

## Handing on a tradition



The history, literature, philosophies and institutions that embody the tradition, for all their defects, need to be valued for the way in which they shape a community

One of the challenges facing churches today has to do with tradition. Tradition is a sometimes charged word, but it refers to an everyday social need. It has to do with how a community passes on its way of life and its understanding of authoritative writings that shape it. The word itself can refer both to what is passed on and to the process of passing it on. The challenge of passing on a tradition is perennial. Both ways of living and writings reflect the culture of their own time and so need to be translated into the

changing languages of later cultures. The challenge is perhaps especially acute in our own culture which emphasises the need for individuals to shape their identity by their own choices. In this world the call to pass on a way of life and identity can be seen as old-fashioned and constraining of freedom. The writings foundational to the tradition will then also be dismissed as irrelevant and authoritarian. Such a cultural climate makes it difficult for churches to represent the Scriptures as authoritative. It also challenges Western societies in their need to hand on a democratic way of life and governance in a culture that lacks familiarity and interest in its founding documents and history. To meet this challenge both in churches and in state the contribution of people who have a deep familiarity with the tradition is particularly important. Two recent books written by Biblical scholars for church audiences engage with Christian tradition in ways that explore its richness and engage with contemporary culture. They are very different in their style and in their intended audience.

By Andrew Hamilton

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