TRADITION

Etymologically tradition means "handing on" or "transmission." It can mean either the process of transmission itself (often written with the capital "T") or the content of what is transmitted (written with the small "t"). The latter can be used in the singular (the content in general) or in the plural (the distinctive traditions of each Christian denomination in particular).

It is universally agreed that no society, secular or religious, can be constituted or survive without some tradition. Without being rooted in a tradition one loses both the moorings of one's present identity and the directions for one's future. But one's attitude to tradition cannot simply be acquiescence and repetition. St. Paul's injunction: "Test everything; retain what is good" (1 Thess 5:21) is valid in this regard. Jesus himself displayed the same critical attitude toward his Jewish traditions. On the one hand, he followed many teachings and practices of his religion; on the other hand, he replaced rabbinical interpretations of the Law with his own ("You have heard that it was said.... But I say to you") and broke many of the Jewish ritual laws, e.g., those concerning the Sabbath and food observances.

For Christianity, which is a historical religion, tradition assumes a special importance. Besides the Sacred Scripture there is a body of traditions which are normative for all Christians. Against the Gnostics who claimed to possess a secret knowledge which alone leads to salvation, Irenaeus and Tertullian argued that there is a public postscriptural tradition located in the consensus of the Churches founded by the apostles, in particular the Church of Rome established by Peter and Paul. This consensus was termed the "rule of faith" or the "rule of truth," a principle distinct from though not independent of the Scripture, by which the orthodoxy of beliefs is measured. This rule of faith is embodied most fully in the creeds and later in the teachings of ecumenical councils. The normativity of tradition is solemnly affirmed by the fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II, 553): "We rightly confess the doctrines that have been transmitted to us by the divine scriptures and the teaching of the holy fathers, and by the definitions of the one and selfsame faith made by the four holy councils" (canon 14). Again the seventh council (Nicaea II, 787) states that anyone who "rejects the ecclesial tradition, written or unwritten" is to be anathematized (canon 4).

> One central issue regarding tradition is its relation to Scripture. Scandalized by many abusive traditions of the Catholic Church at their times, the sixteenth-century Reformers set forth "Scripture alone" as the formal principle corresponding to the material principle of "justification by faith." In reaction to this position, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) taught that the gospel, "the source of all saving truth and rule of conduct" is "contained in the written books and unwritten traditions" and that the council itself "receives and venerates with the same sense of loyalty and reverence all the books of the Old and New Testaments ... together with all the traditions concerning faith and morals."

In contemporary ecumenical dialogues, the differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant positions regarding the relationship between Scripture and tradition have been largely overcome. For one thing, the historico-critical research in biblical studies has shown that before the composition of the Scripture, in particular the Gospels, there had been oral traditions which were later selected, synthesized, or explained according the needs of the Churches. Indeed, the canon of the Scripture itself was established by postscriptural tradition. For another, historical studies on the Council of Trent's phrase "the written books and unwritten traditions" has shown that the post-Tridentine interpretation of it as meaning two separate, parallel, and independent sources of revelation is unwarranted. Some Roman Catholic theologians have argued that for the Council of Trent Scripture and tradition are identical in content though different in form and that therefore tradition is only formally, not materially, independent of Scripture.

Vatican II, in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *(Dei Verbum),* did not settle the issue of how Trent should be interpreted. However, it strongly insists on the unity of Scripture and tradition: "Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture, then, are bound together, and communicate

one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal.... Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence" (no. 9). The council goes on to say: "Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church" (no. 10). As to the contents of tradition, Vatican II declares: "What was handed on by the apostles comprises everything that serves to make the People of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith. In this way the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes" (no. 8).

Though there is widespread agreement today among the Churches about the necessity of tradition for a correct understanding of Scripture as well as about the necessity of tradition to be in conformity with the Scripture, there is no consensus as to how the authenticity of traditions is to be gauged. It may be said in general that Jesus Christ himself, as he is attested in the Scripture, is the criterion by which traditions are to be judged. Or appeal can be made to St. Vincent of Lerins' threefold criterion of universality, antiquity, and consensus. In the concrete, however, the question of whether a particular doctrinal or moral tradition is in fact in conformity with Jesus Christ or whether it has in fact been believed "everywhere, always, and by all" still needs to be decided. Who in the Church is authorized to make such a determination? The Roman Catholic Church declares that "the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone," even though "this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but its servant" (no. 10). Obviously not all the Churches agree on this point. Despite these serious divergences, ecumenical unity has been considerably strengthened by the universal agreement that tradition is essential for the life of the Church and that it is a living, developing force. Or as a terse aphorism has it, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."