

# Introduction

Making a case for the Christian tradition can easily be understood as: defending the truth or the superiority of the Christian religion in discussion with unbelievers, with a view to their conversion. That is not what this book intends to do, however. Instead, the book is an effort to present the tradition as a way of life that deserves to be taken seriously by the contemporary world, including modern and postmodern sceptics who regard themselves as ‘cultured despisers of religion’. The Christian tradition is an ecosystem of religious imagination, by which people make sense of their lives as well as participate in the ongoing struggle of humankind to achieve some measure of peace and unity. It is a celebration of humanity in communication with past and future generations. The book is a call to do justice to that reality.

But that call also implies a challenge to believers for whom an attachment to ‘tradition’ is no longer self-evident. There are many Christians who seek to dissociate themselves from faith-expressions handed down through the generations, and to rebuild their faith on the basis of personal spiritual experience. Many Catholics struggle with an institution that uses doctrines to control individual consciences. Protestants seek to free themselves from burdens of guilt and obscure mythology, supposedly left to them by ‘tradition’. For many believers, even the existence of God is no longer a simple, unquestioned truth, and they tentatively consider forms of Christian atheism or post-theism. There is a widespread search for more convenient shortcuts to religious truth. And it is difficult for a self-invented spirituality to remain connected to the beliefs of forefathers and foremothers.

That sentiment, of course, partly feeds upon a more pervasive Enlightenment spirituality of distrust with regard to tradition in general, shared by believers and non-believers alike. The implied message of modern western culture is that, in order to become a mature individual,

one is called to leave the house of bondage named tradition. In the postmodern world 'modern maturity' may imply loneliness and confusion, because of the loss of the so-called grand narratives and the blurred distinctions between truth and 'fake'. Still, many prefer that loneliness to being patronized.

This book makes a case for the Christian tradition while taking all those problems with 'tradition' seriously. It is not a case for a simple restoration of old-time religion or a call to return to the certainties of the past. Instead, it is an effort to reflect on the dynamic of tradition as such, and to consider what it means that Christian faith is among us in the form of tradition. What does it mean to be part of a community that extends through time and to cherish truths that have been formulated in contexts that are no longer ours? To what extent does the critical reinterpretation and reformulation of cherished truths belong to tradition itself? What is the nature of articulated religious truth in relation to individual spirituality? How do doctrine, spirituality and activity refer to each other? To what extent is tradition a house of bondage; to what extent is it a house of comfort and security? Is it a closed house, or does it remain open and connected to the wider world?

To present the faith with those questions in mind necessarily implies serious attention for the context of 'traditioning'. Not only the articulated contents of the tradition come into view, but also the ways in which tradition connects to lives of people and cultures and to the history of the wider world. The 'what' and the 'how' of faith are in permanent interaction. That is a fundamental presupposition throughout the book.

The distinction between 'what' and 'how' reminds the theologian of the traditional distinction between faith-as-content (*fides quae creditur*) and faith-as-disposition (*fides qua creditur*). The first refers to formulated truth, articles of a confession, doctrinal affirmations; the second to consent, trust, and experience. For example: one can believe that Jesus is the incarnated Son of God (*fides quae*), and one can have a personal experience of that incarnation in Holy Communion or in prayer (*fides qua*). The distinction was originally intended to safeguard the balance between the two: the faithful were encouraged to internalize the faith but religious emotions were not allowed to relativize or overgrow the content. Spiritual life can undermine the authority of the explicit tradition, as many historical examples of heretic and sectarian movements testify.

In a secularized culture, where the authority of church-teaching is no longer self-evident, the balance between the two kinds of faith is difficult to maintain. Obviously, the *fides qua* has flourished much more strongly during the past two centuries than the *fides quae* – in two

respects. First of all, attention has developed for religion as a human activity: a primordial relation is presupposed between the human and the divine, and the contents of that relation are determined by the ways in which that relation is experienced. Secondly, assenting to traditional teaching no longer automatically means obedient acceptance: listening and reading also imply interpretation; what the tradition says is at least partly determined by the recipient of the tradition. One result of this twofold emancipation of the *fides qua* is that discussions about faith are reduced to discussions about the relation of the believing self with whatever that self means by 'God'. *Fides quae*, in other words, tends to be reduced to a matter of personal preference – and that, of course, considerably weakens the relation between faith and tradition.

Restoring that balance, as this book intends to do, inevitably implies a certain rehabilitation of the *fides quae*. Such a rehabilitation, however, must avoid the temptation of becoming a kind of catechism that presents 'the' faith with authority. It should be quite clear: no doctrinal authority exists external to the process of tradition itself. There is no transcending point of view from which it can be decided what is or is not authentically Christian. The presentation of the *fides quae* in this book remains, therefore, a matter of personal insight and preference, albeit with the claim that it stands in the Christian tradition and contributes to its further development. The author does not defend the 'truth' of 'the' Christian faith, but presents the faith as an ongoing adventure. For believers, it remains an adventure, and non-believers should take it seriously as such.

Prayer is presented as the pre-eminent focus of the interaction between *fides quae* and *fides qua*, between the 'what' and the 'how' of faith. Prayer is the native ground of faith, the space in which the various expressions of faith are kept and cherished. Both faith and theological reflection are understood as movements within a relationship of prayer: a relationship between the self and the inscrutable reality that is sometimes called 'God'. To be sure: this is not prayer understood as occasional ritual, but as a sustained dynamic of questioning and searching, of preoccupation with the coherence of all things, of finding answers, of living in commitment. Prayer, thus understood, is truly 'never ending': large as life itself. It is a never-ending triadic conversation between self, God and world, in which life in its fullness is sought, found, lost and found again. Images of faith and theological concepts live and move in the context of that conversation; although they are not irrational, they are not 'beliefs' that compete with scientific insight. They are the products of religious imagination that claim to express truth – fed and sustained by prayer.

Faith is seen as constituted by three basic elements: (religious) imagination, tradition and prayer. Together, these three form a specific 'cognitive strategy', a specific way of dealing with reality that differs from 'ordinary' (daily or scientific) knowledge. 'Imagination' plays a crucial role in human life even apart from religion, both in the formation of personal identity and in the shaping of societies and cultures. 'Tradition' is the living connection between past and future; it is the 'history' by means of which humans relate to time. Analogously, religious imagination and religious traditions feed and support the continuing existence of faith.

In this perspective, the Christian tradition can be seen as one among many 'systems of imagination': as a specific narrative in constant interaction with the arena of narratives to which it belongs. There are many ways in which people make sense of their lives as well as participate in the ongoing struggle of humankind to achieve some measure of peace and unity. To put it more strongly: the human activity of (religious) imagination evokes the image of the unity of humankind as a community of communication. This book is an effort to keep these lines (the individual and the global) together.

The first part of the book deals with the concepts of imagination, tradition and prayer. Against this background, the second part of the book explores the 'triad' self-God-world as the framework for the unfolding of major insights of the Christian tradition. The reader will find that a predominant place is assigned to the concepts of guilt and reconciliation. Those concepts represent a unique Christian way of looking at the human predicament and the problems of the unity of humankind – related as they are to faith in a God who reconciles, redeems and creates. The world – indispensable point of reference and context for the never-ending prayer – comes into view as history, evolution, cosmos, and finally as creation.

The third part considers themes of the Christian tradition that are related more specifically to Jesus Christ and to the hope for 'new life', both in personal and cosmic terms. Remembering (Christ) and anticipating (the coming age) are the two basic movements of never-ending prayer: they constitute the identity of the believing individual and simultaneously the dynamic of the tradition. In the final chapter, the various lines of the book converge in a reflection on mission: the way in which the Christian faith comes to life in the larger contexts of humankind.

The author of this book is a white Northern-European Protestant, whose faith and thinking have been shaped by a century of global disarray and by simultaneous efforts to expand the horizon of Christianity and Christian theology truly to 'the ends of the earth', but inevitably also by the specific hang-ups of a modern western world view. The limits

and biases of that historical position will no doubt become obvious to the reader. Still, the case this author makes for the Christian tradition is not a case for his own point of view, even though that point of view is present on every page. By reflecting on his own tradition from a certain distance, he invites the reader to enter the space where each specific Christian tradition is called to reflect on its own genesis.

Along with this invitation, the author hopes to meet the possible criticism that it is quite artificial to speak of 'the' Christian tradition. How can we responsibly use that generalization, in view of the endless diversity of world Christianity? Can we even pretend that an African celebration of the presence of Christ with the aid of regional rituals and an Orthodox recitation of the ancient liturgy of communion have anything in common except the reference to Christ? The answer is: yes, we can appeal to the fact that both are part and result of a complex history of traditioning in which ordinary believers have struggled and still struggle to find ways to maintain their fascination with Jesus in their own time and place. To be sure, that common struggle does not by itself create 'unity' or even mutual understanding, but it does delineate a space for reflection on the nature of tradition-bound faith. It is the space of *intellectus requirens fidem*: rationality seeking to understand faith. It is in that space that this book intends to move.