


The workings of tradition

From “distinctives” to a living tradition

Laura Schmidt Roberts

As the five-hundredth year of Anabaptism approaches, we are afforded an opportunity to recall the past in service of reflecting on what it means to be part of this particular Christian tradition today. Historical streams mark our existence as humans. We find ourselves lodged in and shaped by multiple traditions—of faith, culture, nationality, education, and so on. *Living* traditions continue to have relevance and shaping power because people in them engage past and present understandings in ways that



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make them meaningful for the present and the future. Philosophers and theologians will tell you what you already know from experience: that this results in multiple understandings and incarnations of—and “family” arguments about—the identity of the tradition.

This multiplicity is perhaps truer now than ever, with the emergence of neo-Anabaptism as a pan-denominational movement—meaning people do not change denominations and become Mennonite, for example, but rather identify as hyphenated Anabaptists (e.g., Anabaptist-Anglican or Anabaptist-Baptist). Such variety marks our past as well as our present, as Anabaptism exhibited multiple movements and varied views and communal practices from its inception. This reality leads us to ask how we think about and articulate shared identity in the face of multiplicity, difference, and change spanning five hundred years. Another way of asking the questions is this: How does tradition *work*, creating a sustained identity across time marked also by change and diversity?

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I would like to address these timely questions in two directions: first, by presenting a way of thinking about how tradition works (past, present, and future) and, second, by exploring the importance of narrative for

thinking about shared communal identity across time. I will draw on the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur as I develop these ideas.¹

How tradition works

One way to think about historical traditions is as a “text” that we interpret and reinterpret over time. We have numerous texts that we do this with as Anabaptists: the Bible, as part of the wider Christian tradition, but also the writings, confessions, martyr stories, theological treatises, and so on of historic Anabaptism and of those who have sought to follow this way of being Christian since the sixteenth century, such as Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren. Reading and understanding these texts are primary ways we encounter the tradition and grapple with what it means to be part of it.² That act of (re)reading and (re)interpreting can also serve as a model for how historical traditions work—how they remain vibrant and meaningful across time and why an identifiably distinct tradition that shapes shared identity includes multiplicity, difference, and change across time.

One of the most important things to recognize about a historical tradition such as Anabaptism is that it is an ongoing action—a process of traditioning—in the sense of being as much *operation* as deposit or heritage. A long line of interpreters living out their understanding shape how we are affected by the tradition and our conscious engagement with it. Traditioning is pluriform; varied understandings historically and in the present—with various construals of meaning asserted—constitute the tradition. We do not simply receive the content of a tradition; we must engage it and interpret it to discern what it means to live and believe as persons in this tradition today. Ricoeur puts it this way: “Our ‘heritage’ is not a sealed package we pass from hand to hand, without ever opening, but rather a treasure from which we draw by the handful and which by this very act is replenished.”³

1 For an expansion of this argument, see Laura Schmidt Roberts, “Refiguration, Configuration: Tradition, Text, and Narrative Identity,” in *Recovering from the Anabaptist Vision: New Essays in Anabaptist Identity and Theological Method*, edited by Laura Schmidt Roberts, Paul Martens, and Myron A. Penner (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 33–52; cf. Laura Schmidt Roberts, “(Re)figuring Tradition,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 71–81.

2 Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, edited by Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 27.

3 Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations*, 27.

Situated in traditions

Thinking of tradition as a verb highlights the fact of human historicity, the situatedness of our experience. We are born or brought into families and communities that are themselves shaped consciously or unconsciously by the past—by language, culture, faith, and generations of history and family dynamics. To be human is to be located—in a body, in time and space, in these longer historical traditions. We find ourselves already situated within a horizon of view—what we see and understand from our uniquely shaped perspective.⁴ As we become conscious of this, we do

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some sorting and sifting, deciding what to carry forward and what to let go of. As we encounter new situations, relationships, or ideas, we do the same. Our views and understandings shift but still remain situated in the sense of having a limited viewpoint. This means self-reflection and critical engagement—considering how our biases shape our understanding, asking whose interests are served by systems and practices and the

ideas behind them—are important. Ricoeur calls this the “dispossession of the ego,” a self-critical hermeneutic that attends to elements of power, interest, and ideology shaping our situatedness and the traditions of which we are apart. This posture of humility includes a genuine openness to having our self-understanding and our understanding of tradition challenged and potentially expanded or figured anew as a result.⁵

This is as true at a communal level as it is for us as individuals. Our locatedness and consciousness of the horizon of understanding from which we engage a tradition and its texts make possible a refiguring of tradition in the present. Refiguring—figuring anew or again, articulating afresh the identity and meaning of the tradition in and for the present context—is necessary because tradition does not live in disembodied form. Tradition

4 Ricoeur’s exploration of this notion explicitly draws on Hans-George Gadamer’s historically effected consciousness and fusion of horizons; see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 207–221.

5 Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, edited and translated by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 143, 186–87.

lives only as it is refigured and reembodyed in the present via the open, intentional, self-critical engagement of situated interpreters. Being part of a living, vibrant tradition such as Anabaptism requires such sifting and sorting of past and present because all traditions are ambiguous—marked, as theologian David Tracy observes, by great good and frightening evil, by beauty and cruelty, by reason and error, by mutuality and domination, by belonging and interruption and otherness. There are no innocent traditions.⁶ The same self-critical posture—a hermeneutic of suspicion—must be applied, asking the sometimes difficult but always necessary questions about how elements of power, interest, and ideology have shaped and misshaped the understanding and practice of Anabaptism as a Christian tradition.

The identity of a tradition such as Anabaptism is more iterative than static, and it never gains full closure (unless it becomes a dead tradition of the past). This presents considerable challenge to articulating the identity of a historical tradition. We resort to the language of “distinctives”—listing practices we do or do not do and convictions we hold or object to—as a way of distinguishing ourselves from other groups. But such lists do not capture the fullness of what it means to *live* as a person and community, shaped by and self-critically engaging Anabaptism. For that we need stories.

Narrative identity

Like a living tradition, our personal identity is also an ongoing project. We answer the question *Who am I?* by telling a story of our life. But we never do this from the final end point, death. Rather, at a given point in our lives we tell a story that answers the question *Who am I?* from that point, both backward and forward. The story we tell is selective. It makes connections between disparate events after the fact. We work to make some sense of the discontinuities, changes, and differences; we work to narrate a whole. Doing this requires multiple versions of the story. We introduce ourselves differently depending on the context—by profession, family relationship, or shared interests. The various stories we tell change over time. Sometimes we even say things like *I'm not the person I used to be*. Articulating the nature of the continuous recognizable identity of a per-

6 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 66–81.

son across the span of their life presents a challenge. We are a continuous self, but we are not identifiable as such only on the basis of sameness.

For Ricoeur this is also true of communal identity, and the challenge is best addressed by what he calls the dialectic of narrative identity—a tension holding together identity as *sameness* and identity as self-reflective *selfhood*.⁷ Identity as sameness accounts for similarity and a stability across time born of acquired habits and dispositions. Ricoeur uses character “traits” or “distinctives” as a prime example of this type of recognizability. This kind of permanence by which a person is reidentified as the same via

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a set of distinctives provides an example of “sedimentation” for Ricoeur. In habits or distinctive traits, sedimentation has overcome the innovation that marks the dynamic, living identity of a person or a community.

A list of traits or distinctives is not a self. It answers *what* but not *who*, and the question of identity is not only a question of *what*. Sameness-only identity is inadequate to the varied stories we

tell of our lives. It is reductionistic—as if the fullness of who we are or who our community or tradition is could be boiled down to a list of traits or distilled into a singular essence. Narrative identity requires both sameness and selfhood. The *self* of selfhood is “the fruit of an examined life,” requiring humility, critical self-reflection, and a genuine openness to risking expanded self-understanding, which requires dispossession of the ego. This self sets about answering the question *who* through interpretive narration.⁸

When we tell and retell the story of our lives, we draw together the significance of various events, ideas, and persons and the relationship between them. Ricoeur argues that doing so makes it possible to integrate sameness-identity (the list of distinctives) with what seems to be its contrary: “diversity, variability, discontinuity, instability.”⁹

7 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 245–49.

8 Paul Ricoeur *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 115–25.

9 Ricoeur, *Oneself*, 140–43.

The process by which we configure a narrative whole that reconciles our own identity and diversity is ongoing. We tell and retell the story (or, better, stories) of our lives, configuring and reconfiguring the answer to the *Who am I?* question differently. It is not seamless, and it is never fully stable. The significance of events changes as we stand at different points and look backward and forward and engage in *emplotment*. (You do not know until well after the fact that you have fired the shot heard round the world, for example.) Ricoeur employs a weaving image to describe the ongoing interpretive and dynamic nature of narrative identity, the dialectic of sameness and difference, of sedimentation and innovation, of permanence and change. New threads get added to the loom that change the pattern, including changing how we see the pattern that was previously visible. Ricoeur summarizes the narrative identity of an individual or community as stemming from endless narrative iterations configuring and reconfiguring the story and the figuring anew (refiguring) of tradition that results.¹⁰

Anabaptism as contrasting narrative?

The discussion of narrative identity here underscores that a list of distinctives is inadequate to describe a living tradition whose story continues to unfold and be reconfigured in the present.

Five hundred years in, we are still faced with the question of how to narrate who we are as a tradition today. It is up to us to decide which stories are adequate to the ambiguous reality of Anabaptism—the rich heritage and present pursuit of faithful discipleship, the missteps, failings and blind spots, the vision of the fullness of God’s righteous and just *shalom* that draws us forward. We must continue to ask which stories and voices are welcome—a question that raises issues of power and inclusion important to the current context in which we reflect on the past and ponder the meaning of Anabaptist tradition for the present and future.

Growing scholarship over the past several decades calls attention to the ambiguous, mixed history of the Anabaptist tradition regarding matters of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, power, domination, and abuse. This sifting and sorting by some in the tradition presents a challenge for Anabaptist self-understanding as a contrasting alternative to a Christendom marked by domination, violence, and oppression. While Anabaptist persecution and marginalization at the hands of reli-

10 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 248.

gious authorities with greater power are undeniable historical realities, majority culture identity and accompanying elements of race and class privilege, for example, are equally an undeniable part of the experience of many Anabaptist-Mennonites of Western European descent in Canada and the United States, past and present. Even where some wish to draw sharp contrasts, Anabaptism shares in the mixed nature of the broader Christendom-shaped Christian tradition. We must find ways to tell and hear stories that wrestle with these realities, call for critical self-reflection attending to operations of power and privilege, and call for repentance (*metanoia*) made visible in concrete actions.

The self-understanding of Anabaptism as a contrasting alternative has kept most discussions of power focused outside of the Anabaptist community, centered instead on a principled rejection of power as construed and wielded by the secular state and the call for a radical reconceptualization of power in light of Jesus's nonviolent way. While this theology and witness are terribly important, the need for critique and dismantling of ideologies of domination and abuse of power within the tradition remains great—in communities, congregations and institutions; in relationships between persons; in systemic, institutional forms. Deconstruction of these ideologies operational in and through the tradition is part of the price by which tradition continues. Historical traditions—including Anabaptism—remain living only through ongoing interpretation and re-embodiment. Given the reality of power and ambiguity within Anabaptism, a hermeneutic of suspicion must inform the reinterpretation of the tradition, the sifting and sorting, the multiple understandings and incarnations of the identity of the tradition, and the resultant “family arguments.” With a pairing of retrieval and suspicion, there is room both to affirm the truth about God, humanity, and the world disclosed through Anabaptism and to critique the ways the tradition has obscured such truth through conscious and unconscious machinations of power, coercion, domination, and ideology.

About the author

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