

Mission: Possible **ICS's Role in the Transmission of a Christian Heritage**

By Ron Kuipers

First of all, let me admit to having felt no small amount of trepidation when John Meiboom asked me to address the august congress now seated before me, the alumni of ICS. For any group whose educational choices in life are so astute and discerning as to include academic residency at the Institute for Christian Studies among them must surely constitute a most difficult and demanding audience. Now I realize in saying this that, as a fellow alumnus, I am paying myself the same compliment. So, instead of simply wishing to ingratiate myself to you (although of course I want to do that too), I invest myself in the truth of this compliment; for if it *is* true, I may just have the intellectual resources to be able to meet the challenge here put before me.

I want to speak today about the relationship between faith and tradition, and, more specifically, the role that the ICS plays or might play (or, perhaps, should play) within its particular faith tradition. Already, I have run these two terms together, 'faith' and 'tradition', so that one can almost hear the hyphen between them. But they are not the same thing. In one sense, the 'tradition' part of 'faith tradition' simply names that which carries faith through time and across generations and cultures. Of course, this gloss is too simple and needs to be complicated, which I won't do here, but it still marks an important distinction.

As the subtitle of my talk indicates, I understand tradition in this sense to be involved in "the transmission of a religious heritage." This is surely a loaded phrase. I break it down in the following way: "Transmission" has to do with the 'passing along', through acculturation and education, of the texts, insights, and practices (moral, ethical, ritual, etc.) of a particular religious life pattern from one generation to the next. It is a complex process that no theory can survey in any masterful way, involving the relational interactions taking place in such different societal spheres as the family, the church, educational institutions, etc. In this act of passing along, one generation's donation becomes another generation's reception. A central part of my ongoing intellectual project at ICS is to question what is at stake in such processes of donation and reception. How have these taken place, and how ought they to? More personally, I am keen to find out more about the ways in which my faith has been given to me, and in what form, and also to understand the ways in which I have received it and might continue to receive it.

Finally, I now find myself having been entrusted with a task here at ICS, in which the donation of that which I have received to a subsequent generation of inquiring Christians plays no small roll. I take my current initiation into this responsibility very seriously. All the same, I now find myself in the rather odd position of being called to pass along something I am still receiving, or, something I have received but am still trying to understand. Such, I surmise, is an inescapable part of the life of faith, and also of the life of belonging to any particular tradition.

I came to ICS as a Master's student in 1992 already as someone deeply shaped by the tradition to which it belongs. But I wasn't necessarily happy about that fact, or perhaps, as grateful for it as I should have been. For that rather serious and sometimes angry young man there were many reasons to resent this heritage, and to consider its gifts poisoned, and I carried those deep within my breast. While that discontent did not always work its way to the surface in the most positive or productive of ways, I truly thank God for the existence of ICS at that time, which provided a supportive institutional setting for someone like myself to work out those religious issues that so deeply and existentially affected my sense of personal identity. (An anecdote which reveals how people saw me back then: I still remember an "ice-breaking exercise" at an ICS retreat, in which we were asked to describe the person seated next to us as a fruit or vegetable. Seated to my left, Bob Sweetman did not hesitate to compare me to a persimmon, which before its time leaves the most bitter and horrible taste in your mouth, yet when fully ripe yields a most pleasant flavour. I still don't know what to do with this rather back-handed compliment.)

In fact, early on in my student days at ICS, Henk Hart got into the habit of introducing me to colleagues at learned society meetings with: "This is my student, Ron Kuipers, ICS is his last stop on the way out of the tradition." Well, I'm tempted to say, look at me now: My efforts to find a way out of this tradition, if that is in fact what they were, have landed me squarely within its bosom. What the hell happened? I'm still not sure I know the answer to that myself.

If I were to venture an educated guess about what happened, it would be that during my time as a student at ICS I learned something, and I am continuing to learn many things, about what it means to belong to a tradition, especially one responsible for transmitting a faith as full of possibility as Christianity promises to be. I have also come to a greater appreciation of the inherent value of the very "work of belonging" to such a tradition. I am slowly coming to understand that, while this work is never complete, it yet forms a task that is up to the challenge of giving one's life meaning and purpose.

Paul Ricoeur's description of what it means to belong to a tradition resonates with my own experience of belonging to a religious tradition. He describes such belonging to be filled with a certain kind of tension, "the tension, at the very heart of what we call experience, between the efficacy of the past we undergo and the reception of the past we bring about."¹ For Ricoeur, this tension marks the fact that we are never simply passive victims of our cultural heritage, who lack any critical agency in, or responsibility for, the task of shaping how that heritage is to be received and passed along; we are also active receivers of that tradition, who in so doing may decide, within necessary and enabling, (though reformable) paradigmatic constraints, what shape that tradition will receive. It is in this very activity of receiving a donated heritage that I, with all of you and many others, now find myself engaged. We have now been given the responsibility to shape that which we have received, of shaping that which has to a large extent shaped us.

But what is the difference between actively receiving a tradition and being merely exposed to its historical efficacy? Again, I have found Ricoeur's insights helpful here. In thinking about our reception of tradition, Ricoeur would not have us understand "the inert

¹ *Time and Narrative, Volume III*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 220.

transmission of some already dead deposit of material. . . .” Instead, he would have us understand that reception in terms of what he calls *traditionality*, which he describes as “the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity.”²

Let us ponder this conception of traditionality for a moment. What might Ricoeur exactly have in mind by “the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity”? Well, one really has to read a whole lot of Ricoeur’s work to get a handle on that question, something I spent this past semester doing with 10 other students here at ICS. While I can’t and won’t get into all the nuances, suffice it to say that Ricoeur considers the authentic transmission and reception of a tradition to indicate a *poetic* or creative process, one in which a prior innovation is reactivated in a way that is relevant to the contemporary context of its reception. This creative process is also a hermeneutical or interpretive one, in which the community receiving the tradition is situated between a past they hope to understand and thus make their own, and an unknown future into which they must nevertheless project themselves.

It is in the midst of this tension between past and future, between a past we undergo and also creatively receive and a possible future to which we must inevitably orient ourselves, that I see ICS strategically poised to serve its particular faith community. If we take a step back for a moment from all the nitty-gritty academic work that takes place at ICS, and ask “why bother?” or “why are we doing all this?”, I find it difficult to come up with a better answer than that we do it because we hope to serve a community that struggles to appropriate a particular faith tradition in a such a way that it will be able to speak, with creativity, a healing word to its troubled times.

Well, of course, this is easier said than done. How exactly can we help this faith community creatively harvest from its tradition such healing words? As Lambert Zuidervaart so eloquently argued in his 2003 inaugural address, an important part of that work involves getting a handle on the “trouble” that marks these times. It means remaining fully attuned to human suffering and being fully aware of societal evil. According to what some say, Ricoeur among them, is perhaps the most radical *philosophical* gesture, the gesture of critique, our task here as Christians who take philosophy seriously is to articulate an adequately informed and vociferous ‘no!’ to all the death-dealing forces we discover to be arrayed against the flourishing of our Maker’s creation. It is in this light that I understand the reformational impetus of our tradition, which directs its energy to the positive transformation of life and society.

Historically, ICS as an institution has strongly felt this call to critique, and has pursued it with a passion and intensity that has landed it in hot water on more than one occasion. While I remain proud of that legacy and wish to see it continue, I have become increasingly convinced that this critical voice should never be divorced from a hopeful one, nor from a pastoral one. With Ricoeur, I believe that part of the task of receiving, and thus belonging, to any life-guiding tradition involves an appropriation of the past that at the same time is able to open what he calls “a horizon of expectation” sufficiently

² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume I*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 68.

robust to inspire genuine hope. We profess to believe in a God who is both a creator and a redeemer, and not just a criticizer. Critique, then, must never be considered self-founding, but must be allowed to draw sustenance from the inspiration of a religious tradition like Christianity, one of whose innovations allows us to project a 'horizon of expectation' that can provide us with, to quote Ricoeur again, "a recourse against any given reality and thereby the *possibility* of a critique of the real."³ This, to me, describes the "mission: possible" with which I have entitled this address. Our work at ICS should contribute to a contemporary appropriation of Christianity as a "poetics of the possible"; that is, it should contribute to a creative appropriation of a heritage that sensitizes us to respond redemptively to the pervasive suffering and evil we experience within and around us, while allowing that response to be informed by a hope in the promise made by "the God who comes" to us and suffers with us.

The difficult challenge here involves steadfastly refusing to become triumphalistic by preemptively claiming that Christianity has the answer to all our woes, before we have demonstrated concretely how the horizon of expectation which our tradition only promises to open empowers us to address those woes. We must find some way, then, of holding hope and critique in tandem, and of not allowing the imperatives of one to trump those of the other. That is, our hope and faith in an ultimate reconciliation must not be allowed to ideologically override our sincerest efforts to address the injustices we find about us here and now. So, while I care deeply about the tradition ICS represents, there is one sense in which I could care less about it: It is not worth preserving for the sake of itself, no tradition is. But it is eminently worth preserving if our reception of it continues the work for which its hope provides an opening.

I have the good fortune here at ICS of being able to speak about these matters with an impressive cast of colleagues. For example, it is probably not hard to detect Lambert Zuidervart's influence on my preceding comments about not letting hope override justice, but instead making them part of the same coin. Lambert phrased this tension quite helpfully in some recent email correspondence, and I would like here to share his articulation with you, since it speaks so centrally to my concerns here (don't worry, I have his permission). In reflecting on how he relates to God as both creator and redeemer, he said: "there is a generosity and graciousness within human existence that precedes and funds critique as well as a hope for social transformation that exceeds and invites our efforts to eliminate social injustice. To work out these themes in ways that remain fully attuned to human suffering and fully aware of societal evil is one of the challenges I face as a Christian who wishes to develop a critical social theory."

These reflections on the service that critical theoretical work can provide to a larger community's attempt to receive its own tradition in an edifying way, prompts me to offer one last reflection on the current state of Christianity in North America, if not the world. To my eyes and ears, there is a struggle now taking place for the heart and soul of Christianity, and it is important whose version of this religion proves to be the most influential. It is therefore important that we at ICS engage that struggle on the side of those who wish to combat injustice and who long for God's coming *shalom*. We must do

³ "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 300 (my emphasis).

the hard work of projecting ourselves into that future, in showing signs that this future presents a possible world fit for flourishing human habitation. Many good Christian people, whom we should not be so quick to dismiss or exclude, are being wooed by a popular, theocratic version of Christianity afoot today, exemplified in the most extreme form by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* series of novels. These novels portray a horizon of expectation which positively relishes the day when God will return to tear the 'enemies' of Christianity limb from limb. In them, Jesus assumes the guise of a G.I. Joe who will come back in a hummer to smite the unrighteous. While we may be tempted to laugh at the sheer ludicrousness and utter lack of biblicality presented in this dystopic eschatological vision, we would be foolish to dismiss it, for unjust wars are now being waged partially under the sort of ideological cover it provides. We will make a sham of our hope, and thus of our tradition, if we do not allow it to inspire the most trenchant critique of such evil visions, visions which today are allowed to pass as legitimate versions of Christianity. Yet we must also face the challenge of approaching those who are tempted by such visions in a pastoral fashion, somehow finding a way to criticize the darkness of that vision without making those who hold it themselves feel "left behind."

Our mission, then, should we choose to accept it, is to contribute, as one among many members of the body of Christ, to the covenanted task of ushering in a world that the texts of our predilection promise is possible: A world without tears, when death will be no more, along with mourning, crying, and pain.