

THE MEANING OF TRADITION

As the war now proceeds through stages that can, without undue optimism, be considered decisive, we become conscious of anxieties, fears, and even hopes, which, though always looming in the background of our thoughts, have been obscured by the very uncertainty of the war itself. We are all uneasy about the future of Europe. But we cannot postpone the declaration of our uneasiness until the last shot has been fired. Silence now would be imprudent for many reasons, and especially because it is certain that the end of hostilities will be the signal for an immediate outburst of bitter and passionate discussions between the partisans of the different political and economic systems that stand ready to compete for our support. Therefore, before we come to the parting of the ways, each of us owes it to himself to enter into his own mind and sort out his own ideas. Unless we do this, our ideas are always confused, and confusion is always a sign of latent and unsuspected contradictions; until these are cleared away we are in no position to fight for or against anything.

In our opinion Europe is about to become the theatre of still another war, bloodless we hope, between two parties not yet aligned against one another: the one supporting a new order, and eager to profit by the ravages of the present war to build it; the other zealous to preserve in continuity the spiritual, political, or economic life of the Old World. This is a general view, and does not ignore the intermediate shades of difference that may help to absorb something of the shock between extremes. Of these extremes, the one will be interested in the disappearance of everything that existed in Europe before the war, while the other will turn to the past, desiring either a simple return to it, or the retention, with modification suitable to the needs of the times, of all that is worthy to be preserved.

It is natural that we, as Christians, should distrust all revolutions with their promise of a new order—*rerum novarum*. Through several centuries we have seen human nature agitated with a craving for 'new things' without having as yet found in them the stable balance that it found in the older order. Our distrust turns to hostility as we discover that the price to be paid for the novelties promised us is the price exacted by the devil from all who make a pact with him. Hostility is intensified by the disgust which, as men nurtured under the sweet yoke of our own national culture, we feel

for creeds that either reject that culture altogether, or allow it to survive as no more than a language or a simple theme of folk-lore. Our loyalty to Christ and his Church, as well as to the spiritual values to which our country has dedicated itself, is for us a logical incentive to defend the continuity of European life. When the need for this arises, there arises also the grave danger that, as we prepare for the struggle, we may find ourselves in company with others who also oppose novelty and favour continuity, but from motives very different from ours: the defence, not of eternal values and the various forms in which these are expressed by different societies, but of a political or economic order which in many cases was established in direct opposition to what is distinctively Christian. In such company we hear much talk of patriotism and many appeals to tradition. Hence the reason why we should examine what tradition means for us, and so avoid confusion both in speech and action. It is obvious that our intention here is to consider tradition, not as one of the *fontes* upon which Theology draws, but exclusively in its cultural sense, this being the sense in which it is generally invoked.

We begin first of all by rejecting the popular notion of tradition: a collection of beautiful forms hallowed by the prestige of the past, which we continue to use for the sake of the pleasant sensations they can still arouse, though these are but an echo or ghost of the joy they evoked in former times. Understood thus, tradition is no more than the blameless hobby of those who treasure things that must perforce be locked up in the show cases of museums or else survive only as a mere memory, since they have no longer any hold on our life except by the threads of aesthetic taste, custom or vanity. This is tradition as understood by the proud aristocrat who adorns his apartments with ancestral furniture, tapestries and other family heirlooms; or by the rich nation that has found a way of avoiding popular risings and revolutions. However considered, it is mere gratification of the senses: an archaeologist's pastime, a child's game with baubles, a high-brow's affectation.

In contrast to this cult of external superficiality stands the conception of tradition dear to those who participate in the spiritual inheritance of their own people, and who, by having steeped themselves in its national literature, art and philosophy have come to appreciate the permanent element underlying the multiple forms of a culture. For these, tradition is not something on the surface, precious only because of its beauty, but a life-stream running through all the creative work of a nation, influencing the present generation as well as its predecessors, and uniting us with our ancestors in the great task of fulfilling the historic destiny of our country, be it Eng-

land, Spain or Poland; and this by maintaining and propagating the values to which our country has given birth, or to which it has dedicated itself. Fidelity to tradition thus conceived is fidelity to our own proper being, to a collective self, projected through time. We submit ourselves to it with a pride born of the knowledge that by this submission we are asserting and enriching ourselves.

In this sense, tradition is a kind of atmosphere in which we live and breathe. It implies a commerce, both disinterested and constant, with the past. We must indeed observe that this commerce with the past is fruitful only in the degree in which we habitually view tradition, not as something imposed on us by fate, nor as a blessing to be enjoyed with frivolous *abandon*, but as a collection of tenets which we must be forever examining and purifying by means of a selective process resulting in the rejection of some and the retention of others, and to which must be added the contribution of our own. Without this process tradition runs the risk of becoming petrified.

Such analytical criticism of tradition must tend to separate its purely essential constituents from whatever is merely annexed or accidental to it. It must distinguish with the greatest care that which appears in one age only from those spiritual values, at first sight hidden or invisible, which form the nervous system of a tradition. This is not to say that we may despise those forms to which this spirit has given birth in the course of centuries; but instead of forcing ourselves to attempt an impossible return to them, we must accept the fact that they are perishable; and as they perish we must try to create new forms as vital as the old ones were in their day. Furthermore, the knowledge of what is essential in tradition must enable us to decide in great crises of history what can and must be saved; and to resist the seductions of those pharisees of traditionalism who, constituting themselves champions of our cultural patrimony, repeat its words and gestures, ignorant, and sometimes sworn enemies, of the spirit that once gave them life.

There are other traditionalists who in good faith believe everything old to be good and everything modern, bad; who defend the past as a system not to be discussed or criticised, having unconsciously succumbed to an idealism that sees in the past a golden age opposed to the iron age in which we live. These we must remind that the value and usefulness of tradition does not depend upon its power to put us to sleep in a sterile cult of the past, however beautiful and full of life it may appear in our dreams, but on the profitable lessons it teaches us from the experience of our ancestors when we have problems of our own to solve. That is, instead of trying, in

whatever ideal way, to embody ourselves in the past, we must exert ourselves to embody the best of the past in our own present.

Another error is that of those who, moved by a desire for simplification, will not see the contradictions that there are in the traditions of every people; or who try to eliminate them by suppressing one or more of their elements, denying the value of these, and failing to recognise the possible existence amongst them all of a common denominator that unifies and synthesises them all. We ought, on the contrary, to begin with the conviction that every tradition, if it is truly a life, must have the complexity of life; and that poor would be the history of a people in whose heart various spiritual currents had not crossed, contradictory in appearance only. Also we should avoid the facile illusion of those who unhesitatingly consecrate as traditional what became current only yesterday, and forget what obtained in those ages when the national spirit manifested itself in its greatest purity. The sacrifice of the best elements of tradition to a mere conservative continuity is characteristic of certain classes that care more for perpetuating the order inherited from our ancestors than for studying how those same ancestors would have acted had they lived in our day. What we are saying does not imply that tradition in the form in which it immediately reaches us is always to be rejected; but it does imply that we must view tradition in its proper perspective, and not imagine that the whole history of a people can be learned in its last chapters.

To return now to the traditionalism that tends to preserve those values which are, so to speak, the marrow of the spiritual life of a nation: we believe that the equilibrium to be maintained in the process of evolution largely depends on these values being cultivated and kept in flourishing condition; for they are precisely our criterion for discriminating between what is natural and permanent, and what is perishable and accidental in various developments. They, too, it is that show us the need for pruning away all useless and harmful growths, and the propriety of investigating everything new to ascertain what, if anything, of it may be assimilated. Tradition in this sense is not only the fruitful sap that flows through the past into the present, but, as our guide and impulse towards the future, it more and more identifies itself with the very life, even the very being, of a people.

This continuity which helps us to feel ourselves the contemporaries of earlier generations, and which, by making us their collaborators in the works they began, subdues our sense of time, also enables us to see the true character of the movements which vary the march of nations. The causes of these movements are evident only to the

student who knows how to look for them in the close texture of earlier historical events : events sometimes very remote, and seeming to have no bearing on those we are trying to understand or are having to deal with. How useful this discernment is to the historian and how necessary to the philologist we need not insist ; we would, however, remark that it is this vision of the past as a light projected on to the present that saves the politician from pitfalls, and enables him to anticipate the solution of problems long before they arise. In a word, this it is that gives him the wisdom born of that full experience which is his own and his predecessor's fused into one living memory.

With regard to nations we believe that to spread in each the knowledge of its traditions is not only to invigorate it, by showing it what its vocation is, and increasing its confidence in its special gifts ; it is also to provide it with a balm to heal the wounds caused by internal strife. For when the citizens of any country find nothing in the present to unite them, they must go to the past if they wish to discover values common to them all, in the same way that brothers on bad terms with one another must be reconciled through respect for their father. If, where such deep divisions exist, there is one group that claims to be the champion of whatever is traditional, it is indispensably bound to renounce any monopoly of such a claim ; otherwise it will end by betraying the very thing it is zealous to defend.

It is evident that all we have said applies above all to Europeans, and is what principally distinguishes us from our brethren by race and speech across the Atlantic ; for, without actually feeling themselves to be jointly responsible with us for our culture they have the benefit of the treasury it has produced. In the same way, we Europeans have profited and still profit by the threefold spiritual legacy of Israel, Greece and Rome, and are yet so far from identifying ourselves with these peoples that we can to-day read the story of their decline without personal emotion.

It is with very different feelings that we contemplate a possible attack on our culture by those masses with whom it is our duty to share the spiritual values that are the best part of our patrimony, and who would probably never have threatened them if they had known what they are. By cultivating these spiritual values we must be enabled to solve political and economic problems in accordance with the religion we profess, as well as with our different character and idiosyncrasies as nations. But we must also protect them from those who try to use them as a cloak to cover their defence of their own interests. Let us, however, insist on continuity only

in the case of what is essential and permanent, recognising that it is the fate of forms and structures to perish, and that their continuity must never be bought at the expense of our spiritual inheritance. Only thus can the fecundity of tradition be safeguarded. Collections in museums and libraries are of themselves sterile and lifeless. But tradition, which first produced them as fruits of life and can still produce new ones, is itself both alive and life-giving. It alone made Europe; it alone can keep Europe in being.

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COMMON LIFE AND COMMON LAW¹

On the last page of their classical history of the English Law, Pollock and Maitland wrote these words: 'The men who were gathered at Westminster round Pateshull and Raleigh and Bracton (in the thirteenth century) were penning writs that would run in the name of kingless commonwealths on the other shore of the Atlantic Ocean. *They were making right and wrong for us and for our children.*'

The rules of right and wrong that were framed by these prelates and judges of the Middle Age constitute the Common Law of England, a system of law that rules not only England (and Ireland), but also the Dominions of Canada and Australia and New Zealand and (in great measure) India and most of the colonies and possessions of the Crown. The Common Law rules also 'those kingless commonwealths on the other shore of the Atlantic Ocean,' the states of the American Union, with the single exception of Louisiana.

The Common Law is thus one of the two great systems of Law and of legal tradition by which the world was governed before the war. The other system is the system and tradition of the Roman Law, which governed the great continental countries of Europe and their non-European dependencies. The Roman Law has a history

¹ The substance of a talk given on the 13th May, 1943, at the Rugby Christian Life Week.