

The Paths of Tradition: Analyzing Research Trajectories in Catholic Theology on Tradition from *Dei Verbum* to Our Days

ANTHONY QUEIRÓS, L.C.
Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas
Rome, Italy

In the introduction to the first volume of his *Tradition and Traditions*, Yves Congar stated that his purpose was “to outline a history of how the problem of tradition has been examined.”¹ Indeed, as the Dominican theologian knew, this theological notion has been used to answer different questions throughout history. While Congar described a diachronic variation, today, we can also observe a synchronic one: several contemporary projects in Catholic theology employ the term “tradition” with distinct goals. Despite their variety, all these projects trace their origin to the reception and interpretation of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. Indeed, although past Councils, notably

¹ Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* (New York: McMillan, 1966), xix (introduction). Please note: In contemporary theological discourse, the word “Tradition” is often capitalized to indicate that the author is referring to a specific theological reality, as distinct from either the general human and sociological phenomenon of tradition or from concrete traditions that do not constitute *Tradition* itself. In this article, however, I do not adopt this convention. The reason is that the very distinctions implied by the capitalized form presuppose certain theological assumptions that neither I nor all the authors considered here necessarily share. To capitalize the term would risk imposing on some texts distinctions they do not intend to assert. I therefore use “tradition” in the singular and lowercase, except in the following cases: (1) when directly quoting a text that capitalizes “Tradition”; (2) When referring explicitly to the distinction between “Tradition” and “traditions,” whether to explain, reframe, or critique it; (3) in section titles, for stylistic consistency.

Nicaea II and Trent,² affirmed the normativity of certain traditions for the Catholic Church, it was not until Vatican II that an ecumenical council attempted to describe theologically the reality of tradition.

The assimilation of this conciliar teaching, spelled out in the second chapter of *Dei Verbum*, titled “Handing on Divine Revelation,” can be roughly divided into three overlapping phases, each characterized by different literary forms employed by theologians to engage the conciliar text. From 1965 to 1985, textual commentaries examined the genesis and intricacies of the constitution, shaping its first reception.³ In a second moment, from 1980 onward, new handbooks and dictionaries of fundamental theology began to appear, which no longer provided a detailed commentary of *Dei Verbum* but aimed to integrate its underlying notions of revelation and tradition into new syntheses. Finally, from the turn of the century until our days, articles and monographs have delved into particular questions of the theology of tradition, seeking to expand the synthetic understanding that emerged in the previous periods.

The second of these periods is decisive for two reasons. In the first place, it consolidated a reading of Vatican II and its theology of tradition, emphasizing the elements of novelty present in *Dei Verbum*. In one of the most influential handbooks of that time, Dietrich Wiederkkehr aptly summarizes these elements by referring to four shifts brought about by the Council. The first shift concerns the meaning of revelation itself: while pre-conciliar theologians conceived it primarily as the exposition of a doctrine that surpasses human rational capacities, postconciliar theology emphasizes the event of God’s self-communication. Consequently, the

² See Denzinger-Hünemann [DH] (43rd ed., Ignatius Press, 2012), nos. 600 and 609 (for Nicaea II) 1501 (for Trent).

³ From 1966 to 1985, several commentaries on *Dei Verbum* were written in different languages, mainly by theologians who had been conciliar *periti*. They upheld the view of the “majority position” at the Council and were very influential in shaping the text reception. See Umberto Betti, *La rivelazione divina nella Chiesa* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1970) and *La dottrina del Concilio Vaticano II sulla trasmissione della rivelazione: Il capitolo II della Costituzione dogmatica Dei Verbum* (Rome: Spicilegium Pontificii Athenaei Antoniani, 1985); Herbert Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968); Bernard Dupuy, ed., *La révélation divine* (Paris: Cerf, 1968); Luis Alonso Schökel, ed., *Comentarios a la constitución Dei Verbum sobre la divina revelación* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1969); René Latourelle, “La Révélation et sa transmission selon la Constitution *Dei Verbum*,” *Gregorianum* 47 (1966/1): 5–40; Gregory Baum, “Vatican II’s Constitution on Revelation: History and Interpretation,” *Theological Studies* 28 (1967): 51–75; Antonio Franzini, *Tradizione e Scrittura. Il contributo del Concilio Vaticano II* (1978; repr. Vatican City: Lateran University Press, 2014).

second shift affects the notion of tradition. Whereas it was previously understood as the oral transmission of revealed truths, nowadays, the faith-inspired practice of discipleship constitutes its principal aspect. An official hierarchical institution is best suited to transmit a doctrine, but only a community can effectively transmit shared practices. Therefore, the third shift locates the responsibility for transmitting the Christian faith in the whole ecclesial body instead of restricting it to the sole Church hierarchy. Finally, in a fourth shift, tradition comes to signify not only the conservation of a once-given deposit but also its continuous development in the Christian life.⁴

The second reason for the importance of this period is that theologians began to apply the insights gained by the conciliar document to new questions around the notion of tradition. The discussions around the sufficiency of the Scripture and the correct interpretation of the Tridentine decree on traditions that dominated the fifties and early sixties became, by then, practically irrelevant.⁵ In this changed theological, ecclesiological, and sociological context, the research on tradition branched into five areas that continue to be explored by theologians today. This article intends to individuate these areas, identify their origin in the conciliar or

⁴ Dietrich Wiederkehr, "Das Prinzip der Überlieferung," in *Handbuch der Fundamentalthologie*, vol. 4, *Traktat theologische Erkenntnislehre*, ed. Walter Kern, Hermann J. Pottmeyer, and Max Seckler (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 106–10.

⁵ There is an extensive bibliography dealing with those themes between 1949 and 1965. I mention some of the more relevant works: Maurice Bévenot, "Tradition, Church, and Dogma," *Heythrop Journal* 1 (1960): 34–47; Gabriel Moran, *Scripture and Tradition. A Survey of the Controversy* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963); Josef Rupert Geiselmann, "Das Missverständnis über das Verhältnis von Schrift und Tradition und seine Überwindung in der katholischen Theologie," *Una Sancta*, no. 2 (1956): 131–50; Geiselmann, "Das Konzil von Trient über das Verhältnis der Heiligen Schrift und der nichtgeschriebenen Traditionen," in *Die mündliche Überlieferung*, ed. Michael Schmaus (Munich: Max Hueber, 1957), 123–206; Henri Holstein, "La Tradition d'après le Concile de Trente," *Recherches de science religieuse* 47 (1959): 367–90; Heinrich Lennerz, "Scriptura sola," *Gregorianum* 40 (1959): 38–53; Heinrich Lennerz, "Sine scripto traditiones," *Gregorianum* 40 (1959): 624–35; Edmond Ortigues, "Écritures et traditions apostoliques au Concile de Trente," *Recherches de science religieuse* 38 (1949): 271–99; Tavad George H., *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959); Joseph Ratzinger, "Ein Versuch zur Frage des Traditionsbegriff," in Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1965), 25–69; Paul de Vooght, 1958, "Écriture et tradition d'après des études catholiques récentes," *Istina* 5 (1958): 183–96. Yves Congar offers his own synthetic assessment of the question in "Le débat sur la question du rapport entre écriture et tradition au point de vue de leur contenu matériel," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 48, no. 4 (1964): 645–57.

postconciliar discussions, and trace their progress from the handbooks and dictionaries from the end of the last century until their most recent developments. By way of conclusion, it will point to four elements that seem necessary to advance the research on the theology of tradition.

Historical Studies on Tradition

One of the main gains of contemporary theology is its awareness of the historical situatedness of its concepts. It is, thus, no surprise that a significant historical component was present in the debates around tradition on the eve of Vatican II. Works like those of Congar, Pieter Smulders, Josef Geiselmann, Walter Kasper, and Richard Hanson construed the history of the notion of tradition in a way that would prove influential in the outcome of the Council.⁶ A theological-historical narrative, which would later become dominant, emphasized the harmonious coexistence in the patristic and early-medieval periods of the affirmation of the sufficiency of Scripture in matters of faith with the need to read the Bible within the tradition of the Church. This harmony would be endangered by late-medieval juridical thought and broken during the Reformation. The anti-Protestant reaction hardened the positions and finished by identifying tradition with the magisterium and turning it into a “source” of revelation apart from the Bible. *Dei Verbum*, as the result of the ecumenical, biblical, and patristic movements, was seen as the corrective for this imbalance.⁷

In the aftermath of the Council, the historical research of the great *Ressourcement* figures went largely uncontested. It was not until the end

⁶ Both the Catholic Pieter Smulders and the Anglican Richard Hanson wrote on the notion of tradition in the early Christian centuries: Pieter Smulders, “Le mot et le concept de Tradition chez les Pères grecs,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 40 (1952): 41–62; Richard Patrick Cro Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM, 1962). Walter Kasper wrote his doctoral thesis in 1961 on the theology of Tradition of the nineteenth-century Jesuits of the so-called Roman School: “Die Lehre von der Tradition in der römischen Schule,” in vol. 1 of *Gesammelte Schriften* (Freiburg: Herder, 2011).

⁷ This is a sketchy and unnuanced version of Congar’s account in *Tradition and Traditions*, except, of course, the reference to Vatican II, which took place after the book’s publication. This same historical narrative can be found in various subsequent works, for instance in Walter Kasper, “Das Verhältnis von Schrift und Tradition: Eine pneumatologische Perspektive,” in *Theologische Quartalschrift* 170, no. 3 (1990): 161–90; Jean-Georges Boeglin, *La question de la Tradition dans la théologie catholique contemporaine* (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 19–123 and 171–237; John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15–24.

of the previous century that new studies on relevant theologians of tradition began to reappear. This more recent historical work is usually deeply appreciative of its precursors, even when it suggests an enlargement or even a correction of some of their perspectives. In the field of patristic theology, a 2010 volume published by the Catholic University of America Press gathered experts to discuss the notions of tradition and the Rule of Faith in early Christianity.⁸ In its introduction, Everett Ferguson calls for a fresh examination of the topic.⁹ His conclusions accentuate the difference of views among the Fathers of the Church, distance themselves from the classical work by Smulders,¹⁰ and claim that the distinction between “Tradition” and “traditions” should not be superimposed on the Fathers, despite its theological usefulness.¹¹

Other studies also revisited pivotal figures in the theology of tradition such as Tertullian,¹² St. Augustine,¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas,¹⁴ Martin Luther,¹⁵ Johan Adam Möhler,¹⁶ and Maurice Blondel.¹⁷ Since tradition and development are often seen as related concepts, the thought of John Henry Newman received particular attention in recent studies. Particularly noteworthy are the works of Charles Michael Shea, uncovering the mutual

⁸ Ronnie J. Rombs and Alexander Y. Hwang, eds., *Tradition and the Rule of Faith in the Early Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

⁹ Everett Ferguson, “*Paradosis and Traditio*: A Word Study,” in Rombs and Hwang, *Tradition and the Rule of Faith*, 3–29.

¹⁰ Ferguson, “*Paradosis and Traditio*,” 6n15, 9n24, 9n29.

¹¹ Ferguson, “*Paradosis and Traditio*,” 28–29.

¹² Robert Eno, “Scripture and Tradition in Tertullian,” in *The Quadrilog: Tradition and the Future of Ecumenism*, ed. Kenneth Hagen (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1994), 13–31.

¹³ Herbert Ryan, “The Existential Context of Tradition in the Early Works of St Augustine,” in Hagen, *Quadrilog*, 32–42.

¹⁴ Walter H. Principe, “Tradition in Thomas Aquinas’ Scriptural Commentaries,” in Hagen, *Quadrilog*, 43–60.

¹⁵ Eric W. Gritsch, “Martin Luther’s view of Tradition,” in Hagen, *The Quadrilog*, 61–75.

¹⁶ R. W. Franklin, “Tradition as a Point of Contact Between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in the Nineteenth Century: the Case of Johann Adam Möhler and Edward Bouverie Pusey,” in Hagen, *Quadrilog*, 147–61; Bradford E. Hinze, “The Holy Spirit and the Catholic Tradition: The Legacy of Johann Adam Möhler,” in *The Legacy of the Tübingen School: The Relevance of Nineteenth-Century Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Donald J. Dietrich and Michael J. Himes (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 75–94.

¹⁷ Pierre Gauthier, *Newman et Blondel. Tradition et développement du dogme* (Paris: Cerf, 1988); César Izquierdo, “La Tradición según Maurice Blondel,” *Scripta theologica* 21, no. 1 (1989): 63–96; Robert C. Koerpel, “Between ‘History and Dogma’: On the Spirit of Tradition in the Demands and Limitations of Modernity,” *New Blackfriars* 95, no. 1055 (2014): 3–20; Koerpel, *Maurice Blondel: Transforming Catholic Theology* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2018).

influence between the English convert and the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Perrone,¹⁸ and the doctoral thesis of Andrew Meszaros, which investigates Newman's indirect impact on *Dei Verbum* through Congar.¹⁹ In the next section, we will see how disputes over the soundness of the criteria for authentic development presented in Newman's famous *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* and his "dogmatic principle" divide contemporary theologians.

The works of twentieth-century theologians who exerted an influence upon the shifts in theology of tradition, such as Edmond Ortigues,²⁰ Geiselmann,²¹ and George Tavad,²² have also garnered interest in the past decades. Among them, the Dominican Congar holds a place of honor. While some recent works limit themselves to a laudatory presentation of Congar's theology of tradition,²³ others engage in a more detailed analysis of themes such as the development of dogma²⁴ or the notion of apostolicity.²⁵ Given the completeness of his work on tradition, it frequently serves as

¹⁸ Charles Michael Shea, "Father Giovanni Perrone and Doctrinal Development in Rome: An Overlooked Legacy of Newman's *Essay on Development*," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 20, no. 1 (2013): 85–116; Shea, "From Implicit and Explicit Reason to Inference and Assent: The Significance of John Henry Newman's Seminary Studies in Rome," *Journal of Theological Studies* 67, no. 1 (2016): 143–71. These studies became part of Shea's *Newman's Early Roman Catholic Legacy, 1845–1854* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁹ Andrew Meszaros, *The Prophetic Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also Meszaros, "Haec Traditio Proficit: Congar's Reception of Newman in *Dei Verbum*, Section 8," *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011): 247–54.

²⁰ Jacob Schmutz, "Edmond Ortigues, théologien entre deux conciles," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 173 (2016): 51–71.

²¹ Daniel Eichhorn, *Katholisches Schiftpinzip? Josef Rupert Geiselmanns These der materialen Schriftsuffizienz* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016).

²² The already cited *Quadrilog*, ed. Hagen, is a festschrift in honor of the French-American theologian, and several contributors make reference to him. One of the articles is devoted to his notion of tradition: Marc R. Alexander, "G. H. Tavad's Concept of Tradition," in Hagen, *Quadrilog*, 287–311.

²³ Alberto Toutin, "Tradición e historia en Congar: desafío y oportunidades para una renovación en la transmisión de la fe," *Teología y vida* 52 (2011), 503–26; Frère Émile de Taizé, *Fidèle à l'avenir: À l'écoute du Cardinal Congar* (Taizé, France: Les presses de Taizé, 2011). An English translation of the second work has been published as Émile de Taizé, *Faithful to the Future: Listening to Yves Congar*, trans. Karen Scott (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

²⁴ Frederick M. Jelly, "Tradition as the Development of Dogma according to Yves Congar," in Hagen, *Quadrilog*, 189–207.

²⁵ François Bousquet, "La dimension apostolique de la tradition selon le Père Congar," *Transversalités* 98 (2006): 77–88.

a point of comparison for other theories.²⁶ In recent years, a more critical attitude to this theology emerged, arguing its inadequacy to sustain the interpretation of Christianity to which Congar himself adhered,²⁷ the ecumenical insufficiency of its proposals,²⁸ or some speculative deficiencies.²⁹ To date, the most complete approach to the theology of tradition of the French Dominican remains a scarcely known doctoral thesis published in German in 1989 by Johannes Bunnenberg. In it, the author argues that tradition is not only one of the themes in Congar's theology, but rather its formal principle.³⁰

Finally, the passage of time turned the conciliar event itself into a subject of historical studies. The publication of the *Acta Synodalia*³¹ and the availability of new sources provided additional material for historical research.³² Riccardo Burigana inscribes his *La Bibbia nel Concilio* in a new phase of the historical studies on *Dei Verbum*.³³ More recently, Karim

²⁶ E.g.: Joshua Brotherton, "Revisiting the Sola Scripture Debate: Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger on Tradition," *Pro Ecclesia* 24, no. 1 (2015): 85–114; Andrew Chase, *Tradition in the Theology of Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2019); Ivana Noble, "The Tension Between an Eschatological and a Utopic Understanding of Tradition: Tillich, Florovsky, and Congar," *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 3 (2016): 400–421; Aidan Nichols, "T. S. Eliot and Yves Congar on the Nature of Tradition," *Angelicum* 61 (1984): 373–85; Hans Boersma, "On Baking Pumpkin Pie: Kevin Vanhoozer and Yves Congar on Tradition," *Calvin Theological Journal* 42 (2007): 237–55.

²⁷ Jonathan Robinson, "Congar on Tradition," in *Yves Congar Theologian of the Church*, ed. Gabriel Flynn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 329–55, at 331–35.

²⁸ John Webster, "Purity and Plenitude: Evangelical Reflections on Congar's *Tradition and Traditions*," in Flynn, *Yves Congar Theologian of the Church*, 43–65.

²⁹ Paul Clarke, "The Post-Traditional Ontology and Hermeneutics of Congar's Theology of History," *New Blackfriars* 103, no. 1106 (2022): 499–516.

³⁰ Johannes Bunnenberg, *Lebendige Treue zum Ursprung: Das Traditionsverständnis Yves Congar* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1989), 104.

³¹ *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Vaticani II* (Città del Vaticano: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–2000).

³² An extensive inventory of publications on the Council can be found in Philippe J. Roy, *Bibliographie du Concile Vatican II* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012). Two Roman Universities produced valuable material for the historical study of the Council: Holy Cross University edited the *Concilii Vatican II Synopsis*, including Francisco Gil Hellín, *Dei Verbum*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), and the Lateran University established the *Centro Studi sul Concilio Vaticano II*, that from 2002 until 2016 published six historical volumes. See specially Philippe Chenaux, ed., *Il Concilio Vaticano II alla luce degli archivi dei padri conciliari* (Vatican City: Lateran University Press, 2015).

³³ Riccardo Burigana, *La Bibbia nel Concilio* (Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino, 1998), 17–18, 435–37.

Schelkens has published a detailed analysis of the preliminary schema *De fontibus*, highlighting the diversity of points of view present in its composition.³⁴

All these studies strive to understand how the Fathers of the Church, classical and contemporary theologians, and the ecclesiastical magisterium understood and articulated the notion of tradition. In the footsteps of the *Ressourcement* theologians, they undertake this effort as an act of attention to tradition itself, aimed at gaining access to the consciousness of the Church expressed in theological formulations. Current historical-theological studies continue to build upon the findings of the now-classical works of the past century but also are in a position to take a critical distance from their interpretations. They are not beholden to the same discussions that captured the attention of the theologians before Vatican II, so they can examine these debates from a different standpoint and adopt a less passionate attitude toward the Council as a historical event. This possibility, coupled with the availability of a voluminous amount of material, allows for profuse theological research.

Change and Continuity in Tradition

Prima facie, tradition and change seem antagonistic concepts. However, since at least the time of Vincent of Lérins, Catholic theologians have been aware of a development in doctrine, an awareness intensified in the past centuries due to a growing historical consciousness.³⁵ How is development possible in a divine revelation given once and for all? At the time of Vatican II, the standard answer included the distinction between form and content in doctrine.³⁶ Pope John XXIII, in the opening speech of the Council, echoed this conception and based his call for *aggiornamento* upon it.³⁷ Early postconciliar works on tradition, such as the one written by James

³⁴ Karim Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

³⁵ See Aidan Nichols, *From Newman to Congar: The Idea of Doctrinal Development from the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990); Guy Mansini, "The Development of the Development of Doctrine in the Twentieth Century," *Angelicum* 93, no. 4 (2016): 785–822.

³⁶ Cf. Thomas Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 145–52.

³⁷ John XIII, "Allocutio in sollemni SS. Concilii inauguratione," October 11, 1962, §6: "Est enim aliud ipsum depositum Fidei, seu veritates, quae veneranda doctrina nostra continentur, aliud modus, quo eadem enuntiantur, eodem tamen sensu eademque sententia."

P. Mackey in 1968, made use of this distinction.³⁸ However, subsequent philosophical developments stemming from Gadamerian hermeneutics challenged its hasty employ.³⁹ The International Theological Commission, under the presidency of Kasper, stated in 1989: "It is not possible to make a neat distinction between content and form of expression. The symbolic nature of language is not simply an item of apparel, but in some way, truth itself incarnate."⁴⁰ These changes demand that twenty-first-century theologians adopt other tools to deal with this question.

Theologians of a more liberal leaning tend to use a practical understanding of tradition, where the act of transmitting takes precedence over the content. American theologians John E. Thiel and Terence Tilley appeal to non-foundationalism and pragmatism,⁴¹ while their European colleagues Lieven Boeve and Michael Quisinsky share the postmodern rejection of meta-narratives and resort to the category of "interruption" to conceive the interaction between Christian tradition and the contemporary world.⁴² These theologians emphasize the changes in Catholic practices and doctrinal formulations and argue that continuity in tradition can be construed (and sometimes imposed) only retrospectively.

Other recent works emphasize the aspect of discontinuity in tradition from very different starting points. Philipp Rosemann explores the connections between tradition and transgression, combining the philosophy of Michel Foucault with medieval biblical exegesis.⁴³ Anne M. Carpenter's *Nothing Gained is Eternal* weaves a complex discourse in dialogue with figures associated with *Ressourcement* theology and contemporary Black authors. Her stated aim is to provide "a theoretical account of what

³⁸ James P. Mackey, *Tradition and Change in the Church* (Dayton, OH: Pflaum, 1968), 53.

³⁹ Vincent Holzer, "Le renouvellement du principe dogmatique en théologie contemporaine," *Recherches de science religieuse* 94, no. 1 (2006): 99–128; Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition—After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 121–23.

⁴⁰ International Theological Commission, *The Interpretation of Dogma*, III.3.

⁴¹ John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition. Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Terrence W. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

⁴² Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Boeve, "Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Lessons from Vatican II's Constitution *Dei Verbum* for Contemporary Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 4 (2011): 416–33; Michael Quisinsky, "Can Tradition (Not) Change?," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 86, no. 1 (2010): 107–36.

⁴³ Philipp W. Rosemann, *Charred Root of Meaning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

tradition is"⁴⁴ in its historical concreteness marred by the reality of sin, particularly the sins of colonialism and racism. The theologian defines tradition as Christian action,⁴⁵ and since this action had often been a vehicle for oppression, the image she depicts is ambiguous and far from any triumphalism.⁴⁶ David Bentley Hart's *Tradition and Apocalypse* questions even further the concept of tradition, described in the first lines of the book as "incorrigibly obscure and incoherent."⁴⁷ For the Orthodox theologian, the only possible way to make sense of tradition is to conceive it as an eschatological orientation toward its fulfillment, continually overturning past configurations of orthodoxy.⁴⁸

Of course, theologians who emphasize continuity in tradition take a different approach and draw from another set of intellectual references. The American edition of the *Communio* journal devoted its winter 2017 issue to the topic, with appeals to Henri de Lubac,⁴⁹ Josef Pieper,⁵⁰ and Blondel.⁵¹ Lewis Ayres inscribes his work on tradition in the line proposed by Pope Benedict XVI's "hermeneutic of reform in continuity,"⁵² and works toward conceiving a theology of tradition capable of integrating patristic scholarship and dogmatic and speculative theology, a task he laments the *Ressourcement* was not able to accomplish.⁵³ In the introduction of his already-quoted *Prophetic Church*, Meszaros highlights the importance for Newman of the "dogmatic principle" in tradition and distances himself from the interpretations of Thiel, Boeve, and Tilley.⁵⁴

⁴⁴ Anne M. Carpenter, *Nothing Gained Is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2022), xiii ("Introduction").

⁴⁵ Particularly in her analysis of Maurice Blondel; see Carpenter, *Nothing Gained is Eternal*, 72.

⁴⁶ Carpenter, *Nothing Gained is Eternal*, 169.

⁴⁷ David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 1.

⁴⁸ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 152.

⁴⁹ Nicholas J. Healy Jr., "Henri de Lubac on the Development of Doctrine," *Communio* 44 (2017): 667–89.

⁵⁰ D. C. Schindler, "Taking Truth for Granted: A Reflection on the Significance of Tradition in Josef Pieper," *Communio* 44 (2017): 690–717.

⁵¹ Rodney Howsare, "Tradition as Gift: On the Theologian's Responsibility to Tradition," *Communio* 44 (2017): 810–43.

⁵² Lewis Ayres, "Totius Traditionis Mirabile Sacramentum: Toward a Theology of Tradition in the Light of *Dei Verbum*," in *Dogma and Ecumenism, Vatican II and Karl Barth's Ad Limina Apostolorum*, ed. Matthew Levering, Bruce L. McCormack, and Thomas Joseph White (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 54–80, at 58n7.

⁵³ Lewis Ayres, "Seven theses on Dogmatics and Patristics in Catholic Theology," *Modern Theology* 38, no. 1 (2022): 36–62, at 39.

⁵⁴ Andrew Meszaros, *Prophetic Church*, 1–12.

At the end of *Tradition and Apocalypse*, Hart suggests that the rift between him and those “entirely unpersuaded” by his argument comes from the fact that they “mean very different, perhaps ultimately incompatible things when (they) speak of Christian tradition or revelation or faith or doctrine.” In this case, he says, the only thing to do is “leave the matter there and go our separate ways.”⁵⁵ It may well be the case. Since there is no foreseeable conciliation between those two perspectives, we can only remark on three factors that lie at the basis of these disagreements.

The first is the confidence in the possibility of discerning continuity or development in the historical changes that Christian doctrines and practices underwent through time. It is, therefore, no surprise that both camps disagree on their evaluation of Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* and, to a lesser extent, Blondel’s *History and Dogma*.⁵⁶ Tilley surveys and criticizes Newman’s seven notes, arguing that they fail to provide adequate criteria for distinguishing between development and corruption,⁵⁷ while Hart, more caustically, considers the procedure of the *Essay* “a sleight of hand,” its solution “a failure,” and the category of development bereft of “any probative use” and implies that the whole book is “an exercise in ideology and a collection of historical fables.”⁵⁸ Theologians committed to a notion of continuity frequently appeal to Newman but rarely directly address the critics of his theory.⁵⁹ Meszaros is a notable exception, since he devotes the last chapter of his book to formulating a theory of development that draws from Newman and Congar (a figure inexplicably absent from the works of Carpenter and Hart) and seeks to harmonize divine providence and historical contingency in the formation of doctrinal enunciations.⁶⁰ He notes that the unity, coherence, and com-

⁵⁵ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 186–87.

⁵⁶ We discuss briefly here the debate around Newman. For Blondel, Howsare and Carpenter use the work of the French philosopher in very different ways in “Tradition as Gift,” 822–42, and *Nothing Gained is Eternal*, 37–78, respectively. Hart considers Blondel’s account of development more promising than Newman’s, but equally unconvincing (*Tradition and Apocalypse*, 67–87).

⁵⁷ Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, 110–14.

⁵⁸ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, respectively 3, 9, 89, 45.

⁵⁹ Reinhard Hütter, “Progress, Not Alteration of the Faith: Beyond Antiquarianism and Presentism. John Henry Newman, Vincent of Lérins, and the Criterion of Identity of the Development of Doctrine,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 19, no. 2 (2021): 333–91; José Granados, “From Flesh to Flesh: On the Sacramental Meaning of Tradition,” *Communio* 44 (2017): 643–66, at 659. Ayres does offer a defense of Newman’s account in “*Totius Traditionis Mirabile Sacramentum*,” 75–79.

⁶⁰ Meszaros, *Prophetic Church*, 198–239, especially from 215 onwards.

municability of revelation are assumed principles in his endeavor, which points to the second factor of disagreement.

The two theological tendencies we are describing take two different angles to look at tradition as their primary vantage point. A comparison of two definitions would make it clear. While Ayres describes tradition as “the fundamental theological act because of fundamental Christological and Trinitarian dynamics,”⁶¹ Carpenter writes that “tradition, in a Blondelian mode, is what Christians do.”⁶² Of course, neither of these definitions intend to be exclusive. They are, nevertheless, paradigmatic of what Emanuel Durand dubs, respectively, a high conception of tradition and an empirical approach.⁶³ Those who emphasize the continuity of tradition tend to focus on its theological dimension, seeing it as the continuous work of God in the Church, a notion already present in *Dei Verbum*.⁶⁴ The conciliar document, however, left unaddressed the human dimension of the phenomenon and the contingency of formulas, rites, and practices in the life of the Church, aspects highlighted by theologians who emphasize discontinuity.

Another opposition functions as the third factor of disagreement: tradition as an act or as a content. Since the first post-Vatican II writings on tradition, theologians of a more progressive bent have accentuated the active element by defining tradition as “a process, an activity, an occurrence,”⁶⁵ proposing “a practical theory of tradition”⁶⁶ and contraposing it to “a static whole of doctrine, rules, and cult.”⁶⁷ In this perspective, if the main element in tradition is the act of transmitting itself, changes in the content handed on are of lesser importance, since they do not affect the basic dynamic of transmission. Jonathan Robinson attacks this conception as unsustainable, since every act of transmission necessitates a content, and the content of Christian revelation conditions how we understand and

⁶¹ Ayres, “*Totius Traditionis Mirabile Sacramentum*,” 55.

⁶² Carpenter, *Nothing Gained is Eternal*, 72.

⁶³ Emmanuel Durand, “Toward a Dialogical Approach of Tradition, Allowing for Coherent Self-Criticism,” in Peter De Mey, Kristof Struys, and Viorel Coman, eds., *Answerable for Our Beliefs: Reflections on Theology and Contemporary Culture* (Leuven: Peeters, 2022), 279–305, at 279.

⁶⁴ *Dei Verbum* §8. This notion had already earned criticism during the conciliar sessions, as detailed by Joseph Ratzinger in “Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimmler, vol. 3 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 186–89.

⁶⁵ Mackey, *Tradition and Change*, ix.

⁶⁶ Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, 50–65.

⁶⁷ Boeve, “Revelation, Scripture and Tradition,” 422–23.

perform the transmission.⁶⁸ Both Tilley and Robinson attribute to Congar responsibility for the shift from content to act, quoting a passage from *Tradition and Traditions* where he writes that “tradition is not primarily to be defined by a particular material object, but by the act of transmission, and its content is simply *id quod traditum est, id quod traditor*.”⁶⁹ However, both men recognize that the statement does not possess an absolute value for the Dominican friar. If anything, Congar strives to achieve an equilibrium between the different aspects of tradition, allowing theologians such as Meszaros or Ayres to take inspiration from his work to build a description of tradition that assures its continuity.

These fundamental differences make the prospect of a mediation unlikely. However, each side of the divide would do well to take seriously the exigencies of the other. Catholic theologians committed to the principles of unity, coherence, and communicability of revelation identified by Meszaros must elaborate an account of development that allows for continuity and change. Hopefully, they will do so with due attention to the different aspects of tradition, such as its active and objective dimensions, and combine, as Durand suggests, theological conviction and empirical approach.⁷⁰

Criteriaology and Normativity of Tradition

In 1963, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of the Churches adopted the distinction between “Tradition” and “traditions” in the report of its Fourth World Conference, held in Montreal, Canada.⁷¹ This event and the title of Congar’s two volumes contributed to the diffusion of the usage among theologians after Vatican II. This distinction poses the question of the criteria for discerning what is constitutive of

⁶⁸ Jonathan Robinson, “Congar on Tradition,” in Flynn, *Yves Congar*, 329–55, at 331–35.

⁶⁹ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 296. See Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, 50; Robinson, “Congar on Tradition,” 331.

⁷⁰ Durand, “Toward a Dialogical Approach of Tradition,” 296–97.

⁷¹ See Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of the Churches, “Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions,” in *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*, ed. P. C. Rodger and L. Vischer (London: SCM, 1964), 50–61. Congar affirms that this distinction, which is becoming “normal and classical in Catholic theology,” can be traced back to an 1856 article by the Tübingen Catholic theologian Johann Evangelist Kuhn (*Tradition and Traditions*, 286). The French Dominican, however, admits that the direct inspiration for the title of his book was the study commission established by the World Council of Churches, “without, however, necessarily ascribing to it the same content as would the members of that Commission” (470).

tradition and what is not. Yet, according to Joseph Ratzinger, *Dei Verbum* fails to provide such criteria.⁷² If the distinction is not to be altogether abandoned,⁷³ it is necessary to establish a theological criteriology of the expressions of tradition, a task that several theologians have taken up since the early 1980s.

A chapter in Gerald O'Collins's 1981 *Fundamental Theology* expresses this concern in its title: "Finding the Tradition within the Traditions."⁷⁴ The Jesuit theologian assesses some possible criteria to ascertain the apostolic tradition within its expressions across time, concluding that none of them is sufficient by itself and that the ultimate criterion is the Risen Lord.⁷⁵ Almost forty years later, he readdressed the topic in two chapters of *Tradition: Understanding Christian Tradition*. Its fourth chapter lists a broad range of forms through which the Church passes on the faith, including Scripture, creeds, sacraments, music, architecture, and art, among others. All these means of transmission receive their value because they are related to *Christus praesens*, the only *traditum* of tradition.⁷⁶ However, when O'Collins turns to describe how the Church arrives at determined conclusions in reference to her tradition, it is hard to see a consistent use of theological criteriology. Instead, the book illustrates different reasoning processes that seem tailored to arrive at the general progressive results that the author happens to support in themes such as the possibility of female ordinations to the priesthood, the liceity of artificial contraception, and the reception of the Eucharist by civilly remarried Catholics.⁷⁷

Hermann Pottmeyer, in 1986, proposed a wide-ranging treatment of the question, considering both historical and systematic aspects, in the most

⁷² Ratzinger, "Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation," 185–86. Franzini has a more positive view of the conciliar text on this aspect (*Tradizione e Scrittura*, 311–27).

⁷³ Already in the 1970s, Tavard had rejected the distinction, arguing for a strong discontinuity in tradition ("Tradition in Theology: A Methodological Approach," in *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition*, ed. Joseph F. Kelly [Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1976], 114–15). From a continuist perspective, José Granados criticized the distinction recently in "From Flesh to Flesh: The Sacramental Meaning of Tradition," *Communio* 44 (2017): 660–61. Bernard Sesboué, in an article directed against the French traditionalists, defended it in 1990: "Tradition and traditions," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 112, no. 4 (1990): 570–85.

⁷⁴ Gerald O'Collins, "Finding the Tradition within the Traditions," in *Fundamental Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 208–24.

⁷⁵ O'Collins, "Finding the Tradition," 222–24. O'Collins's Italian fellow professor at the Gregorian University, Rino Fisichella, follows his views in *La Rivelazione: evento e credibilità*, 3rd ed. (Bologna: EDB, 1988), 128–31.

⁷⁶ Gerald O'Collins, *Tradition: Understanding Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 56–75.

⁷⁷ See the last chapter of O'Collins, *Tradition*, "Discerning particular traditions" (92–115).

comprehensive study of the topic so far.⁷⁸ In the second part of his text, Pottmeyer seeks to expand the traditional theological gnoseology. In the past, he contends, a propositional conception of revelation dealt only with the sources or *loci* where it could find tradition, as in the classical treatise by Melchior Cano. Today, he thinks, to this *topic* approach, it is necessary to add a study of the norms and criteria to judge the expressions of tradition (criteriology), the interpretative effort to understand the word of God in light of the signs of times (hermeneutics), and the attention to the subjects of tradition and the nature of its process (pragmatics).⁷⁹ To each of these areas, Pottmeyer devotes a few paragraphs. A few years later, he would write a concise version of the argument for an entry in the *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*.⁸⁰

The theme has also been a subject of Kasper's attention on several occasions. In a 1975 article, the German theologian advocates for a "typological-sacramental" understanding, in which the different "traditions" are seen as "types, models, and signs" of the tradition.⁸¹ Kasper proposes three general points of reference for interpreting the monuments of tradition and their application to the present: the signs of times, the whole of the faith of the Church, and the eschatological orientation.⁸² Ten years later, he would publish a "revision, extension, and continuation" of the article that does not add any particular novelty, except for a slightly more pronounced insistence on the historically conditioned nature of the monuments of tradition.⁸³ Again in 1990, the then bishop of Rottenburg-Stuttgart would insist on the typological understanding

⁷⁸ Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, "Normen, Kriterien und Strukturen der Überlieferung," in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie*, vol. 4, *Traktat theologische Erkenntnislehre*, ed. Walter Kern, Hermann J. Pottmeyer, and Max Seckler (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 124–52.

⁷⁹ See Pottmeyer, "Normen, Kriterien und Strukturen," 140, where he briefly describes the goals for each of these areas. From 142 to 152, he develops these ideas.

⁸⁰ See Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, "Tradition," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 1118–25, especially 1124–25.

⁸¹ Walter Kasper, "Tradition als Erkenntnisprinzip," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 155, no. 3 (1975): 198–215, at 213.

⁸² Walter Kasper, "Tradition als Erkenntnisprinzip," 214–15.

⁸³ Walter Kasper, "Tradition als Erkenntnisprinzip," in *Dogmengeschichte und katholische Theologie*, ed. Werner Löser, Karl Lehmann, and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann (Würzburg: Echter, 1985), 376–403. The last footnote in the chapter refers to the 1975 article and describes the present work as a further revision, expansion, and continuation ("vorgenommene Überarbeitung, Erweiterung und Weiterführung"). Its specifically criteriological part extends from 396 to 403 and reproduces the same ideas from the article in the *Theological Quartalschrift*.

of the monuments of tradition.⁸⁴ By recognizing the relativity of these monuments, he argues, contemporary Catholic theology can work within an “open system,” relying on several interdependent principles.⁸⁵

In 2001, the newest edition of the *Lexikon für Kirche und Theologie* still considered the criteriology of tradition a crucial subject.⁸⁶ But this line of research seems to have stalled since the beginning of our century. Its advancement might require a reconsideration of the Tradition–traditions distinction and a deepening of Kasper’s idea of an open system of theological criteria. Evidently, the apostolic tradition is not identical to its multiple instantiations in the life and history of the Church. However, as the Italian theologian Dario Vitali adverts, “Tradition is not given in its pure state, but always within expressions of the life of a community.” He laments that, “in an effort to rid Tradition of human encrustations, there has perhaps been too much insistence on the negative aspect of these traditions, emphasizing their distance from the divine and apostolic Tradition.”⁸⁷ The relativity of all traditions in relation to the reality of Christ does not mean that all traditions have the same relative value for the Church to whom they mediate the revelation.

Understood under this perspective, the “open system” proposed by Kasper could offer an adequate description of the way theologians and the ecclesiastical magisterium, at different levels, relate to tradition. They must investigate the various monuments of tradition, weighing their intrinsic value and their pertinence to the questions they are trying to answer in a complex way. In this process, they must ensure that every instance of tradition receives sufficient attention and that the reasoning behind every conclusion follows a coherent path.

Two recent theological contributions could exemplify this approach. The first one, surprisingly, comes from a Baptist theologian, Lucas Stamps.⁸⁸ Writing for a collective work by theologians identified with the Anglo-Saxon recent tendency of analytical theology, Stamps proposes a

⁸⁴ Walter Kasper, “Das Verhältnis von Schrift und Tradition: Eine pneumatologische Perspektive,” in *Theologische Quartalschrift* 170, no. 3 (1990): 161–90, at 187.

⁸⁵ Walter Kasper, “Das Verhältnis,” 182, 188–89.

⁸⁶ Joachim Drumm, “Tradition,” in *Lexikon für Kirche und Theologie*, ed. Walter Kasper (Freiburg: Herder, 2001), cols. 153–55 (“Theologie- und dogmengeschichtlich”), at 155.

⁸⁷ Dario Vitali, “La totalità dei fedeli non può sbagliarsi nel credere (*Lumen Gentium* 12): il *sensus fidelium* come voce della tradizione,” *Urbanian University Journal* 56, no. 2 (2013): 37–70, at 65.

⁸⁸ R. Lucas Stamps, “*Norma Normata*: The Role of Tradition in Analytic Theology,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology*, ed. James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 45–54.

criteriology of different expressions of the Christian tradition. Although his methodological choices lack a more substantial theological justification, they can provide a model to be further developed by Catholic theologians. The second contribution goes in a different direction. By exploring the failure of contemporary systematic theology to engage patristic authors as part of its own discipline, Ayres does not offer anything similar to a set of criteria but raises the more fundamental question of the place of the Fathers within speculative theology. His reflection should be extended to other monuments of tradition.⁸⁹

Tradition as a Human Phenomenon: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

In a brief recension of the 1977 book *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition*, O'Collins's only complaint was that "once again theologians who deal with tradition . . . fail to make use of help coming from cultural and social anthropology."⁹⁰ This complaint was all the more justified, as human sciences were producing a growing corpus of studies on tradition from philosophical, anthropological, and cultural perspectives since the end of the 1950s.⁹¹ However, Vatican II and its first theological reception did not engage this scholarship.

Before the Council, Congar had already hinted at the analogies between the natural and the theological aspects of tradition,⁹² and Geiselmann, in 1962, wrote a chapter on "religious tradition as a universal human phenomenon."⁹³ Ratzinger, in 1974, published an article on the anthropological foundations of the concept of tradition,⁹⁴ but it was not until the 1980s that the subject became a common feature in theological handbooks and dictionaries.⁹⁵ A comparison between the 1965 and 2001 editions of

⁸⁹ See Ayres, "Seven Theses," 36–62.

⁹⁰ Gerald O'Collins, "Recensiones," *Gregorianum* 58, no. 1 (1977): 201.

⁹¹ For some of the most important treatments of tradition in a non-theological manner in this period, see: Josef Pieper, "The Concept of Tradition," *Review of Politics* 20, no. 4 (1958): 465–91; Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1962), 55–56; Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 277–85; Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁹² Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 369–71.

⁹³ Josef Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1966), 81–112. This book is a translation of the three first chapters of *Die Heilige Schrift und die Tradition* (Freiburg: Herder, 1962).

⁹⁴ Republished as Joseph Ratzinger, "Anthropological Foundation of the Concept of Tradition," in *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 85–101.

⁹⁵ O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, 192–95; Wiederkehr, "Das Prinzip," 100–102;

the *Lexikon für Kirche und Theologie* illustrates this change: whereas the older version did not mention the human fact of tradition, the newer text dedicates its opening columns to the “philosophical-anthropological” aspects of the subject.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, given the comprehensive character of these works, they tend to adopt a generic view, without attempting to dialogue with specific philosophical or anthropological proposals.

In the past decades, a few Jesuit authors writing for *Theological Studies* aimed to incorporate non-theological perspectives in their reflection. In 2009, Joseph Mueller considered the role of “forgetting” in the process of tradition.⁹⁷ A few years later, T. Howland Sanks explored the notion of *habitus* advanced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to think about continuity and change,⁹⁸ while O’Collins and David Braithwaite wrote on “collective memory” as a resource for the theology of tradition.⁹⁹ O’Collins also intended to integrate an interdisciplinary approach in his 2018 book *Tradition: Understanding Christian Tradition*, whose second chapter examines the sociological theories of tradition of Edward Shils, Peter Berger, and Anthony Giddens, which are then referenced in subsequent chapters.¹⁰⁰ Although he recognizes that theologians have dedicated more attention to sociology since he wrote his criticism of *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition*, the Jesuit theologian still could not find a theology of tradition written in meaningful dialogue with social sciences.

A more recent development is the interest of sociologists and historians in the utility of the theological concept of tradition for their own research. In 1995, the French historian Philippe Boutry had already suggested that the notion of tradition used in social sciences is a theological construal.¹⁰¹ The Swiss Reformed theologian Pierre Gisel published *Qu’est-ce que c’est*

Pottmeyer, “Tradition,” 1119–21; Fisichella, *La Rivelazione*, 107–9.

⁹⁶ Cf. Tilman Borsche, “Philosophisch-anthropologisch” (cols. 148–49), s.v. “Tradition,” in Kasper, *Lexikon für Kirche und Theologie* (2001), with Joseph Ratzinger, “Tradition,” in *Lexikon für Kirche und Theologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1965) cols. 290–99.

⁹⁷ Joseph Mueller, “Forgetting as a Principle of Continuity in Tradition,” *Theological Studies* 70, no. 4 (2009): 751–81. In the already-quoted *Charred Root*, Rosemann takes up Mueller’s idea and considers the category of “destruction” in Martin Luther and Martin Heidegger as a type of forgetting in the process of tradition (145–64).

⁹⁸ T. Howland Sanks, “A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Dynamics of Tradition,” *Theological Studies* 76, no. 2, (2015): 298–310.

⁹⁹ Gerald O’Collins and David Braithwaite, “Tradition as Collective Memory: A Theological Task to Be Tackled,” *Theological Studies* 76, no. 1, (2015): 29–42. Included as an appendix in O’Collins, *Tradition*, 123–38.

¹⁰⁰ O’Collins, *Tradition*, 20–34.

¹⁰¹ Philippe Boutry, “Tradition et écriture,” *Enquête* 2 (1995): 39–57.

une tradition? in 2017, where he uses the religious notion as a pattern for studying the more general human phenomenon.¹⁰² In a 2016 article in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, political scientist James Alexander attempts to present a systematic theory of tradition, and he mentions the work of Congar among those worthy of attention in this task.¹⁰³

Attention to human sciences enhances our comprehension of tradition. Since the theological reality cannot but inhere in an anthropological attribute, understanding the role of tradition for human beings contributes to our comprehension of how Christians receive and hand on divine revelation. The theologian must be aware, however, that there is no established overarching conception of tradition in the philosophical, anthropological, and sociological fields, and as a consequence, theology must integrate fragmentary insights within a coherent theological vision. Taking this line of research demands a capacity for interdisciplinary work, where the theological and non-theological perspectives should be mutually enriching.

Tradition in Christian Life

As Wiederkehr remarked, one of the significative shifts in the understanding of tradition in the last century was the passage from a propositional to a practical view. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, the great treatises on tradition written by Giovanni Perrone and Johann-Baptist Franzelin understood it mainly as a doctrinal corpus, even when they included Christian practices under their definitions.¹⁰⁴ A vision of tradition as Christian practice would not emerge until the so-called “modernist crisis” at the beginning of the last century. At this period, Blondel and Édouard

¹⁰² Pierre Gisel, *Qu'est-ce qu'une tradition ? Ce dont elle répond, son usage, sa pertinence* (Paris: Hermann, 2017).

¹⁰³ James Alexander, “A Systematic Theory of Tradition,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 10, no. 1 (2016): 1–28.

¹⁰⁴ Both men were Jesuit theologians who taught in Rome and wrote influential treatises. Perrone writes on tradition in the second part of the second volume of his *Praelectiones theologicae* (Rome: Typis Collegii Urbani, 1842). He acknowledges that tradition purveys faith, morals, and discipline, and it is transmitted orally or by practice (243), but he restricts his reflection to the “divine and dogmatic traditions,” which he defines as the truths preached orally by the apostles and kept by the Church’s magisterium (293). Franzelin devoted a treatise to tradition and Scripture: *De Divina Traditione et Scriptura* (Rome: Typographia Polyglota, 1875). He distinguishes various meanings of the word but focuses on the propositional aspect of tradition, as the doctrine of faith taught by the magisterium (96).

Le Roy, two French Catholic philosophers, offered contrasting accounts of the relationship between tradition and practice that can serve as patterns to analyze contemporary proposals.¹⁰⁵

Blondel proposed his theory of tradition as action against the historicism of Alfred Loisy in three articles published in 1904, later gathered in the book *History and Dogma*.¹⁰⁶ He saw Christian practice as the means of preservation and transmission of a supernatural object that exceeds our understanding and unveils progressively in time. For him, everything is given at the beginning, in the Christian practice, and tradition transforms what is “implicit and enjoyed into something explicit and known.”¹⁰⁷ Le Roy,¹⁰⁸ on the other hand, adopted a conception of dogma not unlike that of Loisy.¹⁰⁹ He denied that the dogmatic formulas could convey a positive meaning and reduced them, instead, to negative boundaries and pragmatic injunctions.¹¹⁰ Blondel realized a profound difference between their apparently similar conceptions when he charged Le Roy with sustaining a “semi-naturalist theory” in which there is no external divine teaching, but simply metaphorical expressions of the “obscure necessities of life.”¹¹¹

This dichotomy is present in contemporary studies. While some

¹⁰⁵ For the controversy between Blondel and Le Roy, Monique Foket offers a historical perspective in “L'article ‘Qu'est-ce qu'un dogme?’ d'É. Le Roy, La Réplique de J. Wehrle et le rôle de M. Blondel,” *Ephemerides theologiae Lovanienses* 60, no. 1 (1984): 60–97, while Otto König has a more speculative take in “Was ist ein Dogma?,” *Theologie und Philosophie* 52, no. 4 (1977), 498–524. Blondel had remarked the differences between his position and Le Roy's in two cordial letters written to the philosopher and later published in Maurice Blondel, *Correspondance philosophique* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1961), 253–66. Blondel's friend Johannes Wehrle used a much less irenic tone to distinguish between both philosophers in an article published in 1905: Joannès Wehrle, “De la nature du dogme,” *Revue biblique* 2, no. 3 (1905): 323–49.

¹⁰⁶ Maurice Blondel, “History and Dogma,” in *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma* (London: Harvill, 1964), 219–87. The original appeared in 1904 as a series of three articles in the journal *La Quinzaine*.

¹⁰⁷ Blondel, “History and Dogma,” 267–68.

¹⁰⁸ He expressed his views on this subject in the article “Qu'est-ce qu'un dogme,” published in *La Quinzaine* on April 16, 1905. It was later expanded into *Dogme et critique* (Paris: Librairie Bloud and Cie, 1907). Two studies on Le Roy are Monique Foket, *Science, philosophie et théologie chez Édouard Le Roy: La controverse autour de “Qu'est-ce qu'un dogme?” (1905–1907)* (Louvain-la-Neuve: KU Leuven et Université Catholique de Louvain, 2013), and Guy Mansini, “What Is a Dogma?” *The Meaning and Truth of Dogma in Edouard Le Roy and His Scholastic Opponents* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁹ For a comparison, see 63–66 of Mansini, “What Is a Dogma?”

¹¹⁰ Le Roy, *Dogme et critique*, 19–26.

¹¹¹ Blondel, *Correspondence philosophique*, 257.

theologians see in Christian sacramental, moral, and religious practice the coming-into-action of a divinely given revelation, others see in it a factor of discontinuity and reevaluation of the once-given. In his already-quoted *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, Tilley espouses this latter view when, through a “practical theology of tradition,” he proposes a radical reinterpretation of the notions of truth, revelation, and authority.¹¹² This view tends to emphasize tradition, understood as Christian practice, as the creative interpretation by the ecclesial community of the original event of revelation, as does the Italian theologian Carmelo Dotolo.¹¹³ We are not far from the perspective of Le Roy, to whom practice conditions the reception and interpretation of the doctrinal teaching of the Church, which by itself has no binding intrinsic meaning.

Another way of conceiving tradition as Christian praxis, in a perspective more akin to Blondel’s, is to turn to established practices, especially sacramental, as embodiment of the faith and bearers of a practical understanding of revelation. Nicholas Healy Jr., for instance, highlights the coherence between the traditional sacramental practices of the Eucharist and marriage and the truths regarding the union of Christ and the Church.¹¹⁴ By living and contemplating these practices, the faithful can gain a deeper understanding of the faith that sometimes surpasses its notional expressions.

This approach can be complemented by an account of how Christian practices anchored in tradition transform the faithful and enable them to partake more fully in divine life through grace. Ayres adopts this perspective when he argues that the act of tradition is “an effective sign and may effect the gradual restoration of the intellect that is intrinsic to life in Christ.”¹¹⁵ The trilogy *Cultural Liturgies*, by the Reformed thinker James K. A. Smith, provides a stimulating complement to this perspective.¹¹⁶ Especially in the first volume, Smith argues that the practices of the Christian liturgy form their participants beyond conceptual formation

¹¹² Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, 152–86.

¹¹³ Carmelo Dotolo, “Teologia dalla tradizione: Note di metodo,” *Urbanian University Journal* 56, no. 2 (2013): 119–31, at 123–26.

¹¹⁴ Healy, “Henri de Lubac,” 667–89, at 670–73.

¹¹⁵ Ayres, *Totius Traditionis Mirabile Sacramentum*, 55.

¹¹⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), *Imagining the Kingdom* (Baker Academic, 2013), and *Awaiting the King* (Baker Academic, 2017).

and orient their hearts toward the kingdom. A more complete theology of tradition could integrate and develop this insight.¹¹⁷

The interest in Christian practice is a welcome feature of contemporary theological thought, and its inclusion in the theology of tradition is an established gain from the past century.¹¹⁸ Given the complexity and amplitude of the notion of praxis, several configurations for its theological discussion are possible. There is also a clear intersection between this area and the three previous ones: a theological understanding of Christian practice will necessarily be influenced by the theologian's appraisal of continuity and change in tradition, by the consideration of the normativity of past expressions of Christian doctrine and practice, and by different philosophical and anthropological commitments. At the beginning of the past century, Blondel pointed out a way (later developed by Congar¹¹⁹) to consider tradition as action without slipping into pragmatism, anti-intellectualism, or naturalism. Further theological studies from this perspective would surely enrich our understanding of the role of tradition not only in dogmatic pronouncements but also in the life and formation of all Christian faithful.

Conclusion: Moving Forward with Tradition

This brief overview has displayed how the theological reflection on tradition has evolved in the last decades and mapped some current discussions. Besides indicating the most notable works in the field, it has hinted at some lines for future research. These final paragraphs intend to identify a few elements that seem necessary for advancing the theological discussions on tradition.

The first element is theological clarification of the notion of tradition. Contemporary theology has yielded a rich conceptual understanding that moves away from simplistic and univocal comprehension. However, it sometimes risks converting tradition into a wholly equivocal notion

¹¹⁷ An attempt to do so in dialogue with the theology of tradition of Congar is found in Anthony Queirós, "Tradition as 'Formative Environment': Congar and Christian Formation," *New Blackfriars* 105, no. 2 (2024), 169–79.

¹¹⁸ When, in 1998, Jean-Georges Boeglin enumerated the significative aspects of the contemporary reflection on tradition, he listed four areas of research (hermeneutics, liturgy, Christian life, and evangelization), and related them all to Christian practice (*La question de la Tradition dans la théologie catholique contemporaine* [Paris: Cerf, 1998], 301–427).

¹¹⁹ Congar comments positively on *History and Dogma* in *Tradition and Traditions*, 361–68.

and rendering all debate unintelligible. For instance, do Carpenter and Ayres denote the same reality when they both write on tradition? When theologians or the ecclesiastical magisterium appeal to tradition to support a conclusion or decision, what is meant by it? This first element is fundamental for all discussions that invoke tradition as a subject or argument.

Theological research should aim at this clarification by historical and speculative means. The discussions during and around the Vatican II offer an example and a reservoir of arguments for this quest. Theologians from this time turned to the Fathers of the Church and the medieval and the modern theologians, searching for a comprehensive understanding of the notion of tradition. The recent historical studies on these figures supply us with more material to do the same. We could also learn from their integrative approaches: for example, from Tavad, who highlights the role of analogy in tying together apostolic and ecclesial tradition,¹²⁰ or from Congar's careful terminological distinctions in the second chapter of his *Theological Essay*.¹²¹

This theological clarification requires an integral account of tradition, the second element needed for present discussions. Indeed, a series of paradoxes marks the notion of tradition: it comprises divine and human factors, is a factor of continuity and subject to change, is normative and interpretable, has a content, and is an act. Faulty descriptions of tradition tend to eliminate its complexity by downplaying one of the sides and producing an unsatisfactory prospect. While the predominant understanding of tradition in the early twentieth century reduced tradition to its propositional aspect and tended to identify it with the papal magisterium, current trends in the theology of tradition tend to rob it of its supernatural character, reducing it to the sum of changeable Christian practices throughout the centuries. A truly "Catholic" theology of tradition must find principles of synthesis that respect the integrality of each part. Durand rightly points out the need for combining a high theological view with attention to anthropological dynamics. This suggestion should be expanded for the other apparently conflicting elements as well.

Successfully integrating the distinct elements of tradition implies, as a third element, an interpretative framework of the various expressions of tradition. How do we determine the value of these expressions and their normativity for ecclesial faith and practice? The twentieth century clarified

¹²⁰ George Tavad, "Scripture, Tradition and History," *Downside Review* 72, no. 229 (1954): 232–44, at 237–41.

¹²¹ Congar, "An Attempt to Clarify the Notion of Tradition, Its Various Aspects and Meanings," 296–307 in *Tradition and Traditions*.

the distinction between “Tradition” and “traditions,” but its use, so far, has been almost exclusively critical, as a tool against the absoluteness of certain traditions. This use is evident, for instance, in the insistence of O’Collins on Christ as the sole ultimate criterion of tradition. Is it possible to use this distinction also positively and constructively?

The attenuated distinction between form and content postulated by contemporary hermeneutics makes this work necessary. We can no longer think of an abstract notion of tradition that is not embodied in particular traditions and accessible only through them. Aware that there is no “Tradition” outside of “traditions,” theology must continue to build a criteriology for assessing the different expressions of tradition. This criteriology should not imply a reduction to one principle above the others, but as Kasper suggests, it takes the form of a complex negotiation between different points of reference, interpreting each of them in relationship to the others in a shared ecclesial discourse.

A final element is the relevance of tradition for all believers. As Congar beautifully describes, tradition is coextensive with ecclesial life and preserves, communicates, and educates the realism of faith in the Church.¹²² We could add that divine revelation reaches each faithful primarily through lived tradition in the practice, life, celebrations, and instruction of their faith communities (families, parishes, schools, groups, and movements). Therefore, the study of tradition should not be confined to a chapter of fundamental theology—the whole theological endeavor must make explicit how tradition shapes our understanding of faith, morals, and spiritual experience. Tradition has a soteriological import, an ecclesiological/sacramental/liturgical context, and a Trinitarian source. In recent decades, English-speaking theologians have shown a growing interest in questions of Christian life and formation, as well as in culture and politics. These areas cannot but benefit from a robust theology of tradition.

In *Dei Verbum*, an ecumenical council intended, for the first time, to describe tradition, this reality in which the Church lives, preaches, and prays. This article has attempted to map the ways taken by theological reflection since then. It also hints at four elements that will help move forward these discussions. A rich and correct understanding of tradition seems a condition for a fruitful assimilation of Vatican II and, more fundamentally, of the Gospel itself. In fact, as St. Paul did, the Church must

¹²² Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 348–75, particularly 369. Congar uses these three verbs to describe the functions of tradition. Regrettably, the English translation chose to render the French “éduquer” as “develop.”

strive to transmit what she has received from the Lord (see 1 Cor 11:23). When theologians reflect on tradition and within the tradition, they are performing their own ecclesial task for the benefit of all the faithful.

N.V.