A 1963 report on tradition from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches signalled a substantial convergence between the churches over Christian tradition and its relationship to Scripture. However, since the 1960s theologians have regularly ignored the theme of tradition. The few who have discussed this theme have not used the help provided by some sociologists towards understanding the role of tradition in human and religious life: for instance, as being all-pervasive and as shaping the identity of various societies and groups. The process and presence of Christian tradition embrace baptism and other sacraments, the Bible, creeds, and other doctrines; art, architecture, hymns, pilgrimages, literature; the celebration of Christmas, Easter, and other feasts; and much else besides. Particular traditions can call for scrutiny and reform. Tradition: Understanding Christian Tradition proposes various criteria (e.g. the message of the Scriptures and spiritual experience) for discerning and evaluating specific traditions. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ himself is the central tradition at the heart of all Christian traditions. The Spirit remains the primary bearer of the Church's tradition; the secondary agents of tradition include not only ordained ministers but also all the baptized faithful. In the history of Christianity, tradition has interpreted and actualized the Scriptures, but has also been interpreted and challenged by them. An appendix explains the insights coming from specialists in the study of collective memory; their work also sheds light on the workings of Christian tradition.

Jacket image: Marko Ivan Rupnik, 'Annunciation: Mary's hands are in the same position as those playing the harp. In her the Word has found space, it has resounded. Church of the Ursuline Sisters Daughters of Mary Immaculate, Verona – Italy. December 2006. Photo: @ Centro Aletti
Tradition
Understanding Christian Tradition

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Preface

Recently I received an invitation to the launch of a book entitled *Educating for Purposeful Living in a Post-Traditional Age*. A prior engagement prevented me from accepting the invitation. If I had been able to attend the launch, I would have questioned the author over the phrase of ’post-traditional’ in his title.

Did he mean that we are living in an age which has abandoned many long established customs and practices? That is uncontroversial and obviously true. Many traditional views and values have been judged to be outdated and dropped. With the authority of tradition widely disputed, one cannot appeal to the grounds that ’this is the way it has always been’ and ’this is the way it should remain’. But did the author of *Living in a Post-Traditional Age* mean that our age has literally moved beyond all tradition, and is post-traditional in the extreme sense of having given up its entire heritage? Such a total break with tradition is neither desirable nor possible.

Learning a language, for instance, involves learning a tradition. Every language, even a language open to remarkable change, is traditional. As it is handed on through teaching and learning, it acts as a major tradition by providing group cohesion and exercising a measure of social control. Paradoxically those who speak out against tradition do so through their inherited language. They use traditional language to challenge tradition.

To allege that we live in a ’post-traditional age’ can be as confusing as alleging that we live in a ’post-historical age’. Even those who prefer to remain largely unaware of their historical heritage have been shaped, individually and collectively, by history. Consciously or, much more frequently, unconsciously we may take our history in new directions. But a total break with our inherited history remains as impossible as a total break with the tradition we have inherited in so many fields. Tradition, whether recent or older, remains present in every field of human existence and endeavour.

Those who pit modernity against tradition risk forgetting that some traditions or traditions may in fact provide the direction for a valuable
profit from the social studies—in this case, from memory studies that have flourished for decades. Biblical scholars have drawn on those studies, right down to S. Butticecz and E. Norelli (eds), Memory and Memories in Early Christianity (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

By presenting Christian tradition, this book completes a trilogy—on revelation (Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ (Oxford University Press, 2016)), tradition, and Sacred Scripture (Towards a Christian Interpretation of Biblical Inspiration (Oxford University Press, 2018)). I wish to thank Tom Perridge, Karen Raith, the delegates of Oxford University Press, and two anonymous readers for accepting this book. My warm thanks also go to David Braithwaite, Brendan Byrne, Joshua Choong, Isaac Demasc, Massimo Faggioli, Anne Hunt, Robin Koning, Jack Otto, Jin-hyuk Park, Ormond Rush, Tan Tran, Sabine Voermans, Denis White, and Jared Wicks for various kinds of help towards creating this study on tradition.

The book seems necessary, given the way theologians currently neglect the theme of Christian tradition. The New Dictionary of Theology, ed. M. Davie et al., 2nd edn (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016) provides a startling case of such neglect. This large dictionary contains no entry on ‘Tradition’, and does not even list ‘tradition’ in its index.

With great esteem and affection, I dedicate this book to the memory of René Latourelle (1918–2017), twelve years dean of theology at the Gregorian University (Rome) and a pervasive influence in my theological life. When quoting the Bible, I normally follow the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); the translations from the Latin texts of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) are my own. As a Christian, I use the terminology of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Here ‘old’ is understood as ‘good’ and does not imply ‘supersessionism’, or the view that the New Testament has rendered obsolete and so superseded the Old Testament.

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