the *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 27 (1964), pp 73–89.

[7] Murray, *op. cit.*, p 254. Cf. *Dei Verbum*, esp. 7–10.

[8] See John W. O'Malley, 'Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's Aggiornamento', in *Theological Studies*, 32 (1971), pp 573–601.

II recognized that if God and his love and the salvation he wrought for us are eternal, it is also true that men learn about them and accept or reject them in time. If revelation is not exactly time's fool, it nonetheless comes within his bending sickle's compass.

Christian revelation is of its nature, then, two-sided: for all its timeless value, it is always revealed to and grasped by men living at a particular time.[9] The history of revelation did not end with the close of the apostolic age. It is, rather, co-extensive with the spiritual history of mankind. Each individual's own reaction to the offer of grace, however that offer may come to him, constitutes a chapter, as it were, in the multi-volume history of God's self-disclosure. This history recounts the adventures of mankinds' spiritual odyssey. Although certain of its chapters have been collected into those two privileged volumes we call the Testaments, the story as a whole is still being fashioned. And we can always expect later volumes to help to clarify the long-term significance of the earlier ones.

To think in terms of a universal spiritual history of mankind, within which to understand the revelation which is attested to in the bible, is particularly important at this moment in history, as the dialogue among the various world religions gathers momentum. But this is not to introduce a new idea so much as to recover an old one. (It is also to take a few more steps towards the door in our 'solution by walking'.) The church fathers who enlisted and baptized pagan learning in the service of the gospel, and the humanists of the renaissance for whom truth was one, thought, quite generally, in such terms. But more important, the biblical writers themselves thought in these terms; for they were not so much concerned to report on a series of cures and wondrous events that transpired in a minor mediteranean land, but to communicate what Jesus continues to do for those who put their faith in him. In writing the scriptures, they provided us with a rich source of symbols which can mediate Christ's action to individuals. The christian community and its worship, and an individual's own personal experience of death-resurrection, can occasion, however, a 'revelation within' which corresponds to and fulfils the 'revelation without' that can be found in the bible.

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[9] See Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (London, 1966), pp 13ff., 36.

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The bible, despite what christians have too often tried to make it, is not a reservoir of timeless proof-texts to be quoted in order to foist on others one's own particular brand of christianity. But it does provide us with significant data for understanding how we are to act responsibly and creatively in the face of tradition. These data rest not so much in isolated proof-texts as in the decidedly manifold range of view-points the scriptures contain. The days are past when we want to harmonize the gospels at the expense of appreciating each evangelist's view-point, or when we use the pauline texts as a norm against which to judge writings which betray 'early catholicism'. In the words of Robert Murray, 'a crucial feature of the data given us by God is pluralism. We *may* not reduce this to univocal expressions or to a "monolithic" unity'.[10] But even if we attend to a single author, as I propose we do in the pages which remain, we find overwhelming evidence that scripture itself enjoins upon us as a posture towards tradition that sees the data handed on to us from the past as something to be creatively transformed in the present. The model which scripture provides by doing this is itself an essential feature of revelation.

Whoever would understand the writings of the first and most creative of christian theologians would not do badly to consult T. S. Eliot's provocative essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.[11] In recommending this I am not subscribing to a simplistic equation of theology and poetry based upon an assumption that both are imaginative expressions of man's more chimeral wishes. And certainly St Paul is not best interpreted as a poet. But in so far as creative theology bears this essential affinity to poetry, that the work must, ultimately, be appreciated in relation to the tradition which provides its context, it is not inconceivable that considering the pauline letters in relation to Eliot's reflections might yield a fresh reading of something that is for many of us deceptively familiar.

That we know more about St Paul and his background than about any other figure in the early history of christianity can be a snare and a deception. It can divert our attention from the message Paul bears and lead us to expect that the biography of the author shall provide the key to his work. Paul, we know, would be horrified at

[10] Murray, *op. cit.*, p 257.

[11] *Selected Essays* (London, 1932).

our interest in him rather than in his Lord. But it is a particularly grave occupational hazard of New Testament studies, which have a relatively limited and already well-ploughed field to circle back over again and again, to get things all out of proportion by earnestly studying every clue, no matter how haphazardly it might have chanced to come down to us. We do not have a complete picture of early christianity, and we cannot reasonably expect to construct one. Nor do we need one to be good christians, or readers of the New Testament.

It is chiefly here that consulting Eliot's essay has salutary effects. He takes literary documents seriously and does not try to make of them something they were never meant to be. In assessing the relationship of a poet to the tradition of western literature, he is not concerned with details of history nor intent to uncover idiosyncrasies. Paradoxically, he suggests that we might best appreciate a writer for his debt to tradition. He does not mean, of course, 'a blind and timid adherence' to all that has been handed down, but rather a creative sensitive relating of one's writings to what is best in the past.[12]

In considering an author's individuality, then, Eliot rejects a dichotomy between the individual and tradition, and proposes that, to value a writer for those 'aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else', entails a prejudicial assumption. 'Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most influential parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously'.[13]

The technical scholarly questions involved in determining who Paul's ancestors were should not so intimidate us that we overlook what is certain. I do not suppose that Eliot would have been so interested as Paul himself seems to have been in the extent to which the first apostles gave Paul information about Jesus.[14] Eliot speaks of literary ancestry, not of biographical details. This is particularly evident in a remark that hints at the importance of Paul's vision on the Damascus road: 'Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it. Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British museum'.[15]

Paul's Plutarch was the book we call the Old Testament. In the book of Genesis he found Abraham, the paradigm for the man of

[12] *Ibid.*, p 14. [13] *Ibid.* [14] Gal 1–2. [15] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p 17.

faith, and Adam, who, as the first representative of all mankind, provided him with a category for interpreting Christ's universal redemptive mission.[16] Paul perceived that the Christ-event was the key to all human history: the key because Christ reversed the alienation of man from God which had ever marked human history. Jesus he saw as an instrument of a 'new creation' still more vital than that hoped for by deutero-Isaiah.

More basically still, Paul learned from the Old Testament of God's desire for man's salvation, of his never-failing steadfast love: this afforded a category for understanding that what God had done in and through Christ effected a cosmic reconciliation,[17] embracing 'all things whether on earth or in heaven'. Further, the traditional notion of expiation offered Paul another category by which to interpret Christ's work. But most especially the story of the exodus (itself a rich traditional symbol within the Old Testament) provided the model for perceiving Christ's action as a redemptive liberation of God's people. The new understanding of how the gentiles could be numbered among this group is the more powerful for being all-pervasive in Paul's thought. As Yahweh adopted a people as his own, so now Christ has bought this people with a price.[18] Their freedom entails a slavery to Christ[19] and their being bound to a law of love, which replaces that of Sinai. Moreover, Paul understood Christ's work metaphorically as a gratuitous justification of men before God in the tradition of the Old Testament insistence on the 'uprightness of Yahweh', whereby the eternal judge manifests his steadfast love. Christ, as man and God, effects this justification.

No doubt Paul was not the first to discover that all God's purposes had converged in Jesus Christ. He shared with other christians an embryonic tradition of referring the scriptures to Christ, a tradition which arose quite naturally among people who turned to the language and literature in which they had been brought up to interpret their experience of God in their relationship with Jesus. They believed firmly that the scriptures belonged to them because of Christ, who fulfils them. Like Dante and Shakespeare and Milton in later eras, Paul appropriated the traditions he inherited, transformed them creatively, and thereby discovered in them, not only their former value, but also the basic unity between past and present which can only be effected when former values are accepted

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[16] Cf 1 Cor 15, 45; Col 1, 18.
[17] Cf 2 Cor 5, 19.
[18] 1 Cor 7, 23.
[19] 1 Cor 7, 22.

as present ones. Paul discovered in his ancestors an openness to a present which was not yet in existence when they were passing down the values of the past.

The first, the most articulate and the most fully individual of the early christian writers stands among the first rank in western literary tradition because of his twofold contribution to the past and to the future. Paul not only made tradition for those coming after, but his achievement has had for those coming after a retroactive effect: as we look back beyond him to what goes before, we see there, because of him, potentialities and significances brought to the fore for us, so that we must say that Paul also creates the tradition we see leading down to him.[20] Because of Paul, the Old Testament means something different to us: he has invested a new meaning in the past. And this forms an integral part of the biblical revelation.

Whatever happened to Paul as he was journeying that day to Damascus, he accepted it as a personal revelation of a Jesus who was alive and active in the lives and work of his disciples: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'[21] This revelation changed for him the meaning of the 'recorded experience' in which he had been educated, and made the scriptures applicable to his character and circumstances in a decisively new manner. Through the experience which is epitomized in his conversion, Paul gained that profound historical sense which perceives 'not only . . . the pastness of the past, but . . . its presence': and this compelled him to preach and to write 'not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature', at least of the jews but perhaps of the greeks as well,[22] has 'a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order'; for it all points to the significance of God's work in Christ as the crown of human history.

Not by repeating the teaching of Jesus does the first great christian writer attest to his Lord's immortality, but through his thoroughgoing conviction that Christ continues to live and work in his 'body'. For the image of the body of Christ, perhaps suggested by that experience on the Damascus road, most regularly serves Paul for insisting on the moral union of all believers in the Lord. He perceived the unity of the temporal and timeless in Christ, which is the prerequisite for succeeding generations' putting on 'the mind of Christ'.[23]

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[20] Cf. F. R. Leavis' remarks about Jane Austen as a pivotal figure, in *The Great Tradition* (Harmondsworth, 1962), pp 13–14.

[21] Acts 9, 4. [22] Cf Acts 17, 28–29. [23] 1 Cor 2, 16.

According to the book of Acts, as well as his own letters, Paul was a 'chosen instrument' of Christ,[24] a medium through whom the gospel comes to men. At every turn Paul is aware that his own lot, the christian's lot, is death to self and service to the Lord. Thus 'to live is Christ, and to die is gain'.[25] Paul finds the model for this identity and behaviour in Christ's own emptying of self for our sakes in the incarnation and on the cross. Thus identification with Christ crucified becomes the very basis of a man's worth.

Again, Eliot's remarks about the artist are germane and provide an illuminating perspective. Reacting against the excessive self-consciousness of the romantic poets, Eliot put forward the idea of the impersonality of the artist. The 'poet has not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways'.[26] Paul continually strives to root out his own selfish tendencies and to live only for Christ. In his letter to the Galatians he sets out this ideal: 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me'.[27] In this ideal, the immortality of the writer's chief ancestor, the last Adam and the first-born from the dead, is pre-eminently manifest. Everywhere in Paul's writings Christ is the central theme; and Paul's task is not only to make him alive and present to his readers but to embody in his own life Christ's continuing presence. Eliot's remarks about the artist sound as if they could have been written as a gloss on Paul's ideal for the apostle: 'What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality'.[28]

Paul's self-surrender to Christ and Christ's work marks him out as an individual whose talent has been placed at the service of the best in tradition. It is made not out of custom or habit, but out of personal conviction. 'The poet . . . is not likely to know what is to be done', writes Eliot, 'unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious not of what is dead, but of what is already living'.[29] Everywhere Paul's sense of his mission grows out of that remarkable perception that Christ lives not merely in the traditional writings, not merely

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[24] Acts 9, 15.
[25] Phil 1, 21. Cf. Phil 3, 8–11.
[26] Eliot, *op. cit.*, pp 19–20.
[27] Gal 2, 20.
[28] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p 71.
[29] *Ibid.*, p 22.

in the people who forward the tradition, but above all by the power of God which raised Jesus from the dead. Here Paul parts ways with an artist for whom, in the end, his work may be his god. And here is the grounds for considering the revolution which issued into christianity a special case. For the recorded experience embodied in scripture is to correspond to the personal experience of readers, who likewise live in and for Christ. To read the scripture aright, we must die to the old selves which we bring to the text and be reborn in the vision this recorded experience makes available. To be thus reborn is to experience ourselves the power of God.

At the outset of this article we adverted to the difficulty of making another's experience one's own. By the very nature of things, therefore, we have not been searching for a timeless formula for how christian faith is to be passed on from one generation to the next. Faith has after all something about it which cannot be given but can only be awakened. And so, unable to have a theoretical answer to our paradox, we have attempted a *solvitur ambulando* which entailed for us a confrontation with tradition, especially as it appears in St Paul. I can scarcely conceive of a human activity which more aptly deserves the designation 'traditional' than the one we have been engaged in together in these pages – reading and writing, and about tradition at that. But as tradition is a neutral thing, neither good or bad in itself but only in accord with what we responsibly do with it, it is incumbent on us to go beyond this activity, which can, in the end, become an idol. Reading and writing about the christian tradition provides one traditional means for appropriating it, but the underlying quest for God is the more basic principle which makes for a continuity of faith. And when we really hunger for God, not for an idolatrous image of him that could be captured and frozen in a formula, then we shall have entered the christian tradition.