The Tradition of Christendom and the Second Vatican Council by R. A. Markus

'Tradition' is one of the most problematic words in the vocabulary of theology. At one end of the theological spectrum it serves as the name for a norm whereby to judge any practice or belief, a standard endowed with authority related – in a way which it is not my concern to define more closely here – to that of the scriptural revelation. At the other end of the spectrum it can approximate to customs, practices, beliefs which are carried by the Church through her history as the debris of the past, a dead weight which may have lost meaning and relevance but is built into the Church's sociological structure. Thus a pope of the eleventh century, Gregory VII, who always liked to stress that his own reforming ideals were only to bring the Church back to the precepts of the holy fathers and the ancient canons, could nevertheless reply to his opponents, who invoked time-hallowed customs to justify their opposition, by remarking in words themselves borrowed from a long tradition – that Christ had said he was the truth, not that he was tradition. In general our talk of 'tradition' moves on a level a little lower than the angels of authoritative norm and above the beasts of outworn custom. It is this peculiarity that gives such evocative power to the language, to take a recent example, of Mrs Rosemary Haughton, in one of the more thoughtful contributions to the symposium *Objections to Roman Catholicism.* She speaks (p.130) of a 'current revolution in the Catholic Church', 'the abandonment of ancient principles', of a 'moment of truth' to which the Church has been brought by the vision of herself as seen by others. It is language of this kind which compels the recognition of a revolutionary upheaval which must, in its very revolutionary substance, find its place and in the end its justification in a 'tradition'.

In recent years we have become accustomed to thinking of the sixteenth century reformation and the reaction provoked by it as responsible for much of the exclusiveness, much of the rigidity and distortion of many sides of Catholic life and thought. That there is some truth in this diagnosis is beyond doubt; but the characteristically post-Tridentine attitudes are by no means wholly defensive reactions taken up in the face of Protestant challenge. Their roots lie much deeper. To assess the cost of renouncing these attitudes, the cost of the reorientation imposed by the needs of *aggiornamento,* it is worth tracing their roots as far back as we can. Only then can we be clear

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about the Church's tradition, and, within it, about the power of revolution. A historian looking back at the Church's history from the vantage point of the second Vatican Council may be excused for allowing the power of revolution to loom large in his vision; but the deeper his consciousness of this power, the deeper he must seek for the living tradition beneath the revolutionary transformations.

One revolutionary transformation in the Church's life was that set in train by the eleventh century reformers, the papal reform which we nowadays call 'Hildebrandine' or 'Gregorian', after its most dynamic representative, the deacon Hildebrand who became Pope Gregory VII. It is a transformation which has dominated much of the Church's life for some nine hundred years; it is arguable that it set the tone and determined the shape of the medieval Church, which in turn – so it might be said – created the conditions for the sixteenth century Reformation; and certainly it had helped to shape the Church's reactions to this challenge. The ways, therefore, in which the papal reformers of the eleventh century left the imprint of their ideals on the Church's life are of central interest in any attempt to place the current revolution in its setting in the Church's tradition.

By the mid eleventh century, when the papal reform got under way, the position of the papacy had become something very different from what it had been in the ancient Church. The writer of the Acts of the Apostles, recounting the Pentecostal miracle and its sequel, speaks of those who heard the Gospel message, each in their own tongue; we hear of Parthians and Medes, Elamites and Mesopotamians, and the rest. The author seems deliberately to give precedence to the peoples beyond the imperial frontiers, as if to stress that the Gospel was to be catholic, not Roman. But although we do know of Christian communities which flourished within three centuries on the fringes of the Empire, mainly in the East, we have been reminded also of the apparent lack of interest among Christians in spreading their faith among their neighbours outside the Roman frontiers, especially the Germanic peoples. The evangelical command 'Go ye and teach all nations' was left unheeded by Christian bishops; it was left to the nations to take the initiative. They adopted Christianity, along with the other social relations they entered into, when they settled on Roman soil. During the Roman period, Christianity remained very largely Roman. The catholicity towards which the author of the Acts had pointed became a restricted catholicity in fact: it was very little wider than the *de facto* catholicity embraced by the Roman Empire. It was essentially the catholicity of a Mediterranean Empire and a Mediterranean Church; and this, even though restricted in scope, was nevertheless, within these wide limits, a very real measure of catholicity. By the end of the fourth century Christianity had been tolerated for nearly a century and was well on the way to having become

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the established religion of the empire, with all the machinery of official enforcement and of repression of dissent and heresy at its disposal. By this time a whole world of thought and imagination had grown up among Christians which corresponded to the Christianisation of the Empire. Theologians, preachers, historians, poets and mere men of letters were agreed that the Empire was God's appointed vehicle for Christianity, its natural and necessary *milieu.* Despite Saint Augustine's almost solitary protest against this image of Christianity, the image survived as long as the Empire survived in the West; indeed, it outlived the Empire by manifesting a tenacious vitality in the realm of myth. Augustine and a few of his disciples apart, we have to wait until the Roman world is itself a distant memory to western barbarians before men can conceive of a radically non-Roman Christianity. It is to men like Isidore of Seville, and above all to our own Bede, greatest of medieval historians, that we owe a vision of the Christian destiny of the barbarian peoples in their own right. And even then the power of the myth over men's minds was far from finally exorcised.

For six centuries or more the Church was, in practice, essentially co-extensive with the Roman Empire. Like the Empire, Christianity embraced a wide range of local variety, of social, cultural and of course of ecclesiastical diversity. Often the diversity had a tendency to disrupt or to undermine unity – both of Church and of the Empire. But despite the chequered history of tensions and divisions, especially the slowly deepening rift between Greek East and Latin West, for something like six centuries the Church retained the catholicity which was the correlative of an ecumenical Empire, a catholicity which if restricted in fact, was nonetheless real enough to embrace a wide Mediterranean variety. To the divisions within this Mediterranean Christendom, especially to the drifting apart of East and West, we must add the submergence of North African Christianity beneath the Moslem tide in the seventh century as one of the greatest tragedies of the Church's history. For not only was North Africa the principal source of the intellectual vitality of the Latin Church, but it had long clung to its own traditions of autonomy with a remarkable tenacity. Its loss to Christendom meant the loss of the only province in the Western church which could look Rome in the face. The Belgian historian Henri Pirenne based his famous thesis that the Middle Ages began with the shattering of the Mediterranean unity by the advance of Islam on economic grounds; but it has no confirmation more striking than the Church's history, for the axis of Christendom was now displaced. In the course of a few generations a Western Christendom can be seen to emerge, around an axis defined, roughly, by York, Aachen and Rome. This new Western Christendom and its ever more isolated partner in the East now replace the earlier Mediterranean Christendom defined by Ravenna, Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, Antioch and Con-

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stantinople. The consequences of this displacement are so far-reaching that they can scarcely be estimated, still less summarised in anything but the crudest of terms. But even at the cost of crudity the attempt must be made. For the papacy, especially, the new orientation ushered in a new era.

In the Mediterranean world the Roman Church had been set not only in the midst of a civilisation older than herself and not of her own making, but also, Rome was one of a large number of ancient sees, three of them patriarchal and one claiming, eventually, though in the face of determined opposition from Rome, equality of jurisdiction with the Roman see. The Roman church was one among several with ancient traditions, claiming descent, sometimes with good grounds, from the apostolic era and culturally Rome was the most backward of the major Churches. In the course of the barbarian invasions and settlements, and finally with the Moslem advance, Rome became increasingly isolated from the cosmopolitan world of Mediterranean variety and sophistication. Her isolation led to her acquiring a new status: Rome became the centre of a barbarian world. We are accustomed to thinking of the medieval Church as the guardian of the civilised values of the classical world, their preserver and the teacher of the new world of Germanic Europe, to which it handed on some, at least, of the achievements of antiquity of which it had become the repository. All this is true, and we ought not to lose sight of the considerable achievement of the Church in her civilising mission. But we ought also to remember the enormous costs to the catholicity of the Church at which this civilising mission was accomplished. The medieval Western Church had no longer anything to learn, there was no reciprocity of tensions such as had enriched her life while Rome was one among several great sees each with its own traditions and its relative independence. Instead, the Roman Church became the teacher and mistress of the new nations: imposing on them a new culture, extending over them the network of her own ecclesiastical organisation, her own canon law and liturgy; and in the end, almost, her own political dominance. Catholic historians, such as Christopher Dawson, have quite rightly seen in this the creation of a Western civilisation; but they have rarely stopped to count the cost to the Church, in terms of catholicity, of thus becoming identified with a culture largely of her own making. In a paradoxical way what we see here is a new form of the nightmare that had haunted Augustine. What he had feared above all was the identification of the Church's destinies with those of any secular institution or society. For him, the secular society in question was of course, the Roman Empire, and the Church did survive it. But curiously, by creating a Latin Christendom, the Church created for itself a new set of secular forms and institutions with which her destinies became inextricably tied up. In the twelfth century Otto of Freising, uncle of the

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Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, could neatly – if unwittingly – reject the whole Augustinian vision of history: Augustine had seen all human history as the conflict of the earthly and the heavenly cities; but Otto thought that since the advent of the Christian empire the conflict was over, for the two cities were now one. It was his nephew, or someone in his chancery, who first coined the phrase 'the holy Roman Empire'. The wheel had come full circle; but the tragedy of Christendom lay in the fact that the Middle Ages could produce no effective critic of this theology such as antiquity had produced in the person of Augustine. The recognition of nationhood, the severance of secular institutions from ecclesiastical apronstrings, inevitably took the form of rebellion and separation.

The setting of the papal reform-movement of the eleventh century is this 'Western Christendom'. Born, remotely, from the seed planted in England by the mission sent to Canterbury by Pope Gregory I, the building of Western Christendom was largely the work of English monk missionaries like St Boniface. He and others like him were the men who organised the Latin Church in the West on the Roman model, following Roman customs, Roman canon law and under Roman obedience. The papacy merely reaped the harvest of their work. These missionaries had prepared the ground for the new alliance of the papacy with the leading barbarian kingdom in the West, that of the Franks. The alliance was desperately needed by the papacy in the hour of its gravest crisis. When it came, it finally took the papacy out of the orbit of a Mediterranean into that of a closed Latin, Western Christendom. The Frankish Empire became its political expression, as well as the most effective instrument of its consolidation. By the mid eleventh century the Frankish Empire was gone; but the Latin Christendom of which it had been the expression as well as a powerful agent survived in the political fragments which had taken its place. The reforming popes of the later eleventh century and Gregory VII above all set themselves the aim of placing the papacy in a position of leadership over the secular rulers. The movement began with a profound concern to rid the Church of manifest abuses, it grew into an attempt to deliver the Church from the power of laymen and finally this struggle for freedom was interpreted as a fight to secure the Church's domination over secular power in general. It was, in the last resort, a new vision of a Christian social order that men like Gregory VII wished to bring into being: a strict hierarchical subordination of all authority under papal supremacy.

The doctrine of papal primacy was, of course, old by now. The position of Pope Leo I in the 450's differed little, in substance, from the position defined formally by the first Vatican Council in 1870. All the same, with Gregory VII we are in a new atmosphere, with revolutionary claims being made, scarcely even hinted at in even the most spectacularly

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papalist forgeries of the earlier Middle Ages. The papal archives were now being searched for material to buttress these claims, and Gregory lost no opportunity to assert that he was doing nothing new, that he wished only to restore the Church to its primal purity, in accordance with the precepts of the Fathers. As his model and patron he chose Gregory I; but a few points of comparison between the two men will serve to explode the illusion under which he laboured. Among the twenty-seven propositions in which Gregory VII stated the claims of the apostolic see there is one, to take the most revealing example, which asserts that the pope and he alone is to be called 'universal bishop'. It is ironic to recall the bitter controversy over this title which, though it had arisen a little earlier, came to a head under Gregory I. The title was at that time being claimed by the patriarch of Constantinople; and Gregory lost no opportunity to denounce it as a 'proud and pestiferous title', 'the name of singularity'. Anyone who claimed it, so Gregory thought, was thereby encroaching on the legitimate rights and dignity of all other bishops. His friend, the patriarch of Alexandria, wrote to Gregory, assuring him of his support against the pretensions of the patriarch of Constantinople, and – with more goodwill than understanding – he applied the title to the pope. Gregory hastened to correct what he regarded as a terrible misunderstanding; he wrote back in painful surprise that his friend should have so misunderstood him that he took him to be claiming the title for the pope. The claim, he explained once more, was a blasphemous undermining of the apostolic office of bishops in general, whether it was made by the bishop of Rome or of Constantinople.

Here is a symptom, even though it concerns no more than a form of words, of the gulf between the old and the new. What gives the symptom its diagnostic importance is that to the new imperious tone of the papacy corresponded its actions. What gave Gregory VII's claims substance was the fact that for a generation or so papal legates had been travelling about Europe, holding local synods, hearing law-suits, diverting local episcopal jurisdiction into Roman channels, imposing papal decisions and policies on often unwilling bishops. Much of this, no doubt, was required to meet the genuine needs for reform; but this will not account for the whole change of atmosphere; and in any case, it is the change, not the reasons for it that concerns us. One did not have to be an opponent of reform to discern the novelty of the claims being made. 'This dangerous man', wrote a contemporary bishop, himself a zealous reformer, referring to Gregory VII, 'wants to order the bishops about as if they were bailiffs on his estates'; and Gregorians themselves likened the relation between pope and bishops to that between a king and royal officials. In these fateful years began the transformation of the pope into a universal bishop in something like the sense claimed by Gregory

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VII and abhorred by Gregory I: the pope was becoming a monarch, the local bishop only his official representative in the diocese. Gregory I had no doubts about the pope's primacy of jurisdiction; the doctrine has not changed – but Gregory I would scarcely have found himself at home in Gregory VII's Rome.

Nothing illustrates the changed mentality better than the contrast between the two popes' attitudes to variety in local custom, in liturgy and so forth. It is worth recalling Gregory I's instructions to Augustine of Canterbury, who had asked him whether to use the Roman liturgy in his new see. The pope's reply was, in effect, 'please yourself; you are familiar with the Roman rite, but don't feel bound to follow it; you may have encountered other usages in Gaul, just choose whatever you think is most acceptable to God and the English;' for, as he said in a memorable phrase, 'we should not value things on account of their places of origin, but rather should we value places on account of the good things they produce'. What a difference between this, and Gregory VII's reply to Duke Wratislaw of Bohemia, whose request for permission to use a Slavonic liturgy was turned down as 'foolish arrogance'! Even the most strong-minded popes of the ninth century had encouraged the formation of a Slavonic liturgy, until stopped by diplomatic pressure from the Frankish court; but Gregory VII insisted on the adoption of the Roman liturgy, instead of the traditional Mozarabic, in recently reconquered lands in Spain; and one could cite other instances, from Armenia or Corsica. He once had the temerity to command an archbishop to shave off his beard, 'as we do in Rome'. It is hardly accidental that this is the period in which occurred one of the more spectacular breaches between the Greek and Latin Churches, a breach in which a cardinal, one of the leaders of the Gregorian party, had played a leading part.

Nor can it be accidental that this is also the time when the language of theology underwent significant changes. Hitherto, for instance, 'the body of Christ' had generally been used in reference to the Church. This meaning now begins to recede into the background, and new-fangled expressions begin to take its place. We hear of the 'body of the Church' or 'the body of the clerics' – and even unbelievably, we hear the Bride of Christ spoken of as the 'Bride of the clerics'. Such language is a sign of a very deep-seated revolution in the way men thought of the Church. It is a more juridical conception that they have before their mind's eye, a hierarchical organisation, essentially a kind of governmental structure. It is canon law, significantly the major new intellectual preoccupation of the age, that now moulds the Church's mind; not the Scripture. And its most characteristic product is the papal curia, created in these very years.

The current Council is a landmark. The tide is turning, the pontificate

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of John XXIII will seem, to future historians, as epoch-making as that of Gregory VII. They were both revolutionary and instrumental in bringing about a transformation within the Church's life. Both pontificates raise in the sharpest terms the searching questions: where is the Church's authentic tradition? Does it allow, or perhaps does it even demand, such revolutionary expression?

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