

Tradition as Life-Giving Memory

Lecture Aims

This lecture intends to

- Challenge individualist and constructivist accounts of human knowing;
- Contest propositionalist and past-centred accounts of theological knowing;
- Begin to understand the mediatedness of God's Self-revelation;
- Learn to comprehend the nature of human hearing and response to divine revelation;
- Retrieve the particularity of the past in critical conversation with the present for the sake of the future.

Crisis of Authority: Exteriorisation and Interiorisation

- 'Turn to the self' brings something of a 'crisis of authority'.
- Contrast between (oppressive) *external* and (liberating) *internal* authority
 - External authority wielded by some, imposing, self-asserting and dominating
 - Internalised by others in passivity by others – slavishness
- True authority = interiorised authority

Don Cupitt:

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. The letter is fixed, the Spirit moves. Codified religion, believed and practised according to ready-made rules, is dead religion, whereas living religion is something *we* must make up, all the time and as we go along.¹

- Cupitt's non-realism – contra oppressive 'God out there'
- "we've got to do what God used to do for us."²

Group Exercises – What makes us human?

- word association – 'human'
- Video clip – *Blade Runner*
 - Biology does not make humans unique
 - Physicality circumscribes – human desire to surmount embodied limitations
 - Replicants controlled and manipulated – Blade Runners = final control
 - Replicants are denied their humanity = *denied a past, denied memory*
 - collect old photos = need memory
 - Yet photos freeze past – cannot live off old photos
 - Rachel's memories are manipulated and manufactured.
 - Rationality & self-consciousness alone not make us human – Nexus 6 Replicant (Pris) = Descartes' "I think therefore I am" (*cogito ergo sum*)
 - Rationality cannot function without tradition acquired through memory.³

The General Nature of Memory

Memory and Knowledge

- The *invisible* = cannot ever be seen
- The *unseen* = can be potentially seen but does not for the moment present itself to sight

Understanding the unseen:

¹ Don Cupitt, 'From Religious Doctrine to Religious Experience', <http://www.sofn.org.uk/cupitt97.html>.

² Don Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 4.

³ See Isaac Asimov, 'Reason', in *I, Robot*.

- *Imagination* – we imaginatively construct what the unseen might look like
- *Memory* – memory enables us to understand something of the unseen:

Memory and Sociality

- Much not present to my immediate perception or memory of what I have perceived,
- but present to *imagination* through others' *testimony* or *witness*:
 - 2nd hand quality of imagination
 - Learning through others – knowing as mediated
 - Shapes my performance.

Without socially formed memory our ability to understand & live would be seriously curtailed, & ability to form and sustain relations with other persons would be impossible. [CLIP – *Memento*]

Memory and Self-Identity

Our past, our memory shapes who we are:

- Nations as collective memory
- Without memory we become different persons, discontinuous with our past
[CLIP – *All Quiet on the Western Front*]

Memory and Expectation/Planning

Without memory we have no way of deciding how to act, how to plan, etc.

Problems of Memory

- Stories make the past present
- The darkness or problems of memory
 - Invented memory (e.g., Nazis' Aryan myth)
 - Distorted memory (e.g., *Braveheart*)
 - Forgetfulness (e.g., modern myths of progress)

Theological Memory: Tradition

Video Clips –

- *American History X*
- *Fiddler on the Roof*
- *Luther*
- *Life of Brian*
- Contexts Change Meaning (*Birth, Apoc Now, Jarhead*)

Detraditioned Theologies

- Council of Trent (1545-63):
 - [T]his truth and this discipline are contained in written books and unwritten tradition. [Session IV, April 1546]
- *Traditio* itself, derives from *tradere*:
 - a handing *on* (as in faithful passing on)
 - a handing *over* (as in a betrayal)

If 'learning theology' is conceived of as a process similar to learning the data in a geography text-book, teaching theology is conceived of on the same

pattern. The *tradition fidei* becomes, not 'sharing faith', but something known as 'handing on *the* faith' (there it is, out there on the table, in the book)...⁴

- Radical Reformation's 'get-back-to-the-Bible' uncontaminated by tradition
- C16th Protestant England – Roman Catholicism is distorted and distorting tradition.
- Westminster Confession (1646) rejects all human traditions in preference for scripture
- Pietism – sense of directness and immediacy of the experience God
 - Dangers =
if we appeal too exclusively to internal, material criteria of authority, then we shall be in danger of substituting our standards and our experience for the authority of God; and thus in danger of reducing Christianity to no more than another variant of liberal humanism.⁵
 - too individualistically grounded – concerned with individual's experience of God
 - bypasses irreducible mediatedness of God's grace in the incarnation.

Remembering Our Memories

- All are defined/shaped by the **particularity** of their remembered past = *traditioned* [CLIP – *American History X*]

the sense in which tradition is a matter of identity, so that to have lost touch with tradition in this sense is to be as crippled as an amnesiac who just doesn't remember who he is. [Herbert McCabe]⁶

- Enlightenment's free unsituated self is illusory and dangerous

A person who imagines that he is free of prejudices, basing his knowledge on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself influenced by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him as a *vis a tergo*. A person who does not accept that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what is shown in their light. [Gadamer]⁷

- Objectivity of the world = cannot simply impose our meaning
- Context of our learning = "our experience is always mediated."⁸
- Social context of our learning

Tradition ... involves a personal relatedness to others in both past and future time. ... To deny the salutary character of tradition is to say that we can only be ourselves by freeing ourselves *from* others – by suppressing the other – rather than being set free by them. ... [I]f I come to believe that I have nothing to receive [from others], I am denying something central to their humanity and mine.⁹

- being traditioned/embodyed = **not a burden** in and of itself – part of being free
 - this particularity is grounded theologically in *God's creativity*;
 - *incarnation* = God's ongoing commitment to embodiment;
 - Jesus Christ is irreducibly particular;

⁴ Nicholas Lash, *His Presence in the World*, 9.

⁵ Lash, *Voices of Authority*, 12.

⁶ Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, 199. Cf. Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and The Many*, 171]

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 324.

⁸ Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion*, 107. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 17.

⁹ Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 95.

- Christian witness is enacted witness performed as *remembrance* (the eucharist).
- Past is *socially mediated* – we have memory of, because of, and with others.

When theology confronts the Word of God and witnesses, its place is very concretely in the *community*, not somewhere in empty space. [Karl Barth]¹⁰

- Fragility of memory – need *corrective memory of others*.
 - ‘Traditions’ not stably unchanging – develop, people cross ‘boundaries’
 - Notion of unchanging & eternal ideas = largely modern
- In memory, the past becomes contemporaneous.
 - theology converses with past and present generations (cf. Heb. 12:1)
 - We become contemporaries and fellows of those gone before us

To study theology means not so much to examine exhaustively the work of earlier students of theology as to become *their* fellow student. It means to become and to remain receptive, for they still speak, even though they may have died long ago. ... But above all, theological study means to follow in their footsteps and to turn to the source from which they were nourished, to the norm to which they had already, properly, and unqualifiedly subjected themselves. [Barth]¹¹

Person-Making Conversation

- Not a dead past captivating us in its deadly grip, from which we need to be liberated
 - As if it is a series of unassailable facts
 - & “a substitute for understanding or argument” [McCabe]¹² [CLIP – *Luther*]
 - Faithfulness to which is constituted by simple repetition of past’s insights
- But a conversation with those who have gone before us, guided by them and shaped through them
- Yet a conversation, and therefore critical. As MacIntyre argues,

When a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose. So when an institution – a university, say... – is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be ... Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead.¹³

all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic.¹⁴

- McCabe – analogy of learning a musical instrument –
 - learn skills from those trained who themselves had been trained in the necessary skills

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 39.

¹¹ Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 161.

¹² Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 199.

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 206.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 206.

- but once one is fully immersed in the *technē* one is “ready to depart sometimes from the recognized rules in some respect”, adding to the tradition, even transforming it.¹⁵

Theology of Tradition – the Creeds

Creedal traditions entail opposition to conceptions of faith that are:

- subjectivised – instead, we confess *God* and not ourselves
- individualised – instead, we confess God *together*
- immediate – instead, we confess God together in the context of the *Church*
- wholly present – instead, we confess God together in the context of the Church extended over time.
- finalised 1 – instead, we confess God together in the context of the Church extended over time as it ‘hands on’ its *witness to the free and unpossessable God*
- finalised 2 – instead, we confess God together in the context of the Church extended over time that is *fallible and fallen*.

The Creedal Tradition and Identity

- Identity markers
 - origins in situations of controversy and dispute (Creed of Nicaea, Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Confession)
 - delineate borders of what is meant by ‘God’

the declaration, acknowledged by the community as communally authoritative, of identity-sustaining rules of discourse and behaviour governing Christian uses of the word ‘God’. [Lash]¹⁶

- implicitly exclude that which would distort and subvert (‘heterodoxy’/ ‘heresy’) Christian identity.

Enabled Christian churches “to acquire [and maintain] an identity of its own, and to feel itself to be marked out and differentiated from the rest of society” [G.W. Lampe].¹⁷
- Identity makers
 - Identity in worshipful confession – Creeds refer to God, not primarily to ourselves – shaping identity in the story of the Triune God with the world
 - Oneness of all things – Creeds have to do with the story of the oneness of all things from creation to redemption.
 - Making unity – all confess together, ecumenically
 - “We believe” = identity *together* (cf. style)
 - “We believe in one holy and apostolic Church” – not an assertion to be believed, but in performance together the oneness happens
 - Church context for our learning of God – not what I claim to be religiously and spiritually satisfying for myself
 - Church’s past as historically extended context or body – one with all God’s people.
 - Oneness = patterned on oneness of God, but a differentiated oneness of *Triune* God

¹⁵ McCabe, 201.

¹⁶ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 8.

¹⁷ G.W. Lampe, in the Doctrine Commission of the C. of E., 52.

- Liturgical setting of life – Christian ‘knowing’ as self-involving or personally participative = “We believe”

Tradition as Paideia [CLIP – Jedi Training]

- “[A] tradition is not there first of all to be *appealed* to, but to be *lived*.” [McCabe]¹⁸
- ‘tradition’ as environment within which we learn to think, move, speak, live – the ethos within which we becomes selves
- Ongoing and never-ending critical conversation and development of past-present

it is central to the conception of such a tradition that the past is never something merely to be discarded, but rather that the present is intelligible only as its commentary upon and response to the past in which the past, if necessary and possible, is corrected and transcended, yet corrected and transcended in a way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some yet more adequate future point of view. [MacIntyre]¹⁹

Tradition and Scripture

- Reformation principles of *Sola scriptura, sola christus, sola fide*
- Emphasis on *sufficiency* and *perspicuity* of scripture
- Council of Trent – “in written books and unwritten tradition.”
 - (but not post-apostolic revelation to church; or esoteric, non-public apostolic tradition)
 - Tradition as independent of scripture?
 - Tradition as supplementary to scripture?

The Catholic Church does not regard revelation as adequately presented in Scripture alone – if the word ‘alone’ there is taken to mean the Scriptures divorced from their setting in the life of the Church. [Nichols]²⁰

- If tradition is the atmosphere, training, etc. in Christian identity, then
 - complementary and integral to one another
 - Tradition is what enables scripture to be interpreted
 - Tradition has to do with learning to read scriptures well

The ‘rule of faith’ was an attempt to distil out of the amorphous, unwieldy, and often bewildering diverse mass of Scripture and tradition a basic compendium of Christian belief which could, in turn, provide a key to the interpretation of Scripture and a norm for regulating its use. [Lampe]

Though tradition has its own *loci*, it is more an environment or context or atmosphere in which we read Scripture than an object set side by side with Scripture.²¹

Tradition is thus in no sense a distinct source for divine truth; it is that continuing activity in which, to quote the Council’s text [viz., Vatican II’s *Divine Revelation*], ‘the Church’s full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her’ (*Verbum Dei*, II.8). Tradition is not a separate source of revelation from Scripture; it is the continuing activity of the Church through the ages in seeking to grasp and express under new conditions that

¹⁸ McCabe, 200.

¹⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 137.

²⁰ Aidan Nicholas, 165.

²¹ Aidan Nicholas, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 22.

which is given in Scripture. The study of Scripture takes place within the continuing tradition of interpretation. [Leslie Newbiggin]²²

²² Leslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 53f.