

## THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

***The Meaning of Tradition* (Yves Congar OP, new edition with a foreword by Cardinal Avery Dulles, Family Publications, Ignatius Press 2004)**

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Yves Congar was one of the widest ranging theologians of the last century and a key influence on the thinking of the fathers at Vatican II. Amongst the many subjects he illuminated was that of Tradition, on which he wrote an enormous historical-theological treatise in 1960-63. He also produced a simpler but masterful summary of his thesis in the present volume, originally published in 1964. For a considerable time subsequently it has been out of print but is now restored to us by the initiative of Ignatius Press.

This book is a spiritual as well as a purely intellectual masterpiece. It is the work of a man deeply awed, even enraptured by the process through which the Holy Spirit has not merely preserved but enriched the Church in its process of handing on and explicating the Gospel.

Congar was a prominent pioneer ecumenist and his book is the product not simply of lifelong engagement with previous Roman Catholic ways of understanding the process of Tradition but also with the early stages of dialogue with Protestants. This fact must be carefully borne in mind by the contemporary reader. Congar's understanding of the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* and resultant approaches to the problem of Tradition were contextualised by the state of the dialogue as it was in 1964 and also by the fact that his main contacts were with continental Lutherans and Reformed. Surprisingly, he said little about Orthodox and Anglican approaches (of which he certainly had some knowledge)

and virtually nothing about that of the Anglo-Saxon Free Churches and, in particular, the Wesleyan theological tradition. Had he been able to explore these, he would have realised that a more nuanced approach to Tradition in Protestantism was required. He would also have realised that ecclesiology was more robust within certain Protestant traditions than in the contemporary continental classical Protestant traditions. The 1937

British Methodist ecclesiological statement, *The Nature of the Christian Church*, reveals a robustly pneumatological approach and a strong affirmation that individual discipleship cannot exist, let alone flourish, without participation in the corporate Body of Christ.

Nevertheless, in this book we do see Congar advancing, as any good ecumenist should, in his understanding of partner traditions. His view of Protestants, as somewhat tied to a text rather than is the case with Catholics, who relied on the total stream of living experience and Tradition of the Church, softens to the extent that he acknowledges the sacramental nature of the written Word of God. However, I think that at this stage he had not yet a fully rounded appreciation of the way in which Protestants see the written word of Scripture as a constant source of renewed inspiration and insight into God's kingdom and the resultant nature of the mission laid upon the Church. Matthew 13:52 is a key text for Protestant preachers and exegetes, as well as for Roman Catholics!

While it is true that there remain some Protestant churches deeply suspicious of any practice that cannot be immediately and obviously authenticated from Scripture, most do recognise the fecundity of later traditions and accept it as such, provided it does not contradict Scripture. At one point, Congar talks of Protestants rejecting what they do not find specifically in Scripture and mentions their failure to appreciate the Marian mystery of the Church, the religious life, the dignity of consecrated virginity and the eucharistic presence. On these points, he would have been to a degree mistaken even in 1964. Already the Taizé community was reminding Protestants of the value of the religious life. Most Protestants recognise the uniqueness of the presence of the Lord in "his own appointed way" of meeting us in the Eucharist, even if it is only Lutherans who have insisted on a doctrine of the real corporal presence as essential. It is true that a linking of the contemplative nature of the Church to its Marian dimension has scarcely yet begun to be received, but some headway has been made since.

Towards the very end of the book, Congar asks whether the debate concerning the relationship between Scripture and Tradition across the Reformation divide is for ever destined to remain locked "at the same stage". I think the answer comes partly from the recent Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification. In this, Roman Catholic and Lutheran scholars sat down to re-read the Scriptures together and to come up with a nuanced understanding that does justice to both traditions. Harding Meyer, the Lutheran, argues that a key breakthrough came as a result of a deeper appreciation of the role of the Spirit in Scripture and Church. It will be as we deepen that imperfect communion that we already have with each other that Catholics and Protestants will come together to a new

understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in leading the Church ever deeper in its understanding both of Scripture and Tradition. Meanwhile, Congar's work stands as a monument to a developing understanding from the Roman Catholic side.