

SUMMARY OF PART III

The distinctions between active and objective tradition, historical and dogmatic tradition, and the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition, were made at different times and for different reasons. The terms “active” and “objective” have their roots in scholastic philosophy. Applied to tradition, they refer to transmission and to what is transmitted. The object transmitted is central, corresponding to the “substance” of tradition. By comparison, the act of transmission is a mere accident. But the “accident” of ecclesiastical transmission of Christian doctrine was hardly a chance occurrence for the Catholic theologians of the nineteenth century.

The distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition arose in the anti-Modernist climate of the early twentieth century. Catholic theologians used the distinction in a polemic against the historicism of the Modernists. Not every dogmatic tradition, they argued, could be traced back in documentary fashion to its roots in the apostolic age. The distinction between the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition had yet another origin. It was brought out most clearly in the writings of Counter-Reformation polemicists. But it represents a train of thought which one can trace in Augustine, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Vincent of Lerins.

Despite the differing origins of the three, they have this in common. First, all three are characteristic of the modern theology of tradition. They capture the logical and scholastic flavor of that theology which was decisively formulated by Cardinal Franzelin at the time of the First Vatican Council, and which persisted until and into the Second Vatican Council. Second, the distinctions pose problems for theological thought, appearing somewhat dated in a milieu shaped by hermeneutical philosophy and by Vatican II. In our analysis of them, attention was paid both to their original situation and to their contemporary meaning. The question of truth guided our inquiry in a dual form: what is the truth which the modern theology of tradition sought to grasp? How are we to appropriate it?

The distinction between active and objective tradition lays out the terms of tradition in a logical equation. There is an objective truth and an act of transmitting it. Of these two terms, the latter is more important, because it is the transmission of truth which makes it tradition. The theologians of our period added a third term as a necessary corollary: the magisterium. The act of transmitting Christian truth cannot be adequately discussed, in their view, without reference to that ecclesiastical body which transmits the truth with authority. Thus the terms of their equation are primarily an act and an object, and secondarily a body which performs the act in an authoritative way.

The value of the distinction between active and objective tradition does not consist, however, in their logical simplicity. It lies rather in the problem which the distinction poses for thought: how can tradition be both an act and an object? That Christian tradition is an object, no one would deny. It is a truth, a doctrine, or a practice, handed on from generation to generation, a topic of inquiry subject to scientific scrutiny. One can apparently approach it with objectivity. But the objectivity of tradition is,

according to the theologians of the modern period, less important than its activity. Traditions must be transmitted in order to deserve the name. The act of transmitting them makes them traditions, and not just truths or practices. The role of the magisterium was exalted by these theologians because it performs the act of transmission with authority. Its actions guarantee the truth of the object. Thus the distinction between active and objective tradition serves, in the theology of the modern period, to unite them.

The emphasis on act and object, it can also be said, draws a line between the theology of tradition and Christianity's heritage of Platonism. The truths of the faith are not simply ideas to be grasped by the intellect alone, but take authoritative shape in the teachings of the magisterium. Rather than forms whose embodiment possesses only a transitory and changeable authority, the traditions of the Church represent, and are for this theology in fact, the fullness of divine truth. In short, active and objective tradition form a unity because the object of tradition must enter history, and be acted upon, in order to be tradition. The theologians of the modern period did not explain their terms in this way, but the importance of what they did resides in the unity of truth and historical expression upon which they insisted. Their distinction between active and objective tradition offers to the contemporary mind the perennial problem of the relation between the object of truth and the expression by which it is transmitted and becomes history.

Yet it must be said that the modern theologians, in their discussions of active and objective tradition, rarely if ever posed those terms as a question. They were far more concerned with answers to the Protestant polemic, that is, with delimiting the lines of ecclesiastical authority. This is true even for the recent commentators on the modern theology, Congar and Mackey, who themselves belong to the conclusion of the modern period. Congar, we saw, was suspicious of the virtually unlimited authority which the modern theologians accorded the magisterium. He argued that the object of tradition is not merely that matter which receives authoritative form in the acts of the magisterium. It also conditions those acts, he said, exercising a certain control. This was Congar's answer to the reluctance of the magisterium to acknowledge its own limits. But Congar never treated the question of how the object of tradition does in fact condition the magisterial acts. He never considered the issue as the hermeneutical question of truth and its effect on those who attempt to formulate it.

Mackey's treatment of active and objective tradition has the same shortcomings. To be sure, he notes that the modern theology of tradition departs from the ancient teaching which equated the rule of faith with objective tradition. The ancient teaching did not include a criterion of truth, Mackey says, apart from the truth itself. For the modern theologians, however, that criterion is the teaching of the magisterium. By pointing this out, Mackey criticizes the active-objective distinction; the introduction of the magisterium as a criterion is, relatively speaking, a theological novelty. But Mackey accepts the distinction in the main because it enables him to differentiate between the understanding of the Church and truth which is understood. This is his answer to those who would equate the magisterium's teaching of doctrine with the doctrine itself. The two must be kept separate: the one is doctrine in its purity, so to speak, while the other is

an application of it. The hermeneutical question of application, that is, the question of the sense in which a truth can exist apart from its application, was never raised by Mackey.

The question is important, however, because it cuts to the core of the Christian experience of God. God is both creator, the source of all truth, and creature, the incarnation of the divine in Jesus Christ. The dual nature of Christ is an inevitable factor in the Christian inquiry into the relation between the truth of doctrine and its authoritative expression. If one overemphasizes the divine origin of truth, there is a risk that its expression or application may be relegated to a secondary position. A contrary emphasis on the expression or application of truth tends to canonize an interpretation which, however authoritative, remains only partial. The hermeneutical question of application mediates between these contradictory emphases. Its relevance to active and objective tradition, in which we see the problem in an undeveloped form, deserves further consideration. Active tradition focuses attention on the human institutions through which the divine acts in history. Objective tradition recalls the source of truth whose spiritual matrix, expressed in dogma, encompasses all the sciences, even the most secular.

This brings us to the second distinction characteristic of the modern theology of tradition, that between historical and dogmatic tradition. This distinction arose, we saw, in order to describe the difference between those insights into sacred history available to secular historians, and those available to the Church. The development of this distinction occurred in two phases. The first phase brought the distinction (if not the terms historical tradition and dogmatic tradition) into play as an answer to Modernism. Against the historicism and immanentism of the Modernists, the modern theologians of tradition argued first that dogma cannot be adequately understood in the context of history alone, and second, that the transcendent which has entered history cannot be simply described as the fulfillment of basic human needs. “Dogmatic” refers to that tradition which transcends the data of history and the human subject.

The second phase of the development of the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition occurred at the time of the formal definition of Mary’s bodily Assumption. Theologians such as Altaner and Coppens had argued that the definition was inopportune, because there is no documentation of an unbroken tradition of the Assumption dating back to the apostles. Coppens even used the phrase “explication dogmatique” to describe the Assumption, suggesting that, while it had no historical basis, it nevertheless could be inferred or explicated from other facts known about Mary. Those shaped by the modern theology of tradition responded to this by distinguishing between historical and dogmatic tradition, not implying that dogmatic tradition was unhistorical, but rather that it was more than academic history. The theologians of the modern period employed what Filograssi (and Gardeil before him) called the regressive historical method. They argued that the correct approach to Christian tradition was not one which sought to ignore later dogmatic formulations in a search for a more primitive testimony. This was the positive critical method. Instead, they sought to use the later formulations as a hermeneutical key for interpreting those formulations’ own primitive sources. Dogmatic tradition was thus defined as that which could not be reduced to the historical

records of Christian antiquity, but whose apostolic roots can be more exactly studied through those records.

The importance of the distinction between dogmatic and historical tradition lies first in the critique of historicism, decisively expressed by Blondel. Historicism, the doctrine that history itself provides a sufficient context for the interpretation of events, leads to a philosophic impasse: the context it provides is unfinished, because history is still underway, and so cannot suffice. Blondel recognized this, and developed the counter-concept of history as “*metaphysique en acte*.” It is metaphysical in the sense that the spiritual, psychological, and moral tissue of history cannot be fully expressed in the phenomena of history. Doubtless, it must be said that Blondel also criticized the extrinsicists for relegating the dogmatic importance of historical events to something wholly supernatural. They failed to see, in his opinion, the link between facts and faith. To extrinsicism is due the blame for the Catholic reluctance to pursue, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the problems of historical theology as vigorously as did Protestants. This point is implicit in Blondel’s critique of extrinsicism. But his critique of historicism is more important. Historicism threatened to reduce the concept of tradition to the play of documentary sources. The distinction between dogmatic and historical tradition, to which Blondel contributed, underlines the fact that tradition exceeds the power of documents to express it. It cannot be grasped by a phenomenological method.

Yet this is only the negative side of the critique of historicism. The positive second side reveals the meaning of metaphysics in act: the web of forces called history is greater than the phenomena by which it is known. This concept is present in the distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition, although only in a preliminary fashion. Such a distinction exists, when rightly understood, for the sake of an ultimate unity. Its point is that dogmatic tradition is in fact history. Doubtless, it must be distinguished from historical tradition, the redundant phrase used by the theologians of the period to describe those aspects of the Christian past available to secular historians. Dogmatic tradition, like historical tradition, is subject to investigation by the methods of scientific historiography. It is not unhistorical. But it is more than secular history. It is the Christian past seen in the context of the history of salvation. This should not suggest an irrational and (in that sense) dogmatic viewpoint. Dogmatic tradition refers instead, for those shaped by the modern theology of tradition, to the Christian past viewed in the truest possible light. Not history alone, but the mind of God as revealed in history, enables one to fathom the truth of tradition.

This truth, however, is itself thoroughly historical. The modern theologians of tradition, it must be conceded, failed to see this. Their distinction between historical and dogmatic tradition reinforced what can be called their leading idea, namely, that the divine has entered history and speaks through the magisterium. This blinded them to the necessarily contingent nature of all magisterial pronouncements. It also created a climate in which historical research into the development of dogma – research which suggested that dogmas had not always existed in the form of contemporary teaching – was suspect. Needless to say, the contingency of magisterial teaching was acknowledged after the

Second Vatican Council. But in the period of Modernism and of the Assumption movement, those who hinted at it were silenced. The leading idea of magisterial authority left little room for the history of those human institutions through which doctrine develops and is transmitted.

The theologians of the modern period, one must also say, gave scant attention to the way in which magisterial authority works. They could not explore the question raised by hermeneutical philosophy of tradition's effect on its interpreters. To be sure, they avoided the impasses of historicism. Few were drawn into a study of tradition regarded simply as teachings documented from apostolic times, to be grasped as phenomena of an isolated period. Tradition was rather for them a living thing, a continuum from past to present. They would not have described it merely as an object or phenomenon. But the modern theologians of tradition neglected what might be called tradition's impenetrability. They never questioned the limits of the magisterium's ability to penetrate tradition, or the sense in which tradition envelopes those who bear it in a movement which is both history and spirit. Tradition grasps the Christian, one could say, and resists those who would grasp it. This is the suggestion of hermeneutical philosophy. To the extent that the theologians of our period could not see it, they risked impoverishing the concept of tradition, transforming it, with Scripture, into a mere instrument of the Church.

The distinction between the sufficiency of Scripture and of tradition, the third distinction characteristic of our period, points to the Church's role as interpreter. We saw that, in the decade prior to the Second Vatican Council, there was an apparent consensus, built upon a foundation laid by Geiselman, that Scripture as well as tradition enables the Christian to grasp the truths of faith. Both are sufficient. This consensus marked a change in the Church's understanding of the Council of Trent. For close to 400 years the conciliar document *De canonicis Scripturis* was generally read as a critique of the Protestant principle of *Scriptura sola*. The document was cited as a proof that Scripture contains only part of the truths of the Gospel, and requires the supplementary truths of tradition. Geiselman's research led to a reevaluation of this doctrine. He argued that the conciliar text allowed the interpretation that all truth is in Scripture, and all is in tradition. Tradition, in his view, is the living interpretation of Scripture, which is sufficient for matters of faith. Yet Scripture enjoys only what Geiselman called a material sufficiency. Material sufficiency must be distinguished from formal sufficiency, because the matter of Scripture needs to be properly grasped by the mind of the Church, and thus given authentic form. Only the Church's tradition has material and formal sufficiency, and it alone is the proper locus for the true interpretation of Scripture.

The acknowledgment of the sufficiency of Scripture, even if only a material sufficiency, led to a rediscovery by Catholics of their own Biblical heritage, and to a rapprochement with Protestantism. Catholic Biblical studies awakened in the 1940s from a period of dormancy, and the doctrine of Scriptural sufficiency was a further encouragement to Catholic scholars. Systematicians renewed their appreciation of the Scriptures as the fundamental source for scientific theology. Protestant Biblical scholarship was viewed with new respect. All of this, however laudatory, appears

somewhat tangential to the modern theology of tradition. In fact, it might even be regarded as a movement in opposition to that theology. After all, a greater emphasis on Scripture means a diminished emphasis on tradition and its magisterial exponents, and this has in fact occurred since Vatican II. But to judge the apparent consensus on the material sufficiency of Scripture as a direct counter-concept to the modern theology of tradition would be a mistake. No Catholic theologian has been willing to accord the Scriptures anything more than material sufficiency. And none would insist that Scripture forces the conscientious exegete to break with the Church's tradition. For Geiselmann and his school, tradition is the living interpretation of Scripture. Thus the distinction between the sufficiency of Scripture and of tradition has actually led to an affirmation of their unity.

One must admit that the sufficiency debate can appear as a marginal or misleading issue. The etymology of sufficiency suggests that the word is ambiguous, and that what suffices is not, in any absolute sense, self-sufficient. For this reason, the debate over the sufficiency of Scripture and of tradition can result in a general insensitivity to the divine context without which nothing suffices. Furthermore, constant attention to the media of God's communication can obscure the more fundamental issue of revelation, as Ratzinger noted. The importance of this issue cannot be underestimated, because it relates the media of revelation to the immediate presence of God. Nevertheless, the modern theologians of tradition were not wrong to concentrate on the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition. By so doing, they avoided the docetism of a doctrine of God who only appeared to give himself to humanity, and the Arianism of a Scripture and tradition without true authority. The intensive focus on the media of revelation by Catholic theologians of the modern period (and by Protestants as well) stemmed from a faith that, in these media, God's true self was revealed. The significance of this is at least as great as that of the new climate of Catholic-Protestant reconciliation.

But the modern theology of tradition did not re-examine the concept of magisterial authority which is its chief feature. That concept remained a legalistic one, obsessed with fine gradations in the hierarchy of the bearers of tradition, with the infallibility of the magisterium and pope, and with tradition as an instrument of Church polity. The concept suggested by hermeneutical philosophy, of an authority which both has been acquired and needs to be newly acquired, was never explored. It deserves attention, however, because the application of it to tradition reveals new dimensions of complexity. First, it exposes the authority of tradition as that which must be judged, and yet which, in the final analysis, no human being can bestow. Second, it raises the question of the relation between absolute and necessary truth, on the one hand, and relative and contingent truths, on the other. Finally, the problem of the authority of tradition bears resemblance to the problem of freedom: how is freedom possible to those whose membership in a tradition limits their freedom? The complexity of the authority of tradition was inadequately explored by the theologians of the modern period. Yet their emphasis on the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition, the sufficiency of the contingent, laid the indispensable groundwork for our contemporary questions.

A reconsideration of the modern theology of tradition suggests that this theology, for all its limitations, was a profound effort to plumb the transmission of the truths of Christianity. Indeed, that transmission appears as its own truth, in that it does not exist apart from the truths it serves to transmit. The distinctions upon which we have focused – between active and objective tradition, historical and dogmatic tradition, and the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition – have revealed the preoccupations of the period. We saw an undue emphasis on the magisterium as the sole authoritative bearer of tradition, on the dangers of critical historical scholarship, and on the shortcomings of Protestant reverence for Scripture. But we also won insights into how truth enters history, how history is more than phenomenology, and how the truth of an interpretation depends upon the qualifications of the interpreters. The modern theology also shows marked affinities with important topics in hermeneutical philosophy. Even our preliminary analysis suggests that the problems of application, of the effect of history on its interpreters, and of authority, expose new aspects of the theology of tradition. That theology was not forgotten in the period commencing with Vatican II. It remains to be seen how later theologians have treated the problem of tradition and its relation to hermeneutics.