# Area of Study 2

# Maintaining Continuity of Religious Beliefs in general

# Sample Text

## The Latin word *religare*, which means “to tie, to bind fast” is often given as the etymology of the word religion. The Oxford English Dictionary points out, though, that the etymology of the word is doubtful. Earlier writers like Cicero, the ancient Roman philosopher, connected the term with *relegere*, which means “to read over again” or “to recover again.” Whether the idea of religion comes from binding or rereading, the maintenance of continuity of religious beliefs is an ongoing and essential task within all religious traditions. All aspects of the tradition, its history, the faith of current adherents and the future of the religion are at stake when maintaining continuity of religious belief.

## The reasons for maintaining continuity of religious beliefs include an honoring of the past, providing a focus for the present and a hope for the future.

## *Honouring the past*

## The word, tradition, comes from the Latin *tradere* to deliver or to hand over. Religious faith is understood to be ancient and new. The tradition passes organically from person to person, from generation to generation, in the actions determined by the religious tradition to be most essential to the task of maintaining the faith. The handing-on of the tradition has cross-generational and intra-generational intent. The believer is called to give witness to the faith and to express the faith in ways that enable it to be shared with the youth but also with adult believers and sometimes with non-believers. While not all traditions actively seek converts, all religious groups seek to maintain the continuity of the ancient faith for present and future generations.

## *Focus for the Present*

## The maintenance of beliefs provides a focus for the present life of the tradition and the individuals and groups who make it up. The activities associated with maintaining the faith exercises the faith of contemporary believers. Activities of commitment, including the performance of rituals, reading from sacred texts and storytelling, provide a sense of direction, hope and purpose within the tradition. Stories require interpretation and application to modern circumstances. Such activities require appropriate leadership and authority. Social structures of a tradition in many ways exist for the maintenance of the tradition. The symbols of the tradition, so often a feature of the rituals and stories, point beyond themselves to the great ancient truths of the tradition and make a significant contribution to the maintenance of belief. Thus, the expression of beliefs in the tradition becomes the way of life for its members, an essential source of meaning and conviction.

## Further to this, the individual search for meaning of members is conducted within the belief structure of the tradition. The processes in place for the maintenance of belief provide a structure against which the individual assesses personal faith and community life. The individual adherent makes judgments and forms commitments based on their personal sense of the community life of the tradition and the patterns and structures of the society in which the religious tradition finds itself. The ethical teaching of any religious tradition points to the appropriate goods and appropriate norms for relationships in the tradition and in society. Each individual adherent is given pause to consider their actions as part of their religious tradition. Their actions will tend to maintain the tradition or their actions will tend support some alternative world view. Their actions organically affect the ongoing approach to the maintenance of beliefs within their tradition.

## *Hope for the Future*

## The future hopes of any religious tradition are clearly aligned with maintenance of continuity of beliefs. Plans for the development of resources, human and physical, are profoundly affected by the need to maintain faith. Maintaining religious beliefs is central to decisions about providing for mission and outreach from the religious community to those outside the community. From plans for ongoing production and translation of sacred texts, to planning for leadership in ritual and to schemes for revitalising the faithful, the continuity of the faith in central. Equally, the planning for the development of infrastructure, buildings and monuments, training facilities the like are deeply connected to the maintenance of the faith. And so, the future of the religion is wed to the commitment of believers to the maintenance of beliefs.

## There are internal and external factors that can promote action to maintain continuity of these beliefs.

## External Factors

## The factors that are external to the tradition could include scrutiny or criticism from outside the tradition that may result in adverse or hostile media coverage. Such coverage can lead to some consideration of the way in which ancient beliefs are presented in the public forum. In a similar way the shifting values of the multicultural society can have the beliefs of a religious tradition called into question in the public domain in ways that promote an internal struggle with the nature of beliefs and their expression in the tradition. Natural and human-made disasters can be a challenge to faith resources of a religious tradition. All traditions have approaches to death and suffering that are called on in times of stress when belief can be at its lowest ebb. At other times a change in government or government policy can have a dramatic effect on a faith system, creating new or modified approaches to the issue of maintaining the continuity of faith.

## Internal Factors

## There are factors that come from inside the religious tradition that can instigate action to maintain continuity of beliefs. Internal scrutiny or criticism runs the gauntlet of being perceived as heresy but can over a period of time lead to reformulations of aspects of the belief system. This concerns the place of dissent in a religious tradition. How far can an internal critic go and remain faithful to the beliefs of a tradition? It is the tradition itself and particularly its leadership that must determine the weave of the fibers of belief that make the cloth of faith. At times the actions of leadership within a religious tradition call the tradition to reiterate or reinforce its belief systems. A change of leadership or a change of approach in leadership can raise questions for the continuity of the beliefs in the tradition. The history of all religious traditions shows plainly that the actions of leaders can have wide ranging effects on the development of the system. Such actions can dramatically affect the perception of the tradition internally and in the cultural situations in which the religious tradition exists.

##  Religious traditions employ a number of approaches to maintaining continuity of religious beliefs in response to internal and external factors. The first is the reaffirmation of religious beliefs. In essence it is a restatement of the traditional faith. This is the major approach to the maintenance of beliefs and includes much of the regular agenda of the tradition. This approach can be imbedded in time honored rituals, social order, texts and symbols of the tradition. Other examples of this include creeds and the codification of ethics. The key advantage of this approach is that consistency of the unchanged message avoids confusion for both believers and onlookers. The disadvantage can be monotony.

##  The second way of maintaining continuity is the application of reaffirmed religious beliefs to new circumstances. In this situation the tradition has recognized that the ground has shifted and seeks to address the situation with a timely restatement of the essential tenets of the tradition. The advantage here is the offer of security to the members of the tradition. The ancient faith statements are still in vogue. The down side is that the ancient faith statements may be losing their appeal in changing social circumstances. This may lead to the third approach: the reinterpretation of religious beliefs to address new circumstances.

##  A reinterpretation implies more than restatement. It is a creative hermeneutical (meaning making) process focused on the essence of the belief but applying it to new conditions. Often this is achieved through, not change of belief but a change of emphasis. One belief is highlighted and another neglected or ignored to achieve a response to a new circumstance. This approach appeals to those who wish to see the tradition unaltered in belief and ceremony and leadership but see the need for a new explanation of the faith. It will not captivate those who see the situation in more desperate terms. These may call on the tradition to adopt its final option: the reaffirmation of religious beliefs through reformulation of their expression.

## The most radical approach to maintaining the continuity of belief is reformulation. The ways that the faith has been expressed are judged to be in need of review in a creative reworking of the key aspects of the tradition. In the case of sacred texts this may mean a new translation. Rituals may be embellished, truncated, reworded or reordered. Relationships between authorities within the tradition may be reconsidered or reordered in some way. Histories and authorities may be reinterpreted to account for the reformulation.