

Tradition and Creativity: The Paradigm of the New Testament

Timothy Radcliffe OP

What must I believe to be a Catholic? Catholicism is a highly variegated phenomenon, with an extraordinary diversity of beliefs, practices and traditions. Is this Tradition an inheritance to be cherished, or a stifling burden?

This question becomes especially acute when the Church tries to discover its identity in a new culture or society, as when Paul brought Christianity to the world of the Greek city, or, in our own day, when we ask what it might mean to be a Catholic in monetarist Britain. One way to answer this question would be to scrutinise the Tradition, to see if one can discern an essence that must be preserved, while leaving one some freedom to be creative. Clifford Longley recently described a liberal conservative theologian, such as Karl Rahner, as one who 'sits under obedience to Tradition, and applies his intellectual ingenuity to the negotiation of as much freedom as can be justified within those limits.'¹ Many Catholics can identify with that picture. But I would suggest that if one looks at the genesis of the New Testament one can discover a different paradigm of the relationship between tradition and creativity, fidelity and freedom.

There were several moments between the time of Jesus and the canonisation of the New Testament when the Church was faced sharply with the question: What must we believe? What in the inherited tradition must be preserved? This was so with the Pauline mission to the Gentiles, with the gradual separation of Christianity and Judaism towards the end of the first century, and with the emergence of the Great Church in the second to fourth centuries. In each case the Church was faced with fundamental questions about its identity and its relationship to its Tradition. And in each case it did not find its way through by a delicate negotiation between progressivism and conservatism, between sitting loose and sitting tight to the Tradition. In each case it was a creative innovation, the breakthrough to some new way of thinking and talking, that disclosed *how* the Tradition might be preserved. Paul transformed the way theology was done by writing letters; the early Church explored its identity towards the end of the first century by inventing the genre of the gospels; the emergence of the Great Church was established by the invention of the canon of the New Testament. The Tradition cannot be

preserved by conserving it, but only by some unanticipated and creative breakthrough that enables us to see what fidelity to the Tradition might entail. I will explore this thesis by looking briefly at those three moments in the birth of the New Testament.

A Theology of Letter Writing

Paul's letter to the Galatians takes the form of a lawsuit. 'The apologetic letter, such as Galatians, presupposes the real or fictitious situation of the court of law, with the jury, accuser and defendant. In the case of Galatians, the addressees are identical with the jury, with Paul being the defendant, and his opponents the accusers.'² Paul did not adopt this way of writing just because he wanted to win an argument. Lawsuits were important popular public occasions. People's friends and relatives turned up to cheer them on. They were part of the political process through which alliances and allegiances were formed and cemented. The language of the lawcourt contributed to the language in which people established the networks of friendship and patronage that structured the life of the city. So in adopting that language when writing to the Galatians Paul is giving space to their experience of what it means to be a community. But the rhetoric of dispute is transformed in becoming the language in which he explores what it means to belong to that larger community which is the Body of Christ.

We can see the same process at work in 1 Corinthians. L.L. Welborn has demonstrated brilliantly how Paul analyses the factions that are splitting the Church in Corinth, using the political language of the Greek city.³ The groups of people who are claiming to be for Paul or Peter or Apollos are behaving like the political parties of a typical Greek city state, in which party allegiance was expressed not by support for policies but for the party leader, as again today. Their slogans are like those on the walls of Pompeii. And even in Paul's analysis of what has gone wrong, the divisions between rich and poor, the deceptiveness of sophistry, he used the political language of the day. He is doing 'what Plutarch describes as the object of the art of politics, the prevention of *stasis*'.⁴ The knowledge and wisdom of which the Corinthians are so proud, their skill with words, is the rhetoric that gave one power and influence in the debates that were the life-blood of the Greek city. But Paul adopts this language only to transform it so that it can express what it means to belong not in the city, but 'in Christ'. The language of rhetoric must be transformed into the language of the cross: 'Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?' (1:20f)

Paul writes to the Corinthians within twenty years of the death of Christ. In that time the Church has been transformed from being a small group of Aramaic-speaking Jews gathered around a man in Palestine, to being a network of largely Greek-speaking households, scattered around

the Mediterranean. And the question before the Church, perhaps more acutely than at any other time since, was: what must one believe and do to belong? What in the tradition of those Palestinian Jews must be preserved? Paul seeks to answer that question by plunging into the language with which those on the edge of that tradition sought to explore what it might mean to belong, their language of friendship, of politics and party. It was only through the adoption and transformation of that language that one might discover what it meant to be faithful to the Tradition. And the crucible of that transformation was the letter. It was the letter that gave Paul the space in which to evolve a new language of Christian identity.

It is no coincidence that all the earliest documents in the New Testament are letters. The Church that came into existence with the Pauline mission to the Gentiles was sustained and held together by the exchange of letters. To be baptised 'into Christ' meant to belong to the most efficient postal system in the Empire, apart from that of the Emperor. The Imperial postal system, the *cursus publicus*, had only been established recently, by Augustus, and it was reserved for government business. The rich could despatch servants around the world with their mail, but most people had to rely on friends, merchants or strangers to deliver their mail. Ancient letters are filled with complaints about the frustrations of writing letters that never arrive. But to be a Christian was to belong to a community of brothers and sisters who travelled incessantly around the Mediterranean, carrying news and letters, receiving and offering hospitality. In 1 Corinthians Paul mentions at least ten people who have been or will be travelling between Ephesus and Corinth.

This network of letter writing did not just communicate information. It established what it meant to be 'one in Christ'. It was the incarnation of a particular perception of what it meant to belong in the Church. In fact it made such a perception possible. Letters were, for the Greeks, above all means of establishing and sustaining friendship. It was bad manners to write to people one did not know. Artemon, the editor of Aristotle's letters, described a letter as one half of a dialogue. One should write so as to create a sense of being in the presence of one's friend. Julius Victor suggested various tricks that could support that impression, such as using phrases like 'I see you smile ...' or 'You too?'.⁵ To preach by writing letters was to create a Church bound by bonds of friendship. In fact the closest parallels to Paul's letters are those which people sent to their families.⁶ The form gave substance to Paul's practice of calling fellow-Christians his brothers and sisters. So Paul's theology of the Church as the Body of Christ is made flesh and blood in a postal system. It was a perception of *koinonia* that could not otherwise have been attained. It provided the context within which the tradition that Paul had inherited could encounter and transform the language of belonging of

the Greek city, the language of friendship, of politics and party.

Greek letter-writing conventions were strict and it was in the greetings at the beginning of the letter that one established the precise nature of one's relationship with the other person. Lucian of Samosata scorns someone who opens a letter by writing 'Good health' instead of 'Greetings'.⁷ And we can see what Paul is up to by a cursory glance at the opening of 1 Corinthians:

Paul called (*klētos*) by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church (*ekklēsia*) of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called (*klētois*) to be saints together with all those who in every place call (*epikaloumenois*) on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours; Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul took the conventional opening of a Greek letter, the statement of one's relationship with the other, and transformed it into a meditation of what it means to belong in Christ. He does this by a series of puns. They are a church, an *ekklesis*, literally those called together. But these individualistic Corinthians have to see that they are only such in virtue of being related to Paul who was called to be an apostle. Their calling is founded on his. And they are only a church in virtue of belonging with that whole extended network of those who are called. They cannot be a church in isolation from the whole Body of Christ.

What must I believe and do to belong? That was an urgent and bitterly disputed question in Paul's time. Should one be circumcised, go to the synagogue, observe the Sabbath? It was not a question that could be answered simply by scrutinizing the Tradition. One could only see what it meant to be 'in Christ' by moving from a theology of parable-telling to one of letter-writing. It was only that creative innovation that provided a medium in which the language of the Greek city could meet that of the gospel and be transformed. Then one would be able to see what fidelity to the Tradition might imply.

The Gospels

The gospels are unlike any other literature in the Ancient World. Similarities have been shown between them and Greek lives of the philosophers and histories, and Jewish apocalypses and the testaments, but they remain irreducibly novel. The reason for this novelty lies in the profound crisis of identity that Christianity endured between the last of Paul's letters and the writing of the first gospel, Mark, probably in about AD 70. There was the persecution of the Church in Rome, by Nero, the death of the community's first leaders, Peter and Paul. In the sufferings and uncertainty of that time, the solidarity of the Church was broken as Christians betrayed each other to the authorities. This humiliation and

disintegration was followed by the failure of the Jewish revolt and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. This must have been especially painful for the Christians of Rome who seem to have kept close contact with Judaism.⁸ Yet still Christ did not come. The apocalyptic understanding of the world which was the natural medium of early Christian theology, even for Paul, began to look implausible. And then, as the first century drew to an end, Judaism coped with the loss of its central focus of identity, the Temple with its annual rhythm of feasts and pilgrimages, by establishing a new identity, as Rabbinic Judaism, which necessarily shut out the Christians.

So Christianity had to discover what it might mean for it to be a new religion, a situation that Paul could never have imagined. It is almost impossible to overestimate the traumas of the years that followed Paul's death. The community, of course, still possessed traditions, oral traditions about the sayings and deeds of Jesus, the teaching and acts of the apostles, Paul's letters, but they were traditions that failed to illuminate their contemporary experience. These traditions could never have survived if the churches had not found a new medium in which they could live, and that was the gospels. The parables, the miracles, even the stories of the death and resurrection of Jesus, would have shrivelled and disappeared if it had not been for that extraordinary creative leap of the imagination which was the invention of a new *genre*, the gospels. It is impossible to establish this thesis in a short article, so I will merely illustrate it by a few words about Luke-Acts.

In Acts we read: 'And in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians.' (11:26) That probably comes from the time of Luke, perhaps writing in Antioch, when the followers of Christ would no longer be seen as a curious branch of Judaism. It is to establish that new sense of identity that Luke wrote his gospel and Acts:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. (Luke 1:1—4)

Luke is clearly aware that he is *not* one of the eyewitnesses, one of those who were there from the beginning. The gospel starts from a recognition of a distance to be bridged. This beautifully composed opening, modelled on the classical Hellenistic preface, addressed to Theophilus, suggests just how far he has to travel. He tells us a story that will begin with Zechariah in the Temple, a pious, God-fearing law-abiding Jew, worshipping in a Temple that is no more, according to rituals that probably none of Luke's readers could ever envisage, an alien

figure, remote from Theophilus and his friends. It is that distance that may cause Theophilus to doubt 'the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed'. In fact 'reliability' might be a better translation of *asphaleia*. How well-founded, secure and reliable, can the identity of these new Gentile 'Christians' be, who are so remote from the origins of their faith? What have they to do with a child born into the world of Zechariah and Elizabeth? This is what the many previous attempts to tell the story have failed to show, and why Luke must now tell a tale which carries us from Zechariah in the Temple to Paul in Rome, from the world of Jesus to the world of Theophilus.

Luke described himself as having 'followed all things'. The word, *parakolouthākotī*, usually means 'to walk with', 'to accompany', and indeed the word which is translated by 'narrative', *diāgāsis*, is often used for a travel narrative. Josephus used it for the story of the journey of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem, and in *The Letter of Aristeas* for the account of his visit to the High Priest.⁹ This is appropriate, since Luke is telling us a story that takes us on a long journey, traverses a distance. It is a story which is told *kathexes*, 'in order', with one event coming after another. Luke more than any other evangelist has a sense of salvation as a sequence of discrete events, the Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost. Events that in John are interwoven with each other are, in Luke, placed in their proper sequence, so that the difference between the beginning and the end becomes intelligible. Events in Acts mimic the sequence of the events of the life of Jesus so that we can see how the time of the Church relates to that of the Saviour. It is within this complex narrative structure, this 'journey', that all the fragments of the Tradition—the parables, the miracle stories, the deeds of the apostles, letters and sermons—which otherwise would have perished, live and flourish and speak. It is only such a creative innovation that could show how the Tradition could still speak, and in what sense one could be said to belong to it.

The Great Church and the Canon

In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the hero is described as 'a teacher in the apostolic and prophetic tradition and a bishop of the Catholic Church in Smyrna'. This is probably the first known use of the word 'catholic' to mean not just 'universal' but 'orthodox'¹⁰. Indeed, the guarantee of the orthodoxy of the Church was precisely its universality. It is no coincidence that this new usage is approximately contemporary with our first evidence of an emerging canon of the New Testament, in the works of Polycarp's friend and admirer, Irenaeus. For it was the canon that cemented and expressed this new sense of what it meant to be a Christian.

The Church was still a communion of churches bound together by the exchange of letters. As Rowan Williams writes, 'For Eusebius, the

stature of a bishop is evidently measured in part by the range of his recorded correspondence, the degree to which he activates the lines of communication between churches and participates in the debates of sister communities.’¹¹ Bishops sent each other *litterae communicatoriae*, ‘letters of communion’, for to be in communion was to exchange letters. Eusebius gives a wonderful picture of a bishop wandering around the market place, dictating letters as he goes. The martyrs in prison spent their last hours dashing off letters. This incessant correspondence was characteristic of the orthodox. The individualism so typical of Gnosticism, the individual soul achieving a solitary salvation through knowledge, gave no theological value to this extended correspondence. But the martyrs of ‘the Great Church’ went to die praying for the whole Church. When Polycarp prayed before his death, he called to mind ‘all those who had ever come into contact with him, both important and insignificant, famous and obscure, and the entire Catholic Church scattered throughout the world’. When Fructuosus is about to die, a soldier runs up and begs for his prayers, but the bishop declines: ‘I must bear in mind the entire Catholic Church spread abroad in the world from East to West’ (*Acts of Fructuosus and Companions*). The persecutions of the early Church represented the clash of two postal systems, that of the bishops and martyrs strengthening and sustaining each other, and that of the Emperor, sending out edicts demanding sacrifice and the surrender of the Scriptures. And it is noteworthy that the agent of imperial power was often the *frumentarius*, the official responsible for the post!¹²

Persecution, divisions within the Church, heresy, the rapid growth in the number of bishops with whom one must remain in touch, all sorts of factors too complex to analyse here, meant that the web of corresponding churches needed to break through to a new sense of identity to survive, and one of the agents of transformation was the emergence of the canon of the New Testament. The canon was not just a collection of sacred texts. It was the symbol of the communion of churches. Its form and structure embodies the intercommunion of a network of bishops and their flocks. It makes a claim about what it means for the Church to be one and catholic. The collection of the gospels, which had often been cherished by different communities, was a sign of the gathering of the churches into the Great Church.

John’s gospel had been regarded with suspicion by the orthodox, especially in the West. And it has been suggested that when Polycarp, who had sat at the feet of John, came to discuss the date of Easter with Anicetus, the bishop of Rome, he came as a representative of the Johannine tradition. This may be a bit oversimplified, but the peace agreed between Polycarp and Anicetus probably was an important moment in the acceptance of the fourfold gospel canon. This cemented the union of traditions which had been principally championed by

different parts of the Church.

The obvious symbol of the unity of the Church, a bulwark against all heresies, would have been the proclamation of a single gospel text. This option was particularly attractive to Eastern Christians. Marcion proposed a canon which included just the gospel of Luke; Tatian produced his harmonization of the four gospels, the *Diatessaron*; in the Muratorian canon list we find hints of legends about how John's gospel was written to gather together the teaching of all the apostles. In the face of all the forces that threatened the unity of the Church, the obvious move would have been consecration of a single gospel. Irenaeus tells us that each of the heretical sects had its own. But that would have been an act of ecclesiastical imperialism. Instead the Church consecrated a conversation, a fourfold gospel, which cemented the conversation of Polycarp and Anicetus, who even accepted to differ on the date of Easter. And when, a generation later, Victor, the then bishop of Rome, tried to impose the Western date of Easter on all the churches, he was rebuked by Irenaeus for destroying the peace and harmony of the Church. And Eusebius tells us that Irenaeus, our first witness to the emerging canon of the New Testament, is well-named as 'the peace maker'. The canon was a sign of the peace between the churches.

The New Testament canon consecrates another equally important conversation, between Paul and 'the pillars' of the Church, James and Peter and John. We first come across this dialogue in Paul's letter to the Galatians, and his description of his meeting with the Jerusalem apostles contains elements of conflict and concordat. It was a statement that could be used to legitimate disunity or communion, as indeed it was. Luke keeps the conversation going by offering a bridge between the story of the Transfiguration, in which the inner circle of three behold the glory of the Lord, and the three accounts of Paul's vision of the Lord that sends him on his way to the Gentiles. The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 keeps everyone talking to each other. But not everyone wanted the dialogue between Paul and the pillars to continue. Marcion placed Galatians at the head of a collection of Paul's letters that left no place for the Jewish heritage that the three other apostles represented, and Jewish Christians used Peter and James in documents such as the *Preaching of Peter* or the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and *Recognitions* to justify a law-bound Christianity, for which Paul was the arch-enemy. The canon kept the conversation going by including the two collections of Pauline and 'catholic letters' next to each other. As Gamble says,

the gathering up of these 'catholic letters' and their use alongside Paul's letters gave documentary expression to the idea of corporate and united teaching deriving from principal apostolic mentors. ... Here, too, then, the significance of the collection goes beyond the meanings of the individual documents within it and is a function of its form as much as

of its contents.¹³

So the New Testament canon is a complex of conversations, between the synoptics and John, keeping the churches of East and West in dialogue, and between Paul and ‘the pillars’, holding together our Jewish heritage and the novelty of Christianity. And mediating between these two dialogues is The Acts of the Apostles, detached from Luke. It now has a larger role than Luke could have guessed. Instead of bringing us on the journey that leads from Jerusalem to Rome, it holds together the debate that was the early Church. It was still a community of correspondents, but the fragile network of letter-writing bishops could only be held in communion if unity could be seen not just from the viewpoint of each letter-writer, sending out his missives to all the local churches that he recognised. There had to be some way of making explicit the fundamental communion that all shared, unity as seen from everywhere. One expression of this was the canon.

In AD 304, the deacon Euplus stood outside the council chamber of the prefect in the city of Catania, and shouted ‘I want to die; I am a Christian’, and he walked in carrying the gospels.¹⁴ This combination of the claim to be Christian, to belong to no city or Province, to have no other identity, combined with the possession of the Scriptures, is common in *The Acts of the Martyrs*. The Edict of Diocletian, in AD 303, ordered the Christian Scriptures to be burnt, but even before then, their possession had become a symbol of membership of the universal Church, of a catholic identity. ‘What do you have in your bag?’, the proconsul asks Speratus in 180; ‘Books, and the letters of a just man named Paul.’¹⁵ It is hard for us to imagine what a novel step was the establishment of the New Testament canon. Even in the middle of the second century, the Greek prejudice against the written as compared with the oral, and the obvious step of making one gospel the test of unity, militated against it. But, as with Paul’s use of the letter and the writing of the gospels, it was only such a creative step that could have preserved the Tradition. Just as the parables survived in the gospels, so the gospels remained alive within the new media of the canon, like Russian boxes fitting inside each other. The imaginative leap of creating a canon that consecrated and represented the conversation of the churches showed what it meant to inherit the Tradition, how the gospels and letters were to be read, what belonged and what did not.

Conclusion

The memory that we seek to preserve and hand on is of the life-giving God who raised Jesus from the dead. That utterly novel act is only evoked when we allow it to bring us to new life. Rowan Williams has argued that Revelation is

essentially to do with what is *generative* in our experience—events or transactions in our language that break

existing frameworks and initiate new possibilities of life ...
And to recognise a text, a tradition or an event as revelatory is to witness to its generative power. It is to speak from the standpoint of a new form of life and understanding whose roots can be traced to the initiatory phenomenon.¹⁶

The birth of the New Testament shows how the memory of the Resurrection is now cherished as the Church discovers new forms of life, new ways of speaking. It takes time to discover that to be with Christ is to be 'in Christ', to be 'a Christian', and to be a member of the Church that is 'Catholic'. It was only these creative moments that disclosed what it might be to be faithful to the Tradition.

The dichotomy so typical of the Enlightenment mind, between traditionalists, who preserve a deposit, and progressives, who cut themselves from the past, is subverted by this perception. The question remains: What must I believe to be a Catholic? It cannot be answered once and for all this side of the Kingdom, and then the Church will be no more. But it is only if we are not afraid to be creative, to try extending a catholic hospitality to ways of thinking and being that are different, that we may discover an answer that will keep us going on the way.

- 1 *The Tablet*, 10 December 1988, p. 1428.
- 2 H.D. Betz, *Galatians*, Philadelphia, 1979, p. 24.
- 3 'On Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1–4 and ancient politics', *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1987, vol. 106, pp. 85–111.
- 4 *ibid*, p. 90.
- 5 J.L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters*, Philadelphia, 1986, p. 191.
- 6 See, for example, the example of family letters in J.L. White, *op. cit.* pp. 147–182.
- 7 In *Pro Lapsu*, quoted by Judith Lieu, ' "Grace to you and Peace"', The Apostolic Greeting', in *The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 1985, Vol. 68, pp. 161–178.
- 8 cf R.E. Brown and J.P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome; New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity*, New York, 1982; T.P.J. Radcliffe O.P., ' "The Coming of the Son of Man": Mark's gospel and the subversion of the "apocalyptic imagination" ', ed. Brian Davies O.P., *Language, Meaning and God.: Essays in honour of Herbert McCabe O.P.*, London, 1987, pp. 176–189.
- 9 See J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 1, New York, 1979, p. 292.
- 10 But see the reservations of P. Lemerle, *Philippe et la Macédoine Orientale*, Paris, 1945, p. 94ff.
- 11 'Does it Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?' to be published in ed. R. Williams, *The Making of Orthodoxy. Essays in honour of Henry Chadwick*. CUP. 1989.
- 12 eg. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 6, chapter 40.
- 13 H.Y. Gamble *The New Testament Canon*, Philadelphia, 1986, p. 78f.
- 14 'The Acts of Euplus' in H. Musurillo, *op. cit.*, p. 311.
- 15 'Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs', *The Acts of the Martyrs*, p. 89.
- 16 'Trinity and Revelation', *Modern Theology*, 2:3 1986, p. 199.