

TRADITION AND TELEVISION: RELIGIOUS ASPECTS

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At first sight there appears to be no obvious connection between tradition and television. It is still less evident that whatever connection there may be has any particular religious significance at all. It takes some extraordinary broadcast of a historical event to jolt one into the realization that there can be an intimate relationship between a medium of communication developed within this century and traditions that may have been inherited from remotest times. The importance of this relationship for theology becomes clear only when one considers the anthropological meaning of ancient creeds, cults and customs of all sorts that have been handed down from century to century and suddenly come into focus under the searching scrutiny of the TV cameras.

On November 4th, 1984, Dutch Television proudly claimed a broadcasting first. The announcer declared: "For the first time ever the traditional Hindu rite of cremation is being broadcast live on Western European TV". The occasion was the funeral ceremony of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the murdered Prime Minister of India. Millions of viewers in Europe witnessed it as it happened. They saw Mr. Rajiv Gandhi thousands of miles away lighting the funeral pyre of his mother, his predecessor as Prime Minister of India.

Holy Rites and Writings

The televising of a modern state funeral involving an ancient religious ritual evokes innumerable historical associations and raises deep anthropological issues. It also focuses attention on how a news event can set in motion trains of thoughts that take one to the very roots of some present practices which lie buried deep down in human nature and primordial times. Television can be of immense help in this because of all its powers of expression, facilities for reporting, recording and reconstructing happenings in audio-visual terms, and its vast variety of broadcasting genres, including together with news and current affairs, dramas, documentaries and discussions.

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A scholar of creed and cult cannot help reflecting when considering the Hindu funeral rites of cremation, that had the traditional ritual of "sati" survived up to present times and been put into practice when Mrs. Gandhi lost her husband, she would have never lived long enough to be the first woman premier of her country, the third after her father Jawaharlal Nehru and his immediate successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri.

In accordance with this cultic practice which lasted as long as the 19th Century and was particularly prevalent in India during the Middle Ages, a Hindu widow was burned alive with the corpse of her husband on his funeral pyre. It was said to be the highest duty of "a virtuous woman" (that is the meaning of the word "Sati") to let herself be immolated in this way. Scholars believe that this ritual, which had mercifully died out for a number of centuries, was a medieval revival of a very ancient religious practice.

The sacred Hindu writings themselves, even when describing in considerable detail all the wife's duties towards her husband, fail to mention at all a widow's self-immolation on a funeral pyre with his corpse as the last and crowning act of respect towards the man she was bound to serve and revere during his lifetime.⁽¹⁾ On the grounds of this telling omission, the great 19th Century Hindu religious leader, Rammohan Ray, who paved the way for the prohibition of sati in 1829, was able to point out that a practice which amounted to ritual human sacrifice was in actual fact no genuine devotion but a gross distortion of the true Hindu doctrine based on its sacred scriptures.

In spite of vociferous protests in Europe, as well as in Asia, against any sort of restrictions being imposed on religious practices, Rammohan Ray established the principle that human rights based on ethics take precedence over "divine" rites based on popular piety. Greatly attached as Rammohan Ray was to the Hindu cultural heritage which he strenuously defended against encroachments from Western European sources, he unhesitatingly gave his full backing to legislation introduced by the British Lord William Bentwick forbidding not only sati, but also the immolation of children practised on Sangor Island and the ritual murder in honour of the Goddess Kali performed by the "Thagis", ruthless gangs of religious fanatics from whom the word "thugs" was derived.

There is general agreement today that the sacrifice of human beings in the name of a god or goddess is not sacred, but sacrilegious. Yet it took centuries for the conscience and consciousness of mankind to register this seemingly simple truth and reach a general consensus about it. Religious rituals are meant to stress the worth of the individual person "created in God's image", not to trample upon his dignity by making a human being a subject of immolation or mutilation. Unfortunately, as the Roman poet Lucretius observed when commenting on the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father, Agamemnon, "In the course of history many crimes have been

1. See *Der Hinduismus* by George Braziller (Munich, 1981) p.145.

committed in the name of religion". In this, the Bible and the pagan poet are at one. Biblical scholars interpret the story of Abraham's intended offering of his son Isaac which Jahweh rejected as a clear warning against the practice of human sacrifice prevalent among the nations bordering on Israel.⁽²⁾ The Hebrews were told in no uncertain terms that one cannot serve God truly by slaughtering or slighting creatures created in His image.

Current affairs and news of recent events that come to us through television can uncover links with the past that form the very essence of mankind's cultural heritage. Each culture and sub-culture has its own particularities and patterns, but deep down there are sub-strata that reveal a general, cultural core beneath particular cultural conventions and customs. The records of men's creeds and cults, among them right in the forefront those contained in the book of books, the Holy Bible, take us back not only to the so-called "primitive" cultures that have influenced all current civilizations, but also to primordial patterns implanted on human behaviour at the very dawn of history. The deeper one digs into the past, the more one finds together with undeniable treasures of thought, achievement and art, long discarded rotten matter, creeds involving crass superstition and cults exercised with devilish cruelty. It is not surprising that there are biblical scholars who interpret the very first chapters of Genesis describing mankind's first fall as a dire admonition against fertility rites that often involved immolations of human beings.⁽³⁾

Reviewing and Reconstructing

The telecasting of current affairs programmes about present happenings or situations can, as has been seen, lead our thoughts to the remote past. When television puts on the air a documentary or a drama reconstructing bygone events and developments, then, in its turn, the past is brought forward into the present in our minds.⁽⁴⁾ The name Gandhi is associated both with the present and the past. There is hardly any film that has won as many awards as *Gandhi*, dealing with the life and achievements of Mahatma Gandhi, the chief architect of independent India and spiritual leader of political, social and religious reformers such as Martin Luther King. This biographical film is already available as a video-cassette and will

2. See *Dictionary of the Bible* by John L. McKenzie S.J. (London 1965) p.5.

3. *Ibid.* p.271 – 273.

4. The present author deals extensively with the general question of "History on Television" in an article bearing this title which is to be published in the UNESCO Review "*CULTURES – dialogue between the people of the world*". He sees this as the central issue that emerged in the UNESCO Experts' Conference held on his initiative at the Mediterranean Conference Centre, in Valletta from 11th to 14th October, 1983. The subject was "The Conservation and Revitalization of Cultural Heritage through the Communications Media". Here, the writer intends to bring up for consideration the points that are most relevant to the question in hand, i.e. those with a particular bearing on religion.

surely soon go on the air on the principal television networks throughout the world, so that it can legitimately be regarded as TV material. The film about Mahatma Gandhi brings to life once more on the screen, not only the achievements and the spirit of the man, but also the passing of an epoch in human history and the fading out of a cultural mentality – the gradual withering away of world colonialism.

The past is reconstructed for viewers not only in feature films and biographical series such as *Gandhi*, *Einstein*, *Evita Peron* and such like, dealing with people who died this century, but also those about persons who lived centuries ago, such as Galileo, Marco Polo or Moses. Fictitious as well as factual historical figures and situations, as long as they are true to life in the past, can help viewers today revisualize and pass in review for themselves how people lived even in the remotest periods of human history.⁽⁵⁾ Indeed, it is within the power of television to give viewers the feeling of being actually present while an event takes place, irrespective of distances of time and place. As spectators sitting in front of the TV screen, the living can relive the life of the dead in spirit and go through all their experiences, seeing what they saw, hearing what they heard, feeling what they felt and thinking as they thought.

All aspects of a past culture are brought to life once more by films and dramas of historical personages or periods. The modern viewers get first hand experience of problems and conflicts of past eras, the artistic and literary achievements, the kinds of organization and government, the forms and formalities of society, the customs, ceremonials and cultic practices, in other words, the whole way of life of a particular epoch and place in all its qualities and manifestations. All this however, seldom reaches the viewers in a structured, coherent pattern. The ordering and cataloguing that goes with clear understanding is left to them. It is up to the viewers to review the pageant of the past that is presented to them in proper perspective. Those who followed the serialisation of *Madame Bovary* which started on December 27th 1984, on RAI 2 witnessed an unusual procedure. By putting the dramatization of the novel in the context of a trial of the author for immoral writing, the producers openly presented their own interpretation of the literary work as a conflict of country and city cultures in 19th Century France. The difference of upbringing and mentality in Paris and the Provinces were brought out and emphasised so that one is left with a clear

5. In a paper read out during the Valletta UNESCO Conference, Prof. M. Verdone of Rome University says that history films at their best can not only reconstruct the past vividly, but also perform the functions of historical research, constituting as they do sorts of "historical essays". He warns however, against pseudo-historical films that simply exploit big names or memorable dates for the sake of spectacle and sensation. Intelligent cinema-goers can always learn something even from low standard productions. The unintelligent will be misled if they do not detect distortions in the presentation of history, but this is true of distortions in scholarly books, as well as in popular films. It is not the medium but the dishonest use of it that is to be blamed.

picture of two distinct ways of life in one single country at one particular time.

The setting of *La Traviata*, produced by Franco Zeffirelli, and put on the air by Italian Television on New Year's day 1985, gave a magnificent example of how the whole atmosphere of a place and time can be reconstructed vividly for the modern viewer. There is perhaps no better medium than television to create the dramatic illusion to the full that the audience is actually participating in the action that is being dramatically reenacted and is more than a mere onlooker. Actively reliving the past in imagination with the help of a vivid television presentation may lead people to wish to relive it today in actual reality, bringing back to life, partially or entirely, historical periods and personages long since dead. This revival involves bringing the past not only to the present but also to the future, for it is the wish of those who want to promote this revival to cast the future in the mould of the past.⁶

Contemplating and Copying

Under a title that recalls the famous science-fiction film by Arthur Charles Clarke *2001: A Space-Odyssey*, West Deutscher Rundfunk put on the air a documentary series called: *2021: Kirche auf dem Weg ins dritte Jahrtausend* – (2021: The Church on its way to the third millennium). This series attempts to foresee what the Catholic Church will look like at the beginning of the next millennium. The producers try to show how the cultural roots of Catholics in Third World Countries will play a much larger role in the liturgy and life of the Church as a whole. In the first programme in the series, the viewers are taken to a Benedictine monastery and a Jesuit-run University in India where already now research and concrete experimental steps are undertaken to integrate in the life of Indian Catholics as much of their cultural heritage as possible: Hindu rites and symbols are detached from their original pagan settings, as it were “Christened” and fused with Christian prayers so as to reflect Christian teachings and render them more meaningful and moving for the people of the sub-continent.

Looking back in enthusiasm and feeling in one's bones that the past is part of one's self is all to the good if one stops at that, for there is always something to be learnt by contemplating people's lives, both virtuous and vicious. Passing from reviewing to reviving, and from contemplating the past to copying it, is however, something else again. It is definitely not free from problems and perils for the present and particularly for the future. When looking back turns into putting back the clock, disaster often follows, for the future cannot be fitted into past schemes and cast in old moulds. Politicians who in Europe wished to return to the days and ways of

6. cf. The article by the present author in *CULTURES* Vol. V, No. 2, 1978, called ‘Words into Images: Televising Stories from the Classics’, particularly the section ‘Frontiers of *Pride and Prejudice*: Moral of the Story’ p.90–98.

Ancient Rome, or revive the legendary virtues of Germanic heroes striving to reach Valhalla only succeeded in the end in destroying what they had already constructed and wanted to build up still further. Recent revolutionary movements in the Islamic world that preach a return to past practice and observance have reinstated primitive punishments such as flogging and the hacking off of hands on the score of fidelity to ancient traditions. Only time will tell whether moderation will eventually set in and save these movements from inevitable destructiveness and self-destruction that follows an indiscriminate exaltation of all ancient practices that is the mark of religious zealots.

The wish to be true to one's cultural identity by revitalizing one's cultural heritage is in itself a highly commendable traditional virtue. The Roman poet Virgil called it "pietas" and valued it so highly that he made it the chief quality of his hero whom he constantly referred to as "pius Aeneas". This treasuring of tradition must however, go hand in hand with much sense, sensitivity and selectivity. Looking backward must include also looking forward. The very nature of inheritance shows that caution and discrimination are called for when dealing with a dead culture. It would be madness to cherish equally both the rot and the riches that lie at the roots of cultural heritage. One cannot honour equally human deeds and inhuman misdeeds simply because they were all done by forefathers who are long since dead. Praise and blame must be parcelled out as and where they are due. The dead wish to be remembered for their good deeds, not their misdeeds, their wisdom, not their ignorance. What was negative, they wish to leave interred with their bones. What was positive, they wish to bequeath to their heirs, and this not as a talent to be buried and left unchanged, but as a capital to be invested and increased.⁽⁷⁾

If cultural heritage is not to be taken over lock, stock and barrel without change, but on the contrary selectively chosen and enriched to be passed on to coming generations, then it is necessary to work out criteria so as to distinguish what is suitable for reviving from what should be simply relegated to museums and films for viewing.

The application of such criteria is unfortunately hampered by the fact that the religious leaders who are to put them into practice are often convinced that however much these criteria may concern other religions, they do not apply to their own, which they hold to be the one and only true religion. Luckily, although Catholics throughout the centuries have often held such views and adopted such an attitude, traditional theology teaches

7. At the UNESCO Experts Conference held in Prague from 30th November to 2nd December, 1982, on "Cultural Content of Television Programmes and its Relation to Traditional, Cultural and Artistic Activities", the present author read a paper on "TV - Sagas based on literary works" published later in *"Culture in Television and Television in Culture"*, (Prague, 1983) p.117 - 134, where he emphasises the creative role of producers in adapting literary works to Television. He also deals with this matter in his book, *"Socio-Political Novels to TV-Plays"*, (Valletta 1981) particularly in Chapter 1 "The Medial Filter", p.20 - 81.

that popes and bishops are not exempt from errors of practical judgement and must abide by the rules of prudence if they are to avoid serious mistakes that may take centuries to correct. History shows that overconfident churchmen can do inestimable damage to the Church – the Galileo case is a glaring example of this.⁸⁾ The rules of common sense based on solid anthropological considerations that govern the revival and reapplication of traditions in religious practice and piety are to be observed by all religions, and if anything more particularly and stringently by the true one.

In the light of what has been said above, the following criteria can be formulated:

The ethical test. It goes without saying that human sacrifice in any shape, form or degree can never be allowed to be revived in any religion under any pretext whatsoever. We now know that not only sacrificial murder or physical mutilation, but every form of violation of inalienable human rights cannot please God. Religious thinkers well grounded in ethics should see to it that no spontaneous manifestation of popular piety oversteps the bounds of the moral law. Uncontrolled fervour and fanaticism can not only cease to be sacred, but could become sacrilegious.

The scriptural test. Holy writings are to be considered as the most binding part of the religious tradition to which they belong. Words may vanish, but scriptures stay. Since the renewal of biblical studies promoted by Pope Pius XII, the essential spirit of the Sacred Scriptures can be better understood than in the past, before the advent of literary form criticism. It is therefore easier to submit traditions of popular piety and practice to the test of comparison with the teachings of the Bible.

The catholicity test. In all civilizations and systems, there is a core of thinking and acting that is of fundamental importance and a cover in which it is wrapped up. The cover on the surface can often be detached from the deep core without causing it damage, for however attractive it may be in itself, it is more often than not, no more than the temporal and local outward expression of the essential substance. It is like clothing that can be removed or replaced without any loss of identity. In ritual, the symbolism employed and the image expressed are the outward show and the inward substance. So it is that the rites of one religion can be taken over by another to mean something quite different. Old rites from the past can be revived to express realities of the present, and truths handed down from the past can find expression in new rituals. What is most universal and fundamental is a core that can bear a multitude of covers that best suit the time and the place. The essentially catholic is adaptable to all climes and times.

8. The Second Vatican Council refers to the Galileo case in a footnote to these words in *Gaudium et Spes*, Section 36: "We cannot but deplore certain habits of mind, sometimes found too among Christians, which do not sufficiently attend to the rightful independence of science. The arguments and controversies which they spark lead many minds to conclude that faith and science are mutually opposed".
cf. "*The Documents of Vatican II*", ed. Walter M. Abbott S.J. (New York, 1966) p.234.

The cultural identity test. Each culture, each country, and where they still exist, each clan and class, has its own characteristic qualities and peculiarities. Its deep rooted traditions give it a cultural identity of its own. The Incarnation took place to redeem all mankind. Therefore, all forms of cultural expression, including genuinely human notions in all religions, are compatible with Christianity, to which they can give a local colouring and emphasis of style. The local colour of one country does not necessarily fit another. Notions of Nirvana are at home in Southern Asia, and visions of Valhalla in Northern Europe. The style of spirituality in each case should conform to deep cultural patterns if it is to take deep and lasting roots.⁽⁹⁾

The social suitability test. There should be harmony between the outward expression of individual, personal piety and liturgical manifestations of public prayer. When private devotions take bizarre turns, they can hardly be suitable for social performance by the community at large. On the other hand, forms and formalities imposed on individuals from above will find little meaningful response from the single person. Spontaneity and social suitability must go hand in hand in the prayerful striving of man to commune with God.

The classical periods test. Just like individuals, nations and religions have their ups and downs. Tradition as a whole is made up of different layers from different periods, some particularly fruitful, some almost entirely sterile. The periods of peak achievements are referred to as "Golden Ages" or as classical periods. It is from such periods that the best practices and forms of expression can be culled to be given a new "Sitz im Leben" to use an expression from biblical scholarship. This new "place in life" often implies giving an old custom a new function in modern, social living; just putting it back as it was, will not do. Building constructively on a received tradition is no easy matter. Contrary to what many seem to expect, much creativity is needed. Elements of form and matter must be detached from their original setting, reworked and integrated anew in another harmonious whole, containing both ancient and recent. Inspiration from the past, not imitation of it, is what keeps a tradition alive and vibrant.⁽¹⁰⁾

Culture and Communication

The carrying on of tradition is fundamental to human nature and we Catholics believe also to the handing down of the divine message of

9. cf. Edmond Leach in "*Culture and Communication*" (Cambridge, 1976) particularly Ch. 3 "Objects, sense images, concepts", Ch. 7, "The Symbolic ordering of a man-made world: boundaries of social space and time" and Ch. 8, "The material representation of abstract ideas: ritual condensation".
10. In an article for "*English for Seniors*", a Westdeutscher Rundfunk publication for Secondary School Teachers suggesting how educational radio programmes can be used in class, the present author shows how the radio play "And No Birds Sing" by Ted Willis takes motifs from poetry (Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci") and reworks them into an entirely modern radio drama.
Cf. "BBC Productions" p.31 – 39 Schulfunk, Schuljahr 1984/85 – 1.

salvation. Anthropologists recognise culture and communication as two fundamentally important distinguishing marks between man and beast.⁽¹¹⁾ Only human beings have conceptual language together with the whole complicated apparatus for passing on information which they have developed through the centuries. Only human beings possess the capacity to learn from one another and pass on their findings, thoughts and artifacts from generation to generation, in other words to hand down a cultural tradition from ancestry to posterity.⁽¹²⁾

The relationship between culture and communication is so intimate that they may be defined in almost the same terms. Ward H. Goodenough writes: "As I see it, a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members. Culture being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning: knowledge, in a most general, if relative, sense of the term".⁽¹³⁾ He later goes on to say: "We may define a language in precisely the same terms in which we have already defined a culture. It consists of whatever it is one has to know in order to communicate with its speakers as adequately as they do with each other and in a manner which they will accept as corresponding to their own".⁽¹⁴⁾ That is why the link between tradition and television, probably the most important means of social communication today,⁽¹⁵⁾ is decidedly not as tenuous as it might at first appear.

11. "Men have tried to distinguish themselves from the animals in many ways – as 'featherless bipeds', as toolmakers, as the unique possessors of a soul – but perhaps it is our gift of language that most clearly sets us apart. Animals do communicate with one another. They cry, hoot, bleat and coo... Yet these animal noises are more like our human cries, screams, sighs and grunts than they are like language. Language alone has an inherently meaningless set of sounds, which can be used to form a vast vocabulary... No animals speak in nature, and none can be taught to speak by man". Cf. "Animals, Humans and Communication" in "*CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY*" by Holt, Rinhart and Winston (New York, 1978) p.112.
12. "In the diversity of his behaviour, man is again set apart from other animals, for man alone is capable of developing and perpetuating distinct traditions, or different 'cultures', whether in language or in other aspects of his behaviour. Other animals have but a limited capacity to learn varied forms of behaviour, but virtually no ability to teach their juniors to follow them". *Ibid.* p.113.
13. Cf. "Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics" in "*Language in Culture and Society*" ed. Dell Hymes (New York, 1964) p.36.
14. *Ibid.* p.37.
15. What precisely is the most important means of social communication has always been a debating point among media experts. In an article in *CULTURES*, Vol. VI, No.3, 1979 called "Television and Culture: The Image and the Written Word", I discussed the particular properties of books and "the box" and argued that with the advent of "videotexts" the differences between printed matter and electronic media as far as effects on recipients are concerned are becoming more and more blurred. In Germany now, an Encyclopaedia has just been issued with "talking books" that blur the difference between printed matter and the gramophone. Soon no doubt there will be books with not only illustrations in colour, but also moving pictures. When the stage will have been reached of having "audio-visual books", it will become almost anachronistic to talk about distinct qualities of different media. The multimedia era, which has already begun, will have established itself once and for all.

Religious belief and practice are integral parts of cultural traditions so that the laws of how a cultural heritage is bequeath and inherited apply no less to religion than to all other constituents of culture. The Church has recognized from the start the positive potentials of the mass media that have made world-wide communication between men so much more effective and speedy than it used to be. Leading Catholics who stress so much the negative aspects of abuses in the way the media are employed can easily give the wrong impression of the official Catholic attitude. Condemnation of misuse should not obscure commendation of the techniques themselves and their proper use. It is the privilege of all men to share in and put their personal stamp on the continuous communicative process that has existed from the beginning of time between human beings among themselves, between the Three Divine Persons from eternity, and between humanity and Divinity from the dawn of Salvation History, most particularly since the Incarnation – when ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us.’ The increased perfection of techniques of communication must therefore be regarded by Christians as a real “godsend”, as the Conciliar Decree *Inter Mirifica* implies in its very first sentence.

It is the mission of the Church to pass on the Good News brought on earth by the Incarnate Word, which means that communication and tradition are essential features of our religion. The way this is done must therefore be of fundamental importance and the rules based on anthropological considerations of how to get the Message across most effectively, should be carefully studied and applied. Television is an admirable means to see these rules in operation. That is why both TV programmes that take our minds back to the origins of human traditions and those that bring these traditions to the present and perhaps take them into the future can make a valuable contribution to religious studies as they help to pass all traditions in review and can lead to the retaining or reviving of the best of them.

There is perhaps no better way of bringing to a close these considerations about the religious aspects of the relationship between television and tradition than by quoting from the Pastoral Instruction “*Communio et Progressio*” on the Means of Social Communication written by order of the Second Vatican Council.

“All over the world, men are at work on improving the conditions for human living and the latest scientific wonders and technical achievements play their part in this. The Christian vision of man, of his motives and of his history, see in this development a response – though usually an unconscious one – to the divine command to “possess and master the world”. It also sees it as an act of cooperation in the divine work of creation and conservation.

It is within this vision that the means of social communication fall into their proper place. They help men share their knowledge and unify their creative work. Indeed, by creating man in His own image, God has given him a share in his creative power. And so man is summoned to cooperate with his fellow man in building the earthly city”. § 7.

Social communications tend to multiply contacts within society and to deepen social consciousness. As a result the individual is bound more closely to his fellow men and can play his part in the unfolding of history as if led by the hand of God. In the Christian faith, the unity and the brotherhood of man are the chief aims of all communication and these find their source and model in the central mystery of the eternal communion between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who live in a single divine life." § 8.