

Beyond mere repetition: On tradition, creativity and theological speech

**Author:**Robert R. Vosloo¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Robert Vosloo,
rrvosloo@sun.ac.za

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This article argues for understanding Christian theological speech, including a Reformed engagement with confessions, as 'traditioned creativity'. The argument is introduced by highlighting a theological hermeneutic that underlies the Belhar confession's accompanying letter. This discussion points towards an account of Christian discourse that is 'traditioned' by the past but also moves beyond the mere repetition of the tradition's authoritative statements. The article, therefore, affirms the need to distinguish between a living tradition and a narrow traditionalism. In addition, the article also interrogates some forms of theological rhetoric in which 'tradition' functions to insert control over spaces and people, often exhibiting totalising discourses and over-triumphant claims.

Contribution: The conclusion links a hermeneutic of tradition (that sees Christian speech, doctrine and action as 'traditioned creativity') to some metaphors that can further illuminate what it means for a tradition to be open to the future in a way that displays vulnerability and vitality.

Keywords: tradition; creativity; the Belhar confession; Hans Urs von Balthassar; Willie Jennings; confessing the faith; fragments.

In a present that is so ambiguous, between a death that is being consummated and a life that is being born, what can the theologian do? What ought he to do? His first move will be to return once more to the past. This return will be beneficial, but only on one condition: that he understands well that history, for from dispensing us from creative effort, imposes it on us. (Von Balthasar 1995:9–10)

Tradition and confessing anew

In 1982, a Reformed denomination in South Africa, then still named the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), accepted in draft form a confessional document known as the Belhar Confession. Four years later, at the General Synod of 1986, the confession was accepted officially and thus became part of the confessional base of this church, with their other confessions being the Belgic Confession (of 1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (of 1563) and the Canons of Dort (1618–1619). After the transition of the apartheid South Africa to democracy in 1994, the DRMC united with the largest part of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in Africa to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), and the Belhar Confession became part of this newly established church's confessional base. The DRC (with predominantly white members) was not part of this unification process and has not accepted the Belhar Confession officially as a confession, although there have been several attempts to do so that failed as the conditions determined by some church juridical regulations could not be met (see Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2017:53–66; Vosloo 2017:277–287).

In the first year or two after the acceptance of the draft confession in 1982, the official reaction of the DRC was negative, taking note of the confession 'with great sorrow' and viewing the confession's emphasis that the church must stand with the oppressed as too one-sided and as based on an unacceptable exegesis typical of liberation theology (*Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, Handeling* 1982:1403, 1986:26–27). We have the 16th-century confessions, many argued, why do we need a new confession?

The Belhar Confession should be understood against the backdrop of the theological struggles in the 1970s and 1980s in apartheid South Africa. Given the biblical and theological justification of the policy and practice of racial segregation by the white DRC, the conviction became stronger in black Reformed churches and some ecumenical circles that the justification of

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apartheid on theological grounds is nothing but a heresy. Hence, the growing conviction that in these circumstances a *status confessionis* has dawned – with the term *status confessionis* being a technical term for the idea that the moment for a state or stance of confession has arrived (see Smit 1984). The gospel itself, many believed, was at stake. At the synod meeting in 1982, a small committee was therefore tasked to produce a confessional document that states what the church believes. The result was a confession – a confession that in typical Reformed fashion affirms that Jesus is Lord and connected this core belief to the biblical call for unity, reconciliation and justice. I will not go into the details of the history of origin and content of the Belhar Confession (for this, see Botha & Naudé 2011; Naudé 2010; Plaatjies-Van Huffel 2017; Vosloo 2020). I do want, however, to call attention to the accompanying letter that was written as a document to be read together with the confession, also with a discussion of the interrelation between tradition, creativity and Christian theological speech in view. The Accompanying letter to the Belhar Confession begins as follows:

We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is at stake. In our judgment, the present church and political situation in the country ... calls for such a decision. (URCSA n.d.:1)

The accompanying letter also makes it clear that the confession 'is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches'; rather, it is proclaimed 'against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion that threatens the gospel itself' (URCSA n.d.:1).

I allude to this letter because I want to underscore how Christian confessional and prophetic speech is understood in this letter. The first important point is that it expresses the strong need to say something because of the experience that the gospel itself is at stake. Hence the need for Christians and the church to say again and anew what they believe, given their experience of current realities. Of course, the church has scripture and other confessions to guide their faith convictions and practices. Still, many believed that the form of speech and public witness needed at this time in history asks for more than the mere repetition of yesterday's truths and wisdom. What is needed, they proclaimed, is a word for the moment, a moment experienced as a *kairos*, or a moment of truth. It is also evident from the history of the origin of the Belhar Confession that the confessing of the faith anew was not dislocated from tradition; there was the deep belief that what it expresses is in line with the deepest convictions of the Reformed tradition, and indeed with the heart the Christian faith itself. Therefore the abundant references in the confession to scripture, the ecumenical creeds, and other Reformed confessions and prophetic statements (cf. Naudé 2010:77–128).

Thus, the Belhar Confession and the accompanying letter consciously aligned itself with the Reformed faith tradition in which it stood. One should also note that the Belhar confession and its accompanying letter intimates a hermeneutic that affirms that Christian speech and witness require more than mere literal repetition of previous theological statements. The times or the moment can necessitate the need to confess anew, and in different words and metaphors. One can even recognise a kind of theological creativity at work. But this creativity is not a work of individual genius that neglects or crosses out the past; instead, it is more a matter of saying anew and again what one has heard than standing in total discontinuity with the past.

One can also add that when the DRMC and the DRC in Africa united in 1994 to form the URCSA, it accepted a church order in which the Belhar Confession is included as part of its confessional base. The first article of this new church order specifically acknowledges that circumstances in the future can arise that might call for the adoption of new confessions (URCSA Church Order 1994). This openness in principle affirms the idea that the church is not viewed as merely a church *with* confessions, but rather a *confessing* church – a church that confesses its faith ever anew, not merely through adopting confessions but also through the nature of its ongoing pastoral and prophetic witness.

So far, I have referred to the Belhar Confession and confessional statements, but this is, of course, just one form of Christian speech and performance. What I presented as the theological hermeneutic underlying the Belhar Confession is also applicable to preaching, prophetic statements, pastoral letters, and the embodied public witness of Christians and churches.

This theological logic of Christian speech and action (as it is displayed, according to my reading, in the accompanying letter to the Belhar Confession), moves beyond the mere regurgitation of the truths of the tradition. Rather, faithfulness to the tradition requires that we risk fresh and new articulation, also for the sake of the specific tradition itself. One should therefore guard against understanding a tradition as a fixed entity and its transmission as a static process. Tradition and creativity should not be seen as mutually exclusive. As the Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles (1992) reminds us:

The ideas of 'tradition' and 'creativity' seem at first glance to be opposed and incompatible. Tradition says continuity; creativity says innovation and hence discontinuity. With the proper distinctions, however, it may be possible to show that the two are not only compatible but mutually supportive. (p. 20)

The question remains, though, how to think tradition and creativity together. In grappling with this question, one should keep in mind that innovation, creativity and originality are not to be contrasted uncritically with tradition. Originality and creativity is actually often the result of a

particular form of engagement with the past. It is thus false to confuse the concept of tradition with stagnation, as 'the activity of the living transmission of a *traditum* is a highly dynamic business' (Pieper 2008:15). Tradition is indeed a dynamic process, with conversation, and even argument and conflict, being vital for the life of a tradition. As De Gruchy (2011) observes:

Traditions stay alive precisely because those who share them are in conversation with the past and in debate with each other ... This is how traditions are re-invented from one context to the next, how they break open to appropriate the new, rather than break down. (p. 12)

Tradition and creativity

In his book simply titled *Tradition*, published in 1981, the sociologist Edward Shils argues that – because of the influence of Enlightenment rationality and scientific knowledge – change and innovation have become coterminous with progress and improvement, while traditionality has become connected with ignorance and superstition. Shils is sceptical of this scepticism towards tradition inherited from the Enlightenment (Shils 1981:4–7). His work is an attempt to revive the notion of tradition against these impulses.

Alasdair MacIntyre too is critical of tradition-free reasoning and the modernist legacy that presents itself as a tradition of non-tradition and defines a 'living tradition' famously as 'an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely about the goods which constitute a tradition' (MacIntyre 1984:222).

While the scepticism against tradition, as underlined by Shils and MacIntyre, should be affirmed, one needs to acknowledge simultaneously that any fossilised understanding of tradition needs to be critiqued. It may be a way of legitimising a theological undertaking that displays an ignorant insularity and a docile antiquarianism.

One should, therefore, differentiate carefully between tradition and traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan's (1984) oft-quoted remark still provides a helpful way into such a discussion: 'Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living' (p. 65).

More recently, David Bentley-Hart (2022) has also utilised – in his book *Tradition and apocalypse: An essay on the future of Christian belief* – the distinction between tradition and traditionalism, describing traditionalism as:

[A] fretful, even at time neurotic, fixation upon the past configurations of the faith that one remembers from childhood, or remembers one's parents remembering, or remember hearing about those who vaguely remember remembering. (p. 12)

Such a traditionalism does not understand the fullness of a living tradition. Over against such a reduction, Bentley-Hart (2022) states:

A tradition, in its full theological sense, is truly vital to the degree that it is always, in every epoch, in a state of patient but dynamic reconstruction ... Here recollection, imagination, and inspired invention must work in inseparable concert. (p. 111–112)

Concerning the Arian controversy and the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, Bentley-Hart (2022) even argues that Arius and his followers were fierce traditionalists who were unable to grasp the demands of tradition, and thus lacked imagination, whereas the Nicene party 'were daring innovators, willing to break with the past to preserve its spiritual force' (p. 129). The language of the former proved to be sterile, while that of the latter gave the tradition new life.

One should also add that it is the thrust of Hart's argument in *Tradition and Apocalypse* that traditionalists resent the disruptive vitality of a living tradition and therefore one finds the struggle within Christian tradition between, on the one hand, those who guard the religious and social stability and, on the other hand, what Bentley-Hart (2022) calls 'the apocalyptic ferment of the Gospel' (p. 131–145). Hence, the claim that true fidelity to what is most original in a tradition entails the play between stability and disruption; it requires an openness to the future in the light of the past's promise.

Although there is often contestation – including concerning their respective historical analyses and constructive proposals – between the voices (from various theological traditions) that critique a static traditionalism, they nevertheless share the view that faithful and liberating Christian speech should not be equated with the mere repetition of ideas from the past or the statements of authoritative figures. I already mentioned how the Belhar Confession draws on the Reformed confessional tradition but moves beyond mere repetition.

One can also think of the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth's (1995) creative engagement with the 16th-century Reformer John Calvin. As we read in the Introduction of his *The Theology of John Calvin* (1922):

(W)e do not have teaching by repeating Calvin's words as our own or making his views ours ... (T)hose who simply echo Calvin are not good Calvinists, that is, they are not really taught by Calvin. Being taught by Calvin means entering into dialogue with him, with Calvin as the teachers and ourselves as the students, he speaking, we doing our best to follow him and then – this is the crux of the matter – making our own response to what he says ... For that Calvin wants to teach and not just say something that we will repeat. The aim, then, is a dialogue that may end with the taught saying something very different from what Calvin said but that they learned from or, better, through him. (p. 4)

One can discern a similar logic in the work of the Anglican theologian Rowan Williams, and more particularly in his reading of Augustine. Jeffrey McCurry's article 'Towards a Poetics of Theological Creativity: Rowan Williams reads Augustine's *De Doctrina* after Derrida' is illuminating here.

McCurry (2007) begins this article with the remark that for Williams:

(T)he choice between faithfulness to received traditions of creedal, scriptural, and theological discourse, on the one hand, and genuine theological creativity, on the other is false. This is because Williams sees the texts of scripture, creed, and tradition not as historical artifacts whose meaning is equated with the original authorial intention behind the texts but rather as scripts for a certain kind of performance, similar to the script of a play. (p. 415)

And McCurry (2007) adds the following pertinent comment concerning theological creativity:

Under the grammar of this kind of poetics of theological creativity, faithfulness to tradition and genuine creativity is not mutually exclusive, and the Christian sources are always waiting to be creatively re-performed for and in ways inflected by present ecclesial and historical needs. In this way the Christian sources do not serve as the end of theological *poesis* but the beginning. (p. 415)

McCurry sees Williams' reading of Augustine as traditioned but not traditional, as creative but not unconditioned. In this sense, McCurry (2007) speaks of a 'traditioned theological creativity' (p. 430) – a term that aptly captures something of the heart of our argument here.

Many other examples can be added in which we see the hermeneutic of 'traditioned theological creativity' at play, also from South African theologians whose work, in this sense, displays sensitivity for the ages and the moment; for historicity and contextuality; and for tradition and creativity.

One can thus say, or so this article argues, that such a historical hermeneutic is not about mere repetition but about performative and participatory remembering, requiring what Catherine Pickstock calls, in conversation with Kierkegaard, non-identical repetition (2013:xi–xii). In a certain sense, total repetition is of course not possible. Kierkegaard's famous example of his returning visit to Berlin to see if identical repetition is possible confirms this. Even if you try to replicate a previous travel experience as carefully as possible, it is still not the same. So, for Kierkegaard, the kind of real repetition that he pleads for is not linked to the memory of external places but rather refers to an inner quality of life that draws in freedom from the past and is able to act in the present as part of a process of 'remembering forward' (see Kierkegaard 1983:150–176).

In arguing that the faithfulness to tradition requires more than mere repetition (or a different kind of repetition in the Kierkegaardian sense), one should also keep in mind that the type of historical (or rather ahistorical) hermeneutic that favours a view that argues that one only need to restate what the Bible or one's tradition says, and in this sense do not risk betrayal, is also performing something very pertinent. Often these kinds of sentiments are driven by the urge to affirm the status quo or to resist the challenge new language

and speech might hold for ingrained racist, patriarchal, or colonial attitudes and structures.

Interrogating and cultivating tradition

In arguing for theological speech as 'traditioned creativity', one should understand this being 'traditioned' in a dynamic way. Faithfulness to the tradition does not exclude but may require taking the risk to articulate anew considering current realities what one has internalised from the tradition. In this sense, a living tradition stands over the sort of 'traditionalism' that has rightly been the target of many critiques. This said, one should add that even if one affirms a dynamic understanding of tradition, a further cautionary remark in reflecting on a responsible hermeneutic of tradition is needed. In this regard, some comments by the Yale theologian Willie Jennings are highly instructive.

In a book symposium on his monograph *After whiteness: A pedagogy of belonging*, published 2021 in the theological journal *Modern Theology*, Jennings responded to his interlocutors in an article '*Against the Finished Man*.' He observes herein that the title of his book *After whiteness* gestures not towards some kind of post-racial future, but that it is a play on Alasdair MacIntyre's influential book *After virtue*, a pivotal book in his own theological journey. Jennings (2021) writes as follows about the reception of MacIntyre's thought on virtue and tradition, and it is worth quoting him at length:

It offered a path toward cultivating a comprehensive theological identity. Yet through its digestion and dissemination ... I watched a colonial process of formation assert itself in and through the grasping of something called tradition. What I saw was less a matter of MacIntyre's philosophical project and much more a matter of theological longing. I watched people aim their life towards a vision of maturity that bridged an imagined past to current intellectual postures. But the past was not what was actually brought forward but instead a person held tightly in a dream of coherence and clarity that had merged with the colonial master's dream of the control of spaces. (p. 1057)

What I take from Jennings' comment is not so much a critique against the notion of tradition as such, as an exposure of how the rhetoric of 'tradition' can be in service of a type of colonial desire associated with the trope of 'white self-sufficient men' guided by control, possession and mastery. According to such a mentality, we know and control the tradition and become the gatekeepers of a polished and coherent tradition we have mastered through our grasp.

Jennings challenges such a view of tradition, affirming and extending in the process the idea that tradition is best understood as a pneumatological reality in which one participates. It is through living in and with the Spirit that we are connected with others across space and time. 'Yet,' Jennings (2021) adds, 'when the living of the faith are baptized in colonial desire, then the Spirit is thwarted

and tradition unfolds within the logic of the plantation' (p. 1057).

These remarks by Jennings challenge a rhetoric of tradition that functions as a totalising discourse in which notions such as comprehensiveness, coherence and clarity are used as tools to exclude, in part because the understanding of tradition does not allow for ambiguity, messiness, contradiction and plurality. As Jennings (2021) writes: 'Coherence, clarity, consistency – these are not bad words, but when executed through colonialist desire they pull scholarly aspirations towards controlling gestures' (p. 1058).

Jennings rightly points to harmful ways in which the notion of tradition can be utilised in our discourses. It can easily slip into a totalising concept in which we imagine that we can fully oversee tradition as a whole and polished entity.

In her book *Nothing gained is eternal: A theology of tradition*, the Roman Catholic theologian Anne Carpenter too subjects a theology of tradition to decolonial criticism (drawing not only on the work of Bernard Lonergan, Charles Péguy, Maurice Blondel and Hans Urs von Balthasar but also on the writings of M. Shawn Copeland, Willie Jennings and James Baldwin). Carpenter sees tradition as a resource but also makes the concomitant argument that one must not look away from the shadow side of tradition (indeed from its sin and failure). This emphasis challenges any triumphalism in using tradition as a resource for contemporary theological conversations (2022:xii, 169). Carpenter (2022) points out that it is true that 'our Christian past' is much more monstrous than we are accustomed to think. 'But,' she continues, 'it is also true that knowing *this* past is explanatory of a great deal in our actual present,' giving us the task 'of dealing with the past in its present presence' (p. 174). Christianity should, therefore, concretely confront present injustices and their origins, remembering that 'Christian fidelity is rarely comfortable' (p. 174).

Much more can be said against any romanticising (or indeed any one-sided demonisation) of the Christian part. But for our purposes here, I want to underscore the idea that the lack of an understanding of a tradition as complex, ambivalent and messy quickly leads to reductive and often outright false constructions of a coherent and all-comprehensive 'tradition'. One implication hereof is that an emphasis on 'traditioned creativity' – such as this article also underscores – requires an account of fragments, in line with what the Chicago theologian David Tracy calls 'frag-events'. Tracy (2020) comments:

Frag-events (a neologism – fragmentary and fragmenting events) negatively shatter or fragment all totalities, even as they are positively open to Infinity. Fragments, therefore, can play an important role in a world still largely trapped in oppressive economic, social, political, and even cultural (including religious) totality systems ... Fragments not only shatter all closed systems; they simultaneously open one to difference and otherness. (pp. 1–2)

For Tracy (2020), fragments – understood as fragmentary and fragmenting events (or frag-events) – provide a very fruitful way, albeit not the only way, into the liberating aspects of theories and traditions. As he observes: 'Discover the right fragment – in one's own and other traditions, in one's own and other lives – and you will discover an entry into the eventful, infinite character of reality itself' (p. 2).

The theology of tradition that Jennings and Carpenter point towards, and which also resonates in Tracy's language of fragments (or frag-events), challenges the rhetoric in which 'tradition' is put into service of totalising discourses and any over-triumphant claims. One of the signs of the integrity of theological discourse (also confessional and prophetic speech) might well be that it is not self-congratulatory and does not seek separation. In this sense, the accompanying letter to the Belhar Confession is again instructive. Here we read that the act of confession is 'a two-edged sword':

We know that the attitudes and conduct that work against the gospel are present in all of us and will continue to be so. Therefore the confession must be seen as a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and the readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, for that will disqualify us in the very act of preaching to others. (URCSA n.d.:2)

Yet this attitude does not deter one from speaking and confessing, even if the speech is painful and can bring sadness. Such speech is, however, at its core not hurtful but hopeful. Thus, the accompanying letter concludes:

We know that such an act of confession and process of reconciliation will necessarily involve much pain and sadness. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse and confession ... We are only too well-aware that this confession calls for the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and society that have developed over many years. However, we confess, that for the sake of the gospel, we have no other choice ... Accordingly, our prayer is that the pain and sadness we speak of will be pain and sadness that lead to salvation. (URCSA n.d.:2)

Conclusion

As an epigraph to this article, I used some words by Hans Urs von Balthasar and, in closing, I want to return to some metaphors he uses that capture well the theological hermeneutic that this article – with its emphasis on Christian speech and performance as 'traditioned theological creativity' (cf. McCurry 2007:430) – argues for.

In the Foreword to his book *Presence and thought: Essay on the religious philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, Von Balthasar (1995) argues that there is no historical situation (and we can add text or figure) that can provide 'a kind of master key capable of solving all the problems that plague us today' (p. 10). Certainly, the theologian can and must appeal for help to tradition. Still, one must be clear what tradition can and

cannot give us. And in this regard, Von Balthasar uses a helpful set of metaphors that can illuminate the argument for Christian theological speech as traditioned creativity. Von Balthasar (1995) writes as follows about tradition:

One would be quite mistaken to imagine it as a relay of runners, each of whom, at the end of his segment of the race, hands of the 'witness' or the 'message', or a written work that, through space and time, is preserved of itself in its immovable materiality. If there were indeed a witness and a message to preserve, a more correct image would be that of a torch ... For even while it remains identical to itself, a living flame can lay claim to being protected, at every moment, against a constant succession of dangers and being sustained by a substance that is ever new. In very truth, this living Flame is that of the Spirit of love, who, having come down from heaven to the Holy Land, is jealously preserved by her through all generation in order to inflame the world. (p. 11)

Like all metaphors, the metaphor of a torch and a living flame has its limitations and cannot fully convey the depth and complexity of the concept of a tradition. Yet it points to an account of tradition with an openness to the future that is not about the transmitting of a dead deposit, but about participating in and sharing something vulnerable, ever-changing and life-giving. Theologically speaking, it affirms an account of tradition as a pneumatological reality sustained by the Spirit of truth and love.

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