

Why Tradition Matters

The death of Pope Benedict XVI was a significant turning point in the Catholic Church. The Vatican's watchdog of the magisterium was a medieval scholar, a noteworthy theologian who, in the 1960s, was considered a theological vanguard. In his later years, however, Benedict established walls that did not allow the aims of the Second Vatican Council to adequately develop. His preoccupation with the tradition and his staunch defense of Christian doctrine effectively set him in opposition to the postmodern, scientific and technological culture. His skepticism of the modern age was at odds with Pope Francis and his social-economic reform through a new, ecological framework. For Benedict, the High Middle Ages were the "best of all times" and the challenge was and remains, among Conservative Catholics, how to reclaim the medieval worldview.

Pope Benedict has been labeled a "traditionalist," in contrast to Pope Francis, who is identified as a "progressive." These terms, however, can be misleading, as if a progressive thinker does not value tradition.

A traditionalist is, in the broadest sense, one who upholds or maintains tradition. Anyone who celebrates feasts such as Christmas and Hanukkah is, in some way, a traditionalist, in so far as one practices and celebrates the rituals and traditions of these feasts. Traditionalism can become problematic, however, when tradition is used to resist change, as if new ideas might dispel or eliminate precious elements of the tradition. When tradition becomes a retaining wall to defend one's position, then the "-ism" can

lead to a schism. Hence, there is healthy traditionalism and unhealthy traditionalism, and both are present in religious institutions today. A healthy traditionalism means engaging the tradition as a vital way of life, in which a tradition can enrich culture, and, in turn, be challenged by culture to evaluate its core values. An unhealthy traditionalism can create opposition by refusing to engage culture in a mutually beneficial manner. In this respect, tradition can become like a giant rock, unable to budge, blocking the view of new life.

The word "tradition" comes from the Latin *traditio*, the noun of the verb *tradere* meaning to transmit, to deliver. Used as a term of ratification in Roman law, the word *tradere* meant to hand over an object with the intention of parting with it on the one hand and of acquiring it on the other. A good simile would be that of a relay race where the runners, spaced at intervals, pass an object from one to the other, for example, a baton or torch. Although the word tradition implies conserving the past, it is more than retaining the past; rather, it is the continual presence of a spirit and of a moral attitude.

Yves Congar described tradition as a "spontaneous assimilation of the past in understanding the present, without a break in the continuity of a society's life, and without considering the past as outmoded." Perhaps we might say that tradition enables the continuity of values/ideas, as the past yields to the present. What links one generation to another is the principle of identity, which is inherent to tradition and which the tradition strives to maintain.



Ilia Delio, OSF, PhD is a Franciscan Sister of Washington, DC and American theologian specializing in the area of science and religion, with interests in evolution, physics and neuroscience and the import of these for theology.

Why Tradition Matters

Cicero once claimed that tradition is like a second nature, that is, tradition is integral to identity. Many ethnic groups still retain their traditions, although younger ethnic generations are completely assimilated to postmodern culture. Identity formed by tradition means construing the tradition as a framework in which one understands oneself, one's social and natural world, and one's place in it.

*The vitality of a tradition is
its ability to change,
while retaining core values.*

Tradition is the living out of a set of acceptable norms and doctrines. Every authentic tradition has certain features. First, there is a core of fundamental values and beliefs that are particular to the tradition. Next, there are witnesses to the tradition, those in whom the set of beliefs have taken root.

Identity is inherent to tradition and which tradition strives to maintain. The act of ritual and celebration is formative of identity. Traditions give rise to cultures because they give rise to meaningful lives. Those who partake of a tradition bear witness to its particular meaning. It is they to whom the future of the tradition is entrusted, insofar as they remain faithful to its identity.

What makes a tradition a "tradition," therefore, is the reception and transmission of a core set of values/beliefs that shape a particular culture in such a way that the self-identity of the tradition is maintained from past to present by those who bear witness to it.

It is unfortunate that traditional customs have become commodities in our own time. Walk into any store in late October and one can find Christmas trees and nativity scenes on sale. Our consumer society has thinned out tradition by turning symbolic rituals into consumer products.

In his provocative work, *The Analogical Imagination*, David Tracy confronts the reader with a challenging question: "In a culture of pluralism must each religious tradition finally either dissolve into some lowest common denominator or accept a marginal existence as one interesting but purely private option?" This is what Pope Benedict feared. Must the Christian tradition either dissolve into some lowest common denominator or accept a marginal existence as one interesting but private option?

I consider myself a traditionalist, in so far as I deeply value the Christian tradition, while remaining open to understanding its core values in new ways. The beauty of the Christian tradition informs my entire life: what I am, what I do and how I choose to act.

What distinguishes my work is not negation of tradition but how I understand Christianity as a "living" tradition, an organic and evolving one. The vitality of a tradition is its ability to change, while retaining core values. Just as a human person grows into the fullness of one's identity, so too with religious traditions. While each tradition has its own "genetic code," the features of the tradition mature through the lived experience. It is only with growth and development that traditions can reveal their unique beauty. A human person grows into one's own identity by feeding the mind and soul. Similarly, a tradition grows by developing insights that redound on its core values in order to live out those values in vital ways.

What stimulates the Christian tradition to grow today? This is a question that divides the so-called "traditionalists" from the "progressives." Traditionalists want to preserve the past in its pristine form, while progressives seek to live out traditional values in ways that open them up to new meanings. I suppose in this respect, I am a progressive traditionalist. So too was Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. He was well-informed about the new philosophy of his day and acquainted himself with the commentaries of the Islamic philosophers. Thomas Aquinas was, what we might call, a "cutting-edge" thinker. He was constantly thinking through the boundaries of the Christian tradition in light of science and culture.

Why Tradition Matters

Delwin Brown states that traditions are creative when they maintain a dynamic interface between culture and canon, that is, the established body of writings. He writes:

The creativity of a tradition is the tensive character of the life lived within, and sometimes against, its boundaries.

The viability of a tradition is the vastness of its collected resources, unified enough to sustain needed continuity and diverse enough to create something new for new times. The power of a tradition is the worth of its space, the productivity of its complementary and competing voices, as it progresses through the novelties of history.

The dynamism of a tradition is its contestability and therefore its perpetual contest. The relevance of a tradition is its contemporaneity, what it brings to and receives from the discourse of truth in every age. But the life of a tradition, its vitality as a real way of being in the world, is the assumption of its resources as one's own. Tradition is canon lived—the negotiation of corporate and personal identities within canonical space.

The vitality and creativity of spiritual traditions is what makes religion, in the broadest sense, meaningful. Teilhard de Chardin did not see himself outside the Christian tradition but one who was faithful to it. He identified himself as an heir to the early Christian writers, especially the Greek theologians, whose cosmic outlook shaped a vibrant cosmic Christology. His notion of tradition was one that could organically develop in ways that its core values could illuminate culture and not be suppressed by it.

For example, writing on the need to revise the doctrine of Christ in light of evolution, he wrote “what we now have to do without delay is to modify the position occupied by the central core of Christianity—and this precisely in order that it may not lose its illuminative value.” For a tradition to be healthy and vital, it must be able to freely grow without losing its core values. Only that which can grow and change has eternal value.



The core values of religious traditions, like cultural traditions, are becoming irrelevant in our algorithmic, internet world. With a sea of information at our fingertips, many people disregard the organicity of tradition for a smorgasbord of practices or beliefs, ideas gleaned from the internet, like cherries, and throw them

into a basket of “likes” and “dislikes.” Religious syncretism (the amalgamation of different religious cultures, ideas or practices) has been around for quite some time, but it seems to be growing with the internet, as one “jet skis” across websites for individual soul-building.

The flattening out of religious traditions, turning deep-rooted values into sentimental ornaments or mere family gatherings, goes hand in hand with the flattening out of the human person. In his famous article “Is Google making us stupid?” social critic Nicholas Carr lamented that we are becoming like pancake people, spread wide and flat, and mentally thin. When the computer takes charge of the human brain, we lose our ability to think and reflect and thus our capacity to imagine and create. Without creativity and imagination, we lose what is distinctly human. Without an organic rootedness in the past, an historical transcendence, so to speak, we cannot adequately grow into the future.

Why Tradition Matters

The Center for Christogenesis is committed to nurturing the Christian tradition as a living tree of life, rooted in the beginning of the universe and nurturing life into its future fullness. We are not interested to hold on to the past but to cherish the past while engaging the future. In an unfinished universe, where God is ever new, tradition must acquire new meaning of core values, if it is to continue to shape our lives. We need traditions today, as never before, because they provide road signs and symbols on how to direct the energies of our lives. Teilhard was keen on

this idea. Not every invention or scientific development is good, he thought. One must discern the insights of science and technology which can enhance human activity and evolution toward Omega. In his view, Christianity is not normative of religion but normative of evolution, a roadmap in an expanding universe. Valuing tradition is important today, to shape our development toward that which is most important to us, what we really cherish, and what makes fully human and alive.

