

TRADITION AS A KEY TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Peter Abspoel

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Abstract

Catholic Christianity possesses a distinctive power, which has remained latent and undertheorised for a long time: the power to adapt itself to cultural traditions. In theology it has often been seen as accidental, even when it was manifest in practice, especially in local traditions. Since Vatican II, inculturation has been actively encouraged, and new approaches were developed in missiology and ecclesiology. In this essay, Christianity's power of adaptation is presented as central to the 'salvific event' itself. Human beings need to be formed by concrete traditions in order to be human. A redemption that would stamp out their attachment to tradition would amount to their destruction. The relative autonomy of traditional life in relation to God, would, so to speak, constitute a problem for God, if he wanted to provide humankind with a divine assistance geared to its real needs. The incarnation, and the founding of a 'kingdom of heaven', populated by human beings from different traditions, can be seen as ways to accommodate the workings of grace and the Spirit to human tradition-conditioned existence, and thus to answer this 'problem'. This heuristic exploration suggests new clues, not only for philosophical apologetics, but also for Christology, soteriology and exegesis.

Keywords: Christianity, Catholicism, Christology, apologetics, tradition, culture, transcendence, spontaneity, inculturation, incarnation, Maurice Blondel, Cusanus.

After this I looked and saw a vast throng, which no one could count, from every nation, of all tribes, peoples, and languages... (Rev. 7, 9.)

In the last half a century, a revolution has taken place in Catholic thought. For a long time, the faith and Western culture were seen as inseparable; now a very different view is taken.

Typical are the words that pope John Paul II addressed in 1980 to African bishops: every culture, he said, needed to bring forth ‘from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration, and thought’.¹ Here I shall argue that this respect for tradition is not a recent phenomenon, but has been a distinguishing trait of Christianity from the beginning. Indeed, I want to show that the ‘organisation of the salvific process’ seems most intelligible if we see it as aimed at realising a divine assistance tailored to man’s tradition-dependent mode of existence. On the basis of this idea, I shall work out a view, which, I believe, offers clues for possible new approaches in philosophical apologetics and theology.² Here I shall present this view, and my reasons for proposing it, in broad strokes. Only a sketch of the whole issue, I believe, will invite readers to judge for themselves whether the approach I indicate is worth exploring further.

This article grew out of a broader, philosophical investigation into the role of tradition in human life. Inquiring into the conditions of the human sense of meaningfulness (that is, into how people manage to have expectations of life and of themselves), I realised that forms of experience and motivation which exist in virtue of a direct contact between human beings in traditional environments have a more important role to play than one would be led to believe reading most anthropological or philosophical accounts. And it dawned on me that the way persons are conditioned by and respond to traditional ways of life cannot be understood in the way we (try to) understand the workings of systemic wholes. In the latter case, we explain states of affairs or dynamic processes by identifying factors conditioning them – factors considered to be more constant and intelligible (like the laws of physics or psychological functions) than the observable phenomena. In part the impossibility to explain tradition-dependent forms of action and experience in this way is due to the obvious fact that they are highly variable and particular. But that isn’t all. Even when we think about things in universalistic terms, we can only expect something of our action or thinking if we first have learned to have expectations of what we can do, with others, in traditional settings. Whenever we are doing something we consider worthwhile, therefore, we bank on a conditioning which has been effected by other means than reflexive procedures, and the effect of which we cannot reproduce by invoking factors acting out the role of the ‘unconditioned’ in our explanatory

schemes. This led me to conclude that, from a human perspective, the traditional cannot be collapsed into the universal.³ Now the question arose whether the ‘problem’ of the heterogeneity between the traditional and the universal could be resolved at a higher level, by reducing both to a transcendent universality or absolute. That this must be possible, has been assumed by most Western metaphysicians who acknowledged the role of culture or tradition in human life. The Christians among them, like Cusanus and Maurice Blondel, felt this position accorded with Christian principles. The other view, which assumes an impossibility to reduce the traditions constitutive of human life (fully) to any unchanging, universal ‘given’, has hardly ever been tested for its capacity to shed light on human religious experience, and more specifically on Christian beliefs and practices. My aim here is to do just that, in order to see if meaningful connections and contrasts emerge which we cannot discern if we adopt the other point of view.

1. Accommodation of the faith: a historical sketch

As a universal church, the Catholic Church is faced with the question of how to deal with cultural diversity. The question is almost as old as Christianity itself. Paul argued for, and realised, an adaptation of the faith to the cultures of the ‘gentiles’ in the ancient world. For centuries, local churches would be distinguished by their own traditional customs, liturgical forms, organisational structures and theological foci. After becoming the Roman Empire’s state religion, Christianity accommodated itself to Roman administrative and judicial systems, and a trend towards uniformisation set in. The power relations between bishops, priests, deacons and lay people were modelled after those between different levels of (Eastern) Roman officials and the people. Later, after the ‘barbarian’ invasions, a more limited accommodation took place in the West to Celtic and Germanic cultures; the ‘apostles of the Slavs’, Cyril and Methodius, would make some bolder steps, accepting Old Slavonic as a liturgical language. However, when missionaries at the time of exploration came into contact with cultures very different from those they were familiar with, they felt called upon to transfer Christianity and Western culture in a single package. And for them, ‘Western culture’ was not the aggregate of European popular cultures, but the culture of a political and intellectual elite, which was strongly cosmopolitan in outlook and was separated from the people by a wide gap. Christians in India who had had their own traditions for centuries were forcibly compelled to give them up.⁴ Referring to the first conflict, between Paul and those

who maintained that the gentile Christians should adopt Jewish custom, Eugene Hillman writes, ‘Where the Judaizers failed the Westernizers triumphed.’⁵

In the seventeenth century Jesuits in China, India and among the indigenous peoples of Latin America took a different approach. But their efforts to adapt Christianity to foreign cultures were not welcomed by the church authorities. Now that Catholics and Protestants had come to oppose each other, the guardians of the ‘true faith’ were keen on distinguishing between orthodoxy and heresy on the basis of simple, unequivocal criteria. Some missionaries considered most indigenous cultural elements to be ‘from the devil’. In African colonies, traditional forms of singing and dancing, and especially drums, were banned from churches. Only in the second half of the twentieth century an adaptation of forms of celebration and religious experience to other cultures – in Africa, South America, Asia and Oceania – could be discussed again. The Second Vatican Council was a watershed. It is no coincidence, I think, that it took place after most European countries had to let go of their colonies. The decree on missionary activity states that the Church must implant herself into new cultural environments ‘for the same motive which led Christ to bind Himself, in virtue of His Incarnation, to certain social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom He dwelt.’⁶ The popes Paul VI and John Paul II would advocate an accommodation of the faith to all existing cultures. A new word, ‘inculturation’, was even invented for this process. Hervé Carrier has argued that reflection on the role of culture is the greatest challenge for the universal church – and many agree with him.⁷

The change wasn’t just dictated by political circumstances. Philosophical reflection on how cultures affect the experience and thinking of human beings raised fundamental questions about the relationship between an unchanging core of Christianity and its virtually infinitely variable forms of expression, experience and impact. The current Catholic view – expressed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, statements of popes and theological works – is that the faith can and should be adapted to cultural environments.⁸ Often an important role is reserved for spontaneous expressions of the faith, rooted in folk traditions.⁹ It hasn’t remained a matter of words. Local languages have been accepted in the liturgy. In Africa (and elsewhere) musical instruments, singing styles and dances that had previously been regarded as diabolical were brought into the church – leaving some of the faithful in a state of confusion.¹⁰ I believe the church can only move forward by opting for further accommodation, and that this approach was adopted only too late. Now, to many – in Africa and Latin America, for example – it seems that adjustments were made only under

pressure, as more and more people were turning away from the Catholic Church, and flocking to churches that offered more room to ‘indigenous’ forms of spontaneity.

2. The elusiveness of accommodation as a philosophical concept

It is interesting to note that in Catholic thought a respect for culture is mainly expressed in missiology and ecclesiology. The anthropological insight that human beings are to a great extent creatures of their culture has received far less attention in dogmatics, Christology, soteriology, and therefore also in systematic theology.¹¹ In these disciplines, conceptions of a relationship between the orders of ‘nature’ and ‘grace’ still dominate thought. However, if we recognise that culture or tradition plays an irreplaceable role in the ‘humanisation’ of every human being – including the Son of Man –, we are forced to conclude that between the natural and the supernatural lies the ‘order’ of the cultural or traditional, which (at least from a human perspective) cannot be resolved unambiguously into natural and supernatural factors.

Those who recognise that the humanity of Christ bears the stamp of a particular tradition, tend to dispel the spectre of cultural relativism by insisting that the faith must incarnate itself in other traditional environments as it originally incarnated itself in Jewish culture. It seems to me that the incarnation metaphor owes much of its appeal to the fact that it suggests a clear-cut distinction between that which embodies itself and that which supplies the material for the ‘body’. It allows one to believe that the church has a recipe that can be applied in the same way in any cultural environment. Even if the ‘body of Christ’ is not uniform, it can be considered to be the product of a process in which the Spirit plays a dominant role, and forms of tradition-conditioned spontaneity a subordinate one. Implicitly, the whole of cultural life is equated with the natural, and even with ‘flesh’. But should we not say that in every culture a spirit is already incarnated? This is (implicitly) recognised by those who point to the fact that in other traditions and religions elements can be found that are analogous to Christian truths and forms of spirituality. On the basis of this idea, a ‘hospitality’ to indigenous forms of religious expression and experience is often justified.¹²

Various questions present themselves. Are traditional forms of life only worthwhile because they provide raw materials or building blocks for Christian ways of life? How is the accommodation of Christianity to the ‘spirit’ of a culture to be prevented from leading to a relativisation of the radical newness which, according to faith, is presented to humanity in the Good News? Can we indicate how far a responsible adjustment can go, and at what point we

end up with a syncretism which violates Christian principles? Such questions are far from easy to answer, especially if we translate them into practical terms.

If we look for guidance in theories about the role of culture in human life, they turn out to be not only very diverse, but also vague on crucial points. What exactly is culture, how does it form human beings, what does it form in human beings, to which extent does it determine action and thought? It is tempting to reduce culture to something that is easier to grasp for reflexive thought. With hermeneuticians (like the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz), we can assume that different *interpretations of life*, or ‘symbolic systems’, lie at the basis of cultural differences. With more objectivistic thinkers, we can view culture as a fund of techniques and forms of organisation that enable human groups to control nature, or as a supplier of ideological justifications for power relations between groups. Or we may think that cultures owe their dignity to the fact that they, each in their own way, reflect something of ‘the one’. Each of these views entails a conception of the relationship between a cultural praxis and cultural forms of reflection (including the reflection of the theoretician); in my view, none of these conceptions are really convincing. We can choose from a variety of propositions: culture is essentially arbitrary, culture is a product of functional adaptation, culture is a product of the negotiation between groups, culture is the result of a desire to realise the ‘good life’, etc. It is impossible to indicate the merits and the limitations of these various views by means of clear arguments.

The problem is even greater for us Westerners, I believe, because when we think about such issues, we almost automatically fall prey to anti-traditionalist reflexes that go back to ancient intellectualism and the Western warrior ethos.¹³ We are inclined to think that the support we seek and find in tradition-directed life must be replaced by something *entirely different* – an intelligible truth that is independent of everything we know in virtue of tradition, or something absolute we project as the goal of life on the authority of a passionate desire to transcend all limits (including those of human existence). This attitude inhibits us if we want to take stock of what we owe to tradition, and, I would say, also if we want to discern the attitude towards tradition which is implicit in the Christian faith. When we reflect on it, we tend to conceive of the Christian faith as *an ascending way* that leads to a point where man is freed from all dependence on tradition. I think that it was because this anti-traditionalist spirit was so ‘deeply incarnated’ in Western intellectual and religious elites, that these considered their own version of Christianity to be normative, and refused to let it be contaminated by the cultural traditions of others which implied more respect for tradition. The indicated contrast existed also between elite culture and the traditions – including the

Christian traditions – of the peoples in Europe. The fact that the people did not seek an ‘ascending way’ in Christianity, but rather something which could enrich traditional life, could be dismissed and tolerated by the elite, according to an established pattern – by seeing it as a sign of a lack of the ‘right’ aspirations and passion in a ‘lower sort of people’. When Western missionaries were confronted with peoples who had a greater cultural self-confidence, a more open conflict erupted between tradition and the ‘true faith’.

Today, many believe that among the people, or the poor, a more authentic Christianity can be found than among wealthy citizens and intellectuals. But what do the ‘poor in spirit’ find in the faith, when they combine an unthinking confidence in their traditions with a faith in God? Few theoreticians have devoted attention to this question. One of the exceptions is the French philosopher Maurice Blondel, whose view of tradition would exert a major influence on the thought of Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac. His work was a source of inspiration for proponents of the Second Vatican Council.

Blondel points out that tradition provides us with a solution to ‘the problem of action’ (or ‘the problem of life’), which cannot be reduced to an intellectual problem.¹⁴ The gist of this problem is this: in order to experience our way of acting as proper and promising, we need to have expectations of what we can achieve by acting, while, when we stop to reflect, it seems not clear at all what we can expect from our actions: our knowledge of the world is limited; our actions seldom produce just the intended effect; others may influence the outcome of our actions or counteract them; and most importantly, we do not know how to consciously direct our actions towards the ultimate goal of some kind of fulfilment or completion of life. If there is a solution to this problem, we can only find it by experimenting with ourselves in practical life, by learning to trust that we can find ways to make life richer and more fulfilling, without ever being able to give a final intellectual justification for our confidence. If a tradition is to help us to realise ourselves, therefore, it should do more than supply us with explicable knowledge. This holds true for the Christian tradition as well. If the deposit of tradition would be transferred in intellectual form, Blondel maintains, it would unavoidably be distorted by ‘the infidelity of memory and the limitations of intelligence’; it can only be transferred in its integrity, and be applied and developed, if it is entrusted to ‘the practical obedience of love’.¹⁵

3. Tradition and the transcendent

Benefiting from some of Blondel's insights, I have come to the following conclusion. We learn to give meaning to our actions, because we feel the attraction, in concrete life, of something transcending our own thoughts and feelings. This transcendent is embodied by others, and also by a traditional way of life. 'Life' means nothing for us without it. This transcendent awakens our love, and conditions our spontaneity (with our consent); it incites us to have expectations of, and faith in, life and ourselves. It cannot be replaced by ideas or by rationally developed and applied techniques. It doesn't manifest itself in one dimension; rather, it is in virtue of its attraction that we become aware of the many dimensions of human existence, of their interrelation, and of the inexhaustible riches they harbour. By internalising this transcendent, and thus making it immanent (which we can only do partially), we realise ourselves. We feel its authority most when we are in touch with concrete others: when a glance reminds us of what we can be as a human being, when a way of behaving seems convincing to us (though we often cannot tell what it convinces us of), when a song moves us, when we feel co-responsible for the atmosphere in a group, when we enjoy the fact (without being able to explain why) that something is done in the right way – be it conducting a conversation or preparing a dish.

The question we can now ask, is this: how do the transcendence given with tradition and the transcendence of the creator-god relate to each other? The question has seldom been put this way. Implicit answers to it can be found, nevertheless. Nominalist theologians, who pose an unbridgeable gap between our experience in the world and the knowledge of God, will deny there is any relation to specify: by having expectations of the 'traditional transcendent' we would *eo ipso* turn away from God. Realists tend to reduce the traditional to the natural, and to see it as a creation that reflects something of the creator, or a divine *logos*. Blondel's view comes close to that of the realists, although he refuses to conflate tradition-dependent life with the natural (he calls it 'transnatural').¹⁶ He answers the question in a more explicit way. He assumes that the transcendence found in traditional life is a kind of lower manifestation, and gives a foretaste, of the 'pure transcendence' of the uncreated, eternal God.

Blondel can be seen as continuing a philosophical tradition that began with Cusanus (or Nicholas of Cusa) – one of the first European philosophers who recognised the culture-specific character of human thought and experience. (In most forms of 'Christian metaphysics', like those influenced by Platonism and Aristotelianism, culture did not play any role.) Cusanus assumes that the infinity of God (he speaks of a 'negative infinity', because it

exceeds our comprehension) is ‘contracted’ in the created universe, and that each creature (constituting a ‘microcosm’) is in its turn a ‘contraction’ of the universe. In his view, human beings cannot conceive of the universe as a whole, as they are tied to a particular perspective, and think in cultural terms.¹⁷ Pico della Mirandola would take Cusanus’s ideas one step further by describing the universe – and its reflection in the human mind – as evolving.¹⁸ Thus he laid the foundation on which many modern thinkers would build, such as Leibniz, Hegel, hermeneuticians like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and also Newman and Blondel.

It is important to note that Cusanus believes the diversity within the universe, including cultural diversity, reflects the One. This idea we find with Blondel, too. He assumes that a single principle makes everything in the universe cohere, and that a (partial) understanding of the cosmic coherence is possible in virtue of a (vague) knowledge of its ‘supra-cosmic’ source.¹⁹ He maintains that *the natural order as a whole* is both the bond connecting man to God and the obstacle separating them.²⁰ He explains the diversity of cultures as follows: ‘simplicity and unity can only be emulated and assimilated [by the finite] through diversity and plurality.’ The different civilisations, according to Blondel, have the mission to demonstrate through ‘polymorphous realisations’ the wealth of human gifts – something they can only do by conforming themselves, each in their own way, ‘to their divine example’.²¹ Thus, he excludes the possibility that a real heterogeneity might exist in the world and in human experience between the traditional and the universal. In my view, it is enlightening to assume that such a heterogeneity *does exist* – in particular if we want to map out the ‘Christian way’.

Of course, I cannot disprove the claim that in a dimension entirely beyond our ken, where time and space do not exist, everything is one. But I do not see this as a compelling reason for reducing everything to a single eternal, transcendent principle. Doing that, one is a priori setting a limit to what can be transmitted by tradition, by assuming that it expresses something that is already given somewhere, beyond time, and *there* has its source and its perfect existence.

What I will ask the reader to accept as a possibility, is that traditional life presupposes the valuation of some things which have no original divine ‘countervalue’, and that God nevertheless considered these things worth saving, and wanted to reinforce their valuation from ‘heaven’. Implicit in this hypothesis is the idea that the solution that God offers to humankind in the form of the New Covenant (which, in the words of the prophets, consists in human beings receiving a ‘new heart’ and a ‘new spirit’), is not only novel from the point of

view of humanity, but – at least when it comes to its concrete ‘fleshing out’ – even for God himself.²² This assumption undoubtedly must feel counterintuitive to anyone whose mind is accustomed to Western types of Christian speculation and meditation.

What I hope to make clear is that, once we’ve taken this strange step, many things we find in revelation and in Christian life will be seen to fit together in an intelligible way. We can see the ‘salvific event’ as aimed at realising a divine assistance that is geared to human, tradition-dependent existence. If it is so that the transcendence that animates traditional life, and which people must (partially) internalise in order to become human, cannot be (fully) traced back to the transcendence of the uncreated creator-god, God could not help humankind by enabling something like a more intensive osmosis between the absolute and the contingent. If he nevertheless wanted to help and save humankind, he would, so to say, be confronted with a problem. He could not directly control the course of events in traditional life. He could not directly manipulate the expectations people have, and must have, of this life.²³

Hoping to demonstrate its apologetic fecundity, here I shall outline a hypothetical view, according to which traditional life, in its various forms, was not from the beginning wholly subject to eternal, divine norms, but has been (and is being) progressively benchmarked ‘from above’ in the course of salvation history. The apologetic approach I propose is certainly unusual. Most apologists have tried to show that Christian dogmas are consistent with ‘universal’ truths accessible to reason, which they took to be independent of human traditions. I believe that more revolves around tradition than they are inclined to admit, and that central Christian ‘truths’ literally can only be understood in connection with humanity’s dependence on tradition. In order to grasp the view I am proposing, we must credit God with a respect for tradition that goes far beyond the respect that Western thinkers (including the Christians among them) were and are willing to muster. At the same time, I believe, a positive attitude towards tradition-dependent humanity has in fact been adopted by many (ordinary) Christians in the West.²⁴ Only, in practical life they often had to do without the support of theoretical justifications. So here I do not want to present a new theory of Christianity: I want to clarify an attitude towards tradition which in my view was implied from the beginning in the Christian faith. In this view, the divine and the traditional are at the same time separate and interwoven, even up into the ‘heavenly’ realm.

I do not mind accompanying my view with a Copernican caveat: if a model fits a set of facts, this does not necessarily mean that the theory behind the model is correct. In any case, I think the hypothesis has a heuristic value. Those who reject the idea behind it, must at least take the trouble to try and explain the pattern that comes to light. Personally, I believe

that the view I am proposing is at no point in conflict with dogmatic principles, and that any apparent conflict with specific theological theses will only exist for those who wish to see these, in their explicit formulation, as the last word.

4. Implications of humanity's dependence on tradition

As I have said, the hypothesis which I ask the reader to accept, might feel counterintuitive. At the same time, I think there are good reasons for assuming that the transcendent we find in traditional life does not formally or functionally correspond to an absolute in relation to which the whole universe, or the purposiveness manifesting itself in the natural world, can be seen as contingent. It seems reasonable to say that 'the problem of life', as it presents itself to human beings, has no divine example – if we mean by the divine the principle of all that is not subject to any limitation. For human beings, the problem is how to have faith in life, and to strengthen the faith in life of others, in circumstances in which this faith is far from self-evident. In order to give shape to an answer to this very concrete problem, they must rely on traditional means – that is, means which they have found to be effective, without being able to explain how they work. These means are proportioned to the (existential) problem as it presents itself to them, and to some extent are culture-specific. Traditions initiate people into a *world worthy of dedication*, which is intrinsically linked to (a variety of) traditional practices.²⁵

I think we can formulate the meaning of the Christian 'salvific event' (in a broad sense, that is, including its intended effects in human history) in the most coherent way, if we assume that tradition, while providing an indispensable basis for a human sense of meaningfulness, does not offer a really satisfactory solution to 'the problem of life'.²⁶ Traditional life gives rise to expectations it cannot fulfil. The intrusions of evil, and tragic events like disasters, diseases, undeserved suffering – they cannot be exorcised by traditional means. We see that an attempt is made, nevertheless, in many traditional societies: there, people want to hold on to the belief that faith in tradition suffices to bring life to a successful end. They try, as it were, to defend the honour of tradition, by attributing everything that goes wrong – even natural disasters – to the actions of malevolent individuals or to ritual negligence. This means that, apart from legitimate expectations of tradition, illusions are entertained about the effectiveness of magical techniques, and that an unsatisfactory solution is embraced to the problem given with humankind's dependence on tradition. Innocents can be turned into scapegoats, and much energy may be spent on ineffective methods, which

ultimately cannot take away the sense of fear and frustration. But if we recognise that tradition does not offer a complete solution to the problem of life, should we say that a truly satisfactory solution requires a total emancipation from tradition?

This is what most Western thinkers are inclined to believe. According to Blondel, we will only be really satisfied if we are freed from all constraints, and let our selves be replaced by God (equated with the absolute).²⁷ In the end, he too was unable to resist the attraction of the ‘ascending way’. At this point again, he follows Cusanus and Pico della Mirandola. Cusanus frames the human problem and the solution proposed by Christianity as follows. The maximum human beings can find in life is not enough for them. They long to be united with the uncontracted, ‘negative’ infinite, the absolute Maximum. By themselves, they cannot satisfy this innate desire. God could have left them in this frustrating position, but he chose to free them from it through Christ. In him, the absolute Maximum became incarnate, and thus part of the created universe. By uniting themselves with him, through grace, human beings can be elevated above their natural state, and thus see their deepest desire satisfied. The total coherence that already existed in a finite and incomplete way in the universe, and was mirrored or represented in every being, would be fully realised thanks to, or rather in, Christ, *medium* between the finite and infinite. The idea is that Christ – God – became finite, in order to allow people to be infinite like God. The ascending way of faith was supposed to lead beyond the mediator to the uncreated, unchanging principle of everything. According to Pico della Mirandola, human beings could eventually become one with God the Father, who resides above all created things in ‘solitary darkness’.²⁸ The desire to transcend everything limited was already characteristic of mystical theology since Pseudo-Dionysius (whose work Pico knew). Also according to Meister Eckhart, the mystic could rise above the Triune God, to the unknowable One, beyond being and non-being.

A couple of things deserve attention here. In the view that goes back to Cusanus, the dependence on culture-specific ways of thinking, acting and experiencing is recognised as given with humankind’s natural mode of existence. Cultural relativism is justified, on the basis of the idea that different human ways of life only accord with each other – and with God – in a vanishing point which lies beyond human ken. (Cusanus and Pico were interested in non-Christian religions and forms of esoteric knowledge, which they saw as an expression of a general human desire to know God.) At the same time, it is assumed that human beings spontaneously seek to be liberated from the sphere in which they are bound to what they can perceive, experience and know by their natural faculties. Something else that stands out, is that in this view the redemption is directed towards eliminating something like a ‘substantial

shortcoming' in the human being – and the nature of the problem is supposed to lend itself to theoretical explication. Hence Pico's 'Philosophia veritatem querit, theologia invenit, religio possidet'. The plan of salvation would therefore not be aimed at improving the life of people as they know it, by setting something over against the disruptive effect of sin, injustice and suffering. If there is any sin at all here, it is identified with the attachment to normal life, with a reluctance to opt for the 'ascending way'.

I see a few problems with this view, which also seems to inform many modern-day forms of 'spirituality'. Firstly, if we follow this ascending way, we do not arrive at something which looks like a fulfilment of the ultimate promise which was already made in the Old Testament, and which is repeated and specified in the New Testament: 'He will dwell among them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them.'²⁹ Secondly, if the solution provided by God consists in lifting human beings out of the whole sphere in which 'the problem of life' presented itself to them, it is hard to say in what sense this is a solution. And thirdly, if human beings are to transcend the limits of their creaturely existence, it means nothing to speak of God loving humankind. Those who want to make revelation accord with this view must embrace all sorts of paradoxes, and invite others to do the same. In many cases, they can only say, 'That's how it is, even if it is incomprehensible; God has willed it so.'

The view of the 'ascending way' is based on the idea that human beings, more or less in the same way as they transcend their biological conditioning in traditional life, are to transcend their traditional conditioning through grace. But, if we assume that humanity cannot be obtained apart from traditional forms of life, this means that human beings are attributed a desire to leave their human state behind. The desire to break through the limits of human existence is found in Gnosticism and Platonism, and also in the Western warrior ethos. It was cultivated in Europe – first in monasteries and schools – in the form of a desire to direct life on the basis of reflexive rules or guidelines (often taken from books), which served to replace the direction of tradition. How Christian is this desire, or this undertaking? Looking at the Christian revelation, and to Christian practices (such as those which express the love of one's neighbour), we find nothing in them which invites people to despise their humanness. The fact that Christ is supposed to have remained human after his death and glorification, and to come back as a human being, is telling.

The question that now arises is: how is a completion of human life conceivable that does not deprive us of our humanity? We are only human if we humanise the instincts and impulses we share with animals; that is, if we curb and utilise them in order to give shape to a

truly human life. This requires that we attach importance to ‘higher values’, to moral feelings or principles – something we can only do if a tradition invites us to do so, and (at least to some extent) rewards our dedication. Traditions allow us to associate a desire for self-realisation with concrete realisations in collective life. These realisations, however, are never fully satisfactory, as we have seen. Injustice, undeserved misfortune and suffering prompt people to look for something better. But this desire for ‘a better world’ implies a faith in what they are and can be, as human beings. Every person spontaneously wants to see those preserved and saved, about whom he or she is worried. Thus, we can explain a need for divine mercy and grace, without reducing it to a ‘substantial shortcoming’. If indeed God wants, through grace, to confirm and save our faith in what we can be, and in our spontaneous love, it is not enlightening to speak of human beings formed by tradition as *initium aliquod creaturae*, or to think of traditional life as a cocoon, from which we, once transfigured by grace, are to emerge as completely different kinds of beings. The human beings God takes pity on, are those who hanker spontaneously after help and salvation for themselves and others.

This image of the human being – someone who is both needy and worthy of salvation in God’s eyes – was hard to stabilise in Western thought. For Western thinkers it was difficult to see what was to be gained by arresting, at a given point, the upward movement beginning in traditional life. They did not see that what was realised in this life as constitutive of humanity, and presented it as something which was to evaporate in the encounter between man and God. The desire to escape from all that was felt to be limiting was so strong that the ‘gravitational force’ of the humanity realised in concrete traditions was seldom felt. But this was only true as long as one was thinking: in normal life one could not resist its pull. However, this gap between thought and life, it seems, was for many thinkers a source of frustration, and the awareness of it often drove them *to expect more from theoretical thinking*.

5. Putting tradition centre-stage: outline of a hypothetical view

But is a view that considers a dependence on tradition to be constitutive of humanity really more coherent, and more in accord with Christian principles? Doesn’t every tradition seduce people to expect too much from what is largely a human creation, and doesn’t this lead to something like a collective self-deification? Is it not because of sin – we can think of the story of the Tower of Babel – that people became imprisoned in cultural perspectives? If people want to present the incomplete solution to the problem of life that is given with tradition as a

complete solution, aren't they, as it were, building a new tower to scale the heavens, by traditional means?

Whether or not people (also) want to find a substitute in tradition for something that has been lost by sin – I do not dare to speak out on this issue. I can only say that there is much to suggest that God (as Christians imagine him) accepts the dependence of human beings on tradition. Now, someone might object: God comes to look for us where we are, in order to bring us to a destination that we cannot imagine. But if we look without prejudice at the plan of salvation delineated in revelation, it seems that that which human beings derive from tradition plays too important a role in it – both on earth and in 'the kingdom of heaven' – to think that God would want to see it 'improved beyond repair'. Leaving all speculation about what might have been aside, I think we can establish a few things. People need tradition in order to develop faith in life and in themselves; at the same time, this faith is inevitably threatened. If it is undermined, people become susceptible to all kinds of temptations, to magical thinking, to compensatory illusions, to selfishness (and thus to sin). It looks very much as if God, by providing an assistance proportioned to our mode of being, wanted to save the faith in life evoked by tradition, and to complete the incomplete solution to the problem of life that tradition provides us with. This would mean that in the plan of salvation the expectations and desires of tradition-conditioned human beings are a central element, to which other (saving) elements are adjusted.

In the view I shall outline here, God became man, so that, once glorified in 'heaven', he could send down a divine assistance that really is an answer to the problems people face in traditional life. In a way, here God takes pity on humankind as he took pity on the Israelites that were suffering in Egypt. Only, in this case he opts for a more 'radical approach'. In this view, the supernatural plays an equally important role as in the view of the 'ascending way'. The salient difference is, that in this case there is no uniform, eternal example to which everything must conform and which everything in the end must go up into. The divine, in so far as it brings about the salvation of human beings, is assimilated to the humanity realised in traditions, or, if you will, partially humanised. It helps people to be more human; and this is not a formula that can be operationalised in a uniform way. Meanwhile, it does embody an absolute standard – a standard that is found in the union through love with the Emmanuel, God-with-us, who, as God and man, gave a new shape to God's willingness to show his mercy to humankind. We might state the purpose of the God-human cooperation, realised both on earth and in the 'heavens', as follows: it is the realisation of a way of life in which everything that is good in traditional life comes into full bloom – something that can only be

achieved if it is the ‘object’ of divine mercy. This mercy changes the traditional ‘dedication-worthy’, because it now appears that it depends for its consummation on something that is not inherent to it, but it doesn’t turn into something fundamentally different; and the life that is saved remains the life of a community. Therefore, that which binds people to traditional life, and to the promises it evokes, should not be confused with passions which are to die down before man can be responsive to God. Human beings fall into idolatry when they *expect everything* from the means tradition puts at their disposal; but if they *expect nothing* from them, they cannot expect anything either from God’s saving action.³⁰

Perhaps it is good to indicate, too, what is emphatically *not* implied in the view I am proposing here. Firstly, there is no question of God having to change in himself, in order to deliver an assistance tailored to human cultures. Between the divine in itself and human life there is something like an intermediate region, in which God’s mercy for humankind takes concrete shape. Secondly, if we assume a divine assistance needs to be attuned to different traditions, it does not follow that these traditions form some sort of closed universes, such as hermeneuticians imagine them – worlds surrounded by, or constituted by, a horizon *for thought*. The accommodation rather seems necessary in order to provide an assistance that can be experienced by people in different cultures as really proper, as coming from ‘closer than they are to themselves’, and thus as mixing with the spontaneous dedication that is constitutive of traditional ways of life. If we use inner experience as a criterion, such ways of life cannot be clearly distinguished. They are not like homogeneous blocks; within each culture, we find different traditions. And people can become familiar with other ‘worlds worthy of dedication’ than the one they were first initiated into. Meanwhile, there are clear differences that we can point to and feel. It is difficult to imagine how someone we know would be if he or she had been formed by a different tradition.

Then, some might think I am tampering with God’s omnipotence and omniscience when I say that at first he lacked a ‘first-hand experience’ of the problem to which tradition offers an incomplete answer, and therefore could not solve it by intervening ‘from the outside’. Hasn’t God, according to Christian doctrine, created all things, the visible and the invisible? To begin with the last point, we can still assume that he created human beings, and provided them with the various talents necessary for community life. Traditional life is not a ‘thing’ that can be put on a par with created beings. And as far as omnipotence is concerned: if the uncreated creator-god used his omnipotence to create beings that need something from their fellows and from tradition that he cannot give them just like that, I wouldn’t say his power was limited. He could still intervene in the natural world whenever he wished to; only

he could possibly see a reason for restraint. And finally on omniscience: the uncreated God may know everything; but exactly therefore it is conceivable that he does not know what it takes for people to have faith in themselves and each other, in a world of which they know little and in which much is uncertain.

6. The view of ‘the descending way’ and Christian revelation

In the view I am presenting here – let me call it that of the ‘descending way’ – traditional life is a necessary ‘medium’ (though not the only one) for, and a ‘beneficiary’ of, the actions of God, and of human beings who, on earth or in ‘heaven’, strive to realise the Kingdom of God (or the reign of God). As far as I know, this view has never been adequately explicated in theological terms.³¹ The ascending way clearly appealed more to the imagination of theorists, who in their thoughts wanted to rise above all which is relative and traditional. If we formulate this view, we can try to see how much support it finds in revelation, and look for signs that suggest that Christians in several traditions have felt its attraction.

My aim here is to show that if we adopt this view, we will see Christian ‘articles of faith’ dovetail with each other to form one coherent whole, and will be able to connect this whole in an intelligible way to Christian practices. We will then be able to formulate clear answers to a number of questions, which are hard to answer if we adopt the view of the ‘ascending way’. Let me give a handful of examples. Why did the Father deliver all things into the hands of his incarnate Son? Why did the Son of Man have his own enemies, and is he to hand over the kingdom to the Father only after he has conquered them? Why did he give a ‘discretionary power’ to his followers? Why did he remain human after his glorification? Why does he surround himself in heaven (or his ‘Father’s house’) with other human beings, while it seems the Kingdom of God is to be established on earth (although it can apparently only be completed on a ‘new earth’)? Why doesn’t the Christian revelation offer a blueprint for an ideal social arrangement? Why is the Christian faith to be transmitted through interpersonal contact? Why do Christians believe in the power of the prayer of supplication, instead of entrusting themselves passively to a providence arranged ‘from above’? Why do Catholics welcome the canonisation of someone from their own culture with a special joy?

I cannot give a complete answer to all of these questions here.³² I shall try, however, to give some essential clues, connecting them with a generally accepted view of salvation history, and with passages from the New Testament. For the sake of readability, in what follows I shall not repeat time and again what I am taking for granted.

The incarnation and the transfer of everything from the Father to the Son. When the people of Israel violate the covenant that God made with them, God does not turn his back on them, but decides to apply a new method to save them: he will no longer instruct the people and the leaders through prophets, ‘from the outside’; he will become man – Emmanuel, God-with-us –; he will ‘write his law in their hearts’; he will give them a new heart, ‘a heart of flesh’ instead of one ‘of stone’.³³ The ‘salvific event’, which begins with the incarnation of the Son of God, and culminates, after his glorification, in the descent of the Spirit upon his followers, can be seen as the fulfilment of these prophecies. But what exactly changes because of the incarnation? Why would God, after having become man, find it easier to persuade people to do his will – which seems to mean: to strive to realise a life in which all people can flourish and find true joy?

In several gospel passages, mention is made of a transfer of ‘all’ from the Father to his incarnate Son.³⁴ In John’s Gospel we read: ‘The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand.’ This transfer can be understood as a transfer of power (and some translations render it so).³⁵ But what can this mean, or rather, what does it matter, if the Father and the Son are one, and the Son does the will of the Father? It seems an empty gesture. As long as we assume that the humanity of Christ has the function to proclaim God’s message from closer up, and to underline its truth by miracles like healings, or, like some sort of catalyst, to facilitate an assimilation to the divine for his followers, no good reason can be given for the transfer. It only makes sense if Jesus, because he allowed himself to be formed by a human tradition, can experience and see things which so far have escaped the uncreated God. What could that be? I would like to say: what people look for and find in traditional life, and what they look for and do not find, with the result that they become susceptible to wishful thinking and are attracted to substitutes for the true dedication-worthy. If we assume that the Son of Man must give a new shape to the will of the Father to show his mercy to humankind, and that he needed to become human to do that, we will understand that we are not concerned with a transfer of power, but rather with a decision on the part of the Father to love what his human Son loves, on his authority. The Son loves what he loves not just as a human being; he loves it too because he believes the Father who wants to further the salvation of humankind should love it, and should literally confirm it with all his might. But he will realise at the same time this should not be done in a way that undermines the faith in traditional life: after all, what he loves is human, and has traditional conditions.

Other New Testament passages suggest that the transfer of all from the Father to the Son of Man is more than an empty gesture. The Spirit that descended on Jesus after his baptism takes him to the desert, where he is tempted by the devil. Jesus spends forty days there, without giving in. Then we read, ‘angels came to serve him.’³⁶ If they serve him because he is God, we can ask: why only now? If they serve him *as a human being*, it means that something important has happened: God has transferred the direction of providence from himself to his incarnate Son. It is hard to think of a good reason for this, unless we assume that the Father is of the opinion that the angels, if ‘directed’ by Jesus, will be better able to realise what he has in mind than when he does it himself, ‘from the outside’. Where Paul writes that the glorified Jesus is exalted above the angels, the same question arises: wasn’t he always elevated above them as the eternal, uncreated Son of God?³⁷ Apparently it makes a difference whether the angels are obeying him as the uncreated God, or as the Son of Man, who is at home in a traditional way of life. So it seems that the Father gives everything into the hands of the incarnate Son, because he wants to leave it to him to work out a salvation plan that is truly geared to human needs and wants.

The recipe for the construction of the church. It is striking that Christian values and virtues (including faith, hope and love) seem only to be capable of being transferred as a kind of infection, from person to person, in the sphere of traditional life, through ‘inspiring’ actions: proclamation, the laying on of hands, joint meals, sacramental acts, the offering of practical help, commiseration, etc. Jesus urges his disciples to make their actions shine before others, and Paul says that ‘faith comes from what is heard’.³⁸ This recipe may seem strange at first sight, considering the fact that something is to be transferred that normal life does not create the conditions for. ‘Apart from me you can do nothing.’³⁹ Why should the faith grow in and with *concrete communities*? As long as we embrace the view of the ‘ascending way’, it makes little sense. If the believers need the Spirit, who offers understanding and consolation, in order to find and follow the right path through life – why wouldn’t this Spirit be able to work everywhere? It becomes less of a puzzle, if we assume that the Spirit, because of the incarnation, is accommodated to a specific tradition, and serves to reinforce the dedication to traditional forms of action. At least part of what is transmitted by the Spirit would thus be intended to work within the sphere of traditional life, in order to enrich it with what is needed to confirm and save the good in it.

In light of this idea, we can understand why Jesus tried so hard to turn a makeshift group of people into ‘good soil’, that is, into the soil of a receptive tradition. He tried, as well as he could, like some sort of *bricoleur*, to make sure his followers would have the right

expectations of the assistance of the Spirit, before it was available to them. And we see that the disciples, even when they do benefit from this assistance, are expected to continue to promote the openness to the faith in the dimension of traditional life, by showing that what it has to offer enriches it.

If we assume that the Son of Man did not want to rob people of their faith in tradition, we can understand why he has opted for a step-by-step approach, a salvation plan that is a kind of joint effort of human beings and God, and must be realised in and through traditional life. Such a salvation plan, obviously, could not be 'implemented' as a single, uniform solution, because traditional life is different from culture to culture.

Jesus is sent, he says, 'to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'; but, after his resurrection, he invites his followers to make disciples among 'all nations'.⁴⁰ Must we attribute this expansion of his mission to a progressive insight into God's will? We do not have to do that, if we assume that he believed that, as a child of the Jewish tradition, he had to devote his efforts to the creation of a church that was grafted on this tradition. Later, others were to do the same thing in other traditional environments. The incarnation of God thus can be seen as a 'marriage' between the divine and human, traditional ways of giving meaning to life – a marriage that begins in the life of Jesus, and continues, with more and more 'traditional partners', in the lives of those who follow him. The 'body of Christ' grows, by enriching itself with the tradition-conditioned spontaneity of many.

This would mean that human beings, in order to do God's will (that is, to save and confirm the faith in life of others), *should have faith both in their tradition-conditioned spontaneity and in God*. The connection between the two seems to be established in prayer, in particular in the prayer of supplication. Those who, in their unique situation, take their spontaneous love as a guide, and ask God like Jesus ('in his name') to confirm or save what they love, could be considered to act as 'informants of providence'.

On the one hand, Jesus seems intent on reforming the traditional life in certain communities. On the other hand, he promises the assistance of a divine helper and comforter. This assistance, we might say, is necessary to ensure that the Christian tradition (in its various forms) invites people to devote themselves to the true dedication-worthy, and will to a lesser extent be exposed to the dangers that threaten other traditions. It is also necessary to ensure that some, like Jesus, give themselves fully to confirm the faith in life of others – to express, as God-with-us, God's willingness to take pity on humankind. However, these followers do not copy Jesus' life; they are not supposed to let all of their spontaneity be replaced by an 'infused' love. Jesus, trusting their insight, gives them a discretionary power. 'As the Father

has sent me, so I send you ... If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’⁴¹ As Jesus, being familiar with a particular traditional environment, can see into the hearts of others, so his followers will be able to do the same, also in other traditional environments – this seems to be the idea. They should take on the task he has taken upon himself (showing mercy to others in God’s name), and, in order to perform this task properly, a sensitivity is required for tradition-dependent ways of acting and thinking. The ‘freedom of the children of God’ seems inseparable from the spontaneity that is needed in order to (make others) experience traditional life as promising.

The founding of ‘the kingdom of heaven’ and the coming of the Spirit. How could God provide a form of assistance adapted to the human mode of existence? The answer suggested by revelation, is this: he took up human beings – first the Son of Man, and later his followers – into ‘heaven’, in order to make part of their spontaneity (formed both by faith and by tradition) available to others, through grace and the Spirit. This ‘method’ entails a limitation: the adaptation of the divine assistance to various cultures (or traditional ways of life) cannot be achieved in one go; it must be an ongoing process which is only completed when all nations have produced ‘fruits for eternal life’.⁴² This would mean that the spreading of the faith throughout the world in part serves to enable the reinforcement of human love, in its different forms, from the ‘heavenly’ realm.

It seems, then, that the possibility of God to be ‘all in all’ is not given simply as a formal correspondence between everything and the eternal, or absolute. This possibility must be created in and through the lives of those who act in the spirit of Jesus, and who accommodate the working of the Spirit to new traditional environments. If they are assumed into ‘the kingdom of heaven’, the range of the Spirit as a ‘salvific instrument’ is extended, we might say. Their spontaneity, formed by both the Spirit and their own tradition, now is lent an ‘eternal value’. And we can say that the living who feel and accept its authority participate in ‘eternal life’ and experience the presence of God. They feel in themselves the working of a will that they trust more than their own will, and can pray (with Augustine): ‘Give me strength against myself!’ The Spirit thus becomes the bond uniting them with each other and with Christ as children of God, and connecting them to God the Father: but the One, or the ultimate source of unity, does not exhaust the diversity and originality of what is being united (and in that sense is really ‘paternal’).

This is not to say that the faithful, each in their own circumstances, can do what Jesus did. The accommodation to the human way of existence realised by Jesus is not just a cultural accommodation. He was ‘made to be sin’ – that is, he suffered the consequences of sin, until

he felt abandoned by God.⁴³ He underwent a criminal's death on the cross, although he was without sin, in order to ensure that sinners could be saved. He made himself 'equal to them' to induce the Father to love them as himself, and to let the Spirit penetrate, so to say, where it could not penetrate before. This accommodation of the Spirit to the mode of existence of sinful human beings is the work of Jesus alone. Apart from this, Jesus effected the accommodation of the Spirit to a specific culture – and in this his role seems to be less unique. Both forms of accommodation are needed to allow the merciful God to come closer to humankind, and to reinforce the desire of human beings to do good in concrete life; but they should not be confused. The first is necessary to see to it that people, even if they suffer from guilt and self-hatred, can feel that God does not forsake them; the second is needed to see to it that a church that includes people from all cultures can be connected with God through 'the kingdom of heaven'.

In traditional life, people love the dedication-worthy on the authority of their tradition (or the 'traditional transcendent'). In the Christian life, they would *next to it* experience the authority, through the Spirit, of God's love. But we can now see that the Spirit (if it works as I have indicated) doesn't communicate that which God loves for himself, but what he loves for human beings – or rather, these two loves have become indistinguishable since the glorification of the Son of Man. The Son became man and gave his life for the people; he intercedes for them, knowing their weaknesses.⁴⁴ That which human beings experience through the Spirit, thus, doesn't offer them a chance to put themselves in the position of the god of the creation story, who, as it were, examines his own work with an aesthetic eye; he learns to put himself in the position of a god who has taken upon himself the responsibility to lead the people, who were like sheep without a shepherd, to 'green pastures' – a god who needed to be human, and be at home in a traditional way of life, in order to do that, and possibly even to be able to point out what these meadows should look like.

The narrow road. Those who experience the authority of the Spirit (a spirit accommodated to their way of life) will feel that they must account for what they do in traditional life. They will have to ask themselves whether they confirm or undermine the faith in life of others. This 'moral pressure' is not new; under the Old Covenant, too, people were taken to task by the prophets for their behaviour towards their neighbours; they were called upon to be righteous, and to take care of widows, orphans and strangers. What is new, is that Christians can count on it that their efforts to confirm the faith in life of others will be reinforced by grace and the Spirit; therefore, they will have to account, too, for the way they

handle this assistance. It becomes more difficult to find excuses. Ingratitude to God is culpable, if one realises that his designs are geared to man's deepest desires.

But if God really wants to satisfy our deepest desires, why then is the way of faith called narrow? And why should the faith engender division and resistance? The best answer seems to be: many people remain selfish, and they cherish illusions, as it were jealous of God, about what they can do by themselves, without God's help. They like to believe that by means of what they know and control, they can take hold of everything life has to offer. They do not want to acknowledge a higher authority, even one that manifests itself in their own hearts. They refuse to accept that in life they are confronted with a deficit they cannot wipe out themselves – an impotence to realise what they spontaneously expect from life, and a lack of love in their own hearts. Only those who acknowledge and regret their inability to love their neighbour as themselves, can see a promise in the new commandment – 'Love one another as I have loved you' –, and be open to the grace that allows them to fulfil it.

But the fact that the Christian way is narrow, and that few find it, does not mean that the range of human spontaneous responses (shaped or conditioned by tradition) is restricted by grace or by the Spirit. The opposite is rather the case. Because of the taking up of human-traditional examples into the divine, potentially all human experiences and ways of acting, except for the urge to sin, can find a divine norm in Christ (when he reaches 'his full stature') – a norm inseparable from his love of human beings.⁴⁵ If God becomes 'all in all' in this way, the prophecy is indeed realised: 'They will be his people, and he, God-with-them, will be their God.' Then people will 'know as they are known';⁴⁶ that is, they will be able to draw more directly from the source of love which, up until then, mainly nourished the roots of their faith in life in secret. This state cannot be realised in the world as we know it. But those who, with the help of grace, act as 'leaven' to reform the world, will already experience something of the joy to be given fully when the world is completed. And this suggests that we are not to imagine the completed world as totally dissimilar to the world we know.

7. Conclusion

It seems obvious to me that our understanding of what Christianity is about, depends on the extent to which we understand the problem that it wants to provide a remedy for. I have tried to show that many things fall into place if we assume that the problem is this: human faith in life presupposes a faith in tradition, but traditions do not provide adequate methods to confirm

the faith in life in the face of disasters, diseases, aggression, injustice, etc. Human beings therefore easily become accomplices to the evil they suffer.

The view of the ‘descending way’, which represents the divine concerned with humankind as saving faith in human life and in humanity, is not new. I have tried to find words for a view which, I believe, has been implied in the Christian orientation towards life from the beginning. A respect for tradition-conditioned humanity is an identifiable element in the lives of Christians throughout the centuries. This is especially true for Catholics, who, not for nothing, filled their churches with the images of people. In my view, this respect for normal, traditional life is a distinctive trait of Christianity – at least if we compare it with other world religions.⁴⁷ The theoretical justification for this respect, however, leaves much to be desired, even at a time when all around the praises of inculturation are sung.

The proposed interpretation of the ‘salvific event’ stresses the need for inculturation, but in some of its conclusions it diverges from more conventional inculturation theories. It is not necessary to think that cultures are only acceptable to God insofar as we can find practices and views in them that are similar to Christian ones. I have created room for the idea that God wants to help all who recognise that tradition does not provide the definitive solution to the problem of life, but who still want to hold on to the promises evoked in and by traditional life. God does not save these promises by replacing tradition-conditioned experience by something unrecognisable. Tradition asks the question, Christianity gives the answer – and it must inculturate itself for that answer to really be an answer. Those who enter the ‘new life’, are therefore not characterised by the fact that they are not conditioned by tradition; they are characterised by the fact that, in the depths of themselves, they are conditioned by a desire, reinforced by grace and the Spirit, to love what is really dedication-worthy in traditional life, and to confirm this love in others. Thus, the Good News is really news, even though it does not detract from the value of traditions. Anything that evokes and confirms faith in life and humanity, is acceptable to God. Thus, we may think God takes pleasure in the ways in which people take responsibility for each other and for the quality of life in communities, in the ways they bring out the beauty and dignity of human beings, and in modes of action that express faith in human spontaneity, like music and dance. But the same cannot be said of all the ways in which people try to explain or fill the gap between the promises evoked by traditional life and actual life. Therefore, restraint should be exercised in adapting Christianity to ‘indigenous’ religious traditions (in the narrower sense). A distinction should be made between on the one hand expressions of devotion, trust, gratitude and humility, and on the

other artifices taken recourse to in the fight against evil and misfortune, which are often counterproductive.

I have endeavoured to show that if we use a ‘divine respect for tradition’ as a key, the shape and *raison d'être* of the ‘salvific event’ will appear before us as a coherent whole. I don’t think I have jeopardised any article of faith. All major traditional formulas remain valid. Human life elicits a need for divine mercy; God enriches it with something that people cannot find themselves; a mystical relationship is at the heart of the faith; the salvation of humankind is ultimately due entirely to Christ, etc. However, some things are easier to understand if we assume that the ability of God to be ‘all in all’ is not given *a priori* (as is often assumed), but is realised by an accommodation of the Spirit and grace to a variety of human ways of life. The involvement of other people than Jesus – in traditional life, ‘the kingdom of heaven’ or ‘the communion of saints’ – can then be shown to have an indispensable function. The humble who are elevated are not appointed as some sort of lackeys to the heavenly king; their own, tradition-conditioned spontaneity matters: it is an instrument, we could say, that they make available to God, so that he can come closer to the humanity he wants to save. Thus we can understand why Jesus promised that those who trust in God will not only be servants, but also will be served themselves – as people who want to see ways of life they are attached to come into full bloom.⁴⁸ As said before, I believe that this view provides useful clues for a new apologetics. I can imagine that the key I present might be helpful too for those who are looking for ways to stress the relevance of faith in their proclamation, and for theologians who want to do the same thing in theoretical terms.

Not everything that comes to light if we use this key is equally heartening, however. One thing that becomes clear, is that *a lack of faith in tradition* – which for long has been characteristic of Western life, and now, because of global economisation and technologisation, is spreading around the world – entails a danger of spiritual alienation. We can say that those who expect too little from tradition, have too little appreciation for what God wants to reinforce and save. Thus, an explanation for what Martin Buber calls the ‘eclipse of God’ presents itself. The further inculturation of Christianity in cultures where tradition and the dedication-worthy are still being associated, holds a promise in my view. Perhaps it will become clearer – also to people in the West – what joy can be found in the faith. But this promise is, like anything having to do with tradition, threatened in today’s world. If the way of faith in tradition becomes more difficult to find and travel, then – if there is anything in what I have said – the Christian path of faith may become correspondingly narrower.

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Note on the contributor

Peter Abspoel was born in 1962 at Haarlem, The Netherlands. He studied cultural anthropology at Utrecht University, and did research in Mali, Cameroon and Nigeria. He contributed to ethnological exhibitions, and worked as a literary editor and translator (translating African literature, among other things). For ten years, as a staff member of a national refugee organisation, he participated in the public debate on asylum policy and

human rights issues. In 2015 he received a PhD in philosophy from Radboud University Nijmegen. Tradition, anti-traditionalism, religion and secularisation have for long been his main intellectual foci. He became a Roman Catholic in 1991. He is a free-lance non-fiction writer and a board member of PEN Netherlands.

¹ Judith Dwyer (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, p. 482.

² Here I am bringing out the implications for apologetics and theology of a view of Christianity I have expounded at greater length in my *Zingeving in het Westen: Traditie, strijdersethos en christendom* (Sources of Meaning in the West: Tradition, the Warrior Ethos, and Christianity).

³ Hermeneuticians may seem to arrive at the same conclusion by a different road. They will say all cultural perspectives are surrounded by a horizon for thought, and therefore are limited. Yet there is a difference. They deny the possibility of access to universal knowledge on the basis of a presumed universally-valid knowledge of the processes of interpretation and the nature of the material our minds have to work with. In fact, they postulate a 'horizontal' heterogeneity between different cultural interpretations to safeguard the (relatively) homogeneous nature of each cultural view, which, they suppose, reflects a general human desire for intellectual coherence. And they believe they can explain, invoking principles held to be self-evident or revealed by a phenomenological search for basic 'givens' in human experience, why no one of these views can be extended to a point where it embraces all that is represented by the others. (Some structuralists and post-structuralists present similar explanations, invoking semiological principles.) In my own view (influenced by Maurice Blondel's philosophy of action) an irreducible heterogeneity is already present in our simplest experiences. This means we cannot get a firm grip, from a reflexive standpoint, on the elements we use to build up our images of life, or on the motives and kinds of thinking we rely on in concrete, social life. See also my 'In praise of foolish conviviality: Some thoughts on the unthinkable connection between tradition, spontaneity and ethics'.

⁴ See e.g. Brian Moynahan, *The Faith: A History of Christianity*, p. 553 ff.

⁵ In Joseph A. Komonchak et al. (eds), *The New Dictionary of Catholic Theology*, p. 511.

⁶ *Ad gentes*, 10.

⁷ In J. Gremillion (ed.), *The Church and Culture Since Vatican II*.

⁸ See e.g. *Fides et inculturatio* (1988) by the International Theological Commission.

⁹ See e.g. Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 48.

¹⁰ See e.g. Michael Muonwe, *Dialectics of Faith-Culture Integration: Inculturation or Syncretism*, p. 13.

¹¹ Perhaps it is useful to stress the fact that I do not embrace any 'traditionalist thesis' of the sort that claims that everything we find in human life and thought must have been put there by tradition. However, I feel justified in assigning an indispensable role or function to tradition. We would not learn to value (and develop) human faculties and virtues, unless we value what can be realised by means of them in traditional life.

¹² See e.g. *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

¹³ For the influence of the warrior ethos on Western thought, see the second part of my *Zingeving in het Westen*. I have taken the term 'warrior ethos' from Christopher Dawson's *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*. For a condensed version of my view on the matter, see my 'In praise of foolish conviviality'.

¹⁴ See the introduction to *L'Action (1893)*.

¹⁵ 'Histoire et dogme: Les lacunes philosophiques de l'exégèse moderne' (1904), in *Œuvres complètes*, Tome II, p. 440.

¹⁶ See e.g. *La philosophie et l'esprit chrétien*, Tome I, p. 130 ff.

¹⁷ *De docta ignorantia* en *De coniecturis*.

¹⁸ See e.g. Jean-Claude Margolin, 'Pic de la Mirandole', in Jean Greisch (ed.), *Dictionnaire des philosophes*.

¹⁹ *La pensée*, Tome I; e.g. p. 99 and p. 116.

²⁰ *L'Action (1893)*, p. 449.

²¹ *L'Action*, Tome II, p. 283-284.

²² Here I am speaking in anthropomorphic terms, which, if taken literally, can be misleading. The opposition between the before and after can be transcended by God's foreknowledge, or by his understanding of all history as a single event (as Augustine understood God's omniscience). However, sometimes anthropomorphism is preferable, I think (as long as we recognise its limits), to a view that represents God's omniscience as similar to that of Laplace's demon: as an all-embracing knowledge of objects and relationships between objects. This intellectualistic conception homogenises reality to the point that it leaves little room for the dynamics we actually experience and take responsibility for in human life. That which motivates people in traditional life is

equated with the natural, and therefore seen as knowable and capable of being manipulated in the same way as natural objects by an omniscient, omnipotent God. I would like to point out that this view is difficult to reconcile with Christian ideas about a god who wants to show his mercy to humankind. The 'Christian god' may have a complete knowledge of creation and the ability to gauge the moral condition of every human heart; but these don't seem to be accompanied by a desire to manipulate the dynamics of social life directly, in order to realise the Kingdom of God. In other words, in the Christian view, God does not want to stamp out the human spontaneity which traditional life evokes and requires. The incarnation seems designed to fill a gap between, on the one hand, that which can be achieved with the help of God's knowledge and power, and, on the other, that which must be achieved in traditional life in virtue of experiences and forms of action that cannot be replaced by explicit knowledge or manifestations of superhuman power. Exactly therefore, a really positive role can be assigned to human freedom: it is necessary to realise a traditional life which nurtures and supports faith in life. In this life the limitations of individual knowledge and experience are transcended, but not in the same way as the limitations of knowledge are transcended in omniscience. I think that generally we find it hard to recognise the legitimate autonomy of the traditional vis-à-vis the absolute or universal, because we feel the pull of a typically Western desire for comprehensive knowledge. Here I want to point out that we are in a better position to understand the Christian 'salvific event' if we assume that God does appreciate the role of tradition. Reverting to anthropomorphic language, I would even go as far as to suggest that an adequate understanding of what motivates people in traditional life was accessible to God only through the incarnation, and through the assumption of human, tradition-dependent beings into the sphere of the divine. And even if we assume that God's omniscience included this understanding from the beginning, we would have to say that the foreknowledge of what he would experience and learn as a human being was a condition for it.

²³ For the sake of clarity: here I presuppose the *will* of God to save man, as he is, and not to transform him (which he could *ex hypothesi* do), into a different kind of being.

²⁴ By the way, I believe that, because of the influence of the warrior ethos on Western culture as a whole, it was difficult for 'commoners' as well to associate tradition with a life perspective. See the second part of my *Zingeving in het Westen*.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, p 49 ff.

²⁶ For 'the problem of life' see section 2 above.

²⁷ *L'Action* (1893), p. 354.

²⁸ *Oration on the Dignity of Man* [*Oratio de hominis dignitate*], p. 121.

²⁹ Rev 21,3; cf. Lev 26,12, Jer 32,38, Ezek 11,20.

³⁰ Interesting in this context are some passages in the famous exchange of letters between Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome. The former thinks there is nothing wrong with the Christian Jews holding on to (some of) their customs, as long as they do not consider them necessary for salvation. Jerome violently disagrees. If they do not contribute to salvation, they are good for nothing, in his view, or rather, they are bad (*An Augustine Reader*, p. 115-116). Obviously, there is no place in Jerome's mind for any kind of legitimate attachment, except to means of salvation. From his monastery in the Holy Land, probably it never occurred to him that if all people acted on his advice, there would be no social life to speak of, and to be able to provide a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

³¹ Some theologians, among whom Karl Rahner, do believe the Spirit accommodated itself to the human existential situation (see e.g. *Theological Investigations*, Volume VII, p. 186 ff.). But generally this accommodation is supposed to help human beings cross the gulf between the finite and the infinite, or the particular (traditional) and the universal. I am not suggesting that these views are wholly mistaken. I do not deny that traditions to some extent mirror 'universal' relations, and thus can be said to be congruent with a universal, unchangeable order of things. However, in my view the maximisation of this congruence cannot be considered to be a condition (let alone a sufficient condition) for the redemption of humankind, because it would come at the cost of the evaporation of much that makes human beings human.

³² I answer some of these questions more fully in the third part of my *Zingeving in het Westen*.

³³ Jer 31,33; Ezek 11,19.

³⁴ Matt 11,27; Luke 10,22; John 3,35; John 13,3; cf. John 5,22.

³⁵ E.g. the Dutch *De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling*.

³⁶ Matt 4,11.

³⁷ Heb 1,3-4.

³⁸ Matt 5,16, Rom 10,17.

³⁹ John 15,5.

⁴⁰ Matt 15,24; Matt 28,19.

⁴¹ John 20,21-23.

⁴² John 4,36.

⁴³ 2 Cor. 5,21.

⁴⁴ Rom 8,34.

⁴⁵ Cf. Eph 4,12-16.

⁴⁶ 1 Cor 13,12.

⁴⁷ See my *Zingeving in het Westen*, p. 320 ff.

⁴⁸ Luke 12,35-37.