



Marcel Sarot  
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY, THE  
NETHERLANDS

# Why Should One Want to Participate in a Religious Tradition?

## Popper's View of Tradition Applied to Christianity

### Abstract

In this article, I apply the theory of tradition Karl Popper developed in an article on the rationalist tradition to Christianity. Popper helps us to distinguish between four functions of the Christian tradition. (1) The Christian tradition helps people to order their perceptions by suggesting distinctions between what is important and what is less important. (2) The Christian tradition provides people with guidelines for their (moral) behaviour. (3) The Christian tradition provides a framework that helps us to understand the past of our own culture, and can also function as a background against which we may form our own authentic views of life. (4) The Christian tradition is closely connected to the Christian community, which functions as a social group to which people may belong and by reference to which they can define their identity. These four functions shed light on the question why people attach value to participating in the Christian tradition, and why they deplore the decline of the Christian tradition.

### 1 Introduction

In the theological theory of tradition, a distinction is often made between (1) the handing down from generation to generation of opinions, beliefs, customs, etc. (*id quo traditur*), and (2) the opinions, beliefs, customs etc. handed down (*id quod traditum*).<sup>1</sup> This distinction suggests that there are two ways of participating in a tradition. One can participate passively, by receiving the opinions, beliefs, customs etc. of previous generations. And those who already participate passively can also engage actively in their tradition, by handing it on to the next generation.<sup>2</sup> In Western society, both forms of participating in traditions presently are on the decline. This is a general characteristic of our society,<sup>3</sup> and not only a problem for Christianity. To give just one example: even though the Dutch Socialist party was one of the major winners in our last elections for parliament, almost all Socialist traditions – e.g., the celebration of May Day – have by now become extinct. The crisis of tradition, however, is especially poignant for the Christian faith. While

1. See, e.g., Walter Kasper, 'Tradierung und Vermittlung als systematisch-theologisches Problem,' in: Erich Feifel & Walter Kasper (eds.), *Tradierungskrise des Glaubens* (München 1997), 30–52 (40).

2. On the distinction between *traditio passiva* and *traditio activa*, see Luco J. Van den Brom, 'Religious Tradition, Change and Authority,' in: Marcel Sarot & Gijsbert van den Brink (eds.), *Identity and Change in the Christian Tradition*, Frankfurt a.M. 1999, 139–157, esp. 145–148.

3. See, e.g., Johannes Joachim Degenhardt, 'Tradierungskrise des Glaubens,' in: Feifel & Kasper (eds.), *Tradierungskrise*, 11–29 (esp. 14–18).

Socialists might claim that their political stance is not on the decline, but just adapting to the needs of the time, and successfully so, Christianity seems to loose on all fronts. In the case of Christianity, we have to deal with a *crisis of tradition*, a *Tradierungskrise des Glaubens*.<sup>4</sup> The term ‘crisis’ indicates a certain problem awareness: those who use this term or related terms, are unhappy with the fact that the Christian tradition appears to be loosing ground. This must be because they attach value to the passive participation in the Christian tradition; in so far as the active participation in it has any value, this value is dependent upon the value of passive participation. The *handing on* of opinions, beliefs, customs, etc. is valuable only to the extent that these opinions, beliefs and customs themselves are valuable. What could possibly be the value of a religious tradition, in this case the Christian tradition which people feel is slipping through their fingers?

There are many ways of answering this question without referring to the fact that Christianity is a religious *tradition*. One could argue, for example, that one knows that Christianity is true or that one has experienced that Christianity is helpful. Here, I will adopt a different approach to this question, by concentrating on Christianity as a religious *tradition*.<sup>5</sup> Can the fact that Christianity is a religious tradition help us to understand why and how Christianity is valuable for people, and why they deplore the crisis in which Christianity finds itself? I will approach this question by applying to Christianity a theory of tradition the original context of which is not the Christian faith. The theory is Karl Popper’s, who developed it in a lecture on the tradition of rationalism.<sup>6</sup> I will discuss the functions of tradition that Popper mentions, and of each of these functions I will inquire to what extent it could also be said to be a function of the Christian tradition.<sup>7</sup> My hope is to shed light on the functions of tradition, the ways in which Christianity might fulfil these, and the present crisis of the Christian tradition.

## 2 Popper and the Functions of a Religious Tradition

Popper discusses the functions traditions may have in an article on the tradition of rationalism. He does not apply his remarks on the functions of tradition to *religious* traditions. Nevertheless, it does not seem his intention that his remarks on the function of tradition be read as applying to the rationalist tradition only; rather, he seems to intend them as elements of a theory of tradition in general. Moreover, he seems to attach much value to this element of his

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4. Feifel & Kasper (eds.), *Tradierungskrise*; Lieven Boeve e.a., *De relativering voorbij: Gedachten over de voortgang van de christelijke traditie* (Kampen 1994).

5. Religion without tradition is conceivable; in contemporary Western society, there is a tendency towards individualized non-traditional religious views. See below, on *modularization*.

6. Karl R. Popper, ‘Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition,’ *The Rationalist Annual* 66 (1949), 36–55, rpt. in: *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London<sup>3</sup>1972), 120–135. Here, I quote from the original publication.

7. Here, ‘function’ should not be taken in the sense of ‘goal’, but in that of ‘proper activity’, ‘appropriate behaviour’ or ‘role’. On the application of the term ‘function’ to religion, see my ‘Religion, Meaning and Imitation: The Christian Ideal of *Imitatio Christi* as a Way of Making Sense of Life,’ in: Sarot & Van den Brink (eds.), *Identity and Change*, 73–90, esp. 73–74.

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argument: '(w)hat is the function of traditions in social life? . . . Can we analyse the functions of traditions? That is perhaps the main task of a theory of tradition.'<sup>8</sup>

Popper specifies *four* functions of traditions. *First*, traditions help us to perceive order in an environment that might otherwise appear chaotic to us:

Whenever we happen to be surrounded by either a natural environment or a social environment of which we do not know anything, and where we consequently cannot predict what will happen, then we all become very anxious and very terrified. We are terrified and anxious, because if there is no possibility for us to predict what will happen in our environment – for example, how people will behave – then there is no possibility for us to act rationally.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Popper draws our attention to the importance of the factual assumptions of traditions. By means of these factual assumptions, traditions help us to interpret the (natural and social) environment in which we live, 'to bring some order in the chaos in which we live,'<sup>10</sup> so that we can act rationally within it. Apart from ordinary factual assumptions – assumptions of an empirical kind like 'if a fire runs out of oxygen, it will become extinct' – Popper seems to think of metaphysical assumptions here.<sup>11</sup> Thus, he remarks about rationalism: 'A part of the rationalist tradition is. . . the metaphysical idea of determinism. People who do not agree with determinism are usually viewed with suspicion by the rationalists. They are afraid that somehow there must be the Holy Ghost coming round the corner—that is to say, the Free Will and the Divine Grace.'<sup>12</sup>

Thus Popper asserts that it is one of the functions of traditions to create order out of chaos by its factual – both empirical and metaphysical – assumptions. It can easily be seen how this also applies to a religious tradition like that of Christianity. Its main factual assumptions are not empirical, though arguably there are some empirical assumptions. One example of such an empirical assumption is 'Jesus lived in Israel in the 1st century CE' (suggesting to Christians a certain interpretation of the historical evidence). More important are the metaphysical assumptions, such as, e.g., 'This world depends for its origin and its continuing existence upon God,' and 'Life does not stop at death.' These are assumptions that are not empirically falsifiable, and are in fact held by large numbers of Christians. And they can help Christians to discern order in what might otherwise be perceived as a chaos, e.g. by suggesting distinctions between items that are less and more important: 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for

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8. Popper, 'Rational Theory,' 43.

9. Popper, 'Rational Theory,' 49.

10. Popper, 'Rational Theory,' 49.

11. By a metaphysical statement I understand a factual statement that in principle does not admit of empirical verification or falsification. The clause 'in principle' is inserted to distinguish metaphysical statements from factual statements like 'some dinosaurs had grey eyes' which may in fact not admit of verification or falsification, but could in principle be verified by a well-placed observer (an observer co-existing with dinosaurs). Cf. Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* (London 1981), 268–282.

12. Popper, 'Rational Theory,' 39.

yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal' (Mt 6:19–20 NRSV).

Popper mentions as a *second function* of traditions that they give us something 'by which to go on' and tell us 'how to proceed.'<sup>13</sup> Thus, the function of traditions is not merely that they specify the factual context within which we must act. An example that Popper provides may illustrate what he means:

When I was in New Zealand I got hold of a set of American records of Mozart's 'Requiem.' When I had played these records I knew what the lack of a musical tradition meant. This set of records had been made in America, under the directorship of a musician who obviously was untouched by the tradition, which has come down from Mozart. The result was devastating.<sup>14</sup>

In this way, traditions typically include guidelines for acting or conventions of behaviour as well. Here again, it is not difficult to discern parallels in the Christian tradition. There, the guidelines suggested are moral rather than aesthetic; they deal with our behaviour towards other people, towards the material world, and towards God.

Our actions may include the revision and adaptation of traditions; like scientific theories, traditions may need correction. "Traditions have the important double function that they not only create a certain order or something like a social structure, but that they also give us something upon which we can operate: something that we can criticize and change."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the *third function* of traditions is that they provide the stable background that enables us to make meaningful changes. In this connection, Popper argues against 'canvas-cleaning': the sweeping away of existing traditions in order to create new ones. He explains the problem with canvas-cleaning by again referring to the analogy with science: 'In science it would be a tremendous loss if we were to say: "We do not make very much progress. Let us sweep away all science and start afresh." The rational procedure is to correct it and to revolutionize it, but not to sweep it away. You may create a new theory, but the new theory is created in order to solve those problems which the old theory did not solve.' Similarly, 'traditions . . . have no meaning except on the basis of traditions and institutions – such as myths, poetry and values – which all emerge from the social world in which we live.'<sup>16</sup> Innovations are meaningful only against the background of an existing tradition. Elsewhere, in a discussion of Marxism, Popper states the same views with reference to political revolutions:

A revolution always destroys the institutional and traditional frameworks of society. It must thereby endanger the very set of values for the realization of which it has been undertaken. Indeed, a set of values can have social significance only in so far as there exists a social tradition which upholds them. This is true of the aims of a revolution as much as of any other values. . . . Some people say that they do not mind this; that it is their greatest wish to clean the canvas thoroughly – to create a social *tabula rasa* and to begin

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13. Popper, 'Rational Theory,' 49.

14. Popper, 'Rational Theory,' 38.

15. Popper, 'Rational Theory,' 50.

16. Popper, 'Rational Theory,' 51.

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afresh by painting on it a brand new social system. But they should not be surprised if they find that once they destroy tradition, civilization disappears with it.<sup>17</sup>

The examples of the inexpedience of canvas-cleaning that Popper gives are taken either from the context of science, or from the context of society. He is not talking about religious traditions. Nevertheless, his remarks may be judged to be pertinent. In two ways, they also apply to religious traditions. Firstly, now that many young people have no longer been raised as Christians, they cannot operate within a frame of reference that used to be shared by (almost) all. For instance, because they have very little knowledge of the Bible, they will not be able to recognise references to it, or to understand quotations from it. This means that they are no longer able adequately to understand certain classic pieces of literature, certain paintings, etc. In this respect, the loss of the Christian tradition is the loss of culture – in Popper's terms, the loss of civilisation. Secondly, the ignorance of the Christian tradition from which many young people nowadays suffer, is mostly not filled by other religious traditions. Many young people are raised within no religious tradition at all. The place that Christianity used to fill in the life of people has become a vacuum. But when people have not been brought up within a religious tradition, and still feel the need for a religion, they have very little to go by. They have to create their own religion more or less *ex nihilo*. In fact, this is what sociologists see happening in Western society: people create their own views of life by 'shopping,' by constructing it from dissimilar and unconnected fragments picked up in different places. This is sometimes called *modularization*: the construction of a 'religion' from disparate modules.

It does not come as a surprise that views of life that have been created in this way are less coherent and have in other ways less quality than views of life that stand in a long tradition. As a result, nowadays even non-Christians sometimes deplore the decline of the Christian tradition. The following two examples are Dutch, though probably equivalents can be found in other Western societies. Some years ago, the conservative liberal Dutch politician Frits Bolkestein – who is not a Christian himself – called upon our society to return to *Christendom* as a framework for the construction of our identity.<sup>18</sup> And over the last year, the discussion on norms and values dominated the political debate in the Netherlands. Many people appear to be worried that, as a result of the collapse of the Christian tradition as a dominant force in Dutch society, young people no longer share a normative framework. The canvas-cleaning that has taken place has left us in a moral vacuum. Though few people argue that a massive return to Christianity would be the best solution to this problem, many are again looking to the Churches to fill the vacancy of 'main provider of norms and values.'

The *fourth function* of tradition which Popper discusses is, that by complying with it, people 'reassure others of their rationality and predictability, perhaps in

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17. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 343–344.

18. For a discussion of Bolkestein's views, see Luco J. van den Brom, *Zin in de theologie* (Kampen 1994), 20–21.

the hope of making them act in a reciprocal way.<sup>19</sup> Thus, by conforming to a tradition we make a claim about ourselves – i.e., about our own identities: we are the sort of people the behaviour of whom you can predict and on whom you can rely. Here, an aspect of tradition mentioned by Eric Hobsbawm<sup>20</sup> is relevant: since traditions typically are shared by groups, by conforming to a tradition we become members of a group. This helps to reinforce the identity-establishing effect of following a tradition. The identity we claim for ourselves is not always identical with the identity other people ascribe to us. If I claim to be Napoleon, for example, it may well be that most people do not believe me. But if I claim for myself an identity by conforming to a tradition to which other people conform as well, I share the identity that I claim for myself with these other people. This increases the likelihood that other people – both those who participate in the tradition and outsiders – acknowledge my claimed identity.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes, by identifying ourselves with a tradition, we implicitly express the wish that our neighbours conform to this tradition as well. Socialists, for example, typically want other people to be socialists as well, just like many Christians would like to convert everyone else to Christianity.

This fourth aspect of the function of tradition clearly applies to religious traditions as well. Christians have organised themselves into local churches. Though these local groups must not be idealised, they often live to a certain extent up to their task of being *communities*, where people feel at home, where they meet friends, and where in times of trouble they find support, both emotional and material.<sup>22</sup> And when people move house, the local church is often one of the instruments through which they come to know new people and are enabled to ‘settle’ themselves, to feel themselves at home. The mere fact that other people belong to the same church will predispose Christians favourably towards them; they know that they share certain norms and values with these people. This also means that they expect these people to behave in certain ways. When they fail to live up to these expectations, people will be more disappointed than they would be about non-Christians behaving in similar ways.

### 3 Conclusions

Why are people alarmed by the decline of the Christian tradition? Why do they use terms like *crisis*? By applying an analysis provided by Karl Popper in another context, I have tried to show that the Christian tradition has at least four

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19. Popper, ‘Rational Theory,’ 51.

20. Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions,’ in: Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge 1983), 1–14 (9).

21. As Jan Platvoet and Karel van der Toorn remark, ‘The fact that one’s identity is determined by the group to which one belongs means in practice that an individual has a multiple identity.’ Jan Platvoet & Karel van der Toorn, ‘Pluralism and Identity: An Epilogue,’ in: Platvoet & Van der Toorn (eds.), *Pluralism and Identity: Studies in Ritual Behaviour* (Leyden 1995), 352. One and the same person can be Christian, scientist, socialist, etc.

22. On the importance of this aspect, see Paul Wilkes, *Excellent Catholic Parishes* (New York 2001).

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functions that it can fulfil only with difficulty under the present circumstances. (1) The Christian tradition helps people to order their perceptions by suggesting distinctions between what is important and what is less important. (2) The Christian tradition provides people with guidelines for their (moral) behaviour. (3) The Christian tradition provides a framework that helps us to understand the past of our own culture, and can also function as a background against which we may form our own authentic views of life. (4) The Christian tradition is closely connected to the Christian community, which functions as a social group to which people may belong and by reference to which they can define their identity. Thus, Popper's theory of tradition may help us to gain more insight into the functions of religious traditions, to understand why people want to participate in the Christian tradition, and why they deplore its decline.