

# *In Praise of Tradition*

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WITHOUT APOLOGY I shall begin with unstinted praise of tradition as a reality of political existence and cultural creativity. Tradition implies awareness of being, along with awareness of history. Tradition is not only remembrance of ancestors, but also openness to God. Tradition results in appropriate humility of individual persons, while it denies not freedom of choice. Indeed, freedom of choice presupposes awareness of tradition. Tradition is the basis for both authority and continuity; it makes possible the "bringing up" of children as well as the conception of projects. Tradition provides a framework for decisions, particularly those that have to be made without delay; it also provides the material for deliberation when time is available for that. Tradition attends all relations between particular persons—with the possible exception of fashion. Tradition is public memory—the stuff that Aristotle describes as "civic friendship."

In Cicero's *On the Nature of Gods*, three persons, with Cicero as observer, debate problems about the existence and the manifestation of gods. One of the three is supposed to be Gaius Aurelius Cotta, a distinguished orator and politician, consul for the year 75 B.C., and Pontifex, who in the discussion represents the Academy, Plato's school. He is content and able to use rational arguments against

the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophies of Velleius and Balbus, and in favor of the Academy. But at the end he moves beyond the entire discussion itself.

You were doubtful [he says to the others] whether the proposition was as obvious as you would have wished, and so you were anxious to bolster the existence of the gods by many arguments. For me one was enough, that this was the traditional belief of our ancestors. But you despise authority and appeal to reason. So let me meet you on your own ground. You deploy all these arguments to prove that divine beings exist. But by these very arguments you cast doubt on something which to my mind is not doubtful at all. (*On the Nature of the Gods* III, 9)

The man of action is willing to join in a game of the mind, but for reality looks to tradition. His partners in the discussion could have returned his bluntness by pointing to the fact that tradition is something "handed down," not assured by any proof, and not even with a reason for its acceptance, to which Cotta was to reply: "Now all this I have said about the nature of the gods was not said in denial of their existence, but to make you realize how difficult a question this is and how dubious is every theory which has been evolved to answer it." (III, 93) The passage may well be a *locus classicus* for "tradition," an attitude for which the an-

cient Romans coined the grave word *pietas*.

This being so, how can we explain the manifest dissolution of tradition in our time and also the almost hysterical negation of tradition at the slightest *souçon* of authority? One should not expect a quotation comparable to the one from Cicero, stemming from the centuries of high Christian culture. Christians were preoccupied, above all, with the will of God. There was no problem with the Ten Commandments, nay, even with "the imitation of Christ." But along with Christianity a new problem had entered human consciousness: history. It could not be avoided, if only as a result of God's Incarnation in a human being, at a certain time and place. In addition, the problem of Christianity and Israel had been made explicit by the ninth chapter of Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. The last book of the Bible, moreover, contained the vision of an angel laying hold of "the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years . . . . And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." (Rev. 20:2,4,7) Regarding this passage, Saint Augustine had admonished Christians not to try to apply it to the future, for "the devil was thus not bound only when the Church began to be more and more wisely extended among the nations beyond Judea, but is now and shall be bound till the end of the world. The Church could not now be called His kingdom or the kingdom of heaven unless his saints were even now reigning with Him." (*The City of God*, XX,8-9)

Augustine's prohibition of speculations about the historical future was strictly obeyed until the beginning of the thirteenth century, when Joachim of Flora presented his scheme of three ages of history, of which the last one, the one of perfection, was yet to come within his-

torical time. In addition, there was the question of the direction in which Christians would normally be looking, whether with their face to the past or to the future. Augustine's *City of God* had made clear that that fulfillment, which alone would give meaning to history, belonged not to time. That placed it in what the Greeks called the *eschaton*: "the furthest, uttermost, extreme"; or, in other words, "beyond time." Those who were looking for this fulfillment in historical time were called, according to Augustine, *Chiliasts*, or, Millenarians, and had to be refuted. (*Op.cit.* XX, 7) Thus, Saint Cyprian, although preceding Augustine, was not theologically mistaken when he proclaimed that "the world is now old, nor has it that vigor and force which it formerly possessed," and had to expect, consequently, the apocalyptic woes which the Gospels, as well as the Book of Revelation, had predicted. It was the Reformation of the sixteenth century which touched off widespread speculations about the particulars of this last age. It was no accident that such speculations came from the Protestants, for they had then recently identified the Pope with "the Antichrist," a figure briefly mentioned in the first Letter of John (2:18,22; 4:3), thus providing historical concreteness to the inquiry into the precise events of tribulation. Still, all those involved in describing the "last age" in historical detail used the Book of Revelation for their text and yardstick.

It was not long before at least some writers found out that a history of sheer doom and gloom ill fitted a God of love and redemption. Thus they began to add to their portraits of coming tribulation a final chapter of improvement and order still in the context of the Book of Revelation. The argument for this eventual improvement was largely based on the new achievements of the physical sciences. The corresponding myth implied a silent or open rejection of religious authority.

In the words of the literary critic Mark Schorer:

The new myth, therefore, finds its modern beginnings as far back as Bacon's denial of authority ("Bacon has broke that Scarecrow Deitie") and the beginnings of scientific investigation. And this protest was summarized once and for all in that era by the metaphysical speculations of Locke and the argument of the tabula rasa. The myth is of man's native goodness, a vision of the liberated individual progressing into dignity when released from the most crushing forms of authority, whether economic, political, or theological. It is the concept of regeneration not in the next world, but in this —the regeneration of the social man. This is the chiliastic hope of the seventeenth-century Protestantism given specifically political form, the millennium conceived anew in terms not of graves burst open but of institutions broken down. It is perfectibility.<sup>1</sup>

The resulting belief in inevitable progress was not slow in taking the place of religion as the religion of modernity. It is clear that this myth involved a complete turnaround in outlook. Until then man had seen himself in the position of the oarsman in a rowboat, moving forward while looking backward. Beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, the inner eye was looking out on the expected progress and the resulting eventual perfection in the social and political setting of human existence, the forward look toward no given reality.

But not until this century was this outlook appropriated by Christian theology, with the implied or explicit derision of the past, and thus of authority. The fatal revision of the faith was not really dangerous, however, until a way was found to locate authority in history's future, and that by leading Christian theologians. Let us look at one of these theologians, Johann Baptist Metz. God's promises, Metz says, concern that which is to come or to be realized. Using a formula

coined by Ernst Bloch, he calls it the "not yet." One cannot speak of "not yet" unless that which is the future exists as a more or less clear vision, sometimes (since Thomas More) called "utopia," which literally means "no place." As More makes clear, his "perfect" city could exist were it not for man's "*superbia*" (pride). In Metz's thinking that future is not to be conceived as a perfection of nature; thus, it is something not based on present knowledge of what is given. If any present knowledge plays a part in the shape to be expected, it is the knowledge of human suffering, the *memoria passionis*. Metz plays a number of illicit games with key concepts. On the one hand, *eschaton* is now a concept of history's future in time and place, a coming political order. On the other hand, the concept of nature is changed from a cosmos to that of raw material for human history, so that nature turns from something to be obeyed into something that is, exclusively, to be exploited. Finally, salvation, a concept stemming from man's wonderment at God's mighty and saving acts, now appears as a purely human political project, precisely the core of Metz's "not yet." It is all based on scripture, but one misses the Savior in that salvation project.

This reference to one of today's leading theologians does not imply that those who think and act without any awareness of tradition and authority have studied contemporary theological works. Both tradition and authority belong largely to the pattern of habit, on which alone institutions can be erected and maintained. Tradition, as Cotta said, is belief with implicit rather than explicit reason, but the contemporary denial of authority to the point of committing murder is devoid even of implicit reason. While young people are frequently the perpetrators of such destruction, it is their parents who have failed to honor tradition in speech and gesture. Our century's public reality has been dominated,

since the end of World War I, by ideologies advancing fallacious reason as their conviction; hence, the ultimate blame must fall on those who could and should have taught parents reasons for not tolerating the disorder of such nihilistic movements. Parents cannot be expected to have undergone philosophical instruction. Still, where there is order, at least a vaguely perceived concept of being prevails even in uneducated minds. That includes both the being of nature and the human being in terms of human nature. Moral and legal reasoning flows from such foundations. Most of this presents itself to non-intellectual citizens as reality without explicit reason, the reality that Cotta placed above speculating philosophy. Today too many people cannot find images of any kind of reality within themselves or their upbringing. Thus, when children, even before their teens, behave disorderly, or destructively, or meanly, or even hatefully, parents are bereft of any words of order to oppose to their children's chaos. They may even

ask themselves what their children "try to say to them," the parents.

We are not yet at the point of inevitable dissolution. That will come when even those who direct and move public institutions cannot find in themselves any reason for their institutions except power. Then mankind will be back in the condition of Hobbes's "war of all against all." Even before we come to that point there will be a period in which any number of nations will have acquired nuclear weapons, for there also will be no reason any more why armaments should be limited. Power has its own rules, but these rules, which apply to animals and even vegetation, are devoid of any specific human meaning. Dissolution will not necessarily bring with it the remedy of social and political anarchy. History alone will not "compel" humans into an ordered existence. There is no substitute for the will to acknowledge the higher reality that permits concepts of meaningful order.

1. *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (New York, 1946), 41-42.