

An Open Letter on Tradition

© 2001 James S. Cutsinger

Published in *Modern Age*, 36:3 (1994)

A TRADITIONALIST asked to write about tradition is faced with a daunting task. Not only must he find fresh words for a familiar topic so as to say something new about something old. Any writer on any subject must do the same if he would capture attention and sustain concentration. But the traditionalist must go further. If he is true to his principles, he must insist in this case that the old really is the new: that the antiquity and continuity of tradition are reasonable means of genuine transformation.

Explaining what is meant by this paradox in words intelligible to fellow traditionalists 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 go somewhat deeper than the familiar political, moral, and even theological expositions of conservative theorists. Little will be said explicitly about the Western intellectual heritage or religious doctrine as such, and nothing at all about social theory or culture. I leave it to the other symposiasts to cover these bases. The approach here will instead be strictly metaphysical. I use this word knowing of course that it may be misunderstood. Some will hear it and suppose that I intend to engage in remote and rarified speculation. What I mean on the contrary is that I shall be trying to cut straight to the essential heart of our topic in order to consider 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 perhaps explain that I have in mind as I write a very specific audience. I have mentioned my liberal colleagues. This article is something of an open letter to them. It represents one more attempt to break through all the hackneyed responses to the dinosaur in their midst. A conservative journal 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 the participants in this symposium from merely talking shop with each other. It may also prove a useful aid to fellow traditionalists in their own real life conversations with liberal academics. And who knows? It might even

succeed in its most important purpose and actually get through to the modernist and post-modernist mind.

Contributors to this discussion will no doubt have defined the key term in somewhat different ways. My own definition of tradition requires that it 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—be they words, gestures, symbols, saints, shrines—take up a certain space. But however one pictures it, revelation and tradition are to be seen, I suggest, as two parts of a single movement from God to man.

This way of looking at the matter is consistent with the usual meaning of the word *tradition*. Tradition, we are told, is the action or result of handing down or transmitting. But at the same time it is important to clarify 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, of course, is the concern of the critic: that the conservative is simply nostalgic for the way things were done in the past, irrespective of their truth or adequacy. One would perhaps be justified in replying to this observation by pointing out that the very length of a given usage almost certainly implies a correspondingly deep human need. But this is not my response here. I prefer to admit instead 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 and to hold the tradition they received from Saint Paul, but the Colossians were warned against the traditions of men. 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 particular custom may be older than any particular tradition. The only essential is a contact with revelation and thus with God.

But wait just a minute. My critics 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 have said, is the difference between what is and

what is not revelation. But where does that get us? How are we 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 wishes and struggles for power by calling them divine. We too, says the liberal, are subject to such wishes 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, nor 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 such in broad strokes is what I am constantly hearing from the majority of the academics around me. What are we 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 sheerly 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 guarantee my privileges and to 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 all this shows is 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 political 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—even if in the whole of our past authentic revelation had not 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. We idealize and idolize the past. We speak in terms of broad generalities and neglect the complexity and concrete messiness of real life. The picture we paint of our ancestors is a fiction of our own imagining. We should wake up and come to grips with the fact that folks are folks. Socrates, for example, was just another academic—not in his disciple’s but in our sense of the term. He taught, we are told, that the soul is divine and inwardly free from the bonds of becoming, and he may even for awhile have believed it. But like the modern scholar, he was basically in the business of solving various mental puzzles and problems. Even when he claimed to be doing something other and higher—when he claimed that it is possible for a man to discern the eternal forms with a disciplined intellect—this was itself 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 sages, saints, and prophets whose teachings are comprised by 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 modern or postmodern critic 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 is to say on that one point which was for them most important. For all tradition, remember, is the tradition of men. And all men, according to my liberal colleagues, are inevitably conditioned by their situation in history, whatever may be their claims to the contrary. What they can know is necessarily colored and restricted: inwardly by their psychological make-up, and outwardly by the environment they occupy. Absolutes are

therefore out of their reach, and those who purport to transmit a teaching of unconditional value—who suppose themselves links in a true tradition—are either simpletons or frauds. Contributors to this symposium are almost certainly in the latter category. For unlike the ancient thinkers they laud, they have plenty of eager colleagues who are ready at the drop of a hat to diminish their foolishness by reciting the many skeptical mantras about what it means to be caught in the web of relativity. We are therefore without excuse. I am perhaps especially blameworthy. It would be rather different had I spoken only about the concept or the problem of God, or had 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 spoken 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 otherwise have facilitated my descriptions of these critics' position. If he has nonetheless noted 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. Nobody 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 will therefore wish to get behind all the party loyalties, all the likes and dislikes, all the historical associations and influences and eponyms, so as 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 have helped 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 am referring to may not be immediately obvious. I have left it for the most part embedded 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*. My report is hardly unique. We

have all been force-fed this maxim hundreds of times. But I suspect that 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 anything else which seems to typify the modernist mentality, whatever the peripheral nuances. And it is this which 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 about 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 our critics. Let anyone try to get past the rim of history and contingency—let anyone even take seriously the possibility that some men have succeeded—and they are sure to cry foul. Certain 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 all 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, we might suppose, could be salvaged. I suspect, however, that they will confess 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 critics of tradition of not using their intellects and for not thinking consistently. As I explained, even if they suppose all tradition to be the tradition of men, they are compelled to make an exception in their own favor. Even if there were

no revelation before, and therefore no contact with something higher than the rim of the barrel, there must now be in their case. And this, of course, is the illogic I speak of. For if no one could know more than the relative, no one would be left to proclaim this was so.

Make no mistake. There is clearly nothing new in these comments. I have myself been over much the same ground countless times, as I am sure my fellow contributors 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 “sort of” dead or a woman “rather” pregnant. I used to try putting up arguments 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 instead there are minds, otherwise fairly supple and clever, which can nevertheless not sustain a thought long enough to ponder its implications. I do not know why, but some apparently intelligent people 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 paper is not to engage in more wrestling. I return to the modern illogic only because I think it is crucial for the whole question of tradition in contemporary life. I would argue, in fact, that diagnosing this malady can help us understand what is decisive about tradition in any period, past or present. For the role of tradition, as defined at the outset, 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 us 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 a 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 is himself a projection of God into space, a kind of living, breathing revelation, from whose touch there should flow to all creatures the reverberations of their origin. But man constantly falls away from this 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 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 history. For then he has no cause to feel bad or inadequate. His torpor excused as if it were a consequence of the very nature of things, he can then turn the tables on those who would speak of the gods, charging them with fantasy.

No one doubts of course that men have always cherished their excuses. I certainly do. There is nothing at all new in our wish 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 constant conformity of my entire being. And in this sense folks really are just folks. No one likes to have his ego killed. Sanctity has never been easy, and those who think otherwise really are just romantics, and not traditionalists. What is new about the modern mentality is not its weakness but its smugness. The position which the modernist espouses 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 to our day is the interest on the part of the critics in applauding man's failures and translating them into the language 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.

It is time to back off just a bit. As I approach my conclusion, I realize that I must admit in all candor that part of the problem we face in dealing with liberal academics may well be the result of a genuine misunderstanding. This is not to take back what I have said. I continue to think that attention is the real key to this matter. But there may be more, and for this reason, one final effort in the direction of clarity will perhaps not have been wasted. Part of the problem, I suggest, is that tradition remains confused in some quarters with things that are simply chronologically old. On this showing, all traditionalists would be reactionaries. This is why I was at pains early on to insist that we focus here only on transmissions 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 age in itself is not the issue, and to encourage us in prescindendo from all the many interminable historical arguments about local apostolic successions.

Of course 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, and the particular traditions are so many palimpsests of a script written into the substance of creation itself. It is not surprising, therefore, that we should 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 and not its causes. This of course 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 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.

I do not, however, wish to leave my reader with the wrong impression. I am not suggesting that we conservatives are altogether alone in our quest of the truth. We are simply conscious about what we are doing, and one hopes conscientious as well. Had they eyes to see, the liberals would realize that our innate nobility obliges all of us to think metaphysically, for no

man can escape his nature, not even by denying he has one. There is no getting around the fact that we are made for the absolute or else we are nothing, and that to be 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 this is so. For 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 now stands in need of an outward assistance. He is dependent on symbols of the truth that he has buried within his heart. Of course most of my fellow academics will still resist my talking this way. They will object that this letter has ignored their demands for criteria and their protests that revelation is far from self-evident. They will complain that my approach remains too abstract, too pretentious, and 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 long for the truth that makes free, whom tradition in contemporary life may yet make whole.