

# Sources of Meaning in the West: Tradition, the Warrior Ethos, and Christianity

(*Zingeving in het Westen: Traditie, Strijdersethos en Christendom*, Vantilt, Nijmegen, 2016, see <https://www.vantilt.nl/boeken/zingeving-in-het-westen>)

## Excerpt from ‘General Introduction’

[Pages 11-20, translated by the author]

In my book, I invite the reader to join me on a voyage of exploration, consisting of three legs that pass through very different landscapes. Successively, I will offer a view of:

- 1) the traditional conditions of human life;
- 2) factors that ensure that in the West these conditions are easily lost sight of in theory and neglected in practice;
- 3) aspects of Christianity that elude us if, yielding to typically Western reflexes, we either see it as something that frees man from all dependence on tradition, or as something that, being traditional, is not to be taken seriously.

Along the way, I shall contribute to a discussion that has been going on for centuries about the way in which Western culture differs from other cultures. When I claim the warrior ethos and Christianity jointly account for the particular character of the West, I am saying nothing new. Christopher Dawson said the same thing long ago. In his view, the restless and dynamic quality of Western society results from the tension between the aspirations of Christians and truculent nobles (I have taken the term ‘warrior ethos’ from him). Implicitly, we find the same view with many others – including Nietzsche. What is new, is that I try to penetrate to the core of the warrior ethos and Christianity, by examining the attitude they entail towards the traditional way of giving meaning to life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Here in Dutch I have used the word *zingeving*; it is a fairly commonplace word. Literally, it means ‘meaning-giving’; but, of course, this sounds awkward in English. I have elsewhere used other expressions and paraphrases to translate this central term (like ‘sources of meaning’ in the title). It is difficult, however, to save all connotations. *Zingeving* is not just a frame of mind, or a way of seeing the world, connected to a certain *Weltanschauung*; it is also feeling, valuing and spontaneous acting in practical life. It embraces both a passive experience of relevance and the acting on it – and implies that one orients one’s actions with reference to a life-perspective. I have avoided terms like ‘view’ or ‘framework’ (the latter term is used by Taylor in his *Sources of*

In order to recognise and define these attitudes, we must form an adequate idea of the role played by tradition in human life. And this is far from easy. If we let ourselves be carried along by the current of Western thought, we are prone to reduce tradition to a particular interpretation of life, or a particular way of utilizing objectifiable things. And all too easily, we confuse the preconditions for giving meaning to life with the thinkable presuppositions for our reflexive activity, such as principles, premises, recognisable relations between knowable elements, and preconceptions that allow us to interpret historical expressions. Also, we easily imagine that the motives people are governed by in ordinary life must be similar to those that govern our reflexive activity. If we do that, we will discount a lot of things, I fear, that need to be considered if we want to understand how human beings give meaning to life. Most people in this world do not strive to be something else than their traditions allow them to become. What is it they are looking for, and finding in life? Some say (I am thinking of neo-Darwinists and some sociologists): we have taken the trouble to understand their motives, they are less exacting. But whoever says such a thing, is not very exacting either, I would say. As Michael Polanyi has shown, we can only think a theory if we rely at the same time on *tacit knowing*, i.e. in a non-theoretical understanding of reality (including ourselves) that can never be exhausted by reflexive thought.<sup>2</sup> Thus the question arises: can a theory ever really express what we look for in life? Could it not be, that in concrete life we depend on a sense of relevance that we cannot invoke when we are speculating? But once we accept this possibility, the subject seems more turbid than ever. The way we give meaning to life cannot be separated in thought from a concrete, culture-specific way of life that is the product of the spontaneous dedication of a diversity of people, with different temperaments, sensibilities, interests, etc., and that encompasses an incoherent jumble of practices. How can an attitude towards life that takes shape within *this life* be contrasted with others – and in reflexive thought at that?

My method for distinguishing between ways of giving meaning to life is to a great extent ‘cribbed’ from the French philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861-1949). He blazes a new trail from a critique of thought to ‘a critique of life’. He starts with this question: what must have been realised, within us and outside us, before we can perform the simplest conscious action, or have the simplest thought? As thinking, meaning-giving, feeling beings, we turn out

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*the Self* to describe a person’s orientation in life) when translating the word *Zingeving*, because they suggest that our experience and acting are structured in a similar way as our reflexive views, or images of life. As you will see, I want to stress the fact that in our spontaneous (but very conscious) acting and feeling, we are often concerned with things that we cannot do justice to in our reflexive representations of life.]

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*.

to be the product of a life that can only be grasped and controlled to a very limited extent by reflexive thought; this, in fact, is only one of the moulding and propelling forces working within it. Theoretical activity and practical action do not duplicate each other's efforts, Blondel says somewhere.<sup>3</sup> Reason cannot tell us why we believe that through acting and thinking we can do and become something worthwhile. And yet, this belief lies at the basis of our ability to act and think. In concrete life, obviously, we solve some problems that are different from the ones we can conjure up in reflexive thought. And only if we make progress in our lives, can we make progress in our reflexive understanding. If we think that we ought to let ourselves be guided by reflection in everything, we ignore the very conditions of our own thinking. The task of philosophy (according to Blondel) is to justify the method by which we have been able to become what we have become, not to offer an alternative for it. A consistent philosophy, therefore, can never recommend us to squeeze spontaneous desires for (further) self-realisation into the straitjacket of thinkable goals. Such a philosophy helps us to see which views or attitudes to life are inconsistent, because they deny what they presuppose, or make it seem insignificant. It also helps us to see that in tradition we seek more than the support of fixed customs, rituals or a view of life: we seek and find in it a perspective for self-realisation, a way of life that invites us to experience it as meaningful.

Only in a traditional setting, I say, can we come to believe in the existence of a *world worthy of dedication*. For this belief to arise in us, we need to see others act in a convinced and convincing way – something which they can do only if they have been convinced of the same thing, and in the same way, by others. This way of acting is traditional through and through. Nature does not provide the sufficient conditions for it, as for instinctive behaviour. What is transmitted in this way has no meaning that can be expounded in the light of something else: it is a quality of the world that exists by the grace of traditional, dedicated action. To parents, it feels like a natural moral obligation to give their children faith in life using this 'method'; and there is no doubt that they must do so in an effective way in order to avoid serious psychological problems. Only when a foundation for our ability to give meaning has been established in this way, can we become consciously interested in other things – e.g. the nature of objects, causal relationships, or 'symbolic structures'. So we do not begin with the kind of knowable elements we use to construct images of reality in reflexive thought: we start with concrete others that convince us of the fact that they are concerned with something

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<sup>3</sup> 'Le point de départ de la recherche philosophique', p. 559. More references to Blondel's works are given further down in this introduction [outside the excerpt reproduced here].

– ultimately *life as a whole* – which transcends all concrete things, and which is literally unimaginable for us.

The unusual conclusion I arrive at, is this one: the human spirit is a product of traditional life. We see others act in ways that give us an idea of what we can be, or what we want to affirm in life. We want to feel what is moving these others in ourselves, but that which attracts us in their way of acting – their love of the dedication-worthy – cannot be internalised just like that, and cannot be exhausted. So we internalise the forms of their actions, realizing that something escapes us. When we interact with others, some of the forms that we carry somewhere within us, appear to be magnetised, as it were; they help to direct our spontaneous actions. And thus we discover what we want to do and want to be. I would say the word ‘spirit’ is fitting for the relationship of our consciousness with such internalised forms that move us in ways we cannot control, but that, nevertheless, we trust more than ourselves – or rather, our confidence in ourselves is inseparable from them.

It may seem that tradition only provides material for *Songs of Innocence*; and in a way this is true. And this is a problem. Setbacks, violent acts, disasters, diseases and accidents – they are difficult to reconcile with the faith that tradition elicits and demands. Attempts to save the honour of tradition by attributing everything that goes wrong to malevolence or negligence are unsatisfactory for various reasons. To find the materials for *Songs of Experience*, we need to look elsewhere than in the world worthy of dedication that we are initiated into by tradition. But it should be clear that we cannot do or sing anything without relying on the spirit that lives within us by the grace of tradition.

Blondel says that all our experiences in life whet our appetite rather than satisfy us.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Blondel, who in a philosophical way wants to determine the conditions of a definitive solution to the 'problem of life', I see the problem as it presents itself to us as an inescapable fact. Traditional life realises the conditions for giving meaning; at the same time it promises more than it can deliver. I don't believe we learn to recognise the relativity of this problem by digging for a foundation of our sense of relevance that lies deeper than the expectations that tradition awakens in us.

The awareness of the problem generates the desire for some support outside or above traditional life. If we try out different ways of relating to life in order to see if they can provide such a support, this is only logical. But there is a danger that we find a solution that makes us forget what the problem was that prompted our search. Of course, we can say:

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<sup>4</sup> *La Pensée*, Tome I, p. 98.

tradition tempts us to embrace illusions; if we learn to recognise this, on the basis of any view whatsoever, we have gone further than tradition can take us. But then we deny the very ground we stand on; and I think we can never, without referring to the road we have travelled guided by a traditional sense of relevance, give any meaning to the words ‘going further’. When we choose to embrace a different or more comprehensive solution to the ‘problem of life’ than tradition offers, we automatically adopt an attitude towards the ‘traditional spirit’ and the expectations of life that are given with it – because they can never be left behind. And such attitudes can be criticised in a philosophical way (if we avoid the pitfalls of intellectualism which Blondel pointed to). Thus I have come to accept that we can best understand what attracts or imprisons someone in a specific way of giving meaning to life, when we learn to identify the attitude towards the traditional way of giving meaning to life which is implicated in it. I demonstrate the illuminating potential of this method by trying to penetrate to the core of the warrior ethos and of the Christian attitude to life.

In the warrior ethos, I see a passionate rejection of all dependence on tradition and the ‘traditional spirit’. This gives rise to a need to prove that one is equal, by one’s own strength, to all possible challenges. The warrior ethos thus breeds contempt for the concrete conditions of human life. The life-goal it dictates is paradoxical and unthinkable: a total victory over everything, to be gained through one’s own passion. Western man (or the ‘Faustian soul’) is characterised according to Oswald Spengler by a desire for the infinite – infinite spaces to be conquered, and an infinite loneliness –; therefore, he experiences all forms as limiting.<sup>5</sup> And indeed, such an insatiable aspiration manifest itself in Western life, in the glorification of pure power and absolute freedom, in a belief in infinite possibilities, and in an urge to break through limits.

In pure form, we find the attitude to life outlined here with aristocratic warriors, at the beginning of recorded history. They considered it heroic to put everything and everyone at stake in reckless adventures of which they expected much more than war booty, namely, something incomparable: glory, the sense of being victor, ‘proof’ of their own divinity. And they had free rein in the ‘barbaric’ West, because there the life-perspective of the warrior-hero was considered to be the highest. This was not the case with other Indo-European peoples, as Georges Dumézil has shown, on the basis of a comparison of myths and religious representations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Die Untergang des Abendlandes*, I, p. 257.

<sup>6</sup> See below, pp. ... [Second Part].

We can recognise many traits of the warrior ethos in later history, not only with warlike nobles, but also in bourgeois culture (especially in the North-Western part of Europe). To have people fight to prove their passion is still regarded as the fairest way to distribute power and wealth unequally. And we see that many Western thinkers like to believe in the possibility of thought gaining a complete victory over reality. Also in very different fields, like that of erotic experience, we can discern the influence of the warrior ethos (as Denis de Rougemont has pointed out).<sup>7</sup> The cult of romantic passion legitimises the urge to use the finite to kindle a desire for the infinite: the true Western ‘love-hero’ is someone who, on the authority of his passion, feels how limiting traditional norms and ultimately all forms are, and yearns for something that is impossible in this life.

The warrior ethos always had a counterpart. The way of life of the nobles could only exist because others groups accepted that their lives did not matter: what they wanted, deep down, was to be left alone. Their traditions met a need for emotional comfort, oblivion and unconstrained sociability. If we look for signs of the survival of the warrior ethos, therefore, we should not only look for things like an obsession with violence, strife, competition and a desire to be in control, but also for openly meaningless activities that both betray and mask a sense of disillusionment. These practices are as exceptional, in a comparative perspective, as those based on the belief that passion is self-justifying.

Both ways of life made it difficult to associate tradition with a life-perspective. One group – the nobility – was hell-bent on proving that they did not need tradition; the therapeutic traditions of the other group did not supply sufficient materials for the construction of an appealing life-perspective. The sociologist Edward Shils traces the unwillingness and inability of Westerners to take tradition seriously to the Enlightenment; it will be clear that I believe this syndrome has a much longer history.<sup>8</sup>

When the West was christianised, a period came to end in which the passion of the warrior-hero ruled supreme. But, as the investiture controversy made clear, the warrior caste did not think of giving up its privileges, which it saw as completely justified. In any case, next to the warrior ethos a Christian ethos appeared, and the question is: what attitude toward the traditional way of giving meaning to life does it imply?

If we ask this question, glaring contrasts jump out at us. Some Christians see salvation as a liberation from the whole sphere of human existence as we know it, and they distrust all spontaneity that exists by the grace of tradition. I consider their view to be contaminated by

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<sup>7</sup> In *L'Amour et l'Occident en Les mythes de l'amour*.

<sup>8</sup> See below, pp. ... [Second Part].

the warrior ethos. But we can also see – more in life than in speculation – the expression of a different understanding of the core of Christianity: many Christians consider man, in the shape he owes to tradition, as worthy of redemption; and they feel called upon to confirm the faith in life of others, relying both on divine assistance and on traditional methods. They want to see a concrete human tradition enriched by what faith has to offer. I argue that those who brought *this* Christian tradition to the West introduced something really new into the existing pattern of culture, and that their view squares best with what the Christian revelation says – and, for that matter, also the Catholic magisterium.

This is the view I have come to defend: Christianity wants to bring man further than he can come relying on tradition alone, but as it were in the same direction, and without depriving him of the spirit which he owes to tradition. This is a conclusion that in Western thought, also theological thought, was difficult to reach, because a tradition-dependent way of giving meaning to life was not seen as constitutive of humanity. Many things that seem paradoxical or obscure when we look at Christian beliefs from an intellectualistic viewpoint, appear clear and clarifying when we see them from another side: from the world in which we are at home thanks to a tradition-dependent sense of relevance. The incarnation, the glorification of the Son, and the assumption of other mortals, formed by different traditions, into ‘heaven’ – we can see them as functional elements of a ‘method’ God uses to provide an assistance that is geared to the human mode of existence; a mode of existence which is characterised on the one hand by dependence on tradition, and on the other by an exposure to threats that easily undermine the faith in life and in tradition. We can see this assistance as desirable, even when we do not know whether it is really available. This shows that we can evaluate the pattern of Christian life and ideas without beginning with the question whether what Christians believe is true or not.

What I want to show, is that in Western life we can recognise three dominant ways of giving meaning to life, and that each of them entails a specific attitude towards life as a whole, and dictates a spontaneous preference for specific worldviews, images of man, moral values and ideas about the transcendent. At first sight, it seems difficult to distinguish factors in the concrete dynamics of life (at an individual and social level) that can be associated with consistent patterns that represent specific ways of giving meaning to life. Therefore, we are prone to think that we need not look for such patterns. I hope to show that it pays off to try and do so nevertheless. We shall then be able to recognise in the warrior ethos and Christianity respectively a reaction and a complement to the traditional way of giving meaning to life. I certainly do not claim that since these patterns came together (in the early

Middle Ages) nothing essential has changed. So I won't pretend that we only need to pour three 'substances' into an imaginary flask and stir it, in order to see the whole of Western history crystallise in our minds. I do believe, meanwhile, that we can better understand the movements of Western life if we have an eye for the character of these 'players', and for the way they interact with each other.

We can say that bourgeois life combines, in an incoherent way, elements of the three described ways of giving meaning to life (and sometimes yet others). The confusion, intellectual and moral, that is typical of modern life need not be attributed to the influence of different *interpretations* or *views*. My method helps us recognise behind those interpretations something which I call a subreflexive core – something that is to a greater extent controlling the process of meaning-giving (as understood by hermeneuticians) than being controlled by it.

Modern bourgeois man, however, has a greater *need* for rational justifications for his own actions and collective enterprises than all of his predecessors. This need results from the fact that the bourgeoisie embraced certain elements of the warrior ethos – they claimed the right to shape their own lives as they saw fit –, while they rejected everything that had made it a 'logical thing' for the nobles to believe that they could do whatever they pleased. The members of the bourgeois class wanted to believe they had reached the highest level of being by themselves, and therefore did not need anything they could not give themselves; but they did not invoke the idea of innate superiority. Like the nobles, they refused to expect anything from the transcendence man can become responsive to in traditional life, and also from the Christian transcendent, of which the poor and lowly were deemed to be pre-eminently receptive. They then went on to desacralise the passion in the name of which the nobles had despised these 'lower forms of transcendence'. Arguments had to fill the void. But using rational arguments alone (remember what Blondel has said) no one can conjure up a life-perspective. Hence bourgeois man is torn between different attitudes to life, without understanding what is attracting him in them. And, in fact, he does not want to take seriously what attracts him in them, because he wants to believe that in order to bring life to completion, he doesn't need to do anything else than he is doing already: to accumulate goods and capital for himself, with the aim of having a 'carefree' life one day, and to contribute to a progress that implies the notion that nothing is left to be desired when material conditions have been satisfied, by the provision of wealth, convenience and health. He doesn't want to see the space for projects by which he pursues such 'rational' goals restricted in any way, and therefore he is prone to believe that all traditional or religious norms are relative or unfounded. He likes to invoke the authority of the natural sciences, as if they were a fire in

which human motives have burned themselves out. In practice, traditional and Christian motives, and the appeal of passion, may play a role in his life – but they rarely control him up to a point where it becomes clear to him what is moving him. If he becomes disappointed with what bourgeois life has to offer, he may try to find something better following a ‘spiritual road’; but he will typically opt for a road which allows him to believe that tradition and tradition-dependent forms of religion lie behind him.

The historical dramas that revolve around the relationships between different attitudes to life – they disintegrate into chaos when we leave out the role of the traditional way of giving meaning to life. If we still want to understand something, we will need to fill gaps in the plot by reasoning, and assume that the ‘actors’ are guided by the same kind of thinking. I don’t think that if we follow this course, we’ll be any the wiser. For other reasons as well, I think it is important that we learn to do justice in our thinking to what we owe to tradition. I point out that our inability to do justice to it is not only a theoretical flaw, but part of a pattern that has far-reaching consequences for people’s lives – and not just in the West. The very conditions of human, or rather humane, existence, seem threatened on a global scale. To a great extent unintentionally, a world takes shape in which the warrior ethos thrives better than any other way of giving meaning to life, even where it did not exist before.

The concerns I have about this, cannot easily be converted into concrete recommendations. The relinquishing of everything traditional is extolled as the way forward nowadays, not only by interested commercial parties, but also by politicians and by well-meaning holders of positions in civil society, educational institutions and churches. In many parts of the world the uncritical adoption of methods developed in the West *in response to the absence of a traditional life-perspective* now leads to the destruction of living traditions. Those who blaze trails for ‘progress’ typically believe it suffices to offer opportunities and motivate people to grab them. The fact that the larger part of human energy is thus being channelled into an effort to make it, or simply to survive, in highly competitive environments – this they see as inevitable or natural. Rarely do we hear someone ask if people do not also deserve the opportunity to realise a life, by means of proven methods, that supports faith in what they can do and be as human beings. The large-scale substitution of traditional forms of action by other, instrumental and supposedly rational forms of action – many see the hand of providence in it, and those who don’t believe in providence expect miracles from it. I can only indicate that there are good reasons for taking a different view.

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