Check for updates

THEOLOGICAL
Studies

Article

Theological Studies
2015, Vol. 76(1) 29–42
© Theological Studies, Inc. 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0040563914565300
tsj.sagepub.com

Tradition as Collective Memory: A Theological Task to Be Tackled

Gerald O'Collins, S.J., and David Braithwaite, S.J.
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne

Abstract

This article gathers and develops some fragmentary suggestions made by theologians and Pope John Paul II about tradition as the collective memory of the church. In the light of insights coming from anthropology, history, neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, and sociology, the article proposes twelve ways for enriching a theology of tradition. Modern memory studies can unite and clarify various aspects of a theology of tradition, understood as collective memory.

Keywords

collective memory, Congar, John Paul II, Ratzinger, tradition

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) signaled a renewal in official Catholic teaching on the nature and function of tradition, a renewal not only expressed by *Dei verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, but also embodied in 14 other documents produced by the council, listed here in the order of their promulgation: *Sacrosanctum concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy; *Lumen gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church; *Orientalium ecclesiarum*, the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches; *Unitatis redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism; *Christus Dominus*, the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops; *Perfectae caritatis*, the Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life; *Optatam totius*, the

Corresponding author:
Gerald O'Collins, S.J.
Email: ocollins@unigre.it

Decree on the Formation of Priests; *Gravissimum educationis*, the Declaration on Christian Education; *Nostra aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions; *Dignitatis humanae*, the Decree on Religious Liberty; *Ad gentes*, the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity; *Presbyterorum ordinis*, the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests; and *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The promulgation of *Dei verbum*, as René Latourelle observed, was "the first time that any document of the extraordinary magisterium had proposed such an elaborate text on the nature, object and importance of Tradition."[1] But a study of Vatican II's integral teaching on tradition must *also* take into account what can be gleaned from other conciliar documents.[2]

While most of the council's teaching on tradition remained focused on questions of specifically Christian tradition, at times the documents looked into the wider area of human tradition and traditions. Thus *Sacrosanctum concilium* addressed the traditions of different peoples (nos. 37–40), with particular respect to their traditions surrounding marriage (no. 77) and funerals (no. 81). *Ad gentes* likewise attended to "local" traditions and cultures (no. 22). Much of what *Gaudium et spes* said about "culture" implicitly dealt with human tradition (nos. 53–62). In both specifically Christian and wider human culture, any tradition, we should add, must be *remembered* tradition if it is going to be effective.

Although the key Vatican II chapter on tradition does not as such introduce the theme of memory (*Dei verbum* nos. 7–10), other texts of the council recall much that the church remembers. At the heart of her life, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy recognizes the Eucharist, the great "memorial" of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (no. 47). Each Sunday the church celebrates collectively the "memory" of the Lord's resurrection; on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, she recalls with the "greatest solemnity" his death and rising from the dead (*Sacrosanctum concilium* no. 102; see also no. 106). Whether within the liturgy itself or beyond it in daily life, all the baptized should "remember the cross and resurrection of the Lord" (*Apostolicam actuositatem* no. 4). Joining the church means dying, being buried, and rising with Christ, so as to "celebrate with the whole people of God the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord" (*Ad gentes* no. 14). Thus the Eucharist collectively keeps alive the central memory that identifies and defines Christian existence: the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the words of the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "primarily in the Eucharist, and by analogy in the other sacraments, the liturgy is *the memorial* of the mystery of salvation."[3]

Vatican II "remembers" other great themes lodged in the memory of the church: for instance, the deep spiritual link between "the people of the New Testament and the stock of Abraham" (*Nostra aetate* no. 4). It is because she "remembers her common

1. René Latourelle, S.J., *The Theology of Revelation: Including a Commentary on the Constitution "Dei verbum" of Vatican II* (Cork: Mercier, 1968) 476.
2. See David Braithwaite, S.J., "Vatican II on Tradition," *Heythrop Journal* 53 (2012) 915–28.
3. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) no. 1099, emphasis added.

heritage with the Jews" that the church deplores all anti-Semitism (ibid.). The council also invokes the shared "memory" of different words from the Lord to motivate various attitudes and actions: mutual love within the Christian community (*Gaudium et spes* no. 93), a concern for the mission to the world (*Lumen gentium* no. 16), and appropriate activity on the part of bishops (*Lumen gentium* no. 27), priests (*Presbyterorum ordinis* no. 5), and lay persons (*Apostolicam actuositatem* no. 4).

Finally, Vatican II introduced the language of collective memory when it confirmed the importance of the "memorial days" of the martyrs and other saints (*Sacrosanctum concilium* no. 104), and evoked the union with the heavenly church realized in the liturgy. There "we remember the glorious Mary ever Virgin blessed Joseph, the blessed apostles, martyrs, and all the saints" (*Lumen gentium* no. 50).[4]

In short, the Second Vatican Council (a) employed the language of "memory," "remembering," and "memorials" and (b) treated "tradition" and particular "traditions." But it never explicitly brought together (a) and (b).

Tradition as Collective Memory

As the work of Vatican II drew to a close, some theologians did, however, invoke tradition and, specifically, the human reality of tradition when speaking (briefly) of tradition as "collective memory." In a work that appeared during the council, Yves Congar wrote, "Tradition is memory and memory enriches experience."[5] He went on to talk of the church's memory: "The church not only possesses self-awareness; she keeps and actualizes the living memory of what she has received."[6] "The living memory" was obviously intended to echo "living tradition," an expression cherished by 19th-century theologians of Tübingen[7] and their successors and eventually inserted into *Dei verbum* (no. 12). George Tavard agreed with Congar: "One could analyse tradition from the standpoint of memory and define it as the church's memory."[8]

In a 1974 essay, "Anthropological Foundation of the Concept of Tradition," Joseph Ratzinger examined the human phenomenon of tradition, arguing that "intellect is basically memory," and that "memory generates tradition."[9] In another essay, originally

4. Here and elsewhere the translation of Vatican II documents is our own.
5. Yves Congar, *Tradition and the Life of the Church*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (1963; London: Burns & Oates, 1964) 8.
6. Ibid. 77.
7. On Johann Sebastian Drey's idea of "living tradition," see John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development of Catholic Faith* (New York: Oxford University, 2000) 59–63; on Johann Adam Möhler's organic model of tradition, see ibid. 63–67.
8. George H. Tavard, "Tradition in Theology: A Problematic Approach," in *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition*, ed. Joseph F. Kelly (Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1976) 62, 84–104, at 92.
9. Joseph Ratzinger, "Anthropological Foundation of the Concept of Tradition," in *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987) 85–101, at 86–87.

published in 1975, Ratzinger stated that “the decisive question for today is whether that memory [and the tradition it has generated] can continue to exist through which the church becomes church and without which she sinks into nothingness.”[10]

In the next decade Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard dedicated a section of his ecclesiology to “the memory of the church”[11] and called tradition “a function of remembrance.” Far from envisaging any possibility of the church “sinking in nothingness,” he maintained that “as the memory of the church, tradition represents the permanence of a Word which is always alive, always enriched, and yet radically always the same, where the church never ceases to nourish its faith.”[12]

A biblical theme about the Holy Spirit “reminding” Jesus’ disciples of “all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26) obviously encouraged a theology that expounded tradition as memory. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* could firmly state not only that “the Holy Spirit awakens the memory of the church” and “in the liturgy of the word ‘recalls’ to the assembly all that Christ has done for us” (no. 1103), but also that “the Holy Spirit *is* the church’s living memory” (no. 1099; emphasis added). In at least three documents, John Paul II introduced the theme of tradition as collective memory but without explicitly identifying the Spirit as the church’s living memory: *Catechesi tradendae* of 1979 (no. 22), *Orientale lumen* of 1995 (no. 8), and *Ecclesia in Europa* of 2003 (nos. 7–8).[13]

Some post-Vatican II studies of tradition, to be sure, do not reflect on tradition as the collective memory of the church.[14] But those who followed Congar in doing so (Ratzinger, Tavard, and Tillard) seemed, like him, to remain unaware of a huge development of studies about memory (and forgetting) in anthropology, history, neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, and sociology.[15] Some or even much of this work consciously looks back to French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who began publishing on collective memory in 1925.[16] Scriptural scholars have happily drawn on

10. Joseph Ratzinger, “What Constitutes Christian Faith Today?,” in ibid. 15–27, at 24.
11. J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R. C. De Peaux (1987; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1987) 140–44.
12. Ibid. 141, 142.
13. The Vatican website publishes all three documents. They are also available in various printed forms: e.g., in *Acta apostolicae sedis*.
14. For instance, Thiel’s *Senses of Tradition* (2000) contains nothing about tradition as the memory of the church; neither does Dietrich Wiederkehr, ed., *Wie geschieht Tradition? Überlieferung im Lebensprozess der Kirche* (Herder: Freiburg, 1991); nor does Thomas Langan, *The Catholic Tradition* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1998).
15. A welcome exception was Joseph G. Mueller, S.J., “Forgetting as a Principle of Continuity in Tradition,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009) 751–81.
16. See, e.g., Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992). A (very) select list of modern studies on collective memory could include such works as Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1987); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University, 1989); Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets* (New

modern memory studies.[17] But theologians have, almost universally, failed to draw on those studies and take advantage of insights that could illuminate and enrich work on tradition.

Studies of Collective Memory: Twelve Applications to the Theology of Tradition

In the fairly recent past, many sociologists and others tended to take a "negative" view of collective memory. As Barry Schwartz puts it, "Believing all realities to be socially 'constructed,' a generation of scholars depreciated collective memory." But Schwartz and other more recent writers have rejected the blanket view that collective memory *merely* reconstructs the past, adapts historical facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present, or even creates such "facts." Rather he argues that as "an intrinsic part of culture, collective memory works in tandem with science, politics, religion, art, and common sense to interpret experience."[18] Beyond question, memory, collective or otherwise, is invariably and inevitably selective, simplified, and structured; it can be consciously manipulated, and frequently lapses into forgetfulness. Nevertheless, in various ways it also operates under the constraints of history. Memory reflects, as well as shapes, social reality. Its claims to represent the past faithfully may not be dismissed out of hand. There is some legitimacy in the historical knowledge carried by collective memory.[19]

Recent memory studies coming from such scholars as Paul Connerton, James Fentress, Paul Ricoeur, Barry Schwartz, and Chris Wickham have encouraged us to apply to Christian tradition their conclusions about the nature and role of collective (or social) memory. Collective memory can perform a properly systematic role in uniting and clarifying various aspects of a theology of tradition. Let us present twelve ways in which memory studies might have this happy result. The first concerns the very legitimacy of the term "collective memory."

York: Cambridge University, 2009); James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Philadelphia: Open University, 2003); Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory*, 3 vols., trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University, 1996–1998); Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004); Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000).

17. See, e.g., James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Rafael Rodriquez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance, and Text* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010); and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, Stephen C. Barton, and Benjamin G. Wold, eds., *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).
18. Schwarz, *Abraham Lincoln* x, xi.
19. As the title hints, much of Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* is devoted to the place of history in memory, collective or personal; see Mueller, "Forgetting as a Principle of Continuity."

(1) First, while it may be natural to think primarily of "memory as an individual faculty," Connerton remarks that many thinkers "concur in believing that there is some such thing as a collective or social memory." Sociologist Clifford Geertz describes culture in terms that also fit collective memory—as a pattern of "inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."[20] Without going as far as Halbwachs, who held that "all memory is structured by group identities" and that hence "memories are essentially group memories," Fentress and Wickham observed that "much memory is attached to membership of social groups of one kind or another."[21] They agreed that "in and of itself, memory is simply subjective," or the property of individual human beings. Nevertheless, "memory is structured by language, by teaching and observing, by collectively held ideas, and by experiences shared with others."[22] In particular, shared memories justify speaking of social or collective memory.

Far from being isolated individuals, people acquire their memories through living in society; when they recall and "place" their memories, they also do this in society. Jeffrey K. Olick, a sociologist who drew on and modified the thought of Halbwachs, has continued to stress the intersubjective nature of memory: "There is no individual memory without social experience, nor is there any collective memory without individuals participating in communal life."[23] Individuals and society are not separate things—neither vis-à-vis memory nor in other ways.

Theologians would not then prove to be "odd persons out" if they were to characterize Christian tradition as collective memory. Such a view enjoys an antecedent plausibility from memory studies in other disciplines. Those studies, admittedly, often do not introduce the term "tradition." Connerton, Fentress and Wickham, and Schwartz, for instance, do not list any reference to "tradition" in their indexes. Ricoeur's 642-page book contains 48 references to collective memory but only one to tradition.[24] Nevertheless, collectively remembering the past obviously involves collectively receiving, narrating, (often) revising, and reliving a tradition or some traditions. Receiving, narrating, revising, and reliving a tradition is inconceivable without remembering the past.

(2) Second, what we quoted above from Geertz and Halbwachs illustrates how anthropologists, sociologists, and other scholars regularly describe collective memory in *all-encompassing* terms. It embraces the intellectual, emotional, moral, and religious frameworks of human life. One would then expect the tradition created and transmitted by the memory of a religious group to have a similar *total* character. Albeit without referencing any modern memory studies, Vatican II not surprisingly presented tradition as

20. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 87–125, at 89.
21. Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory* ix.
22. Ibid. 7.
23. J. K. Olick, "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures," *Sociological Theory* 17 (1999) 333–48, at 346.
24. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* 636, 641.

all-encompassing: "in her doctrine, life, and worship, the church perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she herself believes" (*Dei verbum* no. 8).

(3) Third, Fentress, Wickham, and others who have contributed to memory studies understand memory to express "an active search for meaning." In particular, in its quest for meaning through memory a group finds meaning in the past and relives "its past in the present." "Social memory exists because it has meaning for the group that remembers it."[25] This group *search for meaning*, which involves reliving the past in the present, establishes and clarifies *identity*. Thus "memory has an immense social role. It tells us who we are."[26] The collectively remembered past clarifies for human beings their personal and group identity, which is always an identity-in-relationship. Collective memory plays its role in sustaining *group identity*, whether we deal with small, face-to-face societies or with a world religion whose members personally know only a limited number of others.

Remembering Jesus provides the whole Christian community with the essential meaning for their lives, their basic identity, and a *raison d'être* or main reason for their existence. In that radical sense, the church is a "community of memory."[27] Here some words from Ratzinger (see above), "memory generates tradition," find their supreme exemplification. The memory of Jesus has generated the Christian tradition *tout court*.

Their collective experience of the memory of Jesus continues to tell Christians who they are and to define their identity-in-relationship to him and to the founding fathers and mothers of the church, as well as to those figures in the Christian past who represent the highest values for them. Thus a collective memory at the heart of tradition defines and explains the identity of Christians. Sharing and handing down primarily (a) the distant memory of Jesus and the founding generations of the church and secondarily (b) the more recent memory of heroic figures (for instance, Francis and Clare of Assisi) preserve and nourish the religious identity of Christians. It is above all that distant memory (a) identifies and maintains their collective memory and the stability of the "faith that comes to us from the apostles" (First Eucharistic Prayer). But Eucharistic Prayers also regularly recall martyrs and saints from a more recent memory (b). Both the distant and the more recent memory keep in existence and shape the collective memory that has created the basic Christian tradition and identity.

Congar, who led the way in associating memory and tradition, has remarked, "Tradition is like the consciousness of a group or *the principle of identity* which links one generation to another; it enables them to remain . . . the same people as they go forward through history." In short, tradition is "a principle that ensures . . . continuity and identity."[28] Congar rightly links memory/tradition with identity and continuity;

25. Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory* 73, 97. As Schwartz remarks, "Collective memory is part of culture's meaning-making apparatus" (*Abraham Lincoln* 17).
26. Ibid. 88, 201.
27. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) 227, 229.
28. Congar, *Tradition and the Life of the Church* 8, emphasis added and translation corrected. When reflecting (very briefly) on collective identity, Congar does not consider a collective *identity crisis*, which might be faced and overcome by reappropriating illuminating and life-giving memories from the past and the traditions they created.

modern memory studies can develop and enrich his insights. He also brings us to a third theme found in those studies: the role of memory (and tradition) in ensuring not only group identity but also a closely connected characteristic: continuity.

(4) Fourth, collective memory is crucial in sustaining the link between past, present, and future required by authentic *continuity*. Thus an anthropologist (Fentress) and a historian (Wickham) begin by linking past and present: "We experience the present as connected to the past. Our experience of the present is embedded in past experience."[29] They press on to highlight the role of collective memory in upholding the continuity between past, present, and future: social memory expresses "collective experience; social memory identifies a group, giving it a sense of its past, and defines its aspirations for the future."[30] Thus memory "is not merely retrospective; it is prospective as well."[31]

Here an antiphon composed by Thomas Aquinas for the feast of Corpus Christi readily comes to mind. It embodies the triple time-sign of collective memory, in this case of Eucharistic remembrance: "O sacred banquet in which Christ is received: his suffering is remembered [past], [our] mind is filled with grace [present], and we receive a pledge of glory that is to be ours [future] (O sacrum convivium, in quo Christus sumitur, recolitur memoria passionis eius, mens impletur gratia, et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur)."

In an essay first published in 1974, Ratzinger reflected briefly on the same link between past, present, and future, even if he spoke of unity rather than continuity: "Memory works to give meaning by establishing unity, by communicating the past to the present, and by providing a mode of access to the future."[32] Connerton specifies a central Christian activity that secures such essential continuity by conveying and sustaining collective memory (and tradition): the ritual performances that believers constantly experience.[33] Commemorative ceremonies, like baptism and the Eucharist embody and maintain essential continuity in the Christian tradition. By ritually reenacting such events as the baptism of Jesus and his Last Supper and, it is to be hoped, nourishing a lifestyle required by the grace and meaning of those basic sacraments, Christian memory serves the continuity of tradition. If one asks where and how collective memory and the tradition it has generated continue to operate in the church, her festivities and sacramental life must bulk large in any answer.

(5) Fifth, in a discussion that enriches a theological treatment of tradition, Connerton considers "bodily practices" to be essential in transmitting the collective memory of any group.[34] In one way or another, all social memory is passed on through bodily practices, not least through language. In the case of Christian tradition, passing on social memory constitutes one of the main purposes of language: in preaching,

29. Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory* 24.
30. Ibid. 25.
31. Ibid. 51.
32. Ratzinger, "Anthropological Foundation" 88.
33. Connerton, *How Societies Remember* 41–71.
34. Ibid. 72–104.

catechesis, the performance of liturgical texts, the singing of hymns, religious publishing, and so forth. Here it is important to recall this, even though the linguistic transmission of collective memory will come up under (7) below.

Christian collective memory is expressed and transmitted not only through such traditional bodily practices as making the sign of the cross and various gestures embodied in all the sacraments, but also through such feasts as Christmas, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil, all of which are unimaginable without traditional bodily practices. They include building and visiting Christmas crèches, washing the feet of people, venerating the cross, standing around an Easter fire, and entering a church holding lighted candles. Here it is at our peril that we ignore the bodily practice involved in processions and pilgrimages. Nowadays Christians of different denominations often participate in a Good Friday procession through the streets of their village, town, or city. In a more extended "bodily practice," many go on pilgrimage to Bethlehem, Guadalupe, Jerusalem, Lourdes, Rome, Santiago de Compostela, Walsingham, and the island of Tinos, where Orthodox Christians celebrate in a special way the "dormition" (or falling asleep in death) of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These and other traditional places of pilgrimage have been consecrated by the collective memories and "bodily practices" of Christians. All such bodily practices help "keep the past in mind."[35] Connerton's thesis richly illuminates the transmission of the tradition that Christian memory has created and preserves.

Halbwachs, founder of modern collective memory studies, maintained that "if a truth is to be settled in the memory of a group, it needs to be presented in the concrete form of an event, of a personality (*d'une figure personelle*), or of a locality."[36] Pilgrimages brilliantly exemplify this view. Their goal is a locality, bound up with some central personality and an event in which that person was involved: for instance, Bethlehem (the birth of Jesus), the Lake of Galilee (the scene of much of his preaching), the holy sepulcher in Jerusalem (his death, burial, and resurrection), and Rome (the martyrdom of Peter, Paul, and others).[37] Many, if not all, pilgrimages involve all three elements that Halbwachs considered essential for the emergence of a group memory (which generates an enduring tradition): a locality, a personality, and some event.

(6) Sixth, we have already picked out continuity as characteristic of collective memory and the tradition it creates (see [4] above). For it to survive and prosper, such continuity must be open to constant *revision* and *reform*. Schwarz remarks that

---

35. Ibid. 72. Connerton dedicates some pages to pilgrimage in his later book, *How Modernity Forgets* 14–18.
36. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* 200.
37. Vatican II documents used pilgrimage language: the noun *peregrinatio*, the verb *peregrinor*, and the adjective *peregrinus*. But it used that language metaphorically: of (a) the baptized being on "pilgrimage toward eternal beatitude" (*Lumen gentium* no. 12) or "on pilgrimage toward the kingdom of the Father" (*Gaudium et spes* no. 1); and of (b) the church as such being a "pilgrim" church (*Lumen gentium* nos. 6, 48; *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 6). The council's texts came closest to a literal sense when speaking of "Israel according to the flesh" being "on pilgrimage in the desert" (*Lumen gentium* no. 9).

"memory affects the way people interpret what is happening to them."[38] But what happens to them as individuals and groups constantly changes. Such changing conditions must be matched by constant revisions in memories, if those memories (and the traditions they give rise to) are going to continue serving the spiritual and other needs of people. In his substantial study, Schwartz illustrates how the image of Abraham Lincoln, from his assassination through to the end of the 20th century, underwent steady revision while remaining under the constraints of historical evidence. The church's collective memories must be open to a similar revision, while preserving an appropriate stability, if they are to continue serving the spiritual needs of Catholics and other Christians.

Here a key question concerns the "appropriate stability." What is it and how do we recognize it? Vatican II moved this question to the center of attention, since it set itself to "revising" the church's collective memories and changing various practices in the light of that revision. Some interpret that revision and changed practice by appealing to a scheme of permanent principles and altered forms. We understand such revision as contributing to appropriate stability by regaining and renewing the apostolic identity of the church.[39]

(7) Seventh, Halbwachs understood language to be "the most elementary and the most stable framework of collective memory."[40] Where he wrote of "social frameworks," Jan Assmann spoke of "semantic frames."[41] Translating memories into language through a desire to communicate, groups must conform to conventional semantic frameworks if they are to make memories intelligible, interpret their significance, and pass them on successfully. Memories give rise to language and texts.

To be sure, from the early centuries Christians also translated and expressed their collective memories in other ways—for instance, through visual images embodied in art and architecture. Paintings, sculptures, and church buildings incorporated such memories. But before that happened, Christians expressed their memories of Jesus and the founding events in the life of the church through oral stories and written texts—above all, the four Gospels and the other books of the New Testament that were eventually to be enshrined in the canon of inspired Scriptures.

Here we should recognize how the founding memories of Christianity also took their shape from the textual corpus of the Old Testament. That preexisting body of texts provided an elementary and stable framework for understanding and interpreting the memories of Jesus and the founding events of Christianity. What had taken place was understood to have happened "according to the Scriptures."

---

38. Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln* 20.
39. See Gerald O'Collins, S.J., "Does Vatican II Represent Continuity or Discontinuity?," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012) 768–94, at 791–94.
40. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* 45.
41. Jan Assmann, "Ancient Egyptian Antijudaism: A Case of Distorted Memory," in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, ed. Daniel L. Schachter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1995) 365–78, at 366.

Thus modern memory studies prove their value in describing and explaining the genesis of the Christian Scriptures—not to mention the Hebrew Bible. Those texts emerged from the traditions generated by the personal and group memories of Jesus and the various founding events and figures of Christianity. Vatican II helpfully presented tradition and the Scriptures as coming from the same source (revelation), functioning together in the life of the church, and moving toward the same final goal (*Dei verbum* no. 9). What has been proposed by Halbwachs and his successors underscores even more the radical union between (a) the stable framework of the Scriptures and (b) the collective memory or tradition from which they emerged.

(8) Eighth, modern memory studies have recalled what ought to be seen as an obvious truism: "forgetting is normal."[42] What holds good at the level of personal memory also applies to collective memory. Groups can and do forget, and that belongs to the way memory regularly operates. To his philosophical study of memory and history, Ricoeur adds a section on forgetting.[43] Joseph Mueller, a theologian who stands more or less alone in drawing on modern studies of memory to explicate tradition, rightly recognized the inevitable role of collective "forgetting."[44]

(9) Ninth, Schwartz's study of the collective memories of Abraham Lincoln shows throughout how remembered images of the dead president have oriented people toward thinking and acting in appropriate ways. They have not only reverenced the memory of the dead president but have also been drawn to emulate him by seeing and practicing ideals communicated by the dead president. He has helped fashion a symbolic framework that enabled Americans to make sense of their world and commit themselves accordingly. In Schwartz's words, Lincoln "became America's universal man, changing and remaining the same; standing beside the people and above the people; a reflection of them *and model for them*."[45]

Memory presents past persons and events as (traditional) objects for *emulation* and *commitment.* Remembering the past makes it a program for commitment in the present. Whether we think of such traditions as the daily celebration of the Eucharist or an annual pilgrimage to Padua for the feast of Saint Anthony on June 13, collective memories help the faithful glimpse how they should think about themselves and commit themselves. In particular, so much of the past retrieved by the documents of Vatican II works to provide values and aspirations that should underpin fresh commitments in the present. To take one among innumerable examples, the opening chapter of *Ad gentes* (nos. 2–9) introduced quotations from or references to 23 Church Fathers, some of them, such as Irenaeus and Augustine, more than once. This chapter retrieved from the Christian tradition remarkable texts that continue to inspire and guide the missionary activity of the whole church.

---

42. Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory* 39.
43. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* 412–56. After publishing his work on *Social Memory* in 1989, Connerton subsequently added in 2009 a brilliant study, *How Modernity Forgets*; see n. 16 above.
44. Mueller, "Forgetting as a Principle of Continuity in Tradition."
45. Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln* 312, emphasis added.

(10) Tenth, there is a further area in which studying social or collective memory could yield valuable insights about human and Christian tradition. In the history of general councils of the church, Vatican II broke new ground by attending to and promoting the traditions of different peoples (*Sacrosanctum concilium* nos. 37–40; *Ad gentes* no. 22). Without using the term "inculturation," the council wanted the traditions of various ethnic, local, and regional communities to help shape the Catholic celebration of marriages (*Sacrosanctum concilium* no. 77), funerals (ibid. no. 81), and so forth. Notoriously the colonial period of European expansion, often without discerning what was illuminating and life-giving and what was false and destructive, disparaged and condemned much that shaped local traditions, especially in the area of religious beliefs and practices. Vatican II invested with a justified dignity certain traditions and the memory of such traditions. The council did not, of course, express matters in this way. But at least two of its documents (*Sacrosanctum concilium* and *Ad gentes*) took a positive attitude toward the possibility of a genuine "preparation for the Gospel" (*Ad gentes*, no. 3) being found in particular human traditions and the collective memory that had created and transmitted such traditions.[46] This was to recognize and heal what Ricoeur calls the wounds "stored in the archives of the collective memory."[47]

(11) Eleventh, Ricoeur reminds us that collective memory and the traditions which it inspires can prove pathological, even dangerously pathological. Ricoeur calls such memory "haunted," a "past that does not pass," "collective traumatisms," or "wounds to the collective memory."[48] At times such pathological memories derive from "acts of violence" that founded the history and traditions of some ethnic or national group.[49] Modern memory studies have much to offer about the pathology that can affect memory.

In *Unitatis redintegratio*, its Decree on Ecumenism, Vatican II acknowledged that "every renewal of the church essentially consists in an increased fidelity to her vocation." In fact, "the church is called by Christ" to "a constant reformation, which she invariably needs inasmuch as she is a human and earthly institution" (no. 6). The collective memory of the church (along with traditions to which that memory gives rise) can suffer from pathological wounds (e.g., hostility to other Christians and followers of other religions). The discerning and constant reformation of particular traditions also invite a certain purification of collective memory and the healing of memory's wounds—a theme not developed by the Decree on Ecumenism.

The purification of harmful memories played a striking role in the pontificate of Pope John Paul II (r. 1978–2005). He repeatedly asked Jews, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, and other groups to forgive crimes committed against them by Catholics. On the First Sunday of Lent 2000 in St. Peter's Basilica, he underlined the need to face

46. See Gerald O'Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013) 78–79, 113–16.
47. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* 79.
48. Ibid. 54, 78.
49. Ibid. 79.

the wounds of memory. The confession of sins at the Eucharist on that Sunday featured seven representatives of the Roman Curia asking pardon for such sins as intolerance, anti-Semitism, discrimination against women, and contempt for various cultures and religions. Such wounds in the group identity of Catholic Christians have left toxic memories. The constant reformation of the church proposed by *Unitatis redintegratio* involves recalling and seeking healing for wounds in the collective memory.

(12) Twelfth and finally, Congar's writing of the collective "self-awareness" of the church raises a question about collective consciousness and its subject.[50] Talk of collective memory transposes personal memory to the group level and almost inevitably leads one to ask, Whose memory is it? Is there a transcendent self who exercises this collective consciousness and memory? The language of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ("the Holy Spirit is the church's living memory")[51] could encourage one to think of the Spirit as the transcendent subject of the church's collective memory. The Spirit would then not only awaken this memory but also prove to be the subject exercising this memory.

Congar himself spoke of the Holy Spirit not only as "the soul of the church" who "creates, from within, the unity of the community and its tradition,"[52] but also as "the transcendent subject of Tradition."[53] Here Congar built on the chapter dedicated to tradition in *Dei verbum* (nos. 7–10) with its language about the Holy Spirit "leading believers to the full truth and making the Word of God dwell in them in all its richness" (no. 8). The repeated appeal in that chapter to the Spirit's "help" in faithfully transmitting the gospel has encouraged commentators to understand the Spirit as the primary Agent of tradition or "the invisible bearer of tradition."[54]

To recognize the Holy Spirit as the primary Agent of tradition and the invisible Subject of the collective memory that constitutes tradition brings up the question, Is the Spirit then somehow responsible for the wounds in the collective memory that call for purification and healing (theme 11 above)?[55] One might reply that the holiness of the primary Agent of tradition and invisible Subject of the church's collective memory is not jeopardized by the wounds left by the sins of the secondary agents of that tradition and the human community that constitutes the visible subject of a collective memory. After all, Paul wrote about the Holy Spirit "dwelling in you [plural]" (1 Cor 3:16) and making the Christian community the temple of the Spirit, while using the same

50. See Congar, *Tradition and the Life of the Church*.
51. No. 1099.
52. Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: A Historical and Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (London: Burns & Oates 1966) 340.
53. Ibid. 338.
54. Gerald O'Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, "Tradition," in *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2013) 246–47, at 246.
55. In *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert (1950; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011), Yves Congar wrote about "collective responsibility" for evil and, albeit without using explicitly the language of "collective memory," recalled how evil has also affected the life and memory of the church (349–64).

letter to call on the community to face up to various sins that had wounded them and need healing.

In a similar way the image of the church as the Body of Christ presents all the baptized forming an organic unity with the all-holy Lord from whom their life flows. Yet the members of the church can wound that body through their sinful weakness.

Conclusion

This article has suggested twelve developments for a theology of tradition that could draw and adapt insights from modern memory studies: (1) the basic legitimacy of the language of "collective memory"; (2) the all-encompassing nature of collective memory; (3) the role such memory plays in sustaining group identity; (4) its role in securing continuity; (5) the transmission of collective memory through "bodily practices"; (6) the constant revision and reform of collective memory; (7) the texts such memory gives rise to; (8) the inevitable function of "forgetting"; (9) the emulation and commitment supported by collective memories and the traditions they create; (10) facing harmful memories through now accepting the inculturation of the gospel; (11) confronting toxic memories that have left wounds in the collective identity of the church; and (12) the transcendent subject of Christians' collective memory, the Holy Spirit.

When we introduce what memory studies contribute to a theology of tradition, each of the twelve "contributions" we have identified points to what, in one sense or another, we already know. All these contributions can be unified through the single concept of collective memory. In that way memory studies work to provide a properly systematic view, since their concept of collective memory functions to unite and clarify twelve aspects of a theology of tradition.

In proposing this enrichment of the theology of tradition, we have not drawn from one contributor to modern memory studies but from a number of representative authors who have worked and written in a variety of disciplines. If what we have argued above stands up, these specialists can help us exploit the theme of collective memory and develop more fully the brief suggestions made years ago by Congar and others when naming tradition as collective memory.

Author biographies

Gerald O'Collins, S.J., received his PhD from Cambridge University and is currently adjunct professor at the Australian Catholic University (Melbourne) and honorary research fellow at the University of Divinity (Melbourne). His areas of special competence are fundamental theology, Christology, and the theology of Vatican II. His recent publications include *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions* (2013), *The Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning* (2014), *The Spirituality of the Second Vatican Council* (2014), and *On the Left Bank of the Tiber* (2013). In preparation is a book on Christology and an expanded, revised edition of *Catholicism* (2003).

David Braithwaite, S.J., after three degrees at Sydney University, received a bachelor's and a master's degree in theology from the Catholic Institute of Sydney, and is a research student at the University of Divinity. He has coedited *Fifty Years of Insight: Bernard Lonergan's Contribution to Philosophy and Theology* (2011) and published "Vatican II on Tradition," *Heythrop Journal* (2012).