THE CONTENTS OF TRADITION AND THE DISCONTENTS OF CULTURE

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Wherever there are lovers there are whispers – and wherever whispers abound suspicion is bound to arise. So, maybe, it is not enough to appeal to love in order to explain culture. Love, that Figaro of modern-day psychologists, sociologists, counsellors and preachers, could, as a term, profit from some linguistic analysis. A term which is used to express everything says, in the last analysis, nothing specific.

One reason, perhaps, why contemporary culture finds it so imperative to establish a link to love is because, according to the well-known thesis of Sigmund Freud, the contents of culture are negative.[1] We do what we do, undertake arduous enterprises, build cities, discover deserts, chart oceans, explore space, because we are afraid of death. On the contrary, love is stronger than death and capable of making us survive where pyramids crumble and hearts fail. But where this love-link does not reach a faith beyond "animal faith" (to borrow a phrase from G. Santayana, while giving it a specific meaning)[2] it would be idle to talk of positive or love-contents of culture.

We need desperately to be reminded of this because we find ourselves in the opposite danger, namely to reduce tradition to a cultural form and then ascribe to it the negative signs of culture. Precisely this confusion is at the roots of our discontent *(Unbehagen)* with tradition. A typical form of Western European reasoning runs as follows: "There is no argument against a particular novelty, *except that of tradition.* Therefore, let us go ahead and implement our dreams!" Since Orthodoxy is associated, and rightly so, with tradition, the dissatisfaction with culture is transferred, consciously or unconsciously, to Orthodoxy and the East generally. Actually, however, it is

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1.   See G. Ebeling, "Lebensangst und Glaubensanfechtung. Erwägungen zum Verhältnis von Psychotherapie und Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 70 (1973) 77-100.

2.   In his *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, (New York 1923) G. Santayana (1863-1952) tried to show that skepticism, pushed to its logical consequences, would unsettle both idealism and materialism and that therefore an "animal faith" is needed that goes beyond the immediate grasp of things. There is, in the love that builds culture, a similar transcending of an immediate "do ut des," a capacity to wait, in faith, for long-term results.

not an argument that concerns only the East, but also the West. In Roman Catholicism tradition plays a central role, comparable to that in Orthodoxy, whereas it is typical of the erosion of the role of tradition that, as a matter of principle, the burden of the proof is often supposed to lie with those who question the change proposed. So, the erosion of tradition is a common European argument because, if we abstract from Europe's tradition, we would have to invent one anyhow.

No language is as living as a dead language

A main psychological reason why contemporary culture has lost the sense of tradition is that this is often considered to be a dead language. The example of Latin is instructive. It used to be spoken, but is no longer used as mother tongue by anybody. We can trace the beginning of the end with Latin as a living language back to Quintillian, who maybe died before A.D. 100,[3] when the difference between written and spoken word starts getting to be particularly noticeable.[4] Indeed, philosophically speaking, a dead language has significance in terms of the difference between what is written and what is spoken. Could we claim a comparable value, in a theological framework, for dead languages?

While it would be to beg the question if we were to go along with the common prejudice and simply assume, without further ado, that tradition is a dead language, the opposite is not true. In theology, there is a difference between the written and the spoken word, and it lies at the heart of theology itself. Many would call it the difference between Scripture and Tradition, even though it might not occur to them to further specify that the difference between what used to be – misleadingly – called "the two sources of revelation" is really one between two kinds of words – between the spoken and the written word. Precisely this ignorance of the ontological status of the word is at the root of the widespread contempt of tradition.[5] But theology knows better. It

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3.   In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, (Oxford 1968) p.754, H.E. Butler writes on Quintillian: "The date of his own death is uncertain. It is rashly assumed that he died before A.D. 100 on the strength of Pliny's words 'ita certe ex Quintiliano praeceptore meo audisse memini' (written 97-100). Others have estimated the year of his death to have been later (about A.D. 118).

4.   See W. Ong, *La presenza della parola*, (Bologna 1970) 90-93.

5.   See Y. Congar, *La tradition et les traditions* II, (Paris 1963) 137-180. For a succinct review of the Orthodox viewpoint see Bishop K. Ware, "Tradition and Traditions," in N. Lossky *et alii, Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, (Geneva 1991) 1013-1018.

knows, with the pre-Nicene tradition common to both East and West that only the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, can reveal the Father, which is why the Son is called the Logos, the Word. Every revelation is to be seen in function of this Word, is nothing but a modality of this Word.

Theologians have not always pursued to the last the question about the implication of this for theology, as well as for culture. They have not particularly devoted time to the issue of what the status of humans would have been like had the Trinitarian God not spoken, had God chosen not to reveal Himself – whether they would then not be condemned to wait for God to break the silence or whether the human species as we know it would exist at all. On the one hand, some (e.g., K. Rahner) have asked whether, if humans should forget the meaning of God altogether, humanity as we know it, defined as it is by its intercourse with mystery, would not have become extinct, since it would have transmuted itself into a new breed of wily animal.[6] But theologians have not asked what culture would be like if there was no essential difference between the written and the spoken word. The Reformers' emphasis on the theology of the word (with its bias for scriptures) seems to imply that the written is the primary normative form of the word, spoken and written.[7] *Verba volant, scripta manent!* Nor have they (= theologians) asked what culture would have been like had God chosen to reveal Himself, but with the understanding that that revealed word was not to be committed to writing but was rather to be passed on from generation to generation as the spoken word – somewhat like the process in which Homer's poetry was handed on from generation to generation, or, better still, like that in which revelation itself was first transmitted before it was set down into writing.

It is hard to surmise how things could have been like. Weary speculation pushes us back onto our side of reality. We may guess that, under our current way of conceiving things, if the distinction between written and spoken word came to be missing then there would be, strictly speaking, no dead languages, but simply extinct languages having no chance of being revived. Perhaps the term "dead language" is a misnomer, anyway. Not the language is dead but rather there are no longer people around to speak it as their mother-tongue. These language-carriers lived further in the hearts and minds of those who were on speaking terms with them, by studying their language and literature,

6.   K. Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, (Freiburg i.Br. 1976) 57-58.

7.   See Ong, *La presenza della parola*, 294-320.

but now that Latin is fast becoming an exotic language they are doubly dead, killed by lethal sickness and assassinated by fatal neglect. That this, as such, is no plaidoyer to restore Latin – a point which is just not under discussion here – may be gathered from the following consideration, more of an ontological than of a pedagogical nature.

Nothing is so alive as a dead person. What N.A. Berdjaev (1874-1948) said of the dead we extend to dead languages. Both dead persons and dead languages have something in common. First of all, the distinction between living and dead characterizes reality only from the viewpoint of this side of eternity, i.e. from the human viewpoint of looking at things. God does not draw such a distinction at all. He only deals with the living, whereas we are forced to compartmentalize reality into the living and the dead.[8] Death, for the believer, removes this ambiguity and makes him see reality without the logical mortgage of death. Besides, there are eloquent examples of the superiority in vitality of the dead over the living. Many a tyrant who thought to remove a perilous opponent from the land of the living found, after the crime was committed, the victim's presence everywhere and doubly aggravating, haunting the tyrant's dreams in guilty suspicion and pervading the hearts of the faithful who henceforth revere him as a martyr.[9]

And so it is with dead languages. Nothing is so much alive as a dead language. Like a dead person, a dead language has terminated its becoming. Like a person, too, it must pass a test, it may or may not enter into the perennial life of the classical languages, whereas a living language is still in the process of becoming and the outcome, one way or the other, is uncertain. Having become what it will always be, a dead language which has not been mortified into a fundamentalism of sorts has something permanent to say. Indeed, language can become dead in the negative sense of the word only when reduced to its bare foundations and interpreted literally. Fundamentalists are right in seeing that tradition contains all the fundamentals needed. Thus, besides monks on Mount Athos it was the old Believers who preserved the icons without training after Western models, as N.S. Leskov's story, *Sealed*

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8.   R.M. Rilke (1875-1926) has expressed this mystery in the following fashion:

> "Aber Lebendige machen alle den Fehler, daß sie zu stark unterscheiden. Engel
> (sagt man) wüßten oft nicht, ob sie unter Lebenden gehn oder Toten. Die ewige
> Strömung reißt durch beide Bereiche alle Alter immer mit sich und übertönt sie
> in beiden;" Die Erste Elegie, *Duineser Elegien*, (Frankfurt am Main 1970) 11.

9.   In this sense, Herod's suspicion becomes perverse faith when he considers Jesus to be only John the Baptist redivivus: Mark 6,16.

Angel (1873), goes to show.[10] But the fundamentalist forgets that foundations follow a certain hierarchy of importance, based on objective truth. He kills tradition by making it conform to the letter as first priority in his *hierarchia veritatum*[11] instead of the spirit. And the letter kills, because it interrupts a dialogue to which it is a means by drawing attention to itself, the means. Any attempt to revive the past as such is, as it were, archaeology where urban renewal is called for. It is the interruption of a dialogue, whereas life is insertion into an on-going dialogue. Such efforts are only justified insofar as we see in them our future.

On the contrary, from the vantage-point of the future, dead languages are capable of eliciting a response long after they themselves have ceased to exist as an independent language. In a sense, a "black hole" comes very close to this description, for a star which is dead continues to exercise an influence as if it were still out there. Indeed, this is the great function of any language, which is dead in the sense of being immortal: to keep a language or an issue alive in spite of the fact that, as such, it could have ceased long ago to have anything to say and exercise any influence. The fascination of dogma and canon derive from their status as dead languages, in the sense of being dialogues one cannot afford to avoid. No wonder that both are archaic in diction and vibrant in content. When both diction and content coalesce we have true eloquence. Linguistic beauty is the revitalization of an archetype brought to bear on one particular moment, presently urgent.

Nothing is as eloquent as a silent language

Any attempt to revive the past for its own sake amounts to aping the language of the dead, that is, imitating an outdated diction instead of carrying on a conversation which threatened to be interrupted for ever. Those who cling to tradition for its own sake are rightly dubbed traditionalists, whereas the past can only be revived as the language of the future. To see the future in our past requires the capacity to borrow signs without a syntax, to make a sound without a noise, to predict the future without rousing curiosity. It calls for a silent language.

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10. A. Martini-Wonde, "N.S. Leskows Entdeckung der Ikone," in W. Kasack (Ed.), *Die geistlichen Grundlagen der Ikone* (München 1989) 141-152.

11. "Hierarchy of truths" means that all truth is relative to the main – deep down, the only – truth: that of the Trinitarian God, who reveals and communicates Himself to humanity in grace. Not all truths proposed by the Church enjoy the same nearness to that of the Trinitarian God.

A silent language is one that transmits a message without speaking. Examples of this are rest in music, the rousing of tension in an audience by putting off the beginning of a speech in order to heighten the expectancy, the signpost on the road which indicates the way without following suit, the taciturn in politics, Carthusian sign language, Holy Saturday in the liturgy. But a silent language becomes problematic when the fitting words fail. Inadvertently we remember the eloquent who become hoarse when they have to speak up and the efforts used to silence G.J. Danton (1759-1794), a powerful. speaker, at his trial.

Tradition has something in common with a silent language. It can identify itself with no one language and with no one culture. It is in this sense a universal language. But though it is independent of particular cultures and languages, it cannot do without incarnation in some concrete language(s). The closest tradition gets to be a silent language is through the **disciplina arcani**, the secrecy needed to protect sacred things from the indiscreet, and **apophaticism**, or the negative theology necessary to preserve mystery. The creed was passed on "from hand to mouth" by the first volunteers to become Christians, for volunteers they really were; they had no 2000 years of survival to go by, but 200 years of struggle not to be discouraged at.[12] Apophaticism is the struggle for survival of silent language in the heart of humanity. And in apophaticism tradition recognizes a kin soul, a language which is silent and yet eloquent.

If no language is so much alive as a dead language, no language is so eloquent as a silent language. For in a silent language, enjoying its immortality without being degraded into a few catchy but empty phrases, the form of silence and the absence of words make for a perfect match.

No language is as sacred as a public language

But though tradition is cognate to silent language it is not, in itself, silent language. It resorts to apophaticism, but is no more silent than music is just because there are rests in it. On the contrary, tradition speaks with the most public of languages. Precisely because of this its character as universal language it can be easily ignored, whereas in fact it is the condition of any other language, dead or silent. It is only the transcendental subject which speaks the silent language, just as only the Church speaks the public language. Now this

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12.   This should be repeated in the same breath as S. Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) warning not to make an argument out of so many centuries of Christianity; see his *Philosophical Fragments* and *Training in Christianity*.

is anything but obvious. Something "sacred" is, by definition, something "set apart." So it would seem that the more arcane and restricted a language the more sacred it should be.

In point of fact, it turns out to be quite different. The public language under consideration is known as liturgy. It is the only language capable of preserving tradition. This it does in a way open in principle to everybody else. It gets its universality not through its factual membership, but through its potential addressees. It is the only language capable of making the freshness of origins available to subsequent generations. The only really fully public language is one in which birth dies and death is born, beginning and end coalesce so that nothing is lost but everything may find its place.

In birth everybody repeats the beginning of the world; in death everybody anticipates the end of the world (N.A. Berdyaev). Every newcomer repeats the creation of the world, but everybody does it in his or her own way. Some are born short, others tall; stout or slim; bright or dull; but all somehow, through their birth, intone a hymn of hope, arouse great expectancies. There is an unbounded horizon of hope which characterizes birth, whereas, as Hölderlin says, "das Meiste vermag aber die Geburt," most ambitions have been dealt a fatal blow by birth. So existents, starting to try existence, follow a certain logic or dialectic, repeat mistakes long overcome, become inventive or depressive, till they finally discover who they were at the moment of birth. And everybody who dies anticipates, in his own way, the end of the world. There are those who die out of breath or out of time; hungered or in surfeit; of a natural death or through violence. But all add just another tinge of mystery to the riddle of the world, nay, conflate into the Great mystery of Being itself. The point is that everybody, in his or her birth, re-enacts the beginning of the world; and everybody, in his or her death, anticipates the end of the world, but, and that is the point, only in his or her own way. Whereas in the Christian mystery, theme and syntax of the liturgy, where it is overtly identified with the Paschal mystery, beginning and end, plan and execution, coincide.

And so does language. In its birth language re-enacts the beginning of speech; in its death every language anticipates the end of speech. Every language does it in its own way. Some, like Jeremias, are perennial stammerers; others, like Zacharias are dumbstruck by the violence of message. But the Paschal language, the language of Christian mystery, repeats the beginning of all attempts to articulate hope, and anticipates all attempts to silence despair, in Christ's way. For this reason this public language is capable of recovering the thread of historical significance from the immense flow of banality, of *loci communes*, of "they say," of "così fan tutti."

Humans learn language; they learn particular languages. But there are also universal languages, like gestures and music. Of public languages which come closest to the liturgy the foremost is monasticism. Eastern theology has eloquently defended the view that monasticism is not the preserve of a few, but a duty incumbent on everybody. First of all, monasticism is a universal phenomenon, found, in one way or another, in practically all religions. In some Buddhist countries like Thailand there was even a duty, comparable to compulsory military service, for everybody to pass a certain time in a monastery. Not everybody may want to go along with the pacifist B. Russell who quipped: "The fatherland punishes those who kill natives and those who refuse to kill foreigners!" However, it is a pity that contemporary culture pretends that its citizens should be able to defend the country against potential aggressors, often only framed as such, and does not equip them to fight the very real though often invisible warfare of the Spirit.

In this regard, Eastern theology (e.g., P. Evdokimov, 1900-1970) has stressed that all Christians ought to be spiritually monks.[13] If there is so much sickness in the world, one has to ask whether we are sick because the world is sick – or whether the world is sick because we are sick. Here, the crisis with religious vocations, is at once a symptom of the malaise and hope of its potential cure. Even in profane literature, much is written about the need of an ascetic culture. Prosperity becomes a deficiency. We need a tinge of mysticism to this ascetic culture. We need a language capable of prodding us on to sacrifice, and yet able to show the vast vistas of mystery. In brief, we need the monastic language.

Monasticism is a language, just as man and woman are two languages and East and West two or even several languages. So it, too, can become a dead language. The temptation – in any philosophy or any theology or any formula for the religious life – to think that the last definitive language has been invented and history has come to an end is great. Against this temptation, the appeal to return to the Fathers is an abiding warning against pretences of this type. Many religious founders did not do anything else but return to the Fathers as "back to square one," a corrective of vision. But the monastic language pays attention to the foundations as the future in our past. The fascination of the Fathers is that they had no such cut and dried formula, they knew that they were God's "dilettantes." Nothing could help the world unite better, nothing help the world better out of its current slump, than a universal

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13. P. Edokimov, "Le monachisme intériorisé," *Le millénaire du Mont Athos (963-1963)* I, (Chevetogne 1963) 331-352.

monastic culture, cutting through denominations and faiths. Without a dose of alternative culture, of which monasticism with its refusal to identify with the "schemes"[14] (Romans 12,2) of the world is the prime example, culture itself becomes a flight from reality, a rehearsal of death in the sense of vanity of vanities, living in perennial mourning. The contents of vision become the discontents of culture.

Man and Woman, East and West are (at least) two languages: one may be using silent language when the other is using a dead language. Dialogue can take place only when language is synchronized. Contemporaneity can only be reached in the simultaneous immediacy of the same vision. The only vision capable of creating universal immediacy is public worship.

But can languages be synchronized so easily? Every language is complete, a monad on its own, Just like sickness, which is a split-image in reverse of the corresponding healthy situation. This very completeness may mislead us into thinking that we are solipsists, each in his own way, keeping track of the great passage of time till we are picked up into the fine collection of being. It was perhaps this type of solipsistic feeling that gave rise to L. Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) adage "Die Grenzen meiner Sprache sind die Grenzen der Welt" (The limits of my language are the limits of the world).

There is nothing wrong, of course, in tying up confines with language, in putting words into their place. Words are not only defined; they also define. Grammar is only an extreme case of custom duty, our solecisms real accidents which take place in conversation rather than in driving. What is wrong is the pretence of tying up the world to the one who speaks rather than to the one who listens; that is solipsism. Because of this it would be more correct to say, "The limits of the world are the limits of my audience." This is true so long as not just any audience is meant, but one capable of accommodating all of reality. That can only be the ideal response to worship. In this sense we see the need of a monastic culture.

Conclusion

The cloak does not make the monk, but monks have been known to make excellent cloaks. One could almost say that the most fantastic collection of cloaks comes from monastic inventiveness. So, monasticism does not destroy culture; it usually only punctuates it with a dash for reflection, though at times,

14.   See I. Hausherr, *Renouveau de vie dans le Christ Jésus,* (Paris 1969) 25-37.

when culture gets out of hand, it can also set itself up as a counter-culture. Symphonies do not make culture (Max Frisch) either, but monks make tradition. They make it by keeping it. Once this language becomes a dead language in the fundamentalistic sense of the world, tradition will become extinct. Humanity, too. Tradition is the global vision of humanity, which is coterminous with the global vision of faith. Vision says everything "in the twinkling of an eye," without recourse to words. This is because global vision is what word is before it is either spoken or written. To say that culture has only discontents to serve is to claim that culture remains nominalistic unless it incarnates the values of global vision, which are real symbols of life. Monasticism is like humour: it is a necessary accompaniment of the genius of a culture, but, if there is too much of it, it becomes a substitute for missing genius.[15] The monastic language is only the seasoning of other less universal languages. Like the salt of the earth, it must be served in small doses but must permeate everything.

15. O. Bismarck is supposed to have said: "Humour is an accompaniment of genius, but, if humour gets the upperhand, then it replaces genius."