

the meanings of  
Michael Oakeshott's  
Conservatism



edited by Corey Abel

# Contents

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List of Contributors .....	v
List of Abbreviations .....	ix
Foreword .....	xi

## Part I Religion

1. Skepticism and Tradition: The Religious Imagination of Michael Oakeshott <i>Ian Tregenza</i> .....	2
2. Oakeshott's Wise Defense: Christianity As A Civilization <i>Corey Abel</i> .....	17
3. Language and the Conservation of the Religious Disposition <i>Todd Breyfogle</i> .....	32
4. Religion and Art: Modal Formalism and Political Antinomies <i>Byron Kaldis</i> .....	41

## Part II History

5. What Is Political Thought? The Example of Law in Greece and Rome in Oakeshott's LSE Lectures <i>Josiah Lee Auspitz</i> .....	64
6. A Conservative Concept of Freedom: Otto von Guericke's 'Genossenschaftslehre' and Oakeshott's Philosophy of Practice <i>Michael Henkel</i> .....	77
7. Geography Cannot Replace History <i>Gene Callahan</i> .....	97

## Part III Currents in Philosophy

8. The Relation of Philosophy to Conservatism in the Thought of Michael Oakeshott <i>Timothy Fuller</i> .....	112
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9. Conservatism, Romanticism, and the Understanding of Modernity <i>Roy Tseng</i> . . . . .	126
10. Ryle and Oakeshott on the “Knowing-How/Knowing-That” Distinction <i>Leslie Marsh</i> . . . . .	143
11. Conversation, Conversion and Conservation: Oakeshott, Arendt and a Little Bit of Cavell <i>Richard Flathman</i> . . . . .	161
12. Richard Rorty, Michael Oakeshott and the Impossibility of Liberalism Without Tradition <i>Jeff Rabin</i> . . . . .	183
13. The Conservative Disposition and the Precautionary Principle <i>Stephen Turner</i> . . . . .	204

**Part IV**  
**On Being Conservative**

14. Being English: The Conservative Witness of Michael Oakeshott <i>George Feaver</i> . . . . .	219
15. A Brief Enchantment: The Role Of Conversation And Poetry In Human Life <i>Ferenc Hörcher</i> . . . . .	238
16. One Hand Clapping: The Reception of Oakeshott’s Work by American Conservatives <i>Kenneth B. McIntyre</i> . . . . .	255
17. Conservatives’ Paradox in Post-Communism <i>Attila K. Molnár</i> . . . . .	268
18. ‘A Dark Age Devoted to Barbaric Affluence’: Oakeshott’s Verdict on the Modern World <i>Ivo Mosley</i> . . . . .	278
Index . . . . .	287

# The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott's Conservatism

Edited by Corey Abel

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Stephen Turner is Graduate Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Florida and a devoted Alfisto. He lives on Pass-a-Grille Beach in Florida.

### **Memorial to George Feaver, 1937–2008**

I met George for the first time in the fall of 1979. I was then a Visitor to the Government Department at The London School of Economics. George was making one of his frequent visits to his old haunts and, in particular, visiting his mentor, Maurice Cranston. We met for coffee in the Senior Common Room, had a friendly visit, and then he was off on his travels. A few years later I met him again in Vancouver. The Canadian Learned's were holding their annual meetings at the University of British Columbia. My friend and colleague, Robert Orr of the LSE, and I had proposed a panel on Hobbes's political philosophy, with assistance from George and from Bill Mathie of Brock University. It was on this occasion that George and I spent time together and began to really know each other. He showed us around Vancouver (my first visit there but the first of numerous trips to Vancouver). George turned out to be a sort of polymath about British politics since the nineteenth century, and a fund of stories about the LSE. This fit well with me since I had written my doctoral thesis on John Stuart Mill, and had become a fan of the LSE Government Department, which was, in my opinion, in its golden age. Like George, I have visited London every year for many years, until 1990 primarily to see Oakeshott, Shirley and Bill Letwin, Ken Minogue, Maurice Cranston, Maurice Cowling at Cambridge, and the others, and I still visit even though most of them are gone from the scene.

Michael Oakeshott, the Letwins, Elie Kedourie, Maurice Cranston, Ken Minogue, Robert Orr, John Charvet, and many others were essential participants in that LSE scene. It was an exciting venue for us political theorists. George and I shared all this in common. Later in the 80s, I was assisting a colleague in the Romance Language Department at Colorado College to inaugurate a program of 'North American Studies'. This was to be a comparative study of Canada, Mexico, and the United States. I taught summer courses comparing Canada and the USA, and eventually took a group of students to Canada in the first of what turned out to be a decade-long program of comparative study excursions. Before that, however, I had invited George to visit Colorado College to give some talks to students about Canadian culture and politics, and we spent a good deal of time exploring the Colorado Rockies. I last saw George at the 2006 meeting of the Michael Oakeshott Association where he delivered a paper, a version of which appears in this volume. We had dinner together and he regaled all of us Oakeshottians with endless stories of the ups and downs of his life which were numerous, a mixture of joy and sadness, and sometimes quite adventurous. I had hoped, alas, to see him at the 2009 meeting of the Michael Oakeshott Association.

George was great fun, an old fashioned citizen of the Republic of Letters and a natural exemplification of the world of liberal learning. I was happy to recommend him for a fellowship to engage in researching the Cranston archive at the University of Texas. He would no doubt have produced a vivid memoir of his teacher had he lived long enough to complete it. I think he also qualifies as a natural "Oakeshottian" in the sense that much of his life seemed to be an unrehearsed intellectual adventure.

*Timothy Fuller, Colorado College, January 2010*



# List of Abbreviations

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<b>EM</b>	<i>Experience and its Modes</i>
<b>FS</b>	<i>The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism</i>
<b>HCA</b>	<i>Hobbes on Civil Association</i> (Liberty Fund, 1990)
<b>HCiv</b>	<i>Hobbes on Civil Association</i> (Berkeley, 1975)
<b>LHPT</b>	<i>Lectures in the History of Political Thought</i>
<b>MPME</b>	<i>Morality and Politics in Modern Europe</i>
<b>Notes IX</b>	British Library of Economics and Political Science, Oakeshott Archives, LSE File 2/1/9
<b>Notes XI</b>	British Library of Economics and Political Science, Oakeshott Archives, LSE File 2/1/11
<b>OH</b>	<i>On History and Other Essays</i> (Basil Blackwell)
<b>OHist</b>	<i>On History and Other Essays</i> (Barnes and Noble)
<b>OHC</b>	<i>On Human Conduct</i>
<b>RIP</b>	<i>Rationalism in Politics</i> (Liberty Press, 1991)
<b>RP</b>	<i>Rationalism in Politics</i> (Methuen, 1962)
<b>RPML</b>	<i>Religion, Politics and the Moral Life</i>
<b>SPD</b>	<i>The Social and Political Doctrine of Contemporary Europe</i>
<b>VL</b>	<i>The Voice of Liberal Learning</i> (Liberty Fund, 2001)
<b>VLL</b>	<i>The Voice of Liberal Learning</i> (Yale, 1989)
<b>WH</b>	<i>What is History? and other essays</i>

*To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.*

*Michael Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative"*

# Foreword

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This volume is made up of essays that were, for the most part, originally delivered at the Michael Oakeshott Association's 2006 conference, which took place at Colorado College. Tulane University was to have been host in 2005, a plan that was disrupted, like so much else, by Hurricane Katrina. The conference took the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of 'On Being Conservative' as the occasion to explore the question of Oakeshott's conservatism. As this volume demonstrates, interest in Oakeshott's work continues to grow, and his reputation spreads internationally, with scholars in the United States, Canada, and Britain joined by writers in Hungary, Germany, Australia, China, and Greece. While this volume focuses on Oakeshott's conservatism, it reflects Oakeshott's own breadth of interests and distinctive approach to politics and philosophy, in pursuing not a narrowly ideological understanding of conservatism, nor even a strictly political conception, but instead examining the meanings of his reflections on history, tradition, the relation of philosophy to politics and more.

As those familiar with his work know, 'conservative' was not a term Oakeshott normally used to describe his own position. He was not a doctrinaire supporter of right wing ideology, despite what some harsh and hasty critics have alleged. One finds in his work not a Burkean defense of tradition, but rather a Hegelian and Humean critique of abstract reasoning. For Oakeshott, there can be no defense of tradition that relies on characterizing it as the source of wisdom or goodness *against* a deficient present. Tradition is made up of a continuous stream of innovated, spontaneous, dance-like responses of individual agents to their unchosen circumstances. It is not hard to extract an argument about skill in doing that has substantial resonance with Aristotle's thoughts on practical knowledge, nor to see interwoven with it a Paterian argument about living with intensity and winning one's way through to an existence of one's own. Above all, Oakeshott was a philosopher determined to understand the world without feeling pressed to change it, unwilling to compromise with conventional wisdom, a thinker who therefore offends his friends from time to time.

Oakeshott's interest in religion, history and tradition, and the limitation of state power allies him with other 'conservatives,' and yet his approach to these topics often seems anything but conservative. To define the religious disposition as a determination to live in the present, for example, may strike some as decidedly poetic rather than religious, where our thoughts, we are told, should be profoundly and essentially future oriented: hope for salvation and fear of damnation. Instead

of subsuming the past ('history') under the single head of tradition, Oakeshott carefully distinguishes the study of the past for its own sake, which he says has nothing to do with the present, and tradition, which is continuous with the present and intimately related to the future; it is, as he says, a sharing of authority between past, present, and future. And rather than make an argument about the size of government, or its limitation to some basic, minimal or 'enumerated' set of responsibilities and powers, he instead develops a novel and striking argument about the *mode of association*.

In his distinction between enterprise association and civil association, the crucial issue turns out to be whether the state is understood as having some identifiable common purpose or not. If it does, Oakeshott argues, it becomes very difficult to argue that government should be limited. On the contrary, government should be vested with as much power as needed to pursue its purpose with as much vigor as possible. The more sure we are about the desirability of the end to be pursued, the less interested we will be in limiting power and the more we will seek ways to make government effective. In extreme cases, this view results in a complete denial of the value of human individuality, political rights, and legal order. Divergence from the common pursuit, hesitancy to commit to the pursuit, or a tendency to arrest the exercise of power for merely 'technical' legal reasons will be seen as burdens, possibly as crimes or even sin. This criticism of the politics of enterprise association applies with equal force to projects of the political right as well as the left. Whether a regime fosters virtue, seeks global democratization, promotes income equality, or strives for social justice here and abroad, it speaks the language of enterprise association. It is possible for a Republican President in the United States to be a good Wilsonian; and defense spending can as easily add to budget deficits as welfare, medicine, or education.

A civil association, by contrast, is, according to Oakeshott 'the only morally tolerable form of compulsory association.' He is aware, in spite of the fact that some critics have missed the point, that the state is a non-voluntary form of association, where the authorities have a right to use coercion. This is true in both civil and enterprise association; in political life in either mode the question of why we are using coercion will always be a focus of concern. In enterprise association, this is always in relation to the end pursued. The justification of power, or what is sometimes called the legitimacy of the regime, hinges on acceptance of the validity or desirability of the end pursued. This makes not just everyday legislative, executive, and judicial activities contentious, but puts the very basis of the association on the same contentious plane. For, in any moderately diverse association of human beings, there will be differences of opinion as to what ends in life are worth seeking. The decision to devote the resources of the state to the pursuit of one or a few such ends necessarily excludes a significant portion of what a substantial part of the 'city' opines to be their goods. They will be imposed upon for the sake of others' private visions.

In civil association, power is used on an 'as needed' basis. In a large state with a complex economy and social life, we should not be dismayed to find the size of government to be larger than that in a small, less complex country; but in a

large state that understands itself as a civil association, we should be surprised to find a desire to use the state's power to mold or transform society. A conservative, Oakeshott says, does not lightly surrender known goods for unknown betters. Civil association will seem most compelling and appropriate whenever we are able to focus on the enjoyment of known goods. When we face crises, feel an overpowering need to address great evils, or respond to external threats, the simple pleasures of living peaceably and commodiously with our neighbors fade, and enterprise association restates its argument, always ready for accomplishment.

Oakeshott's dispositional, non-doctrinaire conservatism is tied to his sensitivity to the poetic dimension of life. It is in 'On Being Conservative' that Oakeshott makes his famous complaint that Rationalism denies 'the poetic character of all human activity' It is an essential part of Oakeshott's conservatism to remind us of poetry and of all those forms of experience that are enjoyable for their own sakes – friendship, play, and non-instrumental modes of association, including non-instrumental political association. It is highly significant that after laying out the basic characteristics of the conservative disposition, Oakeshott makes the point that this disposition is, ultimately, a disposition to enjoy certain kinds of activities. Oakeshott's conservatism is really the attempt to refocus our attention upon activities in which we do not seek constant improvement or innovation because the nature of what is being done does not depend upon the pursuit of results. In defending these kinds of activities, in which the end is in the activity itself, he is of course harkening back to Aristotle and putting himself in opposition to a trend in modern thought about human conduct, which denies that such non-instrumental activity is even possible. However, Oakeshott would argue, with Aristotle, that there is an important difference between activities that have some purpose extrinsic to the activity, typically ones that produce some product or other measurable outcome, and those activities that are ends in themselves. This latter kind of activity has an end in a strikingly different way than activities that produce external ends. The activity is inherently enjoyable; non-necessary; intimately related to the highest human capacities; self-sufficient; and intimately connected to human happiness.

The disposition to enjoy the present, to delight in it, to laugh, implies that the given world as we find it is worth affirming, has much good in it, and may be delightful. And indeed, we find in Oakeshott the affirmation of ordinary human experience that is quite at odds with jeremiads of both the left and right. In spite of being able, at times, to pronounce gloomily on the 'dark ages' we seem in danger of falling into, he never made 'crisis' the central motif of his thought, including his diagnoses of modern ills. Instead, he says:

In any generation, even the most revolutionary, the arrangements which are enjoyed always far exceed those which are recognized to stand in need of attention, and those which are being prepared for enjoyment are few in comparison with those which receive amendment: the new is an insignificant proportion of the whole.

It may be that this comes down to one's position in some arcane theodicean debates, or perhaps it could be settled by appeal to moral intuition, possibly even to some

empirical measurement. In any case, Oakeshott found he could enjoy the world, in spite of living 'after Auschwitz' and in the midst of 'the crisis of modernity.'

On a different plane, Oakeshott's appreciation for civil association also comes from a deep and sensitive reading of the history of political thought, especially in its medieval to modern period, but going all the way back to the ancient Greeks. While the non-purposiveness of civil association has been criticized as unrealistic, we find, especially among those political theorists involved in the modern liberal tradition, a set of ideas, miscellaneous, to be sure, concerning the proper basis of authority, constitutional checks on the use of power, rights and privileges of citizens, governance by rule of law, electoral devices serving both accountability and representation, the application of law to the rulers, and so on, none of which would be very meaningful if the point was to understand how best to empower a government to pursue a common purpose. For, as others have noted, many of these devices make effective and energetic rule more difficult, not easier, and ensure that a state will not stay long upon a single course. It may be that the underlying logic of a major stream of modern thought is to rid governance of the characteristics of purposive activity.

Here, we can resort to a kind of empirical check on Oakeshott's reading. His oft-noted 'preference' for civil association is never framed as a merely moral or political preference. It is a claim about what in the modern world is the dominant ideal – the ideal of individualism. Oakeshott's list of proponents of civil association includes an impressive line-up of major thinkers: Pico della Mirandola, Marsilius of Padua, Montaigne, Hobbes, Pascal, Hume, Kant, Burke, Blake, Locke (usually), the American Founders (in spite of their often 'enterprising' rhetoric), Nietzsche, and of course, Hegel. No doubt, the assertion that such a long list of thinkers belongs to an identifiable tradition, and that it is the tradition of conversation, civility, non-instrumentality, individualism, and play is an extraordinary claim. To put it mildly, there should be material enough for many generations of doctoral studies, should anyone feel it worth their while to sort and sift Oakeshott's reading of the tradition of Western political thought.

While we are imagining Oakeshottian research programs, we need not confine our investigation to modern theorists. Oakeshott argues that civil association is a modern phenomenon, and that ancient and medieval polities are not properly understood as enterprise associations. The yearning for a common enterprise rests in part upon a nostalgic yearning for solidarity that the ancient world is believed to have enjoyed; but this yearning, Oakeshott says, is best understood as a reaction to the modern idea of civil association. What the ancients had was neither civil nor enterprise association, although we can detect traces of both modes in authors quite remote from our own times. A simple example might be Aquinas' denial that human law should suppress all vice (*Summa Theologiae*, 96.2), which might lead one further to deny that the state's power should be used to impose a vision of the good life. More subtly, it might lead one to ask whether a 'common good' is possible where such a vision is pursued. Some versions of enterprise association might even be indicted for impiety. Another interesting example would be Aquinas' great forebear, Aristotle.

Aristotle frames his discussion of political rule by distinguishing it from mastery, and returns to this theme again and again throughout *The Politics*. Late in the book, he deploys a peculiar device in his discussion of the best life: the isolated or single city. His aim is to identify what is essential to politics, again to distinguish political rule from mastery, and to determine to what extent war making is essential to politics, while asking what sort of life is best. If a city existed in isolation, would it still be a city; would it still have something essentially political about it, or does 'politics' occur only in the context of war and the acquisition of power over one's neighbors? Would such a city be 'active'? Aristotle answers that such a city would be active, as god and the philosopher are active; that is, there would be internal activity, activity that has its end in itself. Moreover, he concludes that war making is for the sake of peace, not peace for the sake of war making. The aim, it seems, is to be a self-contained city with good laws, and with nothing to pursue other than to maintain itself in its own character.

Akin to Aristotle's single city, one of the qualities of civil association is its essential non-belligerence. By contrast, enterprise association is 'inherently belligerent; its already purposeful disposition invites that of a state of war.' War is one of the commonest examples of mobilization for a common end. The end is clear, single, and undeniably important: our very survival as a people may be at stake. Other political enterprises often adopt the language of war: a war on poverty, a war on drugs, a war on terror, a *campaign* to reduce illiteracy, a *mission* to protect the environment. In 'The Universities,' Oakeshott takes Sir Walter Moberly to task for adopting war as his image of educational reform. According to Moberly, 'The analogy of wartime experience suggests that to get the most out of a university, it must be enrolled in the service of some cause beyond itself.' Oakeshott's response is worth quoting at length:

We cannot too often remind ourselves that in politics, and in every other activity, war offers the least fruitful opportunity for profitable change: war is a blind guide to civilized life. In war all that is most superficial in our tradition is encouraged merely because it is useful, even necessary, for victory. *Inter arma silent leges* is an old adage which can support a wide interpretation; not only are the laws suspended, but the whole balance of the society is disturbed. There are many who have no other idea of social progress than the extrapolation of the character of a society in time of war – the artificial unity, the narrow overmastering purpose, the devotion to a single cause and the subordination of everything to it – all this seems to them inspiring; but the direction of their admiration reveals the emptiness of their souls. Not only is a society just emerged from a shattering war in the worst possible position for making profitable reforms in the universities, but the inspiration of war itself is the most misleading of all inspirations.

With Oakeshott's reminders – about the value of poetry and friendship, the dangers of war as an analogy for political activity, the possibility of delighting in the present – we are invited to reflect on the meaning of conservatism, rather than to be told what conservatives must or must not do. With Oakeshott, this reflection goes well beyond conservatism in the narrow political sense, and leads into the heart of what it means to be associated politically, how we are to understand our relationship to the past and future, and how the modes of human experience

compose a multivocal conversation. Oakeshott has been called a nihilist, a romantic, a Burkean, a liberal, a republican, and a conservative. He has been called nicer things, too. It may be that he is a Tory upon Whig premises. His conservatism does not fit today's political categories. Above all, Oakeshott is a philosopher; those looking for an ideology will find him hard going. But those who want a fresh and profound perspective on the most persistent problems in political theory and philosophy will find much in him to enjoy.

This volume brings together a rich collection of essays on several dimensions of Oakeshott's conservatism, without any pretension of comprehensiveness. Although Irving Kristol at one time found Oakeshott too secular others have found in his work a rich vein of reflections on religion: Corey Abel compares Oakeshott's early plan for a work of apology with his thoughts on religion across his career; Todd Breyfogle examines the links between Oakeshott's thoughts on language in poetry and religion; Byron Kaldis explores the 'antinomies' of religion and aesthetic experience in politics; and Ian Tregenza takes up Oakeshott's radical religious modernism. History and tradition play an important role in Oakeshott's thought, and these are discussed deftly in treatments of Oakeshott's approach to the history of political thought, focusing on the idea of law in Greece and Rome by Josiah Lee Auspitz, a critique of Jared Diamond's use and abuse of history by Gene Callahan, and an in depth comparison of Oakeshott with Otto von Guericke by Michael Henkel. Oakeshott has been most often studied in the United States by political theorists, but he has a great deal to offer to contemporary philosophy, and here we have comparisons of Oakeshott, Arendt and Cavell on the theme of education and conversation by Richard Flathman, Oakeshott and Hume on skepticism by Timothy Fuller; Rorty and liberalism by Jeff Rabin; and Oakeshott's place in relation to Romanticism and the Enlightenment by Roy Tseng. Leslie Marsh lays out for us a detailed analysis of the 'knowing how'/'knowing that' distinction in Ryle and relates this to Oakeshott's distinction between technical and practical knowledge; and Stephen Turner explores the precautionary principle. Finally, several authors explore Oakeshott in relation to more directly political concerns, though these are also highly varied: George Feaver discusses Oakeshott in relation to English identity; Ferenc Hörcher traces the ideals of conversation and poetry in relation to classical and modern theories of rhetoric and morals; Kenneth McIntyre examines Oakeshott's place in the charged debate over the character of American politics and American conservatism; and Ivo Mosely reminds us of Oakeshott's capacity for trenchant criticism of the modernity whose friend he claimed to be.

George Feaver passed away before this volume could be completed, but after having approved the near-final version of his essay. Subsequent changes were restricted to minor points of proofreading. As an editor, it was a pleasure to work with George, on both this volume and on *The Intellectual Legacy of Michael Oakeshott*, for which he contributed a fine piece on Oakeshott and representative democracy. He appreciated the effort to refine a piece of writing, and always strove to keep the conversation going. May he rest in peace.

Corey Abel  
Denver, Colorado, 2010



I

Religion

Ian Tregenza

# *Skepticism and Tradition: The Religious Imagination of Michael Oakeshott*

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## Introduction

While Oakeshott is usually described as a philosopher of conservatism for, among other things, his defense of tradition against rationalism, and for his defense of the tradition of limited government, his thought often went in surprisingly non-conservative, even radical directions. He made the claim in his essay 'On Being Conservative' that it is not 'inconsistent to be conservative in respect of government and radical in respect of every other activity.'<sup>1</sup> In the very next sentence he invoked the names of some of the great early modern sceptics – Montaigne, Pascal, Hobbes, and Hume – as best exemplifying the conservative disposition that he favored. As many commentators have noted there is a close connection between Oakeshott's political conservatism and his philosophical skepticism. Oakeshott was a consistent skeptic and it conditioned all aspects of his thought, including his account of religion and tradition.

Along with his Idealist predecessors Oakeshott sought to defend religious experience from some of the exaggerated claims of scientific naturalism as well as the 'critical history', which shaped the theological debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But he did this by making sharp modal distinctions between realms of human experience, and rejecting the teleological interpretation of world history that was a feature of much earlier Idealist thought. Religion, for Oakeshott, completes the world of practice, but it is distinct from history, science, and philosophy. Religion is practical life itself whenever it reaches a certain level of intensity and satisfaction, whereas science, history and philosophy involve an escape from the demands of the practical mode of experience. Likewise, Oakeshott's elaboration of the idea of tradition in the middle period of his career is closely related to his early claim that the world of practice is an autonomous mode of experience. The search for 'rational' foundations, in the form of fixed

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[1] Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays, new and expanded edition*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 435. Hereafter: RIP.

rules or principles, for ethics, politics or religion – a code of conduct, a bill of rights, a creedal statement – not only involves a failure to appreciate the invariably traditional nature of human experience, it denies the integrity of the practical mode of experience.

In theological circles the themes of tradition and scepticism are not usually run together. Those who defend tradition often do so either because it is said to contain within it the essence of Christianity or because, more generally, it is the vehicle through which truth is revealed. For instance, Jaroslav Pelikan, who has devoted much of his scholarly career to describing the development of the Christian tradition, defends this latter view when he writes that for a tradition not to become a mere idol it must seek to grasp the universal truth of which it is a particular manifestation.<sup>2</sup> In Oakeshott's formulation by contrast, since religion belongs wholly to the practical mode of experience the truth it discloses is conditioned by practical imperatives. Indeed, in his belief in the essentially practical import of religion and religious ideas – God, immortality, salvation – Oakeshott's account has much in common with the anti-metaphysical thrust of much twentieth century theology, from Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann to Don Cupitt. The aims of this paper are twofold. The first is to establish the connections between one of the best-known themes of Oakeshott's writings – the concept of tradition – and his less well-known religious writings. The second aim is to identify some links between these writings and broader trends in modern 'radical' theology.

### **Religion And The End Of 'Faith In History'**

Oakeshott's radical distinction between the different modes of experience is usually described in terms of tendencies within the tradition of British Idealism. That is, he takes over from writers such as Bradley and Bosanquet the idea of orders or degrees of reality but he pushes their separation further than any of his predecessors. An equally important source of this modal separatism comes from his engagement with early twentieth century theological debates centered on the relationship between history and Christian belief.

Much of Oakeshott's early writing addresses theological matters, and reflects the key concerns of church historians and theologians of the time. Of particular concern was the relation between history and Christianity. As is well known, during the latter part of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries many church historians were obsessed with questions concerning the historical Jesus and searching out the essence of Christianity. These were the concerns particularly of liberal theologians who saw themselves as continuing the work of the Reformation, by stripping away the accretions of the centuries to return to a pure form of the faith. It was believed that the more sophisticated historical methods that scholars had developed in the nineteenth century provided the means for a more penetrating analysis of such questions. And with typical nineteenth century optimism historians set about the task of discovering the historical Jesus and with it the essence of

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[2] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), 56.

Christianity. The purpose of all these endeavors was not primarily historical – at least in Oakeshott’s sense of seeking to understand the past for its own sake – but was shaped by practical concerns. This was true not only of liberal theologians but also of someone like John Henry Newman whose turn to the history of the early church resulted in a significant change in his religious practice. Pelikan describes Newman as both rediscovering tradition intellectually, as well as recovering it for existential reasons.<sup>3</sup> But this optimism about what historical studies could reveal about the past in order to inform current religious practice was coming under attack in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Two important figures in this are Ernst Troeltsch and Albert Schweitzer, who, in different ways, could be understood as signaling the exhaustion of this endeavor, what might be called the loss of faith in history. Schweitzer did this by revealing a Jesus completely unlike the liberal/humanitarian of the liberals’ projection:

The Jesus of Nazareth who appeared as the Messiah, proclaimed the kingdom of God, established the kingdom of heaven upon earth, and died in order to consecrate his work – this Jesus never existed. It is a figure sketched by Rationalism, enlivened by Liberalism, and dressed up by modern theology in the clothes of historical science.<sup>4</sup>

Far from revealing a Jesus who would confirm the optimistic ethical sensibilities of the nineteenth century, Schweitzer discovers a Jesus who is a stranger to us, a tragic figure whose expectations of the coming supernatural Kingdom were not realized. ‘The study of the life of Jesus,’ says Schweitzer,

has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Saviour... But He does not stay; He passes by our time and returns to His own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep Him in our time, but had to let him go. He returned to His own time, not owing to the application of any historical ingenuity, but by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returns to its original position.<sup>5</sup>

Don Cupitt suggests that the paradox of liberal Christianity is that it failed at the moment of its own success.<sup>6</sup> The attempt to discover, through historical method, the Jesus of history, and therefore the essence of Christianity (being realized in modern humanitarianism) was to discover a Jesus completely alien to the modern world.

Schweitzer himself shared with the liberals a faith in history’s capacity to reveal the true Jesus. But ‘after him,’ says Cupitt, ‘it was no longer possible to identify faith’s approach to scripture with that of critical reason. After him, faith and reason drew apart: it was one thing to study the New Testament in a strictly critical and

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[3] Pelikan, *Vindication of Tradition*, ch. 2.

[4] Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, cited in E. N. Mozley, *The Theology of Albert Schweitzer* (London: Albert and Charles Black, 1950), 10, 11.

[5] Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, cited in Mozley, *Theology of Albert Schweitzer*, 12, 13.

[6] Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984), 106.

objective spirit, and it was another thing to make a faith-judgement in response to what you had read.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, post-Schweitzer, there is no way of determining the right interpretation of scripture, no divinely packaged truth in scripture, no 'true' Jesus. There is rather, a 'challenge to religious creativity.'<sup>8</sup>

Like Schweitzer, Troeltsch tried to combine the role of the historian with that of the Christian apologist. He believed that the historian would view Christian history differently if he thought it had a future. Where Schweitzer sought to discover the historical Jesus, Troeltsch sought to discern the essence of Christianity. Troeltsch's historicism leads to the conclusion that Christianity is simply one tradition among many. Moreover, the essence of Christianity is shaped by historical development and will in fact be different in different epochs. The effect of this is to undermine the idea of essence. Karl Barth thought he was the last theologian of the nineteenth century – the culmination of liberal theology.<sup>9</sup> Others have seen him as the first theologian of the twentieth and as paving the way for post modernism.<sup>10</sup> The main point to stress here is that Troeltsch's turn to historical method, which was meant to solve certain problems in theology and apologetics, raised as many questions as it settled.<sup>11</sup>

So Oakeshott writes his early essays on religion, and his first major philosophical treatise, *Experience and Its Modes* in the light of these developments: We might call it the crisis of faith in history, or at least the point at which history and theology, or history and religious thinking part company. After Schweitzer and Troeltsch theologians were more circumspect about what history could recover, what could be claimed about history. One response was to turn away from history towards dogmatic theology. Karl Barth is representative of this move. Another response is represented by what might loosely be called radical theology – some key figures here are Bultmann, Tillich and, more recently, Cupitt. Here the aim is to save religious experience in the wake of the loss of faith in history, and indeed metaphysics. To put it in more positive terms, the end of history or the end of metaphysics is sometimes thought of as providing the opportunity for discovering a more authentic understanding of religious experience – authenticity being a key word particularly for existentialists such as Bultmann and Tillich.

Earlier Idealists such as T.H. Green, Edward Caird, and Henry Jones defended religion by making an ally of the new critical history and science. Such developments were understood in teleological terms, as the products of the unfolding of mind, which, far from destroying religion, pointed in fact to the spiritual nature of the universe. By the 1920s – post World War I, and post-Schweitzer – this optimism about the unity of knowledge and specifically about the possibility of

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[7] Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, 110.

[8] Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, 112.

[9] See Garrett E. Paul, 'Why Troeltsch? Why Today? Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,' available at: [www.Religion-online.org](http://www.Religion-online.org). Accessed on 30 May 2006. First published in *The Christian Century*, (30 June–7 July 1993): 676–81.

[10] Max L. Stackhouse, 'A Premature Postmodern,' *First Things*, 106 (October, 2000): 19–22.

[11] For a discussion of these themes, see S. W. Sykes, 'Ernst Troeltsch and Christianity's Essence,' in John Powell Clayton ed., *Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976).

history delivering practically useful judgments about religion was not so easy to maintain.<sup>12</sup>

In various places in the late 1920s Oakeshott is critical of the faith in history that had characterized the recent past. In his 1928 essay, 'The Importance of the Historical Element in Christianity' Oakeshott mentions Troeltsch's *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* and Schweitzer's *Civilization and Ethics* as works that represent this tendency to overstate the importance of history for religion. A faith in what he calls the *prima facie* historical or the historical as such, is not necessary to religion, and is the product of a particular *Weltanschauung*. This has, no doubt, been part of Christian history, particularly in recent years, but he thinks it is on the wane. 'As far as our civilization is concerned,' he writes, 'so much belief in history seems to be working its own ruin; the intellectual energy of our generation is turning in other directions, and the power to stand on the point of the present is returning.'<sup>13</sup> We get in this essay an early articulation of Oakeshott's life-long interest in distinguishing the practical from the historical pasts.<sup>14</sup> Not only does religion not need history; it is better off without it. 'What religion demands is not a consciousness of the necessity and individuality of past events, but a consciousness of the individuality of present experience ... religion is nothing if not contemporary' (*RPML*, 72).

One of the effects of this bracketing of history, the separation of history from practice, is to undermine any teleological reading of history. History is not heading towards a necessary goal or end point. We therefore do not turn to history to discover a guide to present behavior. We can turn to the past for guidance, but not to history. To make too much of history for religious experience is a form of idolatry (*RPML*, 72). In his 1929 essay 'Religion and the World' he says that 'conscience has made cowards of some generations, history and tradition of others, but a generation which would be religious must be courageous enough to achieve a life that is really contemporary' (*RPML*, 36). The practical past provides a resource whose value is to be traded in the present.

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[12] Some later Idealists, such as R. G. Collingwood and Clement C. J. Webb, continued to defend a unified conception of knowledge up to the Second World War. For some discussion see my, 'Collingwood, Oakeshott and Webb on the "Historical Element" in Religion,' *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 13, no. 2 (2007): 93-117. The following three paragraphs draw on this article.

[13] Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 69. Hereafter: *RPML*.

[14] In his early piece, 'An Essay on the Relations of Poetry, Religion and Reality' which Luke O'Sullivan dates at 1925, Oakeshott did not yet make a distinction between the practical and the historical pasts. Indeed, he says he borrows from Schweitzer's view (which in turn is similar to Croce's) that the purpose of understanding the past is to make it live in the present. 'Chronicle is dead history: if we wish to get at the truth we must make it live. The only true source of our knowledge of the life of Christ lies in actual communion with Him at the present time. We must experience the facts of history before we can win from them their truth,' in *What is History? And other essays*, ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), 111 n. 102. In many ways this piece bears the hallmarks of the absolute idealism of an earlier generation. Philosophy and Poetry are described as different ways to reality, which is conceived in monistic terms. For a discussion of the development of Oakeshott's idea of modality during the 1920s see Efraim Podoksik's 'The Idealism of Young Oakeshott' in James Connelly and Stamatoula Panagakou, eds., *Aspects of Idealism: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Peter Lang, forthcoming).

A similar claim is made in another early piece called 'Culture and Despotism.'<sup>15</sup> Here Oakeshott defends a view of culture as personal, as opposed to one of mere acquisition, either of information (the crude encyclopedic view), or of Matthew Arnold's more sophisticated idea of culture as 'the best that has been thought and known in the world.' The encyclopedic view sets up a distinction between Culture and Ignorance and the 'classical' view opposes Culture to Anarchy. In the view of culture that Oakeshott recommends, 'nothing is essential but an integrated self whose purpose is not to remember, adopt or assimilate, but to live a life contemporary with itself. The past and future are nothing to it except in so far as they come alive in the present.' Only this third view, Oakeshott thinks, has an adequate answer to mortality. It does not lead to a feverish activity, nor to a desire for a 'classic' permanence, but to a determination to find an altogether extemporary satisfaction in life. What is valued is not the fruit of experience, but the flower – something we know only in a present enjoyment and cannot garner. Death is not outrun; it is denied, dismissed.

He goes on to say (in providing an exposition of J. C. Powys' work, *The Meaning of Culture*, which articulates this view), 'Culture is then, a way of life, a religion. It does not imply that we consider our own path the noblest or the wisest, but simply that we know it to be our own and value it as such.' This view of Culture is opposed, not to Ignorance or Anarchy, but Despotism – the despotism of mankind's accumulated achievements<sup>16</sup> or an imagined external standard of perfection.

The sources of Oakeshott's concern with present subjective experience at this time are no doubt many. Podoksik suggests that it is a reflection of the 'life philosophy' that was then current in European (and especially German) intellectual circles.<sup>17</sup> Oakeshott mentions in passing both Epicurus and Montaigne as holding to something like the view of culture he outlines. Perhaps we can also add the name of Walter Pater whose work Oakeshott greatly admired and whose two historical novels (*Marius the Epicurean* and *Gaston de Latour*) are centered on characters who engage with the ideas of Epicurus and Montaigne in their quests for spiritual understanding. There are indeed some suggestive parallels between Pater and Oakeshott. *Gaston de Latour* was one of Oakeshott's favorite novels and he identified with the book's protagonist<sup>18</sup> – a priest who loses his faith and who seeks out the company of Montaigne. Pater himself identified with *Marius* and *Gaston de Latour* was written as a sequel to the earlier work – 'a sort of *Marius* in France.'<sup>19</sup> *Marius* itself was written as a rather thinly disguised autobiographical defense of Pater's notorious conclusion to *The Renaissance* where he had outraged

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[15] Oakeshott, 'Culture and Despotism,' *The Cambridge Review*, 51 (May 2, 1930): 367–8.

[16] Or what C. S. Lewis referred to as 'the fatal serialism of the modern imagination – the image of infinite unilinear progression that so haunts our minds.' *The Abolition of Man* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1943; Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., 1978).

[17] Podoksik, 'Idealism of Young Oakeshott.'

[18] Timothy Fuller mentioned this at the Third Plenary Meeting of the Michael Oakeshott Association, in Colorado Springs, CO, June 2006. See also his discussion in 'An Introduction: Michael Oakeshott's Achievement,' *The Political Science Reviewer*, 21 (Spring 1992): 1–15.

[19] Walter Pater, 'Letter to Mrs. Humphrey Ward,' cited in Michael Levey, 'Introduction' to Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 13.

many with his 'hedonistic' and 'subjectivist' calls to live in the present with a 'sense of the splendor of our experience and of its awful brevity.' The appropriate response to the tyranny of time is to engage in activities that carry their own intrinsic reward at the moment in which they occupy us – 'some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, – for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end.... To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense, it might even be said that our failure is to form habits.' For Pater it is in artistic experience that this sensibility is most intensely felt, since 'art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of forms of experience that carry their own intrinsic reward is one of the central features of all of Oakeshott's thought, and his early writings on religion and culture in particular convey a Pater-like mood. Podoksik makes the point that the writings from the late 1920s are marked by 'pathos,' a 'lack of irony' and even a kind of 'religious narcissism' that would disappear in Oakeshott's later work.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps he came to recognize the same limitations of this 'subjectivism' that Pater himself identified when he suggested in relation to Marius' development, that

Cyrenaicism is ever the characteristic philosophy of youth, ardent, but narrow in its survey – sincere, but apt to become one-sided, or even fanatical. It is one of those subjective and partial ideals, based on vivid, because limited, apprehension of the truth of one aspect of experience (in this case, of the beauty of the world and of the brevity of man's life there) that it may be said to be the special vocation of the young to express.<sup>22</sup>

The concluding paragraph to Oakeshott's 1956 essay 'On Being Conservative' strikes a similar tone. If we read this autobiographically it looks as if Oakeshott is revising some of his earlier enthusiasms:

Everybody's young days are a dream, a delightful insanity, a sweet solipsism. Nothing in them has a fixed shape, nothing a fixed price; everything is a possibility, and we live happily on credit.... The world is a mirror in which we seek the reflection of our desires.... The allure of violent emotions is irresistible.... We are not apt to distinguish between our liking and our esteem; urgency is our criterion of importance; and we do not easily understand that what is humdrum need not be despicable. We are impatient of restraint; and we believe, like Shelley, that to have contracted a habit is to have failed.

But this way of being in the world cannot last and 'for most,' Oakeshott continues,

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[20] Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 152–3. For further discussion of the relationship between Oakeshott and Pater see Elizabeth Campbell Corey's *Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics and Politics* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 67–71 and 120–1.

[21] Podoksik, 'Idealism of Young Oakeshott.'

[22] Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 181.



[T]here is what Conrad called the 'shadow line' which, when we pass it, discloses a solid world of things, each with its own point of balance, each with its price; a world of fact, not poetic image, in which what we have spent on one thing we cannot spend on another; a world inhabited by others besides ourselves who cannot be reduced to mere reflections of our own emotions. (*RIP*, 436–7)

The point he is making here is that the 'virtues' of youth are not those that are suitable for politics. But perhaps implicit in this passage is the idea that in the quixotic character of youth there is a special religious insight. Where politics demands a consequentialist attitude to the world, religion is concerned primarily with a certain kind of sensibility that reconciles us to the 'dissonances' of human life. This is developed at greater length in the distinction that he would develop in *On Human Conduct* between self-disclosure and self-enactment. The former entails intentions to bring about change in the world, the latter is not directly related to external consequences, but to an agent's self understanding – 'conduct released from its character as a response to a contingent situation.' 'Here,' Oakeshott continues, 'doing is delivered, at least in part, from the deadliness of doing, a deliverance gracefully enjoyed in the quiet of a religious faith.'<sup>23</sup>

While there is little trace in Oakeshott's later writings of the 'pathos' that marked his youthful religious reflections, there is no fundamental change in his understanding of religion as a particular kind of experience centered on the present and indifferent to worldly achievement.

### Tradition, Religion, and the Identity of Christianity

As mentioned earlier, both religion and tradition are closely connected in Oakeshott's account of practical experience. In *Experience and Its Modes* he wrote that religion 'is not a particular form of practical experience; it is merely practical experience at its fullest.'<sup>24</sup> Further, '[t]here is no exact point in the conduct of life at which religion can be said to begin. Religion differs from other forms of practical activity, not in kind, but in degree; it is characterized everywhere by intensity and strength of devotion and by singleness of purpose' (*EM*, 295). So religion is in fact synonymous with practical experience at its most satisfying level – the level at which there is as much coherence as possible between 'what is' (fact) and what 'ought to be' (value).

Likewise, tradition is very closely related to the concept of practice in that it largely takes the place of the practical mode of experience in Oakeshott's post war writings. W. H. Greenleaf for one sees Oakeshott's use of tradition as another way of describing the concrete universal – 'a concrete entity which, like the historical individual, continues in some sense the same through all the changes it

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[23] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 73–4. Hereafter: *OHC*. Oakeshott suggests that a certain nonchalance in the face of uncertainty in achieving our goals was strong in Epicureanism and Stoicism (*OHC*, 73 n. 1).

[24] Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1933), 292. Hereafter: *EM*.

undergoes.<sup>25</sup> Here Oakeshott's idea of traditional behavior as involving the pursuit of intimations is very similar to the account in *Experience and Its Modes* of practical experience as the never ending endeavor to make the world of 'what is' conform to the world of 'what ought to be'.

For someone who has been described as a traditionalist, Oakeshott in fact says surprisingly little about tradition; and, it is certainly not treated with the sort of reverence characteristic of someone like Burke. Traditions are simply the inescapable context for all current action.<sup>26</sup> They are not to be worshipped or venerated. They do not reveal the ways of providence, nor do they embody Wisdom or Reason – 'there is no sovereign purpose to be perceived or invariable direction to be detected; there is no model to be copied, idea to be realized, or rule to be followed' (*RIP*, 61) – but they do provide us with a set of resources on which we can draw. When too much, or the wrong sort of emphasis is accorded tradition then we have what might be called 'traditionalism'. And Oakeshott would undoubtedly endorse Pelikan's claim that 'tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.'<sup>27</sup> Indeed, they both invoke the same lines from Goethe's *Faust* to underline the importance of appropriating tradition for present purposes:

Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast,  
Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.  
(What you have as heritage,  
Take now as task;  
For thus you will make it your own!)<sup>28</sup>

Traditionalism in this sense is not unlike what Oakeshott refers to as worldliness – the belief that things have value apart from the insights they bring to the present experience of individuals. For the worldly a successful life is measured in external results and achievements, and in the contribution it makes to the stockpile of goods or knowledge. On this view, 'history and tradition ... acquire an exaggerated importance, and the legacy of the past is often appropriated mechanically, as one might inherit an incipient disease or a volume in a foreign language' (*RPML*, 31).

Where tradition in the modern world is usually counterpoised to change and innovation, for Oakeshott and Pelikan<sup>29</sup> a stagnant or ossified tradition is a contradiction in terms, a mere simulacrum of a concrete manner of living. For Oakeshott the mutability of tradition is linked to the way that the practical mode of experience is conceptualized. Whereas the worlds of science and history,

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[25] W. H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics* (London: Longmans, 1966), 55.

[26] Luke O'Sullivan makes a similar point in *Oakeshott on History* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003), 112.

[27] Pelikan, *Vindication of Tradition*, 65.

[28] Oakeshott cites these lines in his essay 'Religion and the World' (*RPML*, 33); Pelikan in an epigraph to *The Vindication of Tradition*. (I have borrowed Pelikan's translation.) Oakeshott uses the following two lines as well: Was man nicht nutzt, ist eine schwere Last,/Nur was der Augenblick erschafft, das kann er nutzen.

[29] Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study In Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1985), ch. 15.

for instance, assume 'a world of facts that does not change or move,' practical experience presupposes change. 'The world of fact in practice is the world of 'what is' at this moment; it is the present as such. What cannot change cannot, for practice, be a fact' (*EM*, 263). Likewise, a tradition of behavior 'is neither fixed nor finished ... [though] some parts of it may change more slowly than others ... none is immune from change ... everything is temporary, but nothing is arbitrary' (*RIP*, 61). This understanding of human life as temporal or evanescent is central to the way that Oakeshott theorizes both religion and tradition. Religion provides us with a means by which we can be reconciled to this condition,<sup>30</sup> whereas tradition offers a degree of stability amidst the change and with it resources to negotiate this change.

In perhaps his most well known passage on the nature of tradition Oakeshott mentions the Christian religion as an example of what he has in mind (*RIP*, 61 n). What he has to say here about the identity of tradition in general clearly echoes his earlier reflections on the identity of Christianity. Later in his career it is developed further in his account of the historical characters civil and enterprise association. Here I want to focus on the earlier work, and in particular on the implications that his view of the identity of Christianity has for its current practice. While the passage on tradition in 'Political Education' is well known, the following passage on the identity of Christianity in an earlier review is not. It is worth quoting at length as much of it is subsequently worked into his account of tradition:

- i. The notion that there has been no development or change is indefensible both historically and logically.
- ii. The identity of a historical phenomenon cannot be preserved by mere adherence to a fixed original datum, because (a) there can be no identity without a real change of some sort, and (b) there is no fixed original datum for us to adhere to.
- iii. If there has been change and development there must also be an identity, for without an identity there can be no change. Christianity is neither a bottle filled once and for all time, nor one into which anything may be poured so long as the label is retained.
- iv.... What we must keep hold of is the fact that we are discussing the development of a world of ideas, and consequently any 'physical' analogy is bound to be misleading. Ideas are not like bricks to be added one above another, nor are they like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle merely to be replaced by one another. The first idea we have is in no sense the 'foundation' of all that grows from it; nor may a later stage be tested by comparing it with a former. In the development of a world of ideas a former stage, as such, is always lost in a later, and there can be no returning.
- v. We must give up speaking of the 'essence of Christianity' if that means merely 'the most important part of Christianity'. Whatever Christianity is it is not its 'essence' unless that be taken to mean the whole of it.<sup>31</sup>

Here Oakeshott is making a philosophical or theoretical point about historical identity, and thereby how best to come to grips with the identity of Christianity. When he writes about tradition in 'Political Education' he has a more practical

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[30] In *On Human Conduct* he would describe the 'central concern' of religion as reconciliation to the 'futility' of the human condition, a 'reconciliation to nothingness' (*OHC*, 83-4).

[31] Oakeshott 'Review of G. G. Atkins, *The Making of the Christian Mind*,' in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 31 (1930): 203-8, at 207-8. I have also discussed this passage in my *Michael Oakeshott on Hobbes: A Study in the Renewal of Philosophical Ideas* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003), 141-2.

agenda – to combat the mistake of Rationalism.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, this view of the identity of Christianity is not without practical implications. After all, at different times he describes Christianity as our tradition, our way of life, or our civilization. How we think about what has historically been described as an historical religion cannot but affect our practical understanding of religion. What are the implications?

Oakeshott is here dismissing the whole endeavor of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to discover the historical Jesus as well as the essence of Christianity. The principle of a tradition (or historical identity) is continuity. There is nothing behind or before a tradition. Indeed, as church historians have known for at least one hundred and fifty years, the gospels themselves are a record of traditions about Jesus. As Pelikan puts it: “Tradition there certainly was, even before and within the Bible and not simply after the Bible: tradition was in Grelot’s phrase, the “source and environment of Scripture”.”<sup>33</sup> Though it has been popular since the Reformation to make a distinction between gospel and tradition, this is a mistake. In the beginning was not ‘the word’. In the beginning was tradition and this means interpretation – ‘no line is possible between what has come to men and their interpretation of what has come to them.’<sup>34</sup> ‘Christianity’ Oakeshott argues, ‘cannot be simply Jesus’ religion because at present, it involves ideas or beliefs about Him and about His death.’<sup>35</sup> Not only is there no original datum on which a tradition is based, there is no core or essential element lying behind the various historical manifestations of Christianity. There is no distinction between essence and accident (*RIP*, 61–2).

In a book very much in the ‘tradition’ of radical theology called *God in Us*,<sup>36</sup> Anthony Freeman asks whether his reinterpretation of Christianity involves a repackaging of the same faith as his ancestors or whether it is a different faith, and he comes to the conclusion that he offers not ‘just a different *interpretation* of the same essential core, but a *different faith*. This is because there is no essence or inner core. Re-interpretation is not like peeling the layers off an onion: the interpretation goes all the way down. All is interpretation. That *is* the essence.’<sup>37</sup>

This is consistent with Oakeshott’s view of historical identity, which implies both change as well as difference. Indeed, he claims that ‘identity, so far from excluding differences, is meaningless in their absence, just as difference or change depend upon something whose identity is not destroyed by that change.’ ‘On this view of identity,’ Oakeshott continues,

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[32] It has to be said that the distinction between practical and historical traditions is not always clearly delineated in Oakeshott. See O’Sullivan *Oakeshott on History* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), 113.

[33] Pelikan, *Vindication of Tradition*, 9.

[34] This line from F.J.A. Hort’s *The Way, the Truth and the Life* Oakeshott uses in his discussion of Hobbes’s treatment of scripture. See Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1975), 53.

[35] Oakeshott, ‘Review of Atkins, *Making of the Christian Mind*,’ 205.

[36] Anthony Freeman, *God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism* (London: SCM Press 1993; Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2001).

[37] Freeman, *God in Us*, 59.

[T]he characteristic of being Christian may properly be claimed by any doctrine, idea or practice which, no matter whence it came, has been or can be drawn into the general body of the Christian tradition without altogether disturbing its unity or breaking down its consistency. This means that an idea or practice may properly be Christian which, in part at least, runs counter to much that had previously been regarded as Christian. It means, also, that the identity of our religion is maintained, not in spite of, but because of, differences and changes (*RPML*, 67).

The theological implications of this principle of qualitative continuity are in fact quite radical. While some parts of a tradition or an historical identity will change slowly and other parts more rapidly, nothing 'is immune from change' (*RIP*, 61). Over time the concrete detail of a tradition may in fact change completely. His argument then is that 'we can change much without ceasing to be Christian' (*RPML*, 70). The concrete expression of Christianity may be completely different today than that of, say, primitive or medieval Christianity, but it is no less Christian.

### Early Christianity, Radical Theology

This view of the Christian tradition provides great scope for creativity. Indeed, in the passage on tradition from 'Political Education' Oakeshott writes that 'nothing that ever belonged to it [a tradition] is completely lost; we are always swerving back to recover and make something topical out of even its remotest moments' (*RIP*, 61). In his early religious writings in particular, Oakeshott is engaged in a work of excavation of this sort.

The most notable example of this can be found in his essay 'Religion and the World,' where Oakeshott returns to the experience of the early church for inspiration. The early Christian community was united in a belief in the imminent return of Jesus, a belief that has no necessary claim on us. Yet this awareness of living at the end of time gave the early Christians a heightened sensitivity to the immediacy of existence and the transience of the present order of things, a sensitivity that we need to recover, Oakeshott thinks, if we are to live religiously. Oakeshott's recovery of the spirit (though not the essence) of primitive Christianity for a present understanding of faith is very much in keeping with twentieth century radical protestant writers including Schweitzer, Bultmann, and Cupitt.

Though undoubtedly there are important differences between these writers, they all have an interest in recovering something of the spirit of early Christianity for the present conduct of faith. For Bultmann this famously involved 'demythologizing' the gospels in order to discern the authentic early Christian experience, which, he thought, could be described in the terms of contemporary existential thought. For Schweitzer it entailed an appreciation of the role that the idea of the Kingdom of God played in the early Jesus movement, and translating this into a modern idiom without its supernatural connotations. Schweitzer describes the contemporary relevance of the idea of the Kingdom as follows:

[O]nly as it comes to be understood as something ethical and spiritual, rather than supernatural, as something to be realised rather than expected, can the Kingdom of God regain, in our faith, the force that it had for Jesus and the early Church. Christianity

must have a firm hold of this, if it is to remain true to itself, as it was at the beginning, – religion dominated by the idea of the Kingdom of God. What the Kingdom of God is in reality is shown by the part which it plays in the life of faith. The precise conception which is held of its coming is a matter of secondary consideration.<sup>38</sup>

The challenge for faith today, according to Schweitzer, is to affirm life in the face of the non-arrival of the Kingdom, whether the Kingdom refers to belief in the literal rule of God on earth or a providential understanding of history.

More recently Cupitt has described what he terms ‘Kingdom theology’ which he thinks is truer to the spirit of Jesus and his early followers than ecclesiastical or church religion. Cupitt’s reading of church history, like Oakeshott’s, owes much to Schweitzer. For Cupitt, Kingdom theology is immediate, non-dualist (whether sacred/profane or natural/supernatural), belief-less, and shaped by a sense of the transience of existence. Ecclesiastical religion, which is mediated and focused on the afterlife, came about, says Cupitt, in response to the non-arrival of the Kingdom. At first Jesus was said to be hidden with God and he would reveal himself and usher in the Kingdom. Over time the Kingdom is ‘deferred so far into the future that it effectively vanishes over the horizon of history.’ The church becomes permanent and establishes sacraments that must be performed and doctrines that must be believed if one is to secure one’s salvation at the end of time. This present life becomes little more than the waiting room for future reward in the afterlife. ‘You are not preparing for [Jesus] to come to you: you are preparing yourself to go to him. Life is spent in readying oneself for death.’<sup>39</sup> It is time, Cupitt thinks, for Christianity to overturn ecclesiastical, mediated religion and return to Kingdom religion – ‘the reformation of Christianity must proceed by going back to the beginning in order to go forwards.... The Kingdom is purely of this present world; it is a new ethic, and a new way of relating oneself to life.’ ‘Kingdom religion,’ he writes,

is simply a way of living, which is popularly described as living life to the full, or to its fullest.... In its contemporary form it passionately loves what is living and only transient, *just for being transient*. Church religion is ulterior, long-termist and thinking ahead, whereas Kingdom religion is intensely focused upon the Moment, the here and now, and is oblivious of everything else. It hasn’t time even to *think* about cosmology: it lives at the end of the world. Church religion thinks and waits patiently. Kingdom religion *burns*: it is in a hurry because it understands that we are already in our last days. There is not much time left.<sup>40</sup>

For Cupitt, as for Oakeshott, the early church’s sense of living at the end of time meant that present experience was infused with a special significance. If the end was near at hand it was futile to be too prudent, too calculating, too future oriented. For Oakeshott, this belief ‘in the coming dissolution of the world was as

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[38] Schweitzer, ‘The Conception of the Kingdom of God in the Transformation of Eschatology,’ in Mozley, *The Theology of Albert Schweitzer*, 102.

[39] Cupitt, *Reforming Christianity* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2001), 7.

[40] Cupitt, *Reforming Christianity*, 54.

much the expression of a certain scale of values as it was a crude expectation of an historical event. Fundamentally he [the Christian believer] believed that history and the natural world must be held subservient to him, his life and his purposes' (*RPML*, 30). The point for us is to learn to live with the sort of immediacy that characterized the early Christian experience, rejecting the world's criteria of success – achievement, career, contribution to the stockpile of knowledge – and replacing it with a conception of human life which carries 'in each of its moments its whole meaning and value' (*RPML*, 32). Where the world sees immortality in 'some far distant, future perfection of the race' or in 'the hoarded achievements of men,' and asks us to spend our lives in its service, a religious view of life finds immortality revealed in present experience (*RPML*, 37).

We find another reference to early Christianity in Oakeshott's 1948 essay 'The Tower of Babel.' In keeping with the shift in mood noted earlier, this essay is more somber than that of his essays from the late 1920s and early 1930s where he detected the awakening of a new religious sensibility. 'The Tower of Babel' has what might be called a therapeutic aim. He says in concluding the piece that 'the only purpose to be served by this investigation of our predicament is to disclose the corrupt consciousness, the self-deception which reconciles us to our misfortune' (*RIP*, 487).

In this essay he is interested in uncovering the origins of a view of morality understood as the 'self-conscious pursuit of ideals.' He suggests that our current obsession to find a 'foundation' for our moral life in a set of principles or codified rules can, in part, be traced back to the second and third centuries of the Christian era, where there was a translation of Christianity as a way of life or a set of customs, to a grammar of belief – 'a conversion parallel to the change from faith in a person to belief in a collection of abstract propositions.' It came about for a variety of reasons including collapsing customs, barbarian invasions, the need to have a package of beliefs that could be 'exported' to those who had no experience of Christianity as a tradition (*RIP*, 484–6). The European moral consciousness has, ever since this time, been infected by the belief that a moral life based on explicit rules and precepts is superior to a tradition of moral conduct.

### Conclusion

No doubt there are many points where Oakeshott and Cupitt would disagree on which parts of the Christian tradition are worth preserving or reviving. For instance, Oakeshott was a great admirer of Augustine, whereas for Cupitt, Augustine is one of the chief culprits in the establishment of ecclesiastical Christianity. There are also clearly parts of the Christian tradition – such as Pelagianism and Gnosticism – that Oakeshott sees as harmful and as resurfacing in modern times in the form of Rationalism. Yet at least on Oakeshott's view of historical identity, Pelagianism and Gnosticism are no less Christian than the Christianity of the early Jesus movement. When we do away with the idea that a tradition has an essence or an inner core holding it together, then we also have to give up on the idea that there is a historical or a rational basis for preferring one expression of the tradition to another. For many Christian or religious believers this is no doubt a disconcerting prospect, but

it also opens the space for great religious creativity. On this view tradition is not a hindrance to individual self-creation or self-fashioning, but a valuable resource, which provides no fixed anchor but it does provide depth. To learn how to become an individual, or to 'become a Christian in Christendom' (as Kierkegaard put it), is at the same time to learn how to draw on a tradition, to make it live in our present experience. This is a creative endeavor not so different from the activity of the artist or the poet. The Australian poet A. D. Hope, who was himself known as something of a traditionalist, expressed this relationship between tradition and creativity in the following terms:

Yet the myths will not fit us ready made,  
It is the meaning of the poet's trade  
To re-create the fables and revive  
In men the energies by which they live,  
To reap the ancient harvests, plant again  
And gather in the visionary grain,  
And to transform the same unchanging seed  
Into the gospel-bread on which they feed.<sup>41</sup>

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[41] A. D. Hope, 'An Epistle from Holofernes' (1960), in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. David Brooks, (Sydney: Halstead Press, 2000), 50. Three recent studies that deal at length with the relationship between poetry and religion in Oakeshott are Elizabeth Campbell Corey, *Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics and Politics*; Glenn Worthington, *Religious and Poetic Experience in the Thought of Michael Oakeshott* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005); and Andrew Sullivan, *Intimations Pursued: The Voice of Practice in the Conversation of Michael Oakeshott* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2007).