

## THE ROLE OF TRADITION IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY: MEDIATING EPISTEMIC DIVIDES

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It is not inappropriate to understand the modern and postmodern periods in the West as representing two moments of intellectual revolution. The modern era was spawned by an intellectual revolution that upset the assumptions of medieval philosophy just as postmodernism in the contemporary period is founded on an intellectual outlook that challenges the assumptions of modern categories.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, both periods correspond to significant paradigm shifts in Western intellectual tradition.<sup>2</sup> By the nature of the case, theological reflection as an intellectual activity in each period is correspondingly impacted, thus making it possible to distinguish a characteristically modern theology from contemporary theology.

In each of these periodic shifts, the question of epistemology comes to center stage, although, as should be expected, an epistemological change signals a corresponding ontological adjustment.<sup>3</sup> From a theological perspective, the paradigmatic shift during the modern period was from the view that has been characterized as extrinsicism, to the developing school of historicism.<sup>4</sup> Epistemologically, extrinsicism stressed the place of divine revelation as the sole source of truth that owed nothing to history, except for the fact that it was given to the believers once and for all at a given point in history. Of course, this view did not preclude internal development through systematization to ensure clarity.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, historicism reduced the realm of truth to history, maintaining, "all truth, including that of the Christian faith, must submit to the judgment of history."<sup>6</sup> In so doing, historicism was claiming the right to treat Christian doctrine as a matter of pure history and thereby subject it to critical

<sup>1</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer On Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 84; see also Peter C. Hodges and Robert H. King, eds., *Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 10.

<sup>2</sup>I mean by the term *paradigm* what Thomas S. Kuhn understood as "an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970], 175).

<sup>3</sup>Fernando L. Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1983), 34ff. My concern in this paper, however, has to do with issues of an epistemological nature.

<sup>4</sup>See William A. Scott, "The Notion of Tradition in Maurice Blondel," *Theological Studies* 27 (1966): 384-385.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 385.

study with the canons of reason. This was the modernist position. Thus was introduced the distinction between faith as assent to doctrine and history as the realm of reason and facts.

On the other hand, the contemporary paradigmatic shift is from modernism to postmodernism. In this instance, the modern concept of rationality, with its stress on autonomous reason and objectivity in the search for an overarching truth, has come under attack. Modernism sought to explain and provide meaning to all reality on the foundation of reason. In other words, the world was what reason thought it to be, and this was to be taken as universally true for all time. Over against modern rationality, postmodernism claims that the very idea of a belief system that is always and universally true is no longer credible. It is argued that the very fact of our situatedness in particular historical contexts forces us to experience the world through our individual and unique perspectives, such that the postmodern outlook "demands an attack on any claim to universality."<sup>7</sup>

Theologically, it is assumed that modernist assumptions of rationality have permeated evangelical thought since roughly 1850 to 1950.<sup>8</sup> Thus, conservative evangelicalism is, philosophically, said to be reflective of certain aspects of modern epistemology. On the other hand, the postmodernist influence in contemporary theology is seen in the various calls for revisioning evangelical theology<sup>9</sup> to reflect contemporary postmodern epistemological concerns.

The situation in which theology finds itself in each paradigm change leads to the stress of extreme positions that moderate voices find necessary to mediate and synthesize. This has been the case in both the extrinsicism/historicism dialectic of the modern period and the modern/postmodern confrontation of the contemporary era. In both cases, a specific concept has been called into service to mediate the competing viewpoints. The concept that has conveniently been called upon to play this irenic function is the notion of tradition, which in the process has undergone some revision.<sup>10</sup> This observation calls for a careful look at the concept of tradition. What is this apparently malleable concept (or concepts) of tradition that makes it amenable to facilitate dialogue between competing epistemological

<sup>7</sup>Grenz, 45.

<sup>8</sup>See John G. Stackhouse, ed., *Evangelical Futures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 32. Donald Bloesch, for instance, has argued that modernist and rationalistic tendencies are discernible in the writings of such evangelical giants as Carl F. Henry, John Warwick Montgomery, Francis Schaeffer, and Norman Geisler (*Essentials of Evangelical Theology* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979], 2:267-268).

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993); and David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup>For a concise but helpful overview of the evolution of the concept of tradition, see David F. Wells, "Tradition: A Meeting Place for Catholic and Evangelical Theology," *Christian Scholars Review* 5 (1975): 50-61. In this article, Wells notes how positions have changed regarding the concept of tradition and are, therefore, an encouragement toward a new dialogue between Catholics and evangelicals.

options? What implications does the evolving concept of tradition have for theological method, and how should these be assessed? This article will address these issues.

The approach adopted here will examine specific theological proposals that have been made regarding the understanding of the concept of tradition that is deemed essential for mediating between apparently irreconcilable epistemological positions. These proposals will be examined with the specific objective of underscoring the nature of the particular concept of tradition that its promulgators espouse. Subsequently, the possible implications that these concepts of tradition may have for theological method will be explored. Before I look at the revisions to the concepts of tradition proposed in the modern and postmodern periods, however, it may be worth reviewing briefly the concept from the early church until the modern period.

### *Tradition: From the Early Church to the Modern Period*

It seems accurate to observe that during the period under review tradition was generally understood in an objective sense, although such characterization runs the risk of obscuring significant variations in meaning attached to the concept. The early patristic period maintained a clear distinction between apostolic *paradosis* (tradition) considered authoritative because of its divine origin, and the church's *didaskalia* (teaching), which was not authoritative, although it was not long before apostolic legends, liturgical practices, and generally accepted interpretations of biblical texts came to be classed under the category of *paradosis*.<sup>11</sup> The movement toward the equal valuation of apostolic *paradosis* and church *didaskalia* would be given a significant boost with Vincent de Lerins's publication of his *Commonitoria*, an event which strengthened the hand of the church in its responsibility, even obligation, in defining the truth.<sup>12</sup> The medieval contribution to this process was the handing over of apostolic authority to the church, as a result of which tradition came to be identified with the functioning of the church.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the Council of Trent became a significant defining moment for the relationship between Scripture and tradition. The Council succeeded in bringing near harmony to three competing

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 51; see also Josef Rupert Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 17. Geiselmann distinguishes the transmission of the *paradosis* to the church (including the committing to writing) by divine action from the testimony of ecclesiastical tradition, which is a human action, albeit with the Holy Spirit's assistance. Nevertheless as a testimony to the already developing elevation of ecclesiastical practices to the level of apostolic *paradosis*, Avery Dulles, for example, notes that Fathers such as Basil could write that "among the doctrines and the definitions preserved in the Church, we hold some on the basis of written teaching and others we have received, transmitted secretly, from apostolic tradition. All are of equal value for piety" ("Tradition and Creativity: A Theological Approach," in *The Quadrilog*, ed. Kenneth Hagen [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994], 313). Still, Dulles, *ibid.*, concludes that "until the late Middle Ages the dominant tendency was to treat Scripture as the basic text of revelation and to rely on tradition, especially patristic tradition, for the authoritative interpretation of Scripture."

<sup>12</sup>Wells, 51.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

schools of thought on the relationship between Scripture and tradition when "it was almost unanimously agreed that the canonical Scriptures are not sufficient as a source of doctrine."<sup>14</sup>

Avery Dulles notes at least three different ways in which the concept of tradition has been nuanced since the Council of Trent: objectively to mean "revealed truths handed down from apostolic times by channels other than canonical Scriptures"; "to designate the process of transmitting the apostolic heritage," both scriptural or otherwise; and as "a criterion . . . to establish the authenticity of certain doctrines and practices."<sup>15</sup> It is quite evident that in all these variations, as in the rest of the period under consideration, there was a bent to see tradition in an objective sense; a body of doctrine, objectively identifiable and requiring to be preserved. The situation will be significantly different in the nineteenth century, which will mark the first major epistemic divide, and hence call for a radical nuancing of the concept of tradition. To this epistemic divide I now turn my attention.

#### *Tradition: Between Premodern Extrinsicism and Modern Historicism*

The objectivist understanding of the concept of tradition from the early church up to the modern period entailed a particular epistemological outlook. Extrinsicism, as this essentially theological epistemological view has been called, structured the relation between revelation and history in clearly defined and unequivocal terms. Knowledge from revelation, according to this view, is supernatural and extrinsic to man and the historical process. It is distinct from historical knowledge both in its source and its essential nature.

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth century, which ultimately gave birth to the modern period, created several difficulties for the epistemology that underlay extrinsicism. Among the powerful forces that were unleashed by the Enlightenment and that would eventually undermine the epistemological assumptions of extrinsicism, three have been noted. The widespread acceptance of the developing scientific worldview, philosophy's turn to the knowing subject, and the development of a new historical consciousness gave the modern period a new epistemological outlook.<sup>16</sup> Historicism was a natural development from the emerging intellectual milieu. Gotthold Lessing's "ugly broad ditch" was a pithy expression, during the eighteenth century, of the intellectual concerns of the school of historicism.<sup>17</sup> As noted earlier on,

<sup>14</sup>Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 88.

<sup>15</sup>Dulles, "Tradition and Creativity," 314.

<sup>16</sup>See Robert H. King, "The Task of Christian Theology," in *Christian Theology*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 10-12. The Kantian Copernican revolution, although epistemological at heart, together with David Hume's philosophical program, "attacked the metaphysical assumptions which undergirded . . . the classic doctrine of revelation," thus challenging the whole edifice of extrinsicism (*ibid.*, 124).

<sup>17</sup>Lessing typically reflected the historicist view when he maintained that the accidental truths of history can never become the proof of the necessary truths of reason.

historicism saw history as the only truth, thus insisting, "all truth, including that of the Christian faith, must submit to the judgment of history."<sup>18</sup>

In the context of this extrinsicism/historicism dialectic, Maurice Blondel attempted, via the concept of tradition, to forge a nexus between the two apparently contradictory viewpoints. It was Blondel's goal to show that the values in both extrinsicism and historicism can be brought to subsist and serve the tradition of the church.

#### Tradition: Blondel's via Media<sup>19</sup>

It is central to Blondel's concept of tradition that tradition may furnish things that cannot be translated into language and that may not be immediately and integrally convertible into an intellectual expression.<sup>20</sup> Contrary to what appears to have been the early church's position, tradition in Blondel's view "is not a transmission, principally oral, of historical facts, of truths received, of teachings communicated, of consecrated practices and of ancient customs";<sup>21</sup> rather, tradition "is a preserving power . . . ; it discovers and formulates truths which the past lived, without being able to articulate them or define them explicitly; it enriches the intellectual patrimony by minting little by little the total deposit and by making it fructify."<sup>22</sup>

By redefining tradition as a formative process, Blondel made room for the influence of research, science, philosophy, and other human, historical means in the tradition-forming process without necessarily subjugating tradition to these means.<sup>23</sup> But underlying Blondel's notion of tradition as a "preserving power" is his philosophy of *action*, according to which truth unfolds in a constant process of action, reflection, and reaction.<sup>24</sup> Tradition, therefore,

<sup>18</sup>Scott, 385.

<sup>19</sup>A series of articles by Maurice Blondel on the subject of tradition between 1904 and 1905 have been reprinted in *Les Premiers Ecrits de Maurice Blondel*. Scott's "The Notion of Tradition in Maurice Blondel" provides a concise overview of Blondel's thought on the subject that will be relied on in this section of my discussion.

<sup>20</sup>See Scott, 386.

<sup>21</sup>Cited in Scott, 386.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 387. I should point out that the departure from the early church's objectivist position on tradition did not begin with Blondel. Already in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Johann Adam Mohler had depicted tradition as a mysterious inner principle or power of spiritual life (Dulles, "Tradition and Creativity," 314).

<sup>23</sup>Scott, 389-390. Preserving for the church a principal role in the tradition-forming process, Blondel writes: "She speaks with an authority independent of all grounds of judgment; but she addresses herself to intelligence as much as to docility, asserting the right of reason because she wishes to teach a communicable truth. She does not have to take account of human contingencies and she does not preoccupy herself with being clever, opportune, adapted; but she uses all human means to be understood, and to find in men the points of insertion prepared for her action. Everywhere her supernatural wisdom lights itself with lights, surrounds itself with precautions, determines itself with natural operations" (*ibid.*).

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 392. In his philosophy of action, Blondel sets up an indissoluble relation between

which in Blondel's view is the life, the action of the church, forms itself by the use of a methodology of action. But this is not all born of natural, existential phenomena, because, according to him, the traditioning process occurs under the active direction of Christ.

It is evident that through his philosophy of action Blondel attempts to bridge the divide between the extrinsicist and historicist views. We must note, however, the important points in the process of this transaction. First, the notion of tradition is invested with a new meaning, namely, the church living her life, as opposed to a deposit of truth to be guarded. Next, Blondel appears to adopt some theological presuppositions in his understanding of tradition. Without denying the committal of divine truth to the church, Blondel sees the need for the historical development and unfolding of this truth. As Scott correctly points out, it is germane to Blondel's view that not only did Christ not commit total truth to the church, but "the deposit of truth which He wanted to commit to the Church could not be given to it under a completely intellectual form."<sup>25</sup> Epistemologically, Blondel presupposes an insufficient original revelation, while his ontological presuppositions lead him to the conclusions that the divine truth could not be contained in any one set of human formulations, and that there cannot be a time in history when the mind of man can exhaust the divine mind.<sup>26</sup>

In more recent times the influence of Blondel's views on tradition, especially within the Roman Catholic Church, has been discernible in the Tübingen theologian Josef Rupert and the French Dominican Yves Congar. Through the contribution of these theologians, Vatican II received the stamp of Blondel's dynamic concept of tradition.<sup>27</sup>

Among Protestant theologians, Thomas C. Oden's concept of tradition would seem to come closest to the modern Catholic understanding of tradition adopted at Vatican II.<sup>28</sup>

thought and concrete action out of which truth unfolds. It has been correctly observed that Blondel's philosophy of action has "nothing to do with those who conceive of philosophy as some sort of inviolate realm of pure thought not to be stained by the concrete loves, hatreds, fears, failures, and aspirations of the living human being as he works out in history and in himself the destiny of the human race. For while human nature is the same, it is existentially ever changing, and so essence must always be discussed in the real world on all levels, theological, historical, biophysical, and not merely on the metaphysical. The philosopher, then, must join hands with the mystic and the saint, with the artist, the scientist, the economist, the sociologist, the laborer in the field and factory, in a living expression and unfolding of truth" (E. Sponga, "The Philosophy and Spirituality of Action," 72-73, cited in Scott, 392).

<sup>25</sup>Scott, 393-394.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 394.

<sup>27</sup>Dulles, *Tradition and Creativity*, 315. Dulles, 316, explains that Vatican II in *Dei Verbum* "speaks of tradition in a subjective or active sense, to mean the process by which the apostolic heritage is transmitted and received in the Church. . . . Unlike Trent which looked upon tradition as invariant, Vatican II understands the tradition as a sense of the faith that develops organically under the aegis of the Holy Spirit."

<sup>28</sup>See Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 338ff. Oden,

*Tradition: Between Modern Objectivism and  
Postmodern Relativism*

Whereas in the controversy between extrinsicism and historicism the critical issue is related to the origin of knowledge and truth, in the contemporary epistemological divide between modernism and postmodernism it is primarily modernism's objectification of rationality that postmodernists find objectionable. In this sense, David Brown's rough characterization of the modernist/postmodernist divide is helpful.

On the one hand we have the modernists, those who continue to support the Enlightenment project of the pursuit of universal values and an ever increasing human knowledge that is seen as objectively validated in shared and secure foundations; on the other, the postmodernists, convinced that objectivity is a will-o'-the-wisp and that therefore what can be achieved is at most the celebration of particularism, with no overarching system of assessment available.<sup>29</sup>

On his part, Anton A. Van Niekirk presents the epistemological contrast between modernism and postmodernism as corresponding to metaphysical thinking versus postmetaphysical thinking.<sup>30</sup> Whereas the former is considered to be substantive, the latter is procedural.<sup>31</sup>

The epistemological crisis that postmodernism precipitates appears to have one clear implication for the destiny of rationality. In the opinion of J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, "the critical rejection of modernist, universalist notions of rationality will indeed imply that it is the destiny of human rationality to stay with tradition."<sup>32</sup> It must be observed that the notion of tradition, which

338, is decidedly against any "uncritical" use of the term "tradition" that makes it mean "rigid formulas and in-group prejudices." For Oden, tradition desires to be "danced, sung, feasted upon, and celebrated." Its vibrant nature allows it to play a vital, dynamic role without necessarily abandoning its enduring aspects.

<sup>29</sup>Brown, 9. Brown, 32-44, later provides a more detailed characterization of postmodernism as involving five different versions, with respect to exclusion of master narratives, no criteria for choice, failure of local master-narrative, meaning given internally by narrative, and no reference beyond the text.

<sup>30</sup>Anton A. Van Niekirk, "Postmetaphysical Versus Postmodern Thinking," *Philosophy Today* 39 (1995): 171-184.

<sup>31</sup>Van Niekirk, 175, explains the difference between substantive and procedural thinking as follows: "In metaphysical thinking, a fundamental assumption is that either theoretical reason will rediscover itself in a world that is itself rationally structured, or that nature and history are rational as a result of being structured by reason itself—whether through some type of transcendental foundation or in the course of a dialectical permeation of the world. In contrast, postmetaphysical thinking entails a procedural concept of rationality. . . . Rationality becomes something purely formal insofar as the rationality of content evaporates into the validity of results. . . . The order of things that is found in the world itself, or that has been projected by the subject, or has grown out of the self-formative process of spirit, no longer counts as rational; instead, what counts as rational is solving problems successfully through procedurally suitable dealing with reality. . . . Procedural rationality can no longer guarantee an antecedent unity in the manifold of appearances."

<sup>32</sup>J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, "Tradition and the Task of Theology," *Theology Today* 55 (1998): 214.

replaces modernity's universalist notion, must by the nature of the case be devoid of universalist and overarching connotations.<sup>33</sup> Thus Van Huyssteen is correct in noting that, with respect to tradition, the postmodern challenge represents a crisis of continuity, a crisis that "now disrupts the accepted relationship between an event and a tradition that gains its stability from that relationship."<sup>34</sup> It is in the context of this dialectic between modernity's *foundationalism* (hence universalism) and postmodernity's *nonfoundationalism* (i.e., extreme relativism) that Van Huyssteen proposes a *postfoundationalist theology*, via tradition, to mediate the opposing positions.<sup>35</sup>

*Tradition in J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen's  
Postfoundationalist Theology*

The problem that Van Huyssteen's postfoundationalist theology attempts to solve via tradition is the fragmentation of theology that has accompanied the postmodern challenge. To the extent that postmodernity renders rationality, as classically understood, problematic, the credibility of theology as a rational activity is seriously undermined. More specifically, by denying rationality any foundations and making it a social construct, postmodernity makes a contextual theological discourse virtually impossible. The exact effect of this state of affairs on Christian tradition is to deny its very condition of possibility as a phenomenon that embodies continuity.

It would seem that the challenge for Christian theology in the face of the postmodern threat is to show how and in what manner the continuity of the Christian tradition can be sustained intersubjectively in a nonfoundationalist epistemological milieu. By "intersubjective" I mean specifically the transcending of different historical and cultural contexts. Van Huyssteen takes the position that it is possible to analyze tradition in terms of its continuous and discontinuous elements. Therefore, he argues, "What is to be rejected is any claim to a necessary, modernist, or metaphysical continuity in history. In this sense, tradition is not something that we presume as an ontological datum, but is rather something we create out of the phenomenon of history."<sup>36</sup> Van Huyssteen concurs with Delwin Brown's theory of religious tradition, which sees change and continuity as primary

<sup>33</sup>It would seem that the so-called "New Yale theology," in spite of its striving for intertextuality, remains committed to a nonuniversalist notion of tradition. See Mark I. Wallace, "The New Yale Theology," *Christian Scholars Review* 17 (1988): 154-170.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 217.

<sup>35</sup>Van Huyssteen's approach to tradition is chosen as representative of a growing tendency among theologians and philosophers on the question of tradition. Among these the following especially may be noted: Brown; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? What Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). For a discussion on Alasdair MacIntyre's approach, see Jennifer A. Herdt, "Alasdair MacIntyre's 'Rationality of Traditions' and Tradition-Transcendental Standards of Justification," *Journal of Religion* 78 (1998): 524-546; also Jean Porter, "Openness and Constraint: Moral Reflection as Tradition-guided Inquiry in Alisdair MacIntyre's Recent Works," *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 514-536.

<sup>36</sup>Van Huyssteen, 218.

categories of the dynamics of tradition and observes as follows:

This opens up a door, beyond the postmodern crisis of continuity, to doing theology with a tradition whose continuity does not have to be guaranteed anymore by a foundationalist metaphysics of history. In this way, we are empowered to criticize our traditions while standing within them but are also empowered to allow a particular history to speak for itself without being subsumed under the umbrella of an all-encompassing theory, based on a series of texts and interpretations we have endowed with a particular authority, which then functions as the accepted ideology of a specific community.<sup>37</sup>

What is tradition, bereft of its continuous metaphysical trappings? As Van Huyssteen develops his postfoundationalist theory of rationality for theology, tradition becomes quite clearly a heuristic phenomenon, the necessary stance of experience from which we interpret the world, and with which we should embark on an interdisciplinary conversation. Each tradition, then, essentially uncovers a *field of concerns*,<sup>38</sup> and constitutes a *research paradigm*.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, from an intersubjective point of view, traditions can only claim theoretical and experiential adequacy without telling us anything about the truth or falsity of the tradition.<sup>40</sup> In Van Huyssteen's view:

We therefore have to accept that cognitive agreement or consensus in theology is also, and may be especially unattainable, and that what Nicholas Rescher called "dissensus tolerance" could prove to be a positive and constructive part of theological pluralism. It is at this point that we reach beyond our specific traditions in cross-contextual conversation, to a shared "borderlands epistemology" where the diversity of our traditions will yield the diversity of our experiences, our contexts and situations, and our values and methodologies.<sup>41</sup>

What Blondel did for the extrinsicism/historicism dialectic, Van Huyssteen does for the modern/postmodern conflict. Van Huyssteen appears to develop a notion of rationality via tradition that mediates the epistemological issues in the conflict between modernity's foundationalism and postmodernity's nonfoundationalism. But what we have is a deflated concept of tradition, at least from the point of view of the early church. Not only are we denied an ontological datum for reflection in tradition, but, epistemologically, tradition furnishes no truth content as such; only theoretical and experiential adequacy. In this latter regard, Blondel's approach is different from Van Huyssteen's since the former only postulated extended development of the *truth*, albeit incomplete, in the history of the church's life.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid. Van Huyssteen, *ibid.*, distinguishes "the field of concerns" as that within "which both consensus and dissent, continuity and discontinuity, acquire coherence and intelligibility," from a "consensus of authority."

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 220.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 226; see also Nicholas Rescher, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 1:3-4.

*Methodological Implications of the Modern and  
Contemporary Concepts of Tradition*

The modern concept of tradition is significantly different from the contemporary postmodern concept by virtue of the latter's denial of an ontological datum for reflection on tradition. From a methodological point of view, however, both concepts have similar effects on the theological enterprise. They both require similar thinking on the nature and goal of theology as well as its hermeneutical and material principles.

Nature and Goal of Theology

Prior to the modern period, and among conservative evangelicals during the modern period, the objective understanding of tradition that prevailed implied a specific understanding of the nature and goal of theology. On the basis of the conviction that God has disclosed truth to humankind, which tradition had the obligation to preserve, theology conceived its task as "the discovery of the one doctrinal system that inheres in the Bible."<sup>42</sup> In both the modern and postmodern concepts of tradition as outlined by Blondel and Van Huyssteen, *truth* does not have a clearly defined identity. In Blondel, historical development of tradition is required for a complete formulation of *the truth*, whereas in Van Huyssteen *the truth* is well-nigh unattainable, since we can only expect theoretical and experiential adequacy.<sup>43</sup> Especially in postmodernism, the altered understanding of truth changes the nature and goal of the theological enterprise. Stanley Grenz clearly reflects the nature and goal of theology in the changed situation. For him theology is a second-order enterprise that reflects a culturally conditioned language of the confession and worldview of the community of faith.<sup>44</sup> He explains further that "the assertion that theology speaks a second-order language is not intended to deny the ontological nature of theological declarations. Nevertheless, the ontological claims implicit in theological assertions arise as an outworking of the intent of the theologian to provide a *model of reality* rather than to describe *reality directly*" (emphasis mine).<sup>45</sup> The modern and postmodern concepts of tradition, therefore, through their ambivalence over the question of truth, redefine the nature and task of theology.

Hermeneutical Principles

The concept of revelation is central to any theological discussion on hermeneutics. An integral component of the modern and postmodern concepts of tradition is an increasing tendency to see tradition as revelation. Carl Braaten spoke to this point when he remarked as early as the mid-1960s that "the coupling of revelation with

<sup>42</sup>Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 87.

<sup>43</sup>See also Michael Jessup, "Truth: The First Casualty of Postmodern Consumerism," *Christian Scholar's Review* 30/3 (2001): 289-304.

<sup>44</sup>Grenz, 78.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

history is an omnipresent feature of modern theology."<sup>46</sup>

The issue at stake here has to do with a changing understanding of the nature of revelation. Whereas the classical view of revelation involved the revealing of *truths*,<sup>47</sup> which for all practical purposes were identified with the Bible,<sup>48</sup> revelation in the modern and postmodern context is increasingly understood in terms of an ongoing divine self-disclosure. Thomas C. Oden, for example, remarks: "God continues to reveal himself in ever-emergent human history" in a way that "complements, extends and develops, but does not negate past disclosures."<sup>49</sup> It would seem that the subjective and dynamic conception of tradition in modern and contemporary postmodern theology requires a corresponding subjective and dynamic view of the doctrine of revelation.

The observations made so far on the question of revelation in modern and postmodern theology are primarily epistemological ones, yet the ontological repercussions of these epistemological moves are seen in the increasing emphasis in evangelical circles on the concept of the "openness of God" and a growing appreciation of the process view of God.<sup>50</sup> Among evangelicals who are inclined to the open view of God may be counted Gregory Boyd, Stephen Franklin, Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger.<sup>51</sup> The affinity between the open view of God and contemporary concepts of tradition appears to rest on the similarity of their thematic emphases. More and more, the themes of creativity, contingency, and solidarity are emphasized as properly constitutive of an adequate concept of tradition for our postmodern times.<sup>52</sup> These concepts, which are antithetical to the essentialist universalism of classical ontology in general, enjoy significant

<sup>46</sup>Carl F. Braaten, *New Directions in Theology Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 2:16; see also Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed., *Revelation as History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969).

<sup>47</sup>J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 91.

<sup>48</sup>H. D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study, 1860-1960* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963), 161. McDonald observes: "It had been the prevailing view that revelation and the Bible were for all practical purposes to be equated."

<sup>49</sup>Oden, 334.

<sup>50</sup>Millard Erickson notes that one of the factors that has contributed to a challenge of the classical doctrine of God is twentieth-century hostility toward any kind of metaphysics (*The Evangelical Left* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], 88). It is relevant at this stage to recall the point made earlier that the postmodern concept of tradition, especially as espoused in Van Huyssteen's postfoundationalist theology, denies the concept any necessary ontological datum.

<sup>51</sup>See *ibid.*, 91-107. For some of the works of the respective scholars mentioned above, see Gregory Boyd, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); Stephen T. Franklin, *Speaking from the Depths: Alfred North Whitehead's Hermeneutical Metaphysics of Propositions, Experience, Symbolism, Language, and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).

<sup>52</sup>See Arthur A. Vogel, "Tradition: The Contingency Factor," in *The Quadrig: Tradition and the Future of Ecumenism*, ed. Kenneth Hagen (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 255-269; also Dulles, "Tradition and Creativity: A Theological Approach," 313-327.

correspondence to the characteristic themes of freedom, process, and relationships, in process theism.

### Material Principles

It is customary to think about Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as the sources used in theological construction.<sup>53</sup> From a methodological point of view, a more important issue has to do with primacy and functional authority among these sources. David Wells has already observed, albeit cautiously, that contemporary theology has effectively reduced the traditional four sources to two: Scripture and experience.<sup>54</sup> Wells discusses the disappearance of reason as well as the assimilation of tradition into experience.<sup>55</sup> Yet, one may speak of a certain hermeneutical reductionism in the contemporary conception of tradition that functionally endows it with primacy.<sup>56</sup>

The contemporary hermeneutical insistence on the historical conditionedness of all texts, including the Bible, would seem to give more credibility to the total tradition of which the Bible is a part, albeit a formative part. David Brown appears to adopt this position when in arguing for the legitimacy of later traditions he observes of them, in connection with Christian tradition, that they should “not only be positively enriching but actually act as a critique of the Scriptural text.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, in the end, the contemporary concept of tradition collapses Scripture into tradition, while tradition in turn is made an argument for experience, i.e., “the experience of the Holy Spirit within the people of God.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, the modern concept of tradition shifts the focus from the *sola Scriptura* principle to the primacy of experience via tradition.

### Conclusion

In the epistemological shifts and turns in Christian theology since the modern period, the concept of tradition has been used to mediate opposing viewpoints. At each juncture, the authenticity of the Christian faith has been argued for through a redefinition of the concept of tradition in a way that is alleged to

<sup>53</sup>On his part, Grenz criticizes the four sources commonly understood as the quadrilateral of sources, and in its place argues for what he call the three “pillars” or norms of theology, i.e., the biblical message, the theological heritage of the church, and the thought-forms of the historical-cultural context in which the contemporary people of God seek to speak, live, and act (*Revisoning Evangelical Theology*, 93).

<sup>54</sup>David Wells, “The Theologian’s Craft,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 175.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 175-180.

<sup>56</sup>See Charles Brummett, “Recovering Pastoral Theology: The Agenda of Thomas Oden” (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1990). Brummett, 281, makes this observation of Oden’s use of tradition and argues: “Pushed to its logical consequences, Oden’s methodology, or at least as he applies it, allows Scripture to collapse into tradition.”

<sup>57</sup>Brown, 5.

<sup>58</sup>Wells, “The Theologians Craft,” 177.

invest the concept with its truest meaning. What seems certain, however, is that at each transitional point the concept reflects some of the significant elements of the philosophical orientation of the times. Thus, the concept of tradition during the modern period was a reflection not only of Blondel's own philosophy of action, but also of Henri Bergson's idea of *élan vital*.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the postmodern concept of tradition shares some of the concerns of postmodern philosophies. For example, Van Huyssteen divests tradition of any necessary metaphysical continuity in response to Michael Foucault's antimetaphysical critique of Christian doctrine.<sup>60</sup>

The methodological implications of these redefinitions of the concept of tradition have been outlined above to stress the fact that these overtures, viewed from a methodological point of view, may indicate a real change in direction in Christian theology. Stanley Grenz confronts some of these same methodological changes and calls for a *revisioning* of evangelical theology. It may be, however, that to the extent that a change in method leads to a change in results, a change in evangelical theological method signals not simply a revisioning of evangelical theology, but a change in its very identity.

<sup>59</sup>Dulles, "Tradition and Creativity," 318.

<sup>60</sup>Van Huyssteen, 216-218.