Tradition and Transformation

The drama portrayed in the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, takes place in an impoverished peasant village in Czarist Russia. The people of Anatevka are mostly hard working Jewish families whose lives are simple, insulated, and ruled by tradition. The opening song, which is a beautiful prologue to the drama that is about to unfold, bespeaks the order that has been given to the community by tradition. Tevye, the local dairyman, and father of five daughters lead the cast in singing: "Tradition, tradition…because of our tradition everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do."[1]

The year is 1905, the eve of the Russian revolution, and the safe world that Tevye has built around his family is about to be shattered by a pogrom against the Jews and the iconoclasm of his beloved daughters. The musical is about the lives of a small community, but it transcends this situation and its enduring appeal is rooted in the timelessness of the dilemmas that confront both Tevye and the people of Anatevka: dilemmas when people formed in one tradition encounter those formed in another, when the winds of change encounter the forces of conservation, and when people seek to live out of their traditions in changed cultural contexts. These encounters bring forth voices arguing, at the extremes, for disengagement from the past, or insisting on conformity with the past. More moderate voices call for a renewed understanding of tradition and its paradoxical capacity for both conservation and innovation.

Central to the story of the *Fiddler* is the very meaning of tradition, and as Richard Altman said in an anecdote, "well, if it's a show about tradition and its dissolution, then the audience should be told what tradition is…."[2] In this paper I will attend to this challenge by noting the role of tradition as a phenomenon of human culture, reviewing its complex religious pedigree, raising some hermeneutical considerations, suggesting some criteria for validating interpretation, and finally addressing its paradoxical role in religious education as both transmissive and transformative.

1] What is Tradition?

Tradition can be understood both anthropologically and theologically. Anthropologically it is a constitutive element of human culture resting on two basic principles: (1) human mortality and historicality, (2) the need to build on the experiences, knowledge and skills developed by others. The first principle recognises that a culture does not end with the death of a generation but that each generation transmits to the next what it holds to be precious. The second principle is a corollary of the first in that it provides the bond between successive generations when values, norms, symbols, attitudes and behaviours are shared throughout history. Tradition is thus a principle of continuity, identity and unity in any culture. However, it is not simply a seamless diachronous process for such a process would negate human freedom. It is simultaneously a synchronous process where both the transmitter and the receiver bring "tradition into relation

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[1] Zero Mostel and Company, "Prologue—Tradition," in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the original Broadway cast recording, compact disk RCA RCD1-7060 (New York City, September 27, 1964).
[2] Richard Altman with Mervyn Kaufman, *The Making of a Musical: "Fiddler on the Roof"* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1971), 31 in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 3.

with their particular situations and experiences and must also interpret for each other their remembered and current experiences, if living recollection is not to transform itself into dead traditionalism."[3]

Conflict about the authority of tradition is a natural and normal process for its authority is regularly challenged through encounter with new cultural, social and historical situations. There is a natural functional relationship between change and tradition for the former is inevitably defined in terms of the latter. The authority of tradition is also under siege because tradition is not simply a datum, but requires interpretation by both transmitter and receiver.

While recognising the role of tradition in human experience our interest is with a theological understanding of tradition. Christian tradition is, however, not merely the religious variant of the anthropological process for it is founded on the fact that in Israel and in Jesus Christ, God is revealed once and for all for the salvation of humanity. This revelation is attested by the prophets and the apostles who under the guidance of the Spirit proclaimed it in word and deed. It is their testimony that inaugurates the Tradition of God's revelation.[4]

As tradition developed within early Christianity it drew on its Jewish heritage. God's original revelation was expressed in the written Torah, and the record of God's ongoing self gift to the people came to expression in the various writings of the Hebrew scriptures. In addition to the written text, much was passed down over the centuries by the scribes and rabbis as oral tradition and interpretation. This oral Law was finally set own in the second century C.E. in the *Mishna*, and in later centuries in commentaries on the *Mishna* known as the *Talmud*—a work whose name means "that which is learned by heart."[5] Oral and written tradition both received public expression in the worship of the community which expressed and affirmed the identity of the people. A similar pattern of oral, written and liturgical transmission became foundational for Christian believers.

Paul, a "Pharisee" (Phil 3:5; Acts 23:6-8) who was himself trained as a disciple (*talmid*) of the Law, appeals to tradition (1 Th 2:13; 2 Th 2:15; Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 11:2, 15:1-5; Rom 6:17) as that which has been "transmitted," "received," and which must be "conserved" and "held fast." [6] It is the enduring source that connects the Christian community to the Paschal mystery of Jesus the Christ whose Spirit continues to reveal him in our lives (1 Cor 12:3).

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[3] Hermann J. Pottmeyer, "Tradition," *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology,* ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, English Language Edition (Slough: St. Paul's / Crossroad, 1994): 1120.

[4] World Council of Churches, "Scripture, Tradition and Traditions," in Ellen Flessemann-van Leer, ed. *The Bible: It Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement.* Faith and Order Paper No. 99. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), 19.

[5] Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to Its Sources, Principles and History* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 166.

[6] Yves M. –J Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*. Originally published by *Libraire Arthème Fayard* in two volumes each entitled *La Tradition et les Traditions*, the first volume being subtitled *Essai Historique (1960)* the second *Essai Theologique* (1963). This translation of two volumes into one was first published in 1966, Part One being translated by Michael Naseby and Part Two by Thomas Rainborough (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), 9.

Paul, "an apostle" by the revelation of God (Gal 1:1), is concerned that those who come to belief are in communion with the apostles (Gal 1:18; 2:2) to whom Jesus revealed himself (Col 1:26-27). This continuity is especially important in Paul's account of the institution of the eucharist (1 Cor 11:17-34) where he appeals to that which he "received from the Lord" and handed on" (1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:1,3). These words seem to indicate that Paul, whom we know was not present at the original event, had a private communication from the Lord about the eucharist. His words are, however, the common technical term for the transmission of an oral tradition,[7] and the Greek equivalent of the vocabulary of tradition preserved in the rabbinic schools.[8]

It is also probable that Paul received this tradition from the apostles who participated in the Last Supper, but, as he transmits it to the new Christian communities, it is clear that he feels free to draw inferences from the tradition. After handing on the tradition about the eucharist (1 Cor 11:23-25), he adds, "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). Even at this early stage the tradition is not only being transmitted, but it is being interpreted developed and transformed.

In addition to the content of the "gospel of God" (1 Th 2:2, 8, 9; Rom 1:1; 15:16) which is fulfilled in Christ (Rom 1:1-4; 2 Cor 4: 4-6),[9] Paul transmits to the community certain rules of behaviour (*parainesis*) intended for the building up of the community. Rejection of Tradition would be a breach of fidelity (Gal 1:6-9); and, while this can be distinguished from the rules of conduct, it is clear that Paul is proposing that there is an intrinsic relationship between the foundational Tradition and the historically-conditioned ethical guidelines which aid us in our living. In teaching his communities of "my ways in Christ" (1 Cor 4:17), and encouraging them to maintain the "traditions just as I handed them on to you" (1 Cor 11:2), Paul is concerned that those who have come to believe in Christ are able to live out that commitment (Col 2:6-7). Belief and behaviour are necessarily related, but a priority is given to belief (Tradition/tradition) while the rules of conduct (traditions) are open to modification in the light of subsequent history and experience. It is interesting to observe that transmission itself involves interpretation, and that both interpretation and development are part of a concept of tradition that is quite dynamic.

We see this in Paul's reflections on the question of divorce and remarriage. Paul appeals to what Jesus said on the subject (1 Cor 7:10-11), and then applies his own interpretation of this principle to a situation that Jesus did not address, marriage between a believer and an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:12). Finally, concerning the unmarried he gives counsel "as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy" (1 Cor 7:25). Jesus apparently did not have to deal with the situation of marriage between people of different faith traditions, or people without any such tradition, so Paul makes an interpretation of the apostolic account of the Master's teaching, and then makes his own prudential judgment about the unmarried in the light of the imminent expectation of the

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[7] Stanley B. Marrow, *Paul: His Letters and His Theology—An Introduction to Paul's Epistles* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 145.

[8] Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, s.v. "Pauline Theology" by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, 82:16-20.

[9] The opening verses of the letter to the Romans explicate the relationship between the "gospel of God" and that of his Son (Rom 1:1-4) which is reckoned to be one of the oldest creedal formulas we have in the New Testament (Stanley B. Marrow, *Paul: His Letters and His Theology—An Introduction to Paul's Epistles*, 71-72).

parousia.[10] Tradition is not fixed and immutable, but is supplemented, reinforced, and developed as it is passed along. For Paul, the experience of apostolic transmission is understood within the richer awareness of the fact "that *the Lord himself* effects everything in his Church."[11]

In the gospels, Jesus is critical of Pharisaic tradition (*paradôsis*) which he sees as the usurpation of the "commandments of God" by mere human precepts (Mt 15:1-9; Mk 7:1-13). The polemics of the developing Christian tradition doubtless intensified the memory of his criticism, but emphasize his commitment to the larger Tradition enshrined in the Law. The texts portray him as charging his disciples to bring others to know the God he has revealed to them, and in this task the Holy Spirit will guide (Jn 14:26), sustain and mediate God's continuing revelation to them as they bear witness to the Lord (Mt 28:19-20).

The Spirit of Jesus (Lk 24:48-49; Acts 1:8) empowers the early disciples, and their witness brings others into the fellowship of faith (1 Jn 1:1-3) which is a communion with Jesus who has revealed the Father to his followers. In the post-resurrection/Pentecost era, the disciples continue to reflect retroactively on the significance of their experience of the Lord (Jn 2:19-22; 12:16). The reception of Tradition is, however, not merely the transmission of original revelation, but an active process which is historically mediated and continues to be revelatory.

> Tradition involves not merely a recollection, but also a deepening of insight; it is preserved not merely in the mind, but also in the "heart," which meditates lovingly on what it holds fast (cf. Lk 2:19, 51); it involves not merely a fidelity of memory, but also a fidelity of living, vital adherence. [12]

For the early church, there was little distinction between scripture and tradition, and the emphasis was on continuity with the source which was read within the tradition of the apostles. Tradition was not seen as a source apart from scripture (which at this stage was the corpus of the Old Testament), but as a way of handing on the truth of the faith, and a source of liturgical and disciplinary practices that, even if not attested to by scripture, were integrally bound up with the life of the nascent Church.

1 A] <u>Tradition in the post-scriptural age</u>

The Pauline sense of the unity of Tradition and scripture was rooted in the belief that there was "only one true *auctor,* one absolute *auctoritas* God."[13] This principle led to a rather generous extension of "inspiration" to a variety of post-apostolic texts,[14] and this would, in part, condition the Reformation disputes about Scripture and Tradition.

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[10] Robert M. Grant, "The Creation of Christian Tradition," in *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition: Essay by Robert M. Grant, Robert E. McNally and George H. Tavard,* ed. Joseph F. Kelly (Notre Dame: Indiana: Fides Publishers, 1976), 4.

[11] Yves M.-J Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, 12.

[12] Ibid., 15.

[13] Ibid., 90.

[14] Ibid., 93. According to Congar, Thomas Aquinas reacted against this tendency and reserved the terms *revelare, revelation,* and *inspiration* to biblical revelation and scriptural inspiration. He also distinguished between the *auctoritas* due to scripture and that appropriate to the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. The common tendency today is to refer to the difference as "apostolic" and "post-apostolic" or "foundational" and "dependent revelation."

The rise of Gnostic groups, and continuing concern for the preservation of orthodoxy, led almost inevitably to appeals to apostolic Tradition and the right to authoritative interpretation. Irenaeus is the first written source in a long line of significant figures who appeal to a principle which he calls the "rule of faith," or the "tradition of the truth"[15] Augustine will appeal to something similar which he calls the "rule of truth."[16] Tertullian, in a curious treatise on the *Veiling of Virgins*, also appeals to the "rule of faith" [17] revealed in Christ and operative through the power of the Spirit.

These appeals to the *regula fidei / regula veritatis* make us aware of the problem of heterodoxy, but they do not give us substantive guidance in how to determine the truth. Vincent of Lerins, in the famous Lerentian Canon, attempts such a hermeneutic when he appeals to "that which has been believed, everywhere, always, by all."[18] This classic appeal to universality, and antiquity and consensus did not offer, as Newman remarks, "any satisfactory result. The solution it offers is as difficult as the original problem."[19] "Belief" begged the question for it did not establish consonance with the Gospel. Clearly, it was impossible to prove that any doctrine had been believed "everywhere" and "always" otherwise the appeal to a "rule of faith / truth" would never have arisen. The number of persons holding an idea does not prove anything beyond the fact that a large number of persons believe something to be true. Such criteria were not only difficult to apply, but they seemed to leave little room for the development of doctrine over time and in dialogue with new people and circumstances. They also implied a "classical consciousness" that employed a flat sense of history, and tended to make any teaching static and immutable rather than dynamic and life-giving.

In an effort to resolve the Trinitarian and Christological debates, the Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451) developed creeds which they saw as being fundamental for the faithful transmission of doctrine. Chalcedon even forbade the making of new creeds or the addition of new articles to them.[20] This patristic period, in seeking to grasp the essence of Christian belief, became normative for later times, and laid the basis for the split between the Latin and Greek Churches "as each side interpreted the normative tradition in the light of what it knew best in the patristic era."[21] This difference in interpretation laid the basis for the definitive split in 1054, and also strengthened the role of Roman *magisterium* as the definitive interpreter of authentic tradition.

The bitterness between East and West served as a prelude to the acrimony that developed as the Council of Trent responded to the Protestant appeal to the absolute authority of scripture. The

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[15] Irenaeus, *Adversus Haerases* 3:4.1. Early Church Fathers Protestant Edition, [CD-ROM] (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997]

[16] Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 3.2.2. Early Church Fathers Protestant Edition, [CD-ROM] (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997]

[17] Tertullian, *De Virgine Vel* 1.1. Early Church Fathers Protestant Edition, [CD-ROM] (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997]

[18] Vincent of Lerins, *Commitorium* 2.6. Early Church Fathers Protestant Edition, [CD-ROM] (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997]

[19] John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* [Harmondsworth, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974, c1973], 88.

[20] George H. Tavard, Tradition," in Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane eds. *The New Dictionary of Theology,* 1038.

[21] Ibid.

Council proclaimed that there was something more fundamental than scripture and tradition, and that was the "Gospel"[22] understood as "the source of all saving truth and moral conduct."[23] This Gospel is:

> contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down even to us,…transmitted as it were from hand to hand, [the Council] following the example of the Orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with equal piety and reverence all the books both of the Old and New Testaments, since one God is the author of both, and also the traditions themselves, those that appertain both to faith and to morals, as having been dictated either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Spirit and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession."[24]

The Council spoke exclusively of apostolic tradition, deferring any judgement on ecclesiastical traditions, and affirmed "the existence, not of two parallel and partial sources, but of two ways or two forms by which the one source of the Gospel is communicated to us in all purity and plenitude, from Jesus Christ onward."[25] Regretfully, post-Tridentine theology generally failed to preserve this stress on the one source and spoke instead of scripture and tradition as two complementary principles while invoking the latter to support the statements of the Roman magisterium.[26] Opposition between those who appealed to Tradition and those who appealed to Scripture hardened into inflexible positions over the next few centuries.

Vatican I (*Dei Filius*, April 24, 1870) did little more than reiterate the relationship of scripture and tradition that had been articulated in Trent. Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Providentissimus Deus* (November 18, 1893)—the Catholic Church's first response to the questions raised by modern biblical criticism—emphasised that God was the author of the sacred books and of the doctrine handed down by the church. As the author of both, God could not be self-contradictory, so there could be no conflict between scripture and tradition. Any potential impact of this document was negated by the Modernist crisis which stifled any theological initiative that attempted to deal with the intellectual challenges of the modern world.

In 1943, the publication of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* gave formal approval for Catholic Biblical scholars to participate in the renewal of biblical studies using the methodologies of textual criticism and historical critical methodologies. However, it would not be until the 1960's that the long standing differences about the respective authorities of Scripture and Tradition began to be resolved in two large fora: the World Council of Churches meeting in Montreal in 1963, and the Second Vatican Council in Rome from 1962-65.

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[22] According to Congar, this meant not the four gospels but "a certain salvific *content:* especially the content relating to the saving event of Christ"(*Tradition and Traditions*, 159) which was received through the scripture and traditions.

[23] Henricus Denzinger and Adolfus Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, n. 1501.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 166.

[26] Ibid., 164.

1 B] <u>Rapprochment</u>

The document produced by the World Council of Churches in 1963 entitled *Scripture, Tradition and Traditions* was the fruit of the work of a Theological Commission on "Tradition and Traditions" established by the Third World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund in 1952. The mandate given to the Commission was "to explore more deeply the resources to be found in that common history we have as Christians and which we have discovered to be longer, larger and richer than any of our separate histories."[27]

One of the fruitful distinctions contained in the report concerned the different meanings of the word *tradition*:

> We speak of the *Tradition* (with a capital "T"), *tradition* (with a small "t") and *traditions*. By the *Tradition* is meant the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church. By *tradition* is meant the traditionary process. The term *traditions* is used in two senses to indicate both the diversity of forms of expression and also what we call confessional traditions, for instance the Lutheran tradition or the Reformed tradition. In the latter part of our report the word appears in a further sense when we speak of cultural traditions.[28]

In a fruitful engagement with the post-Reformation disputes over Tradition and Scripture, the document affirms that we all live in a tradition that can be traced back to the Lord and has its roots in the Old Testament, and that "we are all indebted to that tradition inasmuch as we have received the revealed truth, the Gospel, through its being transmitted from one generation to another."[29] It continues by stating that what is transmitted in the process is the Christian faith, "not only as a sum of tenets, but as a living reality transmitted through the operation of the Holy Spirit."[30] This Tradition is embodied in traditions which are distinct but connected to the Tradition.

Within this positive affirmation of the relationship between Tradition and Scripture there is also recognition of the need for criteria to discern what is of the Spirit and what is mere human tradition. Even the historical emergence of the canon as an indispensable criterion did not resolve tensions because the Scriptures need to be interpreted in changing times. This in turn raised, for the Council the need for a hermeneutical principle that would guide the ability to distinguish valid and invalid interpretations. The Council further recognised that while the traditions hold Scripture in common they have historically been guided by different hermeneutical principles in the interpretation of the text. They concluded by appealing for each church to re-examine its own particular tradition and for a common quest among the churches to safeguard the Word of God from "subjective or arbitrary exegesis."[31]

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[27] World Council of Churches, *Scripture, Tradition and Traditions*, page 19 preamble,
[28] Ibid., #39.
[29] Ibid., #45.
[30] Ibid., #46.
[31] Ibid., #55.

In a beautiful turn of phrase, the document affirms that "the tradition of the Church is not an object which we possess, but a reality by which we are possessed."[32] This reality has both historical and eschatological dimensions so we are called, not only to be a people living out of a history, but a people looking forward to the fullness which will be revealed. This tensive reality invites us not only to be faithful to recalling, appropriating and transmitting the once for all event of Christ's incarnation, life, death and resurrection, but also to live in eager expectation of his coming in glory.[33] The document then goes on to speak of the encounter of the Tradition with new peoples and cultures asserting that "the more the Tradition is expressed in the varying terms of particular cultures, the more will its universal character be fully revealed. It is only 'with all the Saints' that we come to know the fullness of Christ's love and glory (Eph 3:18-19).[34]

The Vatican Council having begun prior to the Montreal continued after that meeting concluded and on November 18, 1965 issued *Dei Verbum* which while focussing on revelation spoke to the issue of the relationship of scripture and tradition. In accord with the approach of Trent, *Dei Verbum* emphasised that scripture and tradition flow from the same wellspring and "make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God which is entrusted to his Church."[35] However, it resituated the Reformation debate by placing both scripture and tradition in the context of revelation which it presented as the self-disclosure of God in Christ and an invitation to dialogue and communion.[36]

In *Dei Verbum,* revelation is not propositional but Christocentric. Jesus "speaks the words of God" (Jn 3:34), and "accomplishes the saving work which the Father gave him to do (cf. Jn 5:36; 17:4),"[37] The appropriate response to Jesus as the Word of God is the "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5; 16:26; 2 Cor 10:5-6) which is a free commitment of the whole person, in response to the gift of God, made with the help of the Holy Spirit.[38] Revelation as communication in both word and deed is wider than the biblical record (Jn 21:25), and Tradition cannot be reduced to a handing on of a series of doctrines and practices.

> Tradition is the ongoing witness to the Christ-event expressed in language and other aspects of the Church's life. It is virtually identical with the faithful continuity of church life through history in response to God's self-disclosure and in handing on the record or objectification of that self-disclosure, the Christian scriptures.[39]

The first sentence of chapter two of *Dei Verbum* reminds us that God has "graciously arranged that the things he once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should remain in their entirety, throughout the ages, and be transmitted to all generation."[40] This transmission, empowered by

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[32] Ibid., #56.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid, #69.

[35] Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed. *Dei Verbum* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans, 1987), #9.

[36] *Dei Verbum,* #2, 3.

[37] *Dei Verbum,* #4.

[38] *Dei Verbum* #5.

[39] John R. Donahue, "Scripture: A Roman Catholic Perspective," *Review and Expositor* LXXIX.2 (Spring, 1982): 235.

[40] *Dei Verbum,* #7.

the Lord and under the prompting of the Spirit was effected by the apostles whose message was eventually committed to writing[41] and has been preserved by the successors of the apostles. Tradition, and the existence of the Church, are historically prior to the existence of scripture (i.e., the New Testament). However, the document states clearly that there is a mutually conditioning relationship between the two. It is through Tradition that the canon of scripture is known to the Church, but scripture is that place where God continues to speak to those who respond in faith. The Council accords priority to the Word of God, but understands this Word to be present both as written and in the form of Tradition.[42] The magisterium is its trustee and interpreter but remains the servant of the Word.

The Council document is a compromise between a variety of positions so it does not resolve all the debates about scripture and Tradition. Its value is in its focus on revelation, its recognition that the Word of God cannot be contained by either text or tradition, and its awareness that the magisterium under the guidance of the Spirit is the servant of the Word.

While the Council excluded certain extremist positions of the debate, and affirmed the privileged role of the sacred scriptures in mediating God's revelation it also formally connected the idea of Tradition and progress in doctrine. "The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on."[43] The Word of God is revealed both through the scriptures and through the ongoing, reflective experience of the Christian community which is graced by the presence of the Spirit (John 14:26; 16:13).

It seems extraordinary that after centuries of bitterness and polarisation over the respective roles of Scripture and Tradition the divide should dissolve within a few short years. Scholars from different ecclesial perspectives were able to turn their attention to more fruitful areas of consideration such as the role of interpretation, and criteria for assessing the validity and authenticity of an interpretation. In these pursuits, they were also assisted by recognition of the transition from a classical consciousness into a gradually evolving historical consciousness that has direct import for biblical studies and for an understanding of tradition.

2] <u>Tradition and historical consciousness</u>

We are increasingly aware that we are participants in history, and we participate as changing historical subjects. This means that our relationship with the past has a dynamic character, for the past never simply "was," but always "is" part of our expanding consciousness. History is not a collection of fixed objects which can be cognitively delivered to the present, for we are "historical microsystems carried by and participating in an historical macrosystem (itself multisystemed) from which we are distinguished by a thoroughly permeable boundary."[44]

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[41] *Dei Verbum*, #7.
[42] Sandra M. Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," *Theological Studies* 39 (1979): 719-736.
[43] *Dei Verbum* #8. The *locus classicus* for the idea of the development of doctrine is John Henry Newman's *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*.
[44] Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991/1999), 67.

The naïve assumption of "historicism" was that we could insert ourselves into the spirit of the past age, and think with its ideas and thoughts as we advanced toward objective knowledge of their situation. This approach generally resulted in what has been termed "an imaginative reconstruction of our own present concerns."[45] It also offered a rather romantic portrait of the historian as a dispassionate, unprejudiced observer akin to the stance affected by those who work in the natural sciences. The various approaches of "historicism" generally failed to acknowledge that we are the subjects of tradition in which we participate through our participation in history, and cannot stand fully outside its formative power. They failed to recognize that there are no purely neutral positions, and to accept that everyone is influenced by particular prejudices which have shaped us, are constitutive of the historicity of our being,[46] and influence the manner of our inquiry into any of the monuments of tradition.

> If we are trying to understand a historical phenomenon from the historical distance that is characteristic of our hermeneutical situation, we are always affected by history. It determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation....[47]

To participate in the affects of history, and also to be brought into being by the "effects" of history is to have what Gadamer called an "historically effected consciousness."[48] Understanding is only possible because we are part of the historical continuum which is shared by both the interpreter and the phenomenon that is under scrutiny.[49]

"Consciousness of being affected by history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation."[50] Every situation, including our own, has a limited horizon, and we cannot acquire understanding of another period of history by imaginatively transporting ourselves into that situation. This would lead to a presumptive and imperialistic reading of the situation through a failure to recognise that our own horizon is shaped by the moving horizon out of which human life emerges. "Understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves,"[51] and this fusion has a certain tension that is productive of transformation in understanding, but remains partial and perspectival because of the limitations inherent in any horizon.[52]

The fusion of the horizons of "past" and "present" is also modified by the fact that we live into an anticipated future. This future dimension of tradition is apparent when we acknowledge that the human person is a creative participant in history and always has a particular interest in mind when examining the collective memory that is tradition.

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[45] Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 140.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* Second Revised ed. Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 300.
[48] Ibid., 340-379.
[49] Kurt Mueller-Vollmer ed., *The Hermeneutics Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 256.
[50] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301.
[51] Ibid., 306.
[52] Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell, 1987), 19.

> The past comes to light as tradition through the action of contemporary living reflection which cannot avoid being contextual and conditioned by its time. Tradition exists only as a contemporary interpretation of the past in the light of an expected future.[53]

When speaking of tradition, we are not speaking of history as a whole, but rather of the "selection, interpretation, valuing, appropriation and deliberate transmission to future members of the particular group with which the individual or community is involved."[54] An individual or a community chooses what it will preserve from a particular history as tradition, and transmits what it values to the next generation by means of ritual, repetition, narration, celebration, and the myriad ways we have developed for carrying past experiences into the present. Language, written and spoken, becomes the medium of tradition which is the "primary form and norm of effective historical consciousness."[55]

2 A] <u>Tradition as Plural and Contextual</u>

Many voices speak to us out of the tradition, and the recognition of this reality makes interpretation of tradition a complex task. The ancient texts, which are one source of tradition, have been subjected to a variety of interpretations throughout history, and the interpretation of any text, symbol or other source of tradition requires an appreciation of the historical reception of the tradition. A relatively adequate interpretation means that we have to dialogue with the monument of tradition, and the plural interpretations that have arisen in the course of historical reception.[56] "No classic text comes to us without the plural and ambiguous history of effects of its own production and its former reception."[57]

The monuments of tradition are also framed in the language patterns of a particular cultural context. The patterns are generally related to the philosophic system or world-view dominant in that particular age. To adequately understand and interpret the classic texts means that one has to move through the subject matter of the text into dialogue with the questions that gave rise to the text—questions which transcend any culturally conditioned expression.[58]

The positive value of this contextual plurality is an awareness that tradition is more varied that we would sometimes like to allow. The awareness of a diachronic variety of interpretation reminds us that the texts have an excess of meaning. Thus, the interpreter must resist both routine and definitive interpretations of a text.[59] An attitude of humility enables us to resist any facile absolutization of the authority of a particular tradition.

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[53] George H. Tavard, "Tradition in Theology: A Problematic Approach," in *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition: Essays by Robert M. Grant, Robert E. McNally and George H. Tavard* ed. Joseph F. Kelly, 84-104. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides Publishers, 1976), 92.

[54] Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 70.

[55] Ibid., 71.

[56] It is important not only to pursue a diachronic history of interpretation, but also to be aware of synchronic interpretations from other belief traditions.

[57] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 69.

[58] Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 77.

[59] Ibid., 12.

Before moving on with the remainder of the paper it is perhaps helpful to summarise the central elements that have emerged from this brief investigation of the question, *what is tradition*?

In its most foundational sense, Tradition is the Spirit which Jesus handed over to his disciples to accomplish the salvific work he had been sent to do. In its most common meaning, it is the content of the historical consciousness that the church transmits from age to age. However, to speak of "content" is in some ways deceptive, for tradition is not an inert object, but a living experience that is not only transmitted, but is creatively and critically appropriated through its interaction with the "subjects" of tradition in the existential present. The content of tradition can be distinguished as "apostolic" and "post apostolic" or foundational and dependent revelation. Apostolic revelation has a normative value because it is the witness of those who participated in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Post apostolic tradition is founded on this original witness, and seeks to deepen and develop its meaning throughout history. None of us stands outside of history for we have an historically effected consciousness which means that we are participants in history and that same history affects who we are and who we are becoming.

Tradition is transmitted and developed in a variety of ways including liturgical ritual, devotional life, literature, religious education and the teaching of the Church. Tradition must also be understood as plural and contextual because of the many voices and the variety of philosophical and theological frameworks that speak to us out of a history of interpretation of any monument of the Tradition.

3] <u>A Hermeneutics of Tradition</u>

When we speak of tradition we are speaking not only of the ongoing influence of tradition, but also of those monuments of the tradition that have been termed "classics" because of their continuing power to be revelatory. Tradition remains a larger reality than the classic written texts, but these historical monuments occupy a significant place in the development of tradition and have become the central focus of any analysis of the content of tradition. The classics are those texts "that bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation." [60]

Hermeneutics is concerned with the explanation, understanding and interpretation of these classic texts which are viewed, not as having a fixed and stable content, but as mediating meaning.[61] The goal of the interpreter in conversation with the text is to grasp the truth about the subject-matter to which the text does not constitute a permanent answer, but which calls into play the historically structured consciousness of the interpreter who seeks to appropriate not only what the text meant but also what it might mean for the present. An effective hermeneutics of tradition must address the issues of text, pre-judgement, truth, appropriation and the criteria that validate an interpretation.

3 A] <u>The text as mediating meaning</u>

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[60] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, 12. See also, David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism,* 14, 108.
[61] Sandra M. Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," 730.

It has become common to utilise Paul Ricoeur's distinctions between the world behind the text, the world of the text and the world in front of the text. These distinctions are fruitful because they remind us of the demands that any classic of the tradition makes on the interpreter. The world of the text invites us to a literary analysis of the material contained in the work, and through it we have an entrée into the world behind the text to investigate the context that gave rise to a particular work. Meaning, however, is always in front of the text, which projects a world that ultimately challenges our self understanding, and concerns what Gadamer[62] has called application and Ricouer appropriation.[63]

One of the most obvious things about a text is that it is first and foremost language, and several characteristics of language are relevant to any theory of textuality. First, language as a medium of expression both reveals and conceals. No verbal expression has the ability to convey a univocal meaning, since language is more conative than denotative, and various combinations of language and circumstances of interpretation may well resulting variant interpretations. The connotative meaning is even more apparent when words are used in conjunction with other words to form larger units of meaning, and there is a concomitant recognition that there is no such thing as a "context-free linguistic meaning."[64] Second, language is the primary symbolic activity of the human person. The very symbolic nature of language:

> Means that language is always by nature ambiguous and therefore susceptible to misrepresentation. Furthermore, language as symbolic is transformative, challenging to the hearer to engage in that which is brought forth in word and to be changed by that encounter.[65]

Third language is fundamentally metaphoric, and operates to tease the mind into new ways of thinking, into making new associations and connections, into exceeding the denotative meaning, and bringing us to encounter reality at the deepest of levels.

These three general characteristics of language remind us that the interpretation of any text is never a simple matter, for when language becomes discourse it does not foreclose meaning but discloses it in ways that do not become automatized. Having reviewed these general characteristics of language let us to the text as a mediator of meaning.

A text gives discourse a certain fixation by writing. But as the structured product of the dialectic of speaking and writing, it is both present to us and distant from us. Gadamer's notion of "historically effected consciousness" reminds us that a text is not an object presented to our subjectivity for interpretation, but involves a projection of meaning that is not strictly contained in the text itself. However, to oppose alienating distanciation and belonging, as Gadamer does in *Truth and Method is*:

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[62] Hang-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 307.

[63] Paul Ricoeur, "What is a Text? Explanation and understanding," in *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences—Essays on language, action and interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 158.

[64] Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 101.

[65] Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text…*139.

> Much more than a particular case of intersubjective communication: it is the paradigm of distanciation in communication. As such, it displays a fundamental characteristic of the very historicity of human experience, namely that it is communication in and through distance.[66]

It is reading that brings the written text into a new proximity and overcomes the alienation of distanciation while preserving cultural distance, the otherness of the text, and at the same time making it one's own. This dialectical struggle between distanciation and appropriation is the very essence of interpretation,[67] and interpretation becomes an explanation of the type of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text.[68]

3 B] <u>Pre-judgement</u>

In most disciplines, it is now a datum that there is no presuppositionless perspective in approaching a text. Heidegger pointed out that before we begin to interpret a text, or understand the meaning of an object, we have already placed it within a certain context, approached it from a certain perspective, and conceived of it in a particular way.[69] Gadamer develops Heidegger's account of the forestructure of understanding by rehabilitating the notion of "prejudice" which had fallen into disrepute during the Enlightenment's resolute opposition of reason and method against tradition and authority.[70] He maintains that reason cannot be elevated to the status of an objective authority, for it too is formed by prejudice, and to maintain a prejudice against prejudice is itself a prejudice, and a failure to recognise that our prejudices constitute the historical reality of our being.[71] The prejudice against prejudice is, for him, a failure to realize that the fore-structure of understanding is always projected as a person comes to terms with a monument of tradition, but the anticipatory projection is continually revised as one encounters the "things themselves."[72] The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias "so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's fore-meanings."[73]

Does this mean that all understanding is merely subjective interpretation? For Gadamer, the answer is an emphatic no! "The issues we bring to the process of interpretation are not our preoccupation alone but rather refer to issues and concerns that have developed within the historical tradition to which we belong."[74] This is in accord with Gadamer's notion of "effective

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[66] Paul Ricoeur, "The hermeneutical function of distanciation," in *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*....131.

[67] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpetation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 43-44.

[68] Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical function of distanciation," 141

[69] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. By John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 191.

[70] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 277-278.

[71] Ibid., 276-277.

[72] Ibid., 267.

[73] Ibid., 269.

[74] Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell, 1987), 78

history," which means that whether we accept or reject elements of the tradition our very being is conditioned by it, and this is what constrains any purely "subjective" interpretation.

How then does one assess the adequacy of our prejudices in the light of the "things themselves," given the fact that our understanding is determined by our "effective history?" In answering this question, Gadamer returns to Heidegger's notion of the hermeneutic circle as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our interpretation proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition, a commonality that is continually being formed in our relationship to tradition. The circle is not a methodological one, but rather "describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding."[75] Understanding is further guided by what Gadamer calls, the "fore-conception of completeness" which is the presumption that the text forms a coherent unit of meaning. This presumption becomes the standard for accepting or rejecting individual interpretations of parts of the text. This granting of a certain normative authority to the text allows us to test the adequacy of our views about the text, and the subject-matter of which it speaks, but leaves open the issue of the truth of the interpretation.

3 C] __The problematic of truth__

The issue of truth has to be addressed so that we can discover whether all interpretations are merely relative or subjective, and whether there is a way to adjudicate the more adequate from the less adequate and the fallacious.

As a means of moving between the shoals of differing interpretations, Gadamer emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing two forms of understanding: "the understanding of truth-content and the understanding of intentions."[76] The former requires an insight into the subject-matter, and the questions behind the subject-matter of the text while the latter involves an understanding of the conditions that led to a particular formulation by a given author.[77]Understanding in the first sense means understanding the "truth" of something, while understanding in the latter sense is more reconstructive and requires an understanding of the motives behind a given claim or action. Gadamer is most interested in the substantive understanding of truth gained through insight into the subject-matter, and turns to the second form of understanding only when attempts to achieve an understanding of truth fail.[78]

> The purpose of interpretation is to come closer to the truth of the subject by letting the text challenge our preconceptions and by questioning the text from our perspective so that it yields more, in the light of our shared tradition, than it could when originally composed.[79]

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[75] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 293.

[76] Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 7.

[77] For Gadamer, a knowledge of the conditions is necessary when attempts to achieve a substantive understanding of truth fail. This may well be an overstatement, for although we seek the truth of a claim, we are also interested in the conditions that give rise to this claim (See, Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason,* 7-8).

[78] Ibid., 8.

[79] Sandra M. Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture," 36

Gadamer rejects the subject-object dichotomy that claims truth belongs to subjectivity,[80] and claims that truth has instead the character of an event that discloses itself as we are caught up conversation with the subject-matter of a text. His familiar analogy of art as play, which he applies to the reading of a text, helps us to understand the meaning of this claim.

Games and works of art have an essential priority over those that experience or play them. In entering into them, players enter a new environment, put aside their own concerns and submit to the authority of the game.[81] "The players are not the subjects of play; instead play reaches presentation (*Darstellung*) through the players."[82] The subject of play is not the subjectivity of the individual, but the play itself in which there is a constant to and fro movement. Playing a game means entering into its rules and procedures which means that the game has a priority over the players. It exercises its authority over them--"all playing is a being-played."[83] A game exists in being played, and its goals exercise an authority over the players who submit to its rules; on the other hand, the game exists only through the participation of the players who through it come to "self-presentation."[84]

Gadamer derives two consequences from this analysis of play. First, the game, work of art, or text only has a concrete existence in being played, viewed or read. Second, the phenomenon that comes to concrete existence in enactment is capable of changing. A game is rarely played the same way twice, and by extension the work of art or the text "remain self-identical while constantly changing."[85]

All presentation is potentially a representation for someone, and this reaches its apogee in the theater and religious ritual where the play has as its *raison d'étre* presentation for an audience. Presentation "is the mode of being of the work of art."[86] Gadamer calls this situation where the game appears to an audience as a self-contained whole a "transformation into structure."[87]The play as structure achieves a certain autonomy and can be disassociated from the creator and from the participants, but it is realized only through the performance of the players for an audience. In Gadamer's analysis, what the audience experiences is a claim to truth which is not in the play itself, or merely in the subjectivity of the audience, but in the in-between that comes into being through performance.

Artistic representation releases subject-matter from its contingency, and as an audience is drawn into it through performance it is opened to the possibility of transformation.

> What is understood in the experience of art is not simply or primarily the author's vision but the validity of the claim the work makes, not what the artist sees but how the content of the work may require its spectators to confront and change their lives.[88]

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80 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 101-102.
81 Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 48.
82 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 103.
83 Ibid., 106.
84 Ibid., 108.
85 Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 51.
86 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 115
87 Ibid., 110.
88 Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 62.

Gadamer's notion of the event character[89] of truth proves to be troubling for those who hold to a theory of "correspondence" which seeks an adequation of any assertion and the reality of which it speaks. The medieval definition, "truth is the adequation of things and the intellect" (*veritatis est adequatio rei et intellectus*), adopted by the scholastics has become a succinct summary of the classic position.[90] The correspondence approach is valid to the extent that any descriptive proposition accords with a feature of the truth claim, but it is inadequate because fundamentally it neglects the realization that a "correspondence between an assertion and a state of affairs is not a correspondence between two simple entities, but entails interpretations of both factual and the assertional."[91]

Linguistic theory has further developed the correspondence theory, and has suggested that "utterances relate to the realm of language, external reality, internal reality and normative social reality"[92] and should meet the criteria of intelligibility and comprehensibility. Utterances relate to external reality about which true or false statements are made, to internal reality as an expression of individual experience, and take place in the social conventions of language in a society of shared values and norms.[93] In the act of communication one of two distinct levels will dominate, either the level of inter-subjectivity or the level of propositional content. The value of this suggestion is that the truth claim of a statement does not necessarily depend on rational verification of the content of the proposition, but on the commitment of the receiver of the communication to the relationship with the other. This proposal, as it has been formulated by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, is not a return to subjective interpretations, but in the theological context an appeal to the history of reception of the original proclamation.[94] Gadamer has been strongly criticized for failing to take into account the history of reception of a classic thereby neglecting its diachronic character and also its convention breaking impact on the original audience. However, Gadamer has sought to address this diachronic component through his notion of "effective historical consciousness" which incorporates the history of reception into the horizon of the interpreter.

Gadamer's approach is also troubling to those who hold to a notion of truth as "coherence." This means that a statement is evaluated as true or false when it coheres or fails to cohere with a series of other statements or a comprehensive account of reality. The problem is that there is no way of ascertaining whether there are other systems within which such congruence might occur, and that

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[89] David Tracy speaks of the event character of understanding by saying that "every event of understanding, in order to produce a new interpretation, mediates between our past experience and the understanding embodied in our linguistic tradition and the present event of understanding occasioned by a fidelity to the logic of the question in the back and forth movement of the conversation" (David Tracy, *The Analogical imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism,* 101).

[90] This classic definition is found in Thomas Aquinas who attributed it to the ninth-century Jewish Neoplatonist Isaac Israeli. The "correspondence" theory appears to have originated in Plato's *Sophist* and is then further developed by Aristotle. See, Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., & The Free Press, 1967) s.v. "Correspondence Theory of Truth" by A. N. Prior.

[91] Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 273.

[92] Ibid., 115.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid., 271-284.

although coherence gives the criterion of truth it does not tell us much about the meaning of truth.[95]

The American pragmatic tradition represented by Charles S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey in response to Cartesian subjectivism developed a theory of truth that stressed its public, objective and practical character. Peirce stressed the "absolute fixity" of truth as it emerged from scientific method, but James proposed a more pragmatic and individualistic criterion when he equated the true and the expedient. Dewey returned to Peirce's experimentalism and proposed that truth is what happens when an idea becomes a warranted assertion.[96]The problem with such approaches is that we are back in the difficulties that faces theories of coherence, namely, that while a statement may be verified within a particular frame of reference we have no way of ascertaining the validity of the frame of reference.

The encounter with the monuments of tradition is an ongoing pursuit of truth, but truth is found not in the subjectivity of the interpreter or in the objectivity of the text, but in the "fusion of horizons" of text and interpreter. There is no appeal to an external norm of truth found outside the encounter, and the subjectivization of truth is obviated by "effective historical consciousness" which has both diachronic and a synchronic frames of reference. One must acknowledge the history of reception, as well as find one's interpretation validated by the appropriate community of reference to which one belongs.[97]

Does this not lead to conformity to the authority of the text? As expected, Gadamer's answer is negative, or he would be denying any evolution in human understanding, and negating the value of present-day experience as a source of authority in our lives. The person seeking to understand shares with the traditionary text a bond with the subject-matter of which the text speaks, but temporal distance introduces both a strangeness and a familiarity between the historically distanciated object and belonging to a tradition. It is here in the "in-between," as we saw in his analysis of play, that Gadamer finds the true locus of the hermeneutical endeavor.[98] Truth is revealed through participation, and is the goal of interpretation, but it resides neither in the subject or the object and is disclosed in the event of encounter with the monument of tradition. Truth does not have a static character, but is ever changing through the ongoing participative dialogue with the text.

3 D] **Application / appropriation.**

The interpreter is not engaged in an attempt to understand the mind and intent of the original author (*mens auctoris*), for the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. It is true that the text belongs to the tradition, but it is co-determined also "by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history."[99]The temporal distance between the

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[95] Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* s.v. "Coherence Theory of Truth," by Alan R. White.
[96] Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Pragmatic Theory of Truth," by Gertrude Ezorsky
[97] David Tracy in *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, 1-46, suggests that there are three publics who will be significant in assessing the validity of one's interpretation: society, the academy and the church.
[98] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 295.
[99] Ibid., 296.

interpreter and the text, and the engagement in the subject-matter of the text allows us to fore-ground our prejudices and to begin to distinguish false and valid prejudices.

If we assume the truth of a monument of tradition, is there any way that we can reject the truth of what we have assumed? As a way of answering the objection, Gadamer turns to Aristotle's analysis of ethical knowledge. Ethical and technical knowledge differ with regard to the relation of knowledge to its application. Both forms of knowledge require practice, but technical knowledge requires the consistent enactment of a particular skill in a variety of situations while ethical knowledge concerns the application of general norms of conduct in a variety of situations. The concrete situation has far more import for ethical knowledge, for the situation affects the norm.

> What is right, for example, cannot be fully determined independently of the situation that requires a right action from me, whereas the eidos of what a craftsman wants to make is fully determined by the use for which it is intended.[100]

The second contrast proposed is that "ethical knowledge has no particular end but pertains to right living in general, whereas all technical knowledge is particular and serves particular ends."[101] In ethical knowledge, there is a reciprocal relationship between means and ends, for the end, right living, does not have a specific content and the means chosen affect what one understands right living to be.

The third contrast is that ethical knowledge concerns itself with the opinions of others while technical knowledge is concerned with the disinterested application of *techne*. We have a "sympathy" for others as they seek to live rightly. We want what is good for the other, not simply what is good for ourselves, and we are therefore open to differences in experience and situation.[102]

Gadamer sees in the preceding analysis of ethical knowledge a model of the problems of hermeneutics. Application is not a consequence of understanding but codetermines it from the beginning, and the understanding of a particular monument of tradition is an understanding that is always related to the particular situation of the interpreter.[103] Hermeneutic understanding like ethical knowledge is always situated, contextual and relational. One's understanding will always go beyond that of the original document, for the interpreter has to be concerned with possible applications of which the original author was unaware. Hermeneutic understanding assumes the truth of that which it interprets, but modifies it in the process of interpretation.

Gadamer's primary description of the process of interpretation is that of conversation or dialogue.[104] A genuine conversation is one that is concerned entirely with the subject-matter (*die Sache*) and at arriving at the truth with regard to it. One is not concerned with relating the opinion of the other to the speaker, but to our own opinions and views. Two presuppositions are

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[100] Ibid., 317.
[101] Ibid., 320-321
[102] Ibid., 322-324. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Truth and Reason*, 94.
[103] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 324.
[104] Ibid., 367-369, 383-389.

critical in this regard: an awareness that we do not know, an openness to the possible truth of other views.[105] The process of Socratic conversation (Gadamer's model) conducted through the mediation of language does not lead to the dominance of one viewpoint over the other, but an advance in the position of each interlocutor.

> What emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors' subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know.[106]

Gadamer argues that the kind of transformed understanding that is the result of real conversation is also the hallmark of hermeneutics--"entering into dialogue with the text."[107] The interpretation of a monument of tradition seeks to determine the truth of the subject-matter at issue by taking seriously the text and defining and testing one's prejudices against the claims of the text so as to arrive at a transformed understanding of the subject-matter. "Understanding thus represents a new unity of judgement or, as Gadamer puts the point, understanding (*Verstehen*) is equivalent to reaching an understanding or consensus (*Verstandigüng*)."[108]

The hermeneutic situation in regard to the monuments of tradition is, as we have already seen in Ricoeur, not exactly the same as a conversation between two people. Texts are "enduringly fixed expressions of life"[109] that need to be understood. The text speaks only through one partner, the interpreter who gives expression to the subject-matter of which the text speaks.

> Only through him [the interpreter] are the written words changed back into meaning. Nevertheless, in being changed back by understanding, the subject-matter of which the text speaks itself finds expression. It is like a real conversation in that the common subject matter is what binds the two partners, the text and the interpreter to each other.[110]

Both oral conversation and textual interpretation are concerned with the subject-matter of which the text speaks, and the process of disclosure of the subject-matter of the text follows the dynamic of question and answer. It is a conversation in which "language mediates truth claims that must then be engaged as part of the process of subjective becoming."[111]

The text brings a subject-matter into language, but this is ultimately the achievement of the interpreter. The text does not have a static meaning, for the interpreter's own thoughts have contributed to the awakening of the meaning of the text. This is what Gadamer has earlier

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[105] He characterizes this as the Socratic *docta ignorantia* "which, amid the most extreme negativity of doubt, opens up the way to the true superiority of questioning" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 362). Dialogue that is guided by the search for truth has the characteristic mode of recognizing that one does not know something, of asking questions and seeking answers which in turn stimulate more questions and answers.

[106] Ibid., 368.

[107] Ibid., 385.

[108] Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 102.

[109] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 387. Gadamer attributes this phrase to Johann Gustav Droysen

[110] Ibid., 388.

[111] Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 141.

referred to as the "fusion of horizons"[112] and understanding occurs in the process of interpretation.

> All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language....The linguisticality of understanding is *the concretion of historically effected consciousness*.[113]

The value of a written tradition is that it is detached from the vestiges of the past--the intention of the author, the sociological and contextual conditions that gave rise to its production, the original addressee--and made free for new relationships.[114]

4] Criteria for a valid interpretation.

Religious educators are mindful that the demand for a hermeneutics of tradition is not a neutral task and that it has been pursued both by those seeking to examine the present situation of the church critically as well as those defending the ecclesial *status quo*. The history of disputes about orthodoxy is a salient reminder that interpretation is a continuing challenge for the Christian community as it seeks to appropriate our common heritage. Three ancient criteria recommend themselves to us. First, the criterion of continuity first developed by Irenaeus of Lyons who maintained that "the church tradition is in itself in uninterrupted continuity with the apostolic beginnings which are normatively communicated by the scriptures. As such the church is the living *regula veritatis*, the rule of truth."[115] Second, historical continuity, or apostolicity, from Moses, through the prophets, apostles, presbyters, and the papacy was seen as a guarantee of faithfulness. Third, since the church is the realm of the Spirit who is truth then the church alone can guarantee the authenticity of any interpretation.

These criteria need to be modified in the light of our realization that the biblical witness is rather more diverse than had been assumed before historical-critical exegesis. Historical continuity is not alone a sufficient warrant for validity, since the Christian community has become dispersed into a variety of denominational traditions, and "historical investigation shows how difficult it is to exempt any Christian belief or practice from substantial change across differences of time and place."[116]The presence of the Spirit is a guarantee of God's faithfulness and creative presence, but is not necessarily co-terminus with the official magisterium, and the biblical witness itself urges us to be assiduous in testing the spirits (1 Jn 4:1-3). Our contemporary consciousness of the possibility of ideological distortions in the appeals to tradition has added a further burden to the search for Christian identity[117].

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[112] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.
[113] Ibid., 389. Italics are in the original
[114] Ibid., 395.
[115] Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, 168.
[116] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 129.
[117] Ibid., 173. See also, Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 37-40. Taylor employs Cornel West's suggestion that there are four "modes of oppression:" domination, subjugation, exploitation and repression. The first two are seen as "discursive practices" which he sees as maintained by those who deal with ideas, texts, theories and uses of

Without intending to be exhaustive, several criteria suggest themselves as appropriate to the challenging demand of interpreting tradition. First, any interpretation needs to be fruitful (Mt 7:16a), and remains subject to the question of how it aids us in the living of our faith commitment. Second, it needs to be congruent with the "Gospel of God" (Mk 1:14; 1 Th 2:2; Rom 15:16), even though this criterion has become somewhat more difficult to apply when different ecclesial communities appeal to principles of private and public interpretation. Congruence with the scriptures, coherence with tradition, and with contemporary modes of thought extend the merely historical criterion of continuity. No interpretation, not even one that rejects elements of tradition, can ignore these constitutive dimensions of our identity. Third, it should be valid for "the text as a whole and the whole of the text,"[118] for no interpretation should be so precocious that the same analysis cannot be applied to the entire text. Sandra Schneiders develops this textual criterion further by reminding us that any interpretation should: (a) account for the text as it stands; (b) be consistent with itself; (c) explain anomalies more successfully than its competitors; (d) be compatible with what is known from other sources; (e) use responsibly all the methods that are appropriate.[119] Fourth, any interpretation must promote the values of the "reign of God." This eschatological criterion remains both a foundational and a demanding criterion for any social institution such as a church, and calls us to resist any interpretation that would perpetuate any form of domination or oppression. Fifth, interpretation requires acceptance by the community of the faithful whose vocation as disciples of the Lord is to provide faithful witness. The communal call to faithfulness operates to negate idiosyncratic interpretations and reminds us that the church is both *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens* wherein all members teach and learn from one another.[120]

Conclusion

Religious educators are inevitably concerned with tradition which can serve either to control or to liberate. It is not adequate simply to transmit certain elements of the tradition, for in making the classics of the tradition accessible[121] one also needs to exercise a degree of suspicion in regard to those elements of the tradition which are not immediately transparent—one's own subjective prejudices, and the question of whose interests are bring supported and whose disregarded?

The challenge is to recognize that a concern for social transformation informs the way in which one approaches the classic texts of the tradition, so that the encounter with the monuments of tradition becomes an event that is perennially revelatory of liberating truth for the present. This encounter is further mediated synchronically through ongoing dialogue with a contemporary community of discourse, and diachronically by the historical reception of the classic texts.

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language. The latter two are termed "extradiscursive practices" in that they refer to the social, economic, class, and institutional practices that maintain the discursive practices.

[118] Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 166.

[119] Ibid., 164-167.

[120] Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry-- The Way of Shared Praxis*, 237.

[121] The phrase "to make accessible" has been used extensively by Mary C. Boys. See, Mary C. Boys, "Access to Traditions and Transformation," in *Tradition and Transformation in Religious Education,* ed. Padraic O' Hare (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1979), 14-23.

Tradition then becomes not a static repository of information, but a dynamic Spirit-filled movement that transforms individuals and communities.

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