2

Tradition

Tradition structures life, it calls time to order. Human communities surface in an environment that is itself without form and void; they summon a future and a past and thus create a coherent narrative in which life can be passed on and relations can be sustained. The order of tradition enables human beings to observe themselves in larger contexts of nature, history and society. Without tradition there can be no self-consciousness, no identity, no society. In the beginning was tradition.

It is appropriate to remind ourselves of this basic function of tradition in a postmodern age that treats traditions with a good deal of ambivalence. On the one hand traditions are distrusted and rejected: should not every individual map out his or her own route in life? Moreover: in view of an endless plurality of traditions, is it not arbitrary to attach oneself to one specific way of living, thinking and believing? On the other hand, traditions are easily invented to bestow legitimacy on new initiatives and to embed them in newly constructed histories. New nationalisms seek a glorious past, and cultural minorities use an invented tradition in their struggle for emancipation. The same ambivalence is apparent in relation to religion. Older religious traditions are treated with suspicion, but many newly emerging religious groups readily adopt ancient prophets or rituals to provide themselves with a historical context.

Given this ambivalence, we need some preliminary reflection to prepare the way for a 'case for the Christian tradition'. What does it mean when we say that time is organized by tradition? What is the specific function of religious traditions?

Memory and anticipation

Human existence is inextricably bound up with time, not only in the sense that it is temporal and finite, but also in the sense that it is caught in a stream it cannot control. That condition makes life possible, yet in order to survive it is equally necessary to offer resistance to it, to subject time to existence. Time must be conquered by space; that is to say: human beings need dry land where they can stand on their feet and look 'before and after'. Identity presupposes a continuous quarrel with time.

To some extent the self that is caught in time is able to transform that condition to its advantage. It can find comfort in the observation of cycles: things happen and return in predictable ways and thus constitute a home of sorts. Or it can establish the mechanism of the clock, that measures a linear movement and provides beginnings and ends to individual and social enterprises. But those efforts remain partial and inadequate. It is only in the construction of private time that the self can achieve a degree of independence. It can establish its own cycles and design its own schedules. 'One's own time' belongs to the basic equipment of the self, and it is essential for human life. Over against the objectifying effect of the networks of time in which the self exists, the inner rule over one's own time needs constantly to be safeguarded. One's own time is the private room of memory and experience where one is completely oneself; it is one's life-plan that has cycles of its own and beginnings and ends of its own.

Directing one's own time implies the cherishing of memories and the visualizing of future, in other words: the construction of a private narrative. Without such a narrative there is no self. That narrative is part of general, 'objective' history and yet it is not. The relation with one's own time differs from the relation with events that can be verified. Knowledge about my place of birth can be objective information, but it can also consist of childhood memories that nourish my life. Directing one's own time therefore means a measure of independence, of not being subject to the stream on which I also depend. That is an inescapable paradox: organizing time is necessary for survival, but it can never be carried out completely and consistently. That paradox provides the space that makes tradition possible and necessary.

Organizing time starts with finding anchorage in the past, with holding on to events and experiences that are meaningful, that function like a mirror in which the self can recognize itself. Memory is indispensable for the development of an autobiographic self. One appropriates time that

is irrevocably past yet becomes revocable through the appropriation –
it is not cancelled or rectified but resuscitated. That is what happens
when events or persons are commemorated. Commemoration means
that these become the raw material of one's personal narrative, or of the
collective narrative of a community, a nation, a culture.

Commemoration is two-way traffic between past and present: the
past is not only appropriated and resuscitated but also interpreted.
That means that ideas and experiences that are alive at the time
of commemoration influence the way in which the past is present.
Sometimes that interpretation goes so far as to overwrite the facts: the
image moves away from what 'really happened'. To put it more strongly:
in essence it is the activity of commemoration itself that generates
history, that creates the ongoing narrative that is the nourishment of
self or community. In that sense, commemoration is a special kind of
imagination.

That imagination creates not only a past but also a future, because the
person or event in question becomes a model, a framework with the aid
of which new things receive meaning. Commemorating a flood implies
making plans for dykes; honouring ancient prophets implies searching
for wisdom in their words that might be relevant for the days ahead.
Obviously, it is the community that plays an important role in this
active construction of past and future. As the community – family,
neighbourhood, culture – maintains the tradition by which it lives,
it builds the home in which the historical self can find its identity.
Traditions come into being, change and become extinct dependent
on the strength of the sustaining community. Traditions are the raw
material by which ultimately humankind itself is written as a coherent
narrative.

Such active construction of history must be distinguished from
practising history as an academic, 'objective' discipline. The 'history of
facts' keeps its distance from the capriciousness of commemorating and
anticipating individuals and communities, in order to guarantee the
widest possible communication about the past. Nevertheless: it cannot
guarantee pure objectivity because the layer of human construction
of history and tradition remains tangibly present. The reconstruction
of 'facts' remains embedded in the construction of a narrative with a
retreating beginning and an unpredictable ending. More strongly even:
history in the sense of 'what really happened' remains secondary to
history that emerges out of commemorating imagination. To be sure,
facts are indispensable in the rational organization of communication
among the various systems of imagination. But imagination as such, and

traditions that preserve and pass on that imagination, do not thereby become superfluous, and neither do they constitute a preliminary stage that one can leave behind.

Obviously, objective and subjective history (sometimes called external and internal history) do not always entertain a harmonious relation. There is 'fake news', and very often moods and opinions receive more weight than established facts. Sometimes objective facts are denied because they are not compatible with certain traditions. Denying the Armenian genocide or the Holocaust is not a part of an academic discussion among historians but a matter of rivalry among political communities. Provocative denial of historical facts, as well as provocative insistence on the objectivity of unproven events, shows that objective and subjective history can collide seriously. Religious traditions are very familiar with those collisions.

The tensions between objective and subjective history cannot be solved by reserving the monopoly of truth for the academic pursuit of history and referring everything not in line with that to the domain of idle phantasy. That would mean depriving objective history of a vital source. Conversely, one cannot declare traditions of memory and anticipation to be immune to historical criticism with an appeal to 'revelation'. That would mean destroying the possibility of fruitful communication between reason and imagination, as well as between different traditions.

Religious traditions

At first sight, religious traditions perfectly fit the description offered above of traditions in general. After a closer look, however, and analogous to the elaboration of imagination and religious imagination in the first chapter, some additional qualifications are in order. Most importantly, religious traditions explicitly thematize the problem of tradition as such: the continuous quarrel with time, presupposed in the search for identity; the paradox of the necessity of controlling time while depending on it; the alliance between commemoration and anticipation; and the tensions between objective and subjective history – all these existential predicaments are no longer merely presupposed, but become the focus of attention. That means that religious traditions exercise a metafunction in relation to tradition in general. That is at least true for the 'great' religions such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity. The explicit consciousness of being immersed in time, of being left to the mercy of

an enigmatic reality, of being dependent on the anchors of memory and anticipation for the creation of a somewhat stable identity – that is the starting point for practices and narratives, stored in the great religious traditions. Those practices and narratives are meant to provide frameworks of security and illumination for both individuals and communities.

For a better understanding of how religious traditions take their place among the traditions that constitute the raw material for the narrative of humankind, it may be helpful to consider them against the background of an (imagined) stage of human history where religious and non-religious elements together form a relatively undifferentiated whole. Great religious traditions as we know them are latecomers in history; how do they distinguish themselves from that previous stage?

In so-called traditional cultures human life is embedded in a system of ritual practices and mythical imaginations. Crucial experiences such as the change of seasons, maturity, birth and death are sustained by those practices and imaginations. Here time is called to order in the sense that the experience of the irrevocable passing of time is translated into a series of practices. Constant repetition mirrors the cycle of time and suggests embeddedness in a comprehensive divine space. Memory of ancestors and anticipation of a 'paradise' are normal aspects of daily life. Sacrifices and the preparation of daily food are part of the same routine. Religious and secular are not (yet) separated.

All that is subject to change when different aspects of individual and common life begin to achieve a measure of independence in relation to each other. Separate responsibilities constitute themselves, of which the cultivation of religious elements is (only) one. Gradually, specific religious traditions come into being – still a part of an encompassing whole, but nevertheless distinct.

When considered in this perspective, the emergence of the great religious traditions and that of a secular domain are, to some extent, two sides of the same coin. With a growing distance between the human being and its immediate surroundings (as a consequence of technological developments) religious questions change as they transcend the coherence of an 'unbroken' society. New forms of religious imagination arise that focus on the existential questions of self, God and world, thereby loosening their ties with the problems of ongoing daily life. 'Religion' begins to imply personal choices and separate institutions. Moreover, religious institutions no longer automatically coincide with specific cultures; they can ally themselves with different cultures and thereby emphasize the distance between limited cultures and the whole of humankind.

(What is described here, is generally referred to as the *axis-age*: the period roughly between 800 and 200 BC in which various great philosophical-religious systems came into being that began to emphasize the individuality of the self and the unity of world and humankind. As a theory of religious history, this 'discovery of simultaneity' may be debatable, but it is obvious that 'somewhere along the way' religion did acquire a metafunction that has remained a determining feature through the centuries.)

Religious traditions with a metafunction, then, presuppose an embeddedness in tradition-bound life while at the same time questioning it. They focus on the confrontation of the individual self with 'all there is', which means that all experiences of a primary symbiosis between self, community, God and world are 'interrupted': these experiences lose their self-evidence. The relation between time and eternity becomes problematic; the ancestors are no longer close at hand; 'paradise' is a long distance away. The notion of eternity begins to play a role of its own in the human quarrel with time and in the construction of history. 'Time' refers to passing reality, 'eternity' refers to what is everlasting, final, divine. Eternity is the decisive conquest of space over time, of stability over uncertainty. By contrast, daily reality becomes unstable and threatening. There is a distance here, that is supposed to be bridged by religious activity. Belonging to a religious tradition becomes a matter of personal choice, of consent with certain beliefs and the decision to entertain certain practices. A distance must be bridged between the self and its final identity: by seeking enlightenment (as in Buddhism), by submission to a divine Lawgiver (as in Islam), by sacramental participation in the life and death of a Saviour (as in Christianity). The connection between time and eternity is sought as well as received, achieved as well as believed. That is religious tradition: it is fully 'tradition' in the sense of the organization of time and community, memory and anticipation; but at the same time it is an interruption of all self-evident continuity between self, God and world, and a perspective on a new, different world.

Two additional comments are in order at this point. First of all: the metafunction of religious traditions focuses by definition on the unity of humankind. As the self becomes lonely in confrontation with the 'eternal universe', the community to which the self ultimately belongs is stretched to include all human beings and all 'provisional' communities. That results in a certain asymmetry between memory and anticipation: memory is related to specific events, persons and contexts that determined the origin of the tradition, but anticipation

is directed towards a community that is universal. That asymmetry leads to a permanent tension in religious traditions: on the one hand a religious tradition intends to be a clear and binding system of beliefs and practices and is, on account of that, constantly subject to the temptation of becoming a closed and authoritarian society that domesticates the dynamic of memory and anticipation; on the other hand, movements of renewal keep striving to recover the original dynamic.

The second comment concerns secularization. It is important to recognize that the emergence of (great) religious traditions entails the creation of a 'secular' realm, that is to say: a space where daily life is carried on under the aegis of religion but nevertheless at a certain distance. Not every action is connected to a religious thought or ritual. Religion is no longer present in the details of life, and life begins to move along by a self-explanatory dynamic. Even though in terms of content religion occupies itself with the most fundamental predicaments of human existence, in terms of practice it constitutes a more-or-less distinct domain. Religious traditions may be present in an overarching way and in specific actions alongside daily life, but they never become 'totalitarian', except perhaps in smaller monastery-like communities. We do well to keep this in mind when we reflect on the typically modern phenomenon of secularization.

Tradition and (post)modernity

The enthronement of the mature autonomous individual – the project of the Enlightenment reaching back to late-medieval times – basically undermines the authority and the legitimacy of tradition, even though it does not necessarily imply the rejection of the fundamental function of tradition in human existence or in humankind in general. What it does imply can be summarized in four points.

First of all, new ways are developed to disclose reality: an open-minded eye, disciplined observation, experiment, theory. Distance grows between thought and things. The dependence on cumulative experience, earlier insights, traditional wisdom – all that diminishes, and as a consequence 'tradition' loses its weight. Secondly, the experience of time changes. Time is no longer an enigmatic given that somehow needs to be mastered, but it is a quality of nature that can be observed and handled. It belongs to the order of things that can be discovered by the autonomous subject. Thirdly, the (post)modern recipient of tradition is no longer passive, but becomes the co-creator of meaning for whatever is

handed down from the past. To a certain extent, this recipient takes over the traditional role of tradition: outlining a way through the opacity of time and space. Tradition loses its quality of 'home' and increasingly becomes an instrument for building a home of one's own. Fourthly: a world comes into view in which a practically unlimited variety of traditions claims attention. That is especially the case with religious traditions. Within a particular religious tradition, different varieties become options – in the modern age unity and heterogeneity within one religious tradition become a serious problem – and in the world at large a plurality of 'roads to salvation' presents itself that can no longer be understood in the framework of one encompassing tradition.

Summarizing: it seems that living 'in' a tradition is no longer an option for the autonomous individual. Aloof and lonely: such is the position of the (post)modern self. Tradition is personalized, selected or even invented. All continuity with previous generations is fundamentally disputable. One consequence of this is that religious traditions are lined up next to national, cultural, social and professional traditions. All kinds of contexts are created for the development of individual and communal identities. Secular traditions, too, canonize and commemorate their saints. Most important of all: religious traditions lose their binding and overarching function. Their claim to represent the most inclusive narrative about self, God and world is no longer generally accepted.

Apparently, (post)modernity leads to estrangement between 'tradition' in a more fundamental sense and actually existing 'traditions'. The existential function of 'tradition' no longer coincides with any specific tradition and may be shared simultaneously by several different traditions, none of which can claim prior binding authority. That 'crumbling' of traditions confronts us with a second interruption (the first being the advent of the *axis-age*). That second interruption consists of the disappearance of the self-evident ascendancy of a religious reading of life. It intensifies the phenomenon of secularization referred to above in the sense that living outside of a religious tradition becomes a totally acceptable option. Religion is no longer an overarching presence.

For those who want to remain faithful to their religion in this (post) modern context, this crumbling of traditions presents certain difficulties. Some people meet those difficulties by relativizing or even disregarding the specifics of the tradition to which they belong and by seeking refuge in 'higher' notions of religion, such as the experience of being connected to a cosmic unity. But there are also countermovements: efforts to rescue religious traditions and to restore the original function of a religious tradition as far as possible, almost as if it were possible to return to a

situation prior to the two interruptions described. Interestingly, those rescue efforts are themselves (post)modern, in the sense that they presuppose the enthronement of the autonomous individual. The most conspicuous of them is fundamentalism; but we must also consider its opposite: the effort to treat religious tradition as an artefact, consciously composed out of a diversity of elements (here called '*bricolage*').

Fundamentalism and bricolage

Fundamentalism is a deliberate intervention in the quarrel between tradition and modernity. It is spectacular as a policy of theocracy that intends to rearrange society according to strict religious rule, but it also exists in a simpler variety: the reluctance to allow modern rationality to interfere with cherished religious convictions. Fundamentalism seeks to protect the tradition – most often a particular religious tradition presented as a coherent system – against the supposedly destructive effects of (post)modernity. It seeks to safeguard a specific form of religion against dynamics such as secularization and pluralization. It is a defensive reaction that refuses to sacrifice the security of a tradition to the dominant culture.

Yet it would be a mistake to regard fundamentalism as a simple rejection of modern rationality and as a longing for the coherence of a 'traditional' culture. Fundamentalism is not the restoration of a premodern lost paradise. To the contrary: it is itself perfectly modern, in the sense that it accepts the independence of the non-religious world and the emancipation of rationality from traditional patronizing. What it does want is to conquer rationality and to subject it to certain traditionally cherished truths, in other words: it uses a secular instrument to create a new central place for those truths.

To put it differently: fundamentalism wants to save religious tradition, not by retrieving the original creative tension between objective and subjective history, but by taking possession of objective history, the history of 'facts', and by positing a universally valid framework in which humankind, in all its diversity, should be understood. Fundamentalism is a *coup*, aiming not at the conquest of rationality by religion but at the establishment of an alternative rationality. That is a simple common-sense rationality that joins the naive realism of daily life and puts the 'facts' of a religious tradition in that context in an unassailable position. Fundamentalism wants to be an alternative science in which, for instance, religious-traditional theories about the origin of the world compete with

theories of evolution. The issue in that discussion is not religion as such, but specific insights of faith: images, concepts and laws formed in a specific tradition are set aside for permanent conservation.

Fundamentalism does not want to reimport religion into a non-religious world but to domesticate that world with the aid of rationally defended insights of faith. It wants to rearrange the relation between history, memory, identity and community sketched at the beginning of this chapter, because it is threatened by the looseness, the unpredictability of that relation. The construction of history through commemoration, the instability of individual and communal identities in the ongoing processes of history – all that needs to be contained by the establishment of 'truth'.

The opposite of fundamentalism is *bricolage* (literally: tinkering with loose parts to create or repair an object). In the context of this chapter it means the individual construction of a religious tradition, or at least a religious world view, with the aid of various elements brought together out of different traditions. The presupposition is the existence of a global depository of wisdom, collected through the ages and available for selection. In the overwhelming plurality that can be observed, identities and traditions become artefacts instead of original dynamics that connect past and future.

Unlike fundamentalism, *bricolage* is not intent upon conquering objective history but upon reviving subjective history, in the sense of making room for the construction of a personal narrative of memory and anticipation. In the process, existing traditions are often regarded as 'objective' hindrances to be overcome in a search for authentic identity. The new construction is used to counteract an estrangement caused by established traditions. Aloof and lonely, the autonomous individual makes a selection of rituals, beliefs, images and practices to establish a new home, a new narrative to call time to order.

Unlike fundamentalism, *bricolage* is not afraid of plurality and mobility. To the contrary, it embraces those in the conviction that the addition of various diverse traditions leads to more 'truth'. The *bricoleur* does not present the selection as a final construction but as a passing stage in an ongoing movement of interreligious dialogue. The phenomenon of interreligious dialogue can be seen as a response to the modern discovery of religious plurality, and as such it is a contribution to the communication between systems of (religious) imagination. In that sense it is certainly a major step forward. However, in spite of the increase in knowledge, communication and enriching insight that it brings forth, it leaves the searching self even more aloof and lonely.

In postmodernity, interreligious dialogue has become an activity inside each religious individual, who thereby becomes a self-appointed 'self-before-God'.

Of course, several varieties and mixtures of fundamentalism and *bricolage* exist in religious communities. Many believers who are unhappy with the tensions between tradition and (post)modernity persevere thanks to a combination of weak fundamentalism and cautious *bricolage*: they cherish traditional insights and images while adopting an attitude of tolerance in relation to other religious traditions. In religious practice, such a combination can be valuable and satisfying, but in the long run it might turn out to be untenable as fundamentalism and *bricolage* represent diverging spiritualities. In the terminology of the introduction to this book: fundamentalism capitalizes on *fides quae*, *bricolage* on *fides qua*. Yet what else is there to choose except some kind of middle road?

Memory and anticipation reconsidered

The answer to that question begins with the observation, that both fundamentalism and *bricolage* implicitly wish to reverse the two interruptions discussed earlier in this chapter: the interruption of the *axis-age* and that of (post)modernity. The first signalled the advent of a 'risky' religion, focusing on individual and universe, and it created a 'secular space'; the second consisted in the crumbling of tradition into an unstructured plurality and the relativizing of religion in general. People seek refuge in fundamentalism or *bricolage* when they find it difficult to live in a spiritual environment in which the two interruptions keep causing a sense of homelessness. They long for a self-God-world relation that is secure and manageable and they seek to protect tradition against meaninglessness.

But perhaps we should treat the interruptions not as threats to religious security but as openings towards a more inclusive structure of memory and anticipation; as invitations to redefine and to take seriously the notion of universality that is implicit in human imagination and made explicit in religious imagination. In that perspective, the interruptions remind existing traditions that there is always more 'world' and more 'God' than can be imagined at any time or place. They figure as warnings against the closure of religious traditions, against the construction of religious communities as bulwarks of truth, and against the division of humanity into those who belong and those who are excluded. That implies in fact that the fulfilment of the longing for a secure and complete

self-world-God relation is 'postponed' until the advent of the unity of humankind. That unity is neither the vindication of one particular tradition over all others, nor the recapture of the space of secularization by religion. It is the flourishing of a world in which the need for closure, hostility and defensiveness has been overcome. Short of that unity, the mission of religious traditions, as well as the dynamic of human imagination in general, remains unfulfilled.

What is 'a more inclusive structure of memory and anticipation'? It is an adventure in which, first of all, the original movement of tradition is recovered. Postmodern selves are challenged to reinvent themselves by asking what the crucial anchors of their identity are and how these relate to the larger field of communication that humankind has become. They are challenged to reconstruct their histories as parts of an encompassing story rather than as private enterprises in which partial and limited goals take the place of what humankind is all about. Secondly, established religious traditions are challenged to prove their legitimacy by re-examining their treasures in the perspective of a unity that transcends their self-definition as limited historical phenomena. No single tradition can claim a privileged position in a plural humankind apart from this effort: to relate all specific wealth of narratives, images, rituals and practices to the ways in which the world as a whole presents itself to believers and non-believers alike.

In that perspective it is quite irrelevant to ask whether one particular tradition contains 'final truth' in distinction to others. There is simply no point of view from which that question could be answered. But more importantly: that question would focus on what traditions have become and not on the living dynamic of memory and anticipation. In that dynamic, no formal truth-question is appropriate but rather the material question as to how the content of a given tradition can and should be interpreted in the light of reconciled communication. To care for a living tradition in that perspective implies the permanent rearrangement of source, content and vision. The security that a religious tradition offers may no longer be the security of a encompassing metanarrative, a stable community or a strong confession of faith. It is the security of an anticipation, permanently activated and nourished by memory. Only by way of that anticipation can the nourishing tradition become and remain a 'home' where selves are secure in the stream of time.