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Tradition, Experience, Interpretation

A Dialectical Model for Describing the Development of Religious Thought

Every scholar of early Christian thought will discover a great deal of variety and change, and many traces of conflict, in her or his sources (see e.g. Dunn 1990). On a smaller scale, similar features are observed by scholars of the Qur'an, my second area of interest (cf. Räisänen 1997, 125–130 on the phenomenon of "abrogation" within the Qur'an). In both cases one is faced with vivid processes of evolving thought. Ninian Smart has stressed that "there is a dialectic between experience and doctrine" (Smart 1971: 24). Yet this aspect of religion may not always receive as much attention as it deserves in the science of religion. A recent survey observes that, in general, the "mutable, processive character of a religion's ongoing life has tended to be overlooked by comparative religionists almost as much as it will probably be denied by the devotees of a tradition." (Lott 1988: 31.) The role of conflict in particular probably tends to be underestimated.

Both in trying to work out a history-of-religion account of early Christian thought[1] (see Räisänen 1990), and in trying to understand the Qur'an with empathy (Räisänen 1971; Räisänen 1997: 81–136), I have often found it useful to envisage religious thought in terms of a dialectic between tradition, experience and interpretation (Räisänen 1990: 122–136). This means that religious thought develops in a process in which traditions are time and again interpreted in the light of new experiences, and vice versa: experiences are interpreted in the light of traditions. In other words, elements of the tradition are reinterpreted, but this happens in the framework of the very tradi-

[1] The choice of religious thought as my topic does **not** imply that I regard the cognitive aspect of religion as the most important one; only that it is important enough to deserve attention in its own right.

tion in question.[2] The emphasis can be put on different sides, either on tradition or on experience. The point is to underline the "process" and its dynamics — to call attention to change, reinterpretation, actualization and reapplication of traditions.[3]

A comparison with the model of Wilfred Cantwell Smith

At first blush, such a model seems akin to Wilfred Cantwell Smith's scheme of "cumulative tradition" and personal "faith" which rightly stresses change, variety, and the dynamic character of the "dialectical process" (Smith 1964: 139–173).[4] With this pair of concepts, "cumulative tradition" and "faith", Smith wants to replace the concept of "religion(s)" which he considers an abstraction (here I have no quarrel with him). He stresses the role of living persons: "one cannot understand the religious life of men unless one sees them as men, vividly; living, actual men in real — and differing — situations, participant each one in a religious tradition that in its concrete actuality is particular for him" (Smith 1964: 150). "Each person is presented with a cumulative tradition and grows up among other persons to whom that tradition is meaningful. From it... and out of the capacities of his own inner life and the circumstances of his outer life, he comes to a faith of his own... His faith is new every morning. It is personal... " (Smith 1964: 168–169; cf. Smart 1971: 24 f.) "A man's faith is what his tradition means to him. Yet it is, further, what the universe means to him, in the light of that tradition." (Smith 1964: 143; cf. Smith 1981: 47.)

More questionable seems Smith's "transcendentalist" approach, his equating of "cumulative tradition" with "the mundane" element (cf. Smith 1964: 145) and faith with "the transcendent" element in relig-

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[2] "... experience and doctrinal interpretation have a dialectical relationship. The latter colours the former, but the former also shapes the latter." Smart 1971: 24.

[3] The category of "experience" is not so crucial, although I shall plead for it too – if for no other reason than the lack of a better category broad enough to cover the range of the pertinent phenomena. But it will be seen that it is very important to understand "experience" in a comprehensive manner.

[4] Indeed, when I long ago tried to find some theoretical underpinning for my interpretation of the Qur'an, Smith's model was the closest counterpart to my own intimations I could find (cf. Räisänen 1971: 100 n. 38). Yet it seemed to me that "experience" might be a more fitting (while more general) category than "faith".

ion (Smith 1964: 141). Faith is inner experience, "a personal quality"; there is an analogy between it and love (Smith 1964: 167). A religion works in human history as "a dialectical process between the mundane and the transcendent, a process whose locus is the personal faith and the lives of men and women ..." (Smith 1964: 168).

Apart from the "religionist" character of this description (cf. Smith 1981: 26, 30) an inherent problem is that "faith" is a category derived mainly from the (Jewish and) Christian tradition. It is not self-evidently applicable elsewhere (why focus on the "faith" of a Buddhist or a Hindu?). As for Christians, one person's faith may seem unbelief in the eyes of another. A more neutral term seems desirable. One can speak of "personal adjustment" of religious beliefs, as Raymond Firth does (1996: 14–47; a definition is found in p. 16). But then it can be asked, What is it that makes such adjustment necessary? My answer is: experience.

What I mean by "experience" is, in accordance with a dictionary definition, *everything* "that happens to one and has an effect on the mind and feelings". I am thinking specifically of anything new that happens to people, such events as call for adjustment.

"Experience", then, is not just — not even primarily — an inner emotion.[5] It can very well refer to an external event. In biblical tradition, the sack of Jerusalem (both in 587 BCE and in 70 CE) was a dramatic and most influential event which brought about vast adjustments in previous convictions. The Babylonian exile proved an extremely fertile situation for religious reorientation.[6]

The term "experience" points to that "something" which stands "between" a tradition and its reinterpretation. From one point of view that means new situations or new contexts. But reinterpretation is accomplished by persons and groups. "New experience" equals "new situation" as perceived by persons or groups. Tradition and experience are inseparably connected.

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[5] Here I seem to move beyond the position of Smart who identifies "the experiential dimension" of religion with the "emotional" (Smart 1989: 13), focusing on "religious experience" (see e.g. Smart 1971: 21–22).

[6] The reorientation was not uniform: we find "universalist" ideas, as in Deutero-Isaiah, but also increased ethnocentrism.

A comparison with the model of Peter Berger

Speaking of experience in connection with religion inevitably evokes the Rudolf Otto — Mircea Eliade tradition of scholarship.[7] I have drawn to some extent on the work of Peter Berger, but I want to make clear how my view differs from the "emotional-expressive" theory of religion.

Berger underlines the fundamental difference between religious propositions and religious experience. Propositions are products of secondary reflection which is caused by religious experiences. The "final objective of any inquiry into the religious phenomenon" must be the "core experience" in its various forms (Berger 1980: 50, cf. 59). Berger speaks of religious experience as "an experience in which a metahuman reality is injected into human life" (Berger 1980: 52). He reduces what really counts in religion to a timeless, individual experience of union with the infinite. In this he largely shares the "religionist" approach of Mircea Eliade.

I do regard Berger's distinction between experience and its theoretical interpretation as crucial. But I find it important to understand "experience" in a much broader sense than "mystical core experience".

The New Testament undoubtedly presupposes certain experiences that might qualify as "core experiences", such as Paul's "call vision". On the basis of Paul's few first-hand references (Gal 1: 15–16; 1 Cor 9: 1; cf. 2 Cor 4: 6; the narrative in Acts 9 is clearly secondary) it is hardly possible to reconstruct the experience. Instead, we can draw conclusions as to what that experience meant for Paul's life and thought: his values changed, he felt he had received a new task. And yet it is hard to tell the immediate consequences of the experience for Paul's life and thought from what dawned on him later on, under the influence of later experiences of quite a different kind, such as social conflicts caused by his new convictions. Consequently, scholars debate whether Paul developed his theology of "justification" immediately after his conversion or only much later in connection with intra-Christian conflicts (cf. Räisänen 1992: 15–47).

Core experiences do not suffice to explain why the new movement emerged as a new religion, distinct from Judaism. It is crucial to find out why Paul drew conclusions from his vision that were different from those that e.g. James, the brother of Jesus, and other Jewish Christians in Jerusalem drew from *their* visions (cf. the clash hinted

[7] A similar emphasis, in the study of the Bible, was present in the work of the "history-of-religion school"; cf. Räisänen 1990: 13–31.

at in Gal. 2: 11–14). The interpretation of experiences (internal and external) in a given social context seems much more important for the development of early Christianity than "core experiences" in themselves.

Instead of searching only for a certain type of inner experience it seems worthwhile to examine the whole spectrum of experiences, including quite mundane ones, as reflected in the material. It does not seem appropriate to limit oneself to explicitly "religious" experience. In fact it is questionable whether "religious" experiences can be singled out at all as a distinct type of human experience (cf. Batson and Ventis 1982: 56–96).

Unlike Berger and Eliade, I therefore wish to outline a conception in which the "profane" everyday reality, bound in time and history, is taken with utmost seriousness.

Quite mundane events can have crucial significance. Thus both the sack of Jerusalem and the persecution of pious Jews by the Syrian monarch Antiochus Epiphanes deeply influenced Jewish thought.

The symbolic universe and its influence on experience

The relative weight given to tradition and experience respectively can vary, not only from interpreter to interpreter, but also from case to case in the mind of one interpreter.

Berger notes that "man is an empirical animal"; "his own direct experience is always the most convincing evidence of the reality of anything" (Berger 1980: 30). This does not mean, however, that man is a *tabula rasa*, covered little by little with new "knowledge" through new experiences. On the contrary, all experience and all perception is deeply coloured by existing "theory".

A human being is born into a community, and a community has its own tradition. The attempts of previous generations to make sense out of experience, to give it form and order have been construed into an authoritative total vision of what the world is ultimately like. Berger and Thomas Luckmann introduced the concept of "symbolic universe" in their influential analysis of this vision (Berger and Luckmann 1967).

A community, then, provides its members with a framework into which the experience of the individual is integrated from the start. The process of learning the language of the group in particular is a process which prepares the individual to perceive the world in a certain way. His/her experiences are not "bare" ones, but laden with *interpretations*; we tend to experience what we have symbols for (cf.

Sundén 1982: 33, 39). An experience has to be related and accommodated to the inherited values and beliefs of the community; this process mostly takes place unconsciously. Thus the symbolic universe deeply affects one's experience, or makes experience possible in the first place.

The impact of experience(s)

On the other hand, tradition is exposed to changes. "All socially constructed worlds are inherently precarious." (Berger 1969: 38.) A person can pause to reflect on this or that experience which does not quite seem to fit with the tradition. To be sure, most experiences support, or can be claimed to support, the inherited symbolic universe; this universe is, after all, the accumulated result of earlier interpretations of earlier experiences within the community. But there is always also a chance that experiences render part of the tradition *questionable*. Then a tension between tradition and experience arises which has to be released in one way or another. This process is often unconscious; adjustment happens over a longer period of time without overt, conscious decisions.

In applying the dialectical model, the emphasis can therefore be put on different sides. One can stress the role of the tradition which affects all experience[8] or, conversely, the importance of new experiences. When a time of rapid change (the Babylonian exile of certain Jews; the rise of Buddhism, of Christianity or Islam) is in focus, more emphasis will be put on new experiences which lead to changes in the tradition than would be the case in the study of other, more peaceful periods (cf. Lott 1988: 130–132; Paden 1992: 89–91).

[8] Lindbeck 1984 presents a healthy corrective to the "experiential-expressive model" of understanding religion, but his account, too, seems oversimplified. According to him, religious change does not proceed from new experiences, but results "from the interactions of a cultural-linguistic system with changing situations". "Religious experiences in the sense of feelings, sentiments, or emotions ... result from the new conceptual patterns instead of being their source" (Lindbeck 1984: 39). Here too "experience" seems to consist only of feelings and sentiments. But in addition to *Erlebnisse*, *Erfahrungen* are also to be taken into account, and this leads to a more nuanced picture.

The relevance of tradition: examples

In Israelite tradition, the "law" of cause and effect, of sowing and reaping, had a central place. Attempts abound to adapt seemingly contrary experiences to this part of the symbolic universe (the book of Job is a case in point). Even the sack of Jerusalem was legitimated within the symbolic universe. A cause had to be found, and thus the Deuteronomic and Chronistic works of history paint in dark colours the sins of Israel which *must* have been the cause of the national disaster of 587 BCE. A similar explanation was given by Jews and Christians alike for the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE (cf. Neusner 1984: 20).

In Roman Palestine "it was as much religious as socio-economic factors which led to the disturbances"; "it was the religious traditions themselves which fired the flames of dissatisfaction and gave a point of comparison with the inadequacies of the present." (Rowland 1987: 18.) "Resentment would have been there, but it is hard to see that resentment being channeled into such revolutionary attitudes without the contribution made by the Scriptures themselves. The traditions about the glorious future... (were) itself a cause of disaffection". (Rowland 1987: 15; cf. 99–100, 105–106). The present was assessed in the light of the (imagined) past; the traditions concerning the past of Israel may be seen as one reason for the war against the Romans.

The impact of experience: examples

The account of Peter's dealings with Cornelius (Acts 10: 1–11: 18) describes *positive experiences* which lead to a new practice.[9] Peter is preaching to Gentiles; the listeners start speaking in tongues. The "circumcised believers" are astonished, but Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"[10] This argument based on an ecstatic experience leads to a change in the symbolic universe at a strategic point (rejection of circumcision as an entrance requirement). This change was not accepted by the old community; accordingly it led to a

[9] It does not matter that a great deal of the account must be ascribed to Luke's rewriting of history. Whatever the historical Peter did and thought, the point is that such a reconstruction made sense to "Luke".

[10] Nils G. Holm points out (oral communication) that an analogous problem was faced in today's "charismatic movement" by many Pentecostals when "heretic" Catholics started speaking in tongues!

host of attempts of legitimation[11] and, eventually, to the formation of a new system of orientation ("Christianity").

A *negative* experience, too, or an experience of *crisis* can act as a mighty catalyst. The sack of Jerusalem in 587 BCE was still accommodated in the framework of the tradition. But, later on, the persecution of the pious by Antiochus Epiphanes was just too much to be adjusted to the old scheme. When the pious were systematically destroyed, while renegades saved their lives, the symbolic universe seemed to be upside down. A change was needed for it to survive at all, so the idea of an otherworldly retribution in the form of (at first, partial) resurrection made its appearance and was, in the course of time, accepted by (most of) the community. It is hardly accidental that the new idea, needed to overcome the problem of theodicy, stemmed from an alien (Iranian) tradition. It is often the encounter of traditions that brings about something novel in crisis situations. On a more general level it may be said that the whole biblical "doctrine" of eschatology — the hope for a great turn of history — is rooted in an experience of frustration in the present which is interpreted in the light of the tradition of God acting in history.

Another (smaller) crisis which came to have profound effects both on subsequent Christian thought and, indirectly, on the sufferings of Jews in Christendom, was the Christians' experience of the rejection of the gospel by most Jews. Several early Christian writers try to come to terms with the problem. Paul's struggle with this experience finds a moving expression in Romans 9–11 where he tries, as it were, three different solutions (divine hardening; human obstinacy; partial divine hardening as part of a plan for saving all and sundry, see Räisänen 1997: 17–32). One of them (double predestination) came to have far-reaching consequences (especially in Calvinism) when transferred to the status of authoritative tradition. Muhammad, too, started using predestinarian language when confronted with the unbelief of his audience (Räisänen 1997: 98–117); this move also came to have major doctrinal and practical consequences. In all these cases I would speak of *social experience*.

Again, it is observed by an interpreter of the fourth gospel that John's "presentation of Christ as a divine Stranger, alienated from and antipathetic to his immediate environment, may articulate the social experience of the group that stands behind this document. This group sees itself as it sees Jesus: unique, misunderstood, under at-

[11] Cf. Paul's claim that "we are the (true) circumcision" (Phil 3: 2) or his assertion that circumcision or non-circumcision are irrelevant matters (1 Cor 7: 19).

tack from the ignorant and demonic, isolated in this cosmos which belongs to ignorance, darkness and the Devil. Yet they, like their Jesus, are intrinsically connected with the realm of the Father. They could thus see themselves as they saw their Savior: alone in the darkness, yet the light of the world." (Fredriksen 1988: 26.)

I will only mention some very influential "experiences" from later religious history: the widening of horizons caused by the voyages of discovery which brought knowledge of unknown peoples and traditions to Europeans (and prompted a bold individual such as Isaac la Peyrère to rethink biblical history in the seventeenth century, cf. Räisänen 1997: 137–152); the new astronomical insights which caused problems for the world view based on the Bible; the confrontation of Muslims with Western constitutional states which has led to visions of a reformed *shariah* (cf. Räisänen 1997: 125–133); adjustment to modern conditions (the experience of "secularization") on the part of mainstream churches. For this, modern Protestantism is polemically criticized both by Smith (e.g. Smith 1993: 41–42, 82–83) and Berger, who speaks of "bargaining with modernity" (1980: 98–121); this indicates that their theories do not do justice to the whole range of pertinent phenomena. Demythologization may not be best characterized as "faith" (although it surely represents what a person's tradition means to him or her — Smith's definition of faith) — but it must be deemed a meaningful reinterpretation of a tradition in the light of one's total experience of the world. At the other end of the scale, the rise of various "fundamentalisms" is undoubtedly also due to social experiences, often to experiences of frustration.

If a change is accepted by (leading members of) the community, the symbolic universe will be modified. This often involves acts of legitimation that actually camouflage the change and suggest that none has occurred, or at least stress continuity with the past. If an innovation is not accepted, this may lead to a break with the community on the part of some of its members who are then forced to construct a new symbolic universe. In this process they may legitimate their stance by drawing heavily on elements of the old one and often stressing their continuity with the past. Not seldom will they be anxious to maintain that it is *their* interpretation, rather than that of the old community, which upholds true continuity with the great values of the past ("we are the true circumcision"; on legitimation with special regard to Luke-Acts see Esler 1987: 16–23 and passim).

Thus the dialectical interaction between tradition (symbolic universe), experience, and interpretation governs the way in which the world is perceived and interpreted by groups and individuals.

The dialectical model has the advantage of being universal, applicable to different traditions. Smith even suggested that by the use of his two notions (cumulative tradition and faith) "it is possible to conceptualize and to describe anything that has ever happened in the religious life of mankind" (Smith 1964: 141)! I resist the temptation to go so far; the dialectical model is hardly a universal key that opens every lock. For instance, a reflective person may theorize about his or her symbolic universe without any obvious experiential impetus.[12] Many features of Gnostic or apocalyptic speculations about heavenly secrets may belong to this category, and so may many patristic reflections on the Trinity.

Unlike Smith's model, mine is neutral: no transcendental categories such as "revelation" are needed. In a sense, though, "experience" functions here as the structural counterpart to "revelation" in a traditional theological scheme. The model also frees one from the need to define which interpretation is "religious" and which is not (and thus from the never-ending story of constructing definitions for "religion"). It could be utilized even in creative theology: as traditions have always been reinterpreted in the light of new experiences, why not do this consciously, and with good conscience?

The model is pragmatic and pedagogical in character: it can be presented in a simple manner, and it seems to make sense on an everyday level of discourse. No doubt questions can be raised, e.g., Does the term "experience" here cover too many diverse phenomena? The concept of "tradition", too, may need refinement (cf. Honko 1995: esp. 133). Nevertheless I find the model helpful, in heuristic terms at the very least.

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[12] This does not preclude the possibility, or even likelihood, that such theorization is supported by some social interest (e.g. the refutation of opponents).

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