



H. Ward Sterett

Hand-Me-Down Truth

by Thomas Fleming

In 1912, a group of Oxford fellows began meeting to work out a minimalist common creed that would be acceptable to all Christians. William Temple, future archbishop of Canterbury, was the guiding spirit of the group, which argued its way down to an inoffensive consensus entitled *Foundations*. The Oxford Seven ended up setting aside miracles, the Resurrection of the body, and other difficult articles of faith on the same grounds that American Presbyterians were to do in the 20's: Such notions might be useful or even true, but they could not be required of Christians living in a scientific age.

The explicit point was to fit the doctrines to the temper of the times. Ronald Knox, then still an Anglo-Catholic, was supposed to have been the eighth Oxford man, but he bowed out; and when *Foundations* was issued, he responded with a Drydenesque verse satire, "Absolute and Abitofhell," in which he ridiculed the substitution of marketing for theology: "When suave politeness, tempr'ing bigot Zeal / Corrected *I believe to One does feel.*"

Knox was never much interested in feeling. It would not entirely do him an injustice to say that he viewed the discipline of religion as a gradual perfection of the will. However, the problem with Archbishop Temple and with other liberal Christians is not that they feel too much but that they think too little or too weakly. Credulous in their acceptance of every modern intellectual from Marx to Darwin to Freud, they could not take the trouble even to consider the authentic foundations of Christian belief.

As C.S. Lewis was to point out, there are people who have trouble accepting the miracle at Cana that turned water into wine but claim to believe that some being we call God created the universe out of nothing. People say it is because "science" has made miracles impossible, but all of this so-called science—theories of evolution, the reduction of the universe to atoms and void, arguments against Christianity, cultural pluralism—is part of an attack on Christianity and against theism *per*

se that goes back thousands of years before the Age of Science.

The antagonism is not between science and religion, but between Christianity and an anti-Christian scientism that is as contemptuous of evidence as any snake-handling Pentecostalist. Most of us are better off accepting what we were taught as children, except in those rare times when we are challenged by prophets and philosophers who do not ask us to overturn the old laws and ancient faiths but to fulfill their deepest meaning. It is preeminently true of Jesus, who called upon Jews to put aside their legalistic nit-picking and to live out the higher message of their scriptures and traditions.

Traditions need periodic refreshment and reform, but the response of traditionalists to the reformer is all-too often "Crucify him!" This is the problem with Alasdair MacIntyre's approach to tradition, which (as Stephen Clark pointed out) turns into a trap, a dead end, unless there is some truth beyond tradition to which believers can appeal. But to concede that traditions can grow stale and crusty, like the hard skin of an old-fashioned horse-pear that must be broken through to get at the fruit under the surface, is only a backhanded way of acknowledging that traditions are the bearers of truth, even if they must be washed and scraped and pared from time to time. Reformers who reject tradition are not reformers at all, but destroyers.

The greatest of the Reformers was an intense reactionary. The traditions of the Church had become corrupt, Luther argued, and they had to be reformed. Although his latter-day disciples like to think that Luther was restoring the Church of the apostles, neither he nor they could know enough about the primitive Church to be able to construct a wayside chapel, much less to found a denomination. Luther was, after all, an Augustinian, profoundly influenced by the patron saint of his order. It was Augustine who pointed out that, in declaring Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Jesus was not enjoining us to fall in love with the Way—the Scriptures and stories of His life and teachings—to the exclusion of the Truth and the Life.

In liturgical questions, Luther was conservative. He advocated a German Mass for those who needed it, but he also wanted to retain the Latin Mass as the highest expression of Christian liturgy. He did not do away with altars or clerical vestments, and he expressed resentment that the “devil” in Rome should get all the good music. Over a hundred years after Luther’s death, Bach was composing sacred music to Latin texts. Quite apart from the *Magnificat* and the *B-Minor Mass*, his Latin output fills two CDs.

If Luther and Bach were dragged down to the contemporary United States, they would probably run in panic from the make-it-up-as-you-go-along, honky-tonk hootenannies that are put on in so many churches that invoke Luther’s name. No, it is not Luther but Luther’s nemesis, Zwingli, who stripped the altars, demolished the ancient liturgies, and, anticipating Descartes by 100 years, infected European Christianity with a purely intellectualist rebellion against the traditions of the Church and of Christian civilization.

While Luther was content to accept any practice not positively prohibited in Scripture, Zwingli went to the extreme of rejecting anything that was not prescribed in the Bible. In theory, this attitude leads to the totalitarian dead end of the Amish, but few people have the courage and self-discipline required for the plain life, and in practice Zwingli’s scriptural test puts the burden entirely on the frail human intellect. Not “Scripture alone” becomes the rule, but what I can conclude by applying my own reason to Scripture, which means my reason as formed by whoever is in charge of my education. Before too long, we are joining Archbishop Temple in consigning most Christian doctrines to the library basement where dangerous books are hidden from inquiring minds.

Zwingli could not have been so naive as to think that ordinary people would be able, on their own, to make coherent sense out of Scriptures written in Hebrew and Greek and addressed to people living in circumstances almost completely foreign to the Swiss peasants of his day or the American software designers of our own. Considering the ignorance, laziness, and stupidity of most people, most of the time, I might as well turn Quaker and wait for lightning to strike my already addled brain as trust my own intelligence to interpret the Bible.

The arguments are so old and well worn I blush to repeat them: If Scripture is the only authority, then who decides what Scripture is? Do not try to cheat and say “God” or the Bible, because no passage in the Old or New Testament provides a list of authentic Scriptures. In the ancient world, there were arguments pro and con regarding “apostolic” writings such as the first Epistle of Clement and serious opposition to the inclusion of the book of *Revelation*, which is still not included in the lectionary of the Greek Church. In the West, the probably forged *Epistle to the Laodiceans* was not formally excluded until the Council of Florence in the 15th century.

Then who or what did decide to include *Revelation* but not Clement? The simple answer is a series of Church councils, but a more inclusive answer would be that the councils ratified the growing consensus of the apostolic churches. In a word, tradition. No tradition, no Scriptures. Calvin thought that, in some mysterious fashion, an individual Christian could perceive not only the meaning of Scripture but even the authenticity of disputed books. But in introducing two variables—an open canon and freedom of interpretation—into the question of interpretation, Calvin set a task that was inhumanly difficult

even for a man of his learning, and the best example of a Christian who exercised his freedom to decide upon the canon he was going to misinterpret is Marcion, the Gnostic heretic who reduced the entire corpus to St. Luke and St. Paul, to whom he gave an antisemitic interpretation.

You may find it convenient to lie to yourself about this for the rest of your life, and in keeping up the pretense that you have escaped from tradition, you are showing an entirely laudable respect for the Zwinglian or Anabaptist traditions in which you were reared or to which you have converted. But for Christians who wish to be honest about what they know, there is no way to bypass the questions of authority and tradition.

Oprah Winfrey asked George W. Bush if he knew anything for certain, and Governor Bush answered that he knew that God exists. But that is exactly what George W. Bush does not know. It is a rationalist cop-out on the same level with his statement that the philosopher he most admires is Jesus Christ. I should like to hear his answer to the tough questions: First, who does he admire most *after* Jesus Christ? And second, on what authority does he know there is a God?

The Oxford Seven concluded that all religions worship the same god. When a similar question was put to C.S. Lewis, he said he agreed but wanted to know which one. It makes a difference whether the one deity is Manitou or Shiva, Astarte or Zeus, Allah or the Christian God. Which is true, which the imperfect imitators? If you take refuge in the answer that all of these gods are tendencies toward a perfect godhead, then yours is probably the god of Newton and Voltaire, the deist projection of Enlightenment intellectuals who were as merciless and uncompassionate toward frail human nature as the windup toy clockmaker they made in their own image. It is they who created the tradition of antitraditionalism.

All healthy societies respect their traditions, not only in religion but in poetry and music, table manners and marriage customs. The laws of Athens that Socrates could not violate by breaking jail (and that he famously defended) were not specific decrees enacted by the Athenian assembly; they were *nomoi*, the customs that had been handed down from one generation to another. Tradition means, quite literally, a giving across from one hand to another, something like the process of one runner handing off the baton to another in a relay race.

Textual scholars speak of manuscript traditions, the readings that have been copied generation after generation by scribes. There are errors, it goes without saying, that are committed and perpetuated in the tradition, but without the tradition there is no text. Scribal fidelity extends to the smallest details. In manuscripts of Greek tragedy, the choral lyric passages are divided into variously shaped short lines called “cola” that were ignored by even the most brilliant scholars on the grounds that there was no consistent tradition, and, even if there were, it would tell us nothing. They were wrong, as it turns out: A consistent tradition is easily constructed out of the slightly varying layouts in different groups of manuscripts, and that tradition goes back, most certainly, to Alexandrian scholars who knew far more of Greek poetry and music than anyone has known since that time. To appreciate the poetic technique of Aeschylus and Sophocles, scholars have to recenter the tradition that they, as heirs of the Enlightenment, have rejected out of hand.

I have spoken of the manuscript tradition in the conventional sense of scribes blindly copying the mistakes of their predecessors while introducing a few of their own, but not all scribes are dunces. Some recognize a superior reading in another

manuscript; others have been scholars who thought they knew enough grammar and meter to correct faulty texts. The results of these conjectural emendations are not always encouraging. R.D. Dawe, looking back over the 70 years of Aeschylean scholarship that preceded his *Repertory of Conjectures*, concluded: "The quality of conjectures is not such as to encourage the thought that of all nature's miracles, man is the finest."

Nonetheless, the true sense of a textual tradition includes the corrections and improvements made by intelligent scribes and modern Greek and Latin scholars from Demetrius Triclinius to Erasmus to Bentley and Porson and A.E. Housman all the way down to Roger Dawe and E. Christian Kopff.

Repudiate tradition, and you will never make sense either of the text or of the poetic rhythm — nor of anything else under the sun. A few scholars or geniuses will be charmingly eccentric, but in the absence of tradition, most people will simply become servile tools of a cultural establishment that will not allow any challenge to its authority. "When I use a word," said Mr. Humpty Dumpty on a famous occasion, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less." When you break down all traditional order, you do not produce freedom and diversity; you produce the University of Wisconsin which, if it cannot find sufficient ethnic variety among the Germans, Finns, and Poles of the Dairy State, will simply fake a publicity photograph to prove its *total* commitment to uniform diversity.

Tradition, because it is a rival source of authority, provides ammunition to those who would challenge an entrenched regime. Destroy tradition, as the barbarians finally succeeded in doing in the late 60's, and you have an army of lost souls "half a million strong," all wearing the same clothes, smoking the same dope, reciting the same passages from *Siddhartha*, all trudging the same weary trail "to get back to the Garden." The 60's kids-turned-80's entrepreneurs were not the "me" generation; they were only the "me too" generation.

Now, they are running the country and the world, and whoever was elected in November is one of Them — not lifestyle freaks, but moral and cultural freaks, slaves to an anti-Christian and anti-Western ideology they can never doubt because they cannot read or think or even listen, if some alien from another civilization tries to tell them about the world that once existed long ago but not so far away. They are filled with bright ideas and new paradigms; they use words like "innovation" and "change," "progress" and "liberation," the vocabulary of enslavement that keeps us as stupid and docile as a domesticated animal.

In repudiating tradition, in trying to "be ourselves," we cut ourselves off from the knowledge, so painfully acquired, of the past several thousand years. We do not, of course, make it back to the Garden or even to the Cave. We turn ourselves into one of those people being watched on (or watching) daytime television — the guy having an affair with his wife's brother or the "infantilist" truck driver wearing his Mary Jane outfit. In a hell that is beyond Dante's imagining, a hundred million brain-dead slaves watch each other on television every night and day of the week. That is where Descartes' and Zwingli's cult of the individual has led us — to self-annihilation.

We can be free, but only if we put our wills in service (that is, in subjection) to the traditions that Chesterton called "the democracy of the dead," to the God in knowledge of Whom, as Monsignor Knox was taught to say, "standeth eternal life," and "whose service is perfect freedom."

Soul of the River

by *Brendan Galvin*

Slipping around the bend
of an instant, a shy,
wingéd thing, a spindleshanks
for hanging a body on,
If the soul can be seen

when it takes on the color of river ice
or a wall of reeds, shapes itself
to a cedar, then to a place where bark
sloughed off a gray pine trunk,

and the river's never the same
river twice, but a mirror to the eagle's
passing rumor and the now-and-then
of geese jockeying down the air
to announce opening water,

then the soul is the river's constancy,
and you are the soul of the river,
great blue, always near,
even on this winter morning — a lobe
of southern air pushing in until it's April
or October for a few hours again —

ice on the river going, the last
snow under roadside
bittersweet and chokecherry
like edges of seafoam,
the marsh hawk up and hunting,

heron, and you've been hunting, too,
your wet footprints crossing the road,
three toes and a spur, like a line
of tree runes on the asphalt, until that wind
chopping up the bay arrives to erase them.