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Introduction

Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis

Modern societies present us with an ambivalent attitude toward the past. On the one hand, most of us are so much part of a culture of innovation that we tend to accord little power and importance to tradition.¹ Being old-fashioned is an invective, whereas it is a virtue to be up to date. As Marx famously phrased it, in modern life all that is solid melts into air.²

Yet, at the same time that the idea of change, innovation, and progress permeates so much of our society, there are areas of life where tradition reigns. A felt continuity with the past provides social institutions and private life with a sense of stability. Religion must surely be one of the domains where the habit of referring to hoary tradition is most prevalent. Ancient texts are passed on through the ages, accepted ways of interpreting them are taught to new generations of members, and rituals are performed according to age-old precedents.

In the dictionary sense of the word, tradition constitutes a set of inherited patterns of beliefs and practices that have been transmitted from generation to generation. In another sense, tradition can rest simply on the claim that certain cultural elements are rooted in the past. Claim and documented historical reality need not overlap. Indeed, in their classic study *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger remind us that some of the best-known “ancient customs” are, in fact, quite recent innovations. The supposedly traditional Highland kilt was invented in the 1730s by an English Quaker from Lancashire. The tartan patterns, supposedly symbols of clan affiliation with roots in earliest recorded Celtic history, were created around the turn of the nineteenth century.³

In the domain of religion, we find an analogous situation, where historically verifiable traditions coexist with recent innovations whose

In compiling the present introduction, we have particularly profited from discussions with Holly Gayley.

¹ For a classic discussion of the ambivalent role of the past, see Shils, *Tradition*.

² Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, section I; see also Berman, *All That Is Solid*.

³ Trevor-Roper, “Invention.”

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origins are spuriously projected back into time. In fact, the trend of inventing ancient historical lineages seems particularly prevalent in the world of religion. Observers of the contemporary New Age scene, for instance, can be struck by the habit of many books and websites to attribute hundreds if not thousands of years of history to practices and ideas that the usual standards of secular historiography date no further back than the 1970s and 1980s. And whereas Hobsbawm and Ranger point to the eighteenth century as the time when traditions began to be invented on a massive scale, the invention of sacred traditions appears to be a perennial motif in religious history. The ancient documents placed at the very beginning of the canonical texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Pentateuch, are conventionally ascribed to the even earlier figure of Moses, who according to modern scholarship probably never existed, and who definitely did not write the texts.

In the self-presentation of a given religion, the transmission of tradition can be roughly subdivided into two stages. On the one hand, many religions include claims that their creeds and practices were originally handed down from a transcendent source. The Vedas are said to be texts revealed to sages, *rishis*, at the beginning of each cycle of existence. The Qur'an as revealed to the prophet Muhammad is a copy of a heavenly text. It is, within the boundaries set by scholarly discourse, meaningless to debate whether a divine revelation is invented or genuine.

On the other hand, most religions also present narratives which explain how the doctrines and practices revealed to the first human recipients have been passed down from them to the present day. Indeed, quite a few religious traditions display little overt interest in transcendent origins, but devote considerable effort to disseminating a particular view of how religious truths have been preserved for posterity. Groups as diverse as Scientology and the sympathetic readers of Carlos Castaneda's works would be examples of religious bodies with little curiosity about the divine but much concern for the individuals who transmitted their spiritual insights to the rest of humanity. The distinction between transcendent origins and human transmission of texts is roughly analogous to that between myth and history. For the latter, the strictures of methodological agnosticism need not apply. In fact, scholarship has on innumerable occasions contradicted the historical claims put forth by the spokespersons of various religious groups.

What does it mean for religious history or a religious tradition to be "invented"? As one begins to unpack the concept, it becomes clear that the generic phrase "invention of sacred tradition" can cover several distinct cases.

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Pseudepigraphic texts can be strategically crafted by the person who actually wrote them in order to give the impression that the writer was somebody else. Numerous Mahayana Buddhist texts put words in the mouth of the historical Buddha, and reinforce the impression of authenticity by referring to specific people and places that also appear in the earliest sources.

Other texts are anonymous in their first stage of transmission, but are misattributed to well-known writers by later commentators and readers. Several medieval texts by unnamed authors were attributed to Aristotle, because translators and commentators affirmed that these texts were part of his genuine writings, and readers for centuries continued to accept this attribution.

Documents can be attributed to people who never existed. Throughout European religion history, seminal texts were attributed to the sage Hermes Trismegistus, a pagan theologian living at the time of Moses. Hermes' stature was such that his works served to legitimate magic and other practices that the church officially frowned upon. Long after the humanist scholar Isaac Casaubon in the early seventeenth century proved beyond any doubt that the Hermetic texts were much younger than previously supposed, and it became clear that Hermes was entirely fictive, esotericists continued to attribute their teachings to the imaginary philosopher.⁴

Invented traditions can have quite distinct effects on a given religion. In some cases, such as Judaism, pseudepigraphic texts add new material to an already existing body of literature. In others, the spuriously attributed text serves as the founding document of a new departure in the history of the religion; the rise of Mormonism as a distinct development within a broader Christian tradition is an apt example of the latter.

Despite such differences, the various versions of "invented tradition" raise similar questions. Why is it so common to misattribute texts? What rhetorical effects are achieved by misattribution? How is it possible to make adherents of a religion accept that a previously unknown text suddenly enters the corpus of scripture? Is the invention of tradition a predominantly modern phenomenon, as Hobsbawm and Ranger suggest on the basis of a variety of examples drawn from secular contexts? If not, does the invention of tradition in the modern West differ significantly from counterparts in

⁴ For a brief summary and extensive bibliography of the legend of Hermes Trismegistus, see the three articles in Hanegraaff, *Dictionary*, on the subject: van den Broek, "Hermes Trismegistus I: Antiquity"; Lucentini, "Hermes Trismegistus II: Middle Ages"; and Faivre, "Hermes Trismegistus III: Modernity".

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other places and times? It is to these and similar issues that we will now direct our attention.

WHY ARE THERE INVENTED TRADITIONS?

Why does nearly every religion have spurious traditions and misattributed texts? Common to a wide variety of cases of invented traditions is the fact that the actual processes of human agency, as recoverable, for instance, through historical-critical research, are overlaid with a historiography that confers legitimacy to religious claims and practices.

Some invented traditions obtain their legitimacy by recreating an ideal past, the time when the founding figure was still with them. In Weberian terms, emergent movements typically gather around charismatic figures. Members of the new religion can with their own eyes witness the astounding feats of their living leader. When the charismatic leader is no longer present, charisma needs to be transferred to some other medium for the movement to continue existing. The devotion once showered upon the founder is now shifted to tangible signs of the leader's greatness: the founder's image, places he or she visited, the works purportedly composed by the leader. The more the movement based its initial success on charisma, the more it may need to insist on attributing every single element of the tradition, including all of the subsequent textual material, to the charismatic individual.

In his contribution below (chapter 1), Mikael Rothstein examines the case of Scientology, a religion so intensely dependent on the ascribed status of its founder, L. Ron Hubbard, that his charisma is vested in a number of different media: hagiographical narratives, photographs of the leader, his name, and even his signature. Every aspect of Scientology gains its legitimacy from Hubbard, who is perceived as the ultimate genius of humankind. Hubbard is no doubt the author of much of the scriptural corpus of Scientology, but as Rothstein remarks, simple arithmetic should convince us that he cannot be the source of everything published as canonical literature. In order to produce the entire body of texts, Hubbard would have needed to finish an unlikely number of pages every single day, year after year. Furthermore, outsiders to the movement have meticulously documented how various editions of the same text have changed over the two decades since Hubbard's death. Notwithstanding, it is an unquestioned dogma of Scientology that every word in every single volume is a faithful copy of L. Ron Hubbard's original writings. As a symbol of the unchanging nature of religious truth, copies of all the texts are kept at a safe location, stored in an underground vault.

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As illustrated in Charlotte E. Hardman's paper (chapter 2), some religious movements take the historiographic legend of the nearly super-human charismatic founder a decisive step further. The organizations and networks that preserve the legacy of Carlos Castaneda ascribe their tradition to Castaneda's mentor, the Yaqui Indian Don Juan Matús. Don Juan certainly comes across as a charismatic leader; among his supernatural feats is the ability to leap over waterfalls. His extraordinary abilities confer legitimacy on his enigmatic and suggestive teachings, and these in turn are the very *raison d'être* of Castaneda's books, of courses in the method based on Don Juan's teachings, and of other products and activities related to Yaqui magico-religious practices. Don Juan's teachings were also the indispensable precondition for Castaneda's personal career: his encounters with the mysterious Yaqui wizard rendered him a PhD degree from UCLA, sales figures for his books soared into the millions, and, as the ultimate symbol of recognition, he was featured on the cover of the March 5, 1973 issue of *Time* magazine. From a strictly historical-critical point of view, there is one overriding problem with this tradition: the available evidence suggests that Don Juan never existed, and that he was a fictional character invented by Castaneda.

Scientology and the teachings of Don Juan are contemporary innovations, and rely on invented traditions that, also from an insider's perspective, are fairly recent. Even those who remain persuaded of the authenticity of Don Juan can be comfortable with the idea that the Yaqui sage discovered his own spiritual path, and did not faithfully transmit the age-old traditions of his ethnic group. For other movements, however, the constructed ideal past lies much further back. The most common cases of inventing sacred traditions may, in fact, be those in which the crucial legitimating events are projected centuries if not millennia into the past. The origin and development of an organization such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS church), discussed in Douglas J. Davies's contribution (chapter 3), will be understood very differently by adherents and outsiders. What to a historian of religions is a fairly modern denomination, created in 1830, is seen by Mormons as a restoration of the original Christian church. Its scriptures, also published for the first time in the 1830s, are similarly by LDS members understood to be faithful translations of originals composed many centuries earlier by Mormon, a fourth-century prophet of the lost race of Nephites, or by such biblical figures as Moses and Abraham.

The authority gained by projecting one's tradition into a legendary past, whether this past is recent or ancient, can serve several purposes. It

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strengthens cohesion within the group, by allowing individual members to identify with a common history: the shared veneration of Hubbard becomes an integrated part of what it means to be a Scientologist. It provides the doctrines and practices with an aura of plausibility: if the scriptures of the LDS church are ancient documents, the distinct theology of Mormonism is presumably also the original teaching transmitted to the first generations of Christians, before these doctrines were misrepresented by other denominations. And, with the LDS church again as an apt illustration, inventing one's history enables religious innovators to shape the tradition of which they are part by ascribing at times radically new ideas to ancient, founding figures.

If constructing an ideologically skewed historical lineage can bestow legitimacy on one's own tradition, it should come as no surprise that hostile outsiders can create their own equally invented histories in order to delegitimize others. In their contribution (chapter 4), Christopher Partridge and Ron Geaves discuss one of the most infamous examples of this genre: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This book presents itself as a documentation of a crucial episode of modern Jewish history: a congress purportedly held by representatives of "the twelve tribes of Israel," the Elders of Zion, who were plotting to take over the world and to subjugate gentiles. In reality, as is well known, the book is an elaborate forgery, created by the Russian secret police in the first years of the twentieth century, in order to justify its antisemitic policies. The true nature of the *Protocols* has been demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt, and presumably few people in the West consider it to be an authentic record of a Jewish conspiracy. Nonetheless, it retains a surprisingly persistent influence in far-right Christian milieus and in the Arab world.

Less virulent, but nevertheless deeply problematic from a historical point of view, are the delegitimizing invented traditions created by anti-cultists, which attribute histories of mind control, brainwashing and criminal activities to the new religions that sprang into existence in the 1960s and 1970s. In their chapter (5), David G. Bromley and Douglas E. Cowan recount the rise of the anti-cult movement, and show how the concerns of parents and relatives of young people who joined new religious movements (NRMs) such as the Unification Church or ISKCON (the "Hare Krishnas") led them to create a mythical history of the movements they set out to combat. "Cults," it was alleged, were in some sense "not really religious," but had been created by leaders and gurus in order to pursue various, darkly hinted subversive goals. The cults were now recruiting young people at an alarming rate, and had developed mind-control techniques that prevented them from

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resisting attempts to draw them in. Readily available information that might have disproved the emergent invented tradition of the sinister cult, such as that members left the “cults” at nearly the same rate that new converts entered them, and that the new religious movements that triggered such controversy never achieved substantial membership size, were ignored.

In an ironic twist, delegitimizing versions of the history of specific religious groups – that is, invented traditions constructed by opponents – can include allegations that these groups are creating invented traditions. In chapter 6, George D. Chryssides discusses the case of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU, formerly the Unification Church, and popularly known as the “Moonies”). One of the NRMs most frequently singled out for attack by the anti-cult movement, it has among many other things been accused of misattributing its own scriptures. The FFWPU is based on revelations said to have been received by its founder, Sun Myung Moon. If a credible case could be made that the purportedly revealed publications were, in fact, works by other religious authors that had been falsely ascribed to Moon, this in the perspective of the anti-cult organizations would radically undermine the claims of the movement.

SACRED HISTORY, SACRED GEOGRAPHY

Particular conceptions of the nature of the sacred past can be found in different societies, and these will influence the specific ways in which misattributions arise and spread. A contrast can, for instance, be seen between religions in the West, such as the modern movements from which the above examples have been drawn, and various other traditions. In many religions, innovations are projected back on to authority figures in that tradition’s own past. Buddhist innovations are attributed to the historical Buddha. Books of the Hebrew Bible are understood to have been written by authors – whether actually existing or entirely spurious – who in the historiography of Judaism are presented as the sages who have inspired and directed formative moments in that religion. The Western religious imagination in part continues this tradition of attributing innovations to “local” figures, but complements these with spurious authors from various exotic cultures.

Invented traditions internal to Christianity are easily located. The Bible is studded with historically untenable references to its own legendary origins. In chapter 7, Einar Thomassen carefully documents and discusses the many cases where books of the New Testament are attributed to

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spurious authors. The canonical status of the texts was essentially dependent on the concept of succession – that is, that the “true” teachings had been passed on via a chain of church leaders, and that they could ultimately be traced back to persons closely associated with Jesus himself and his disciples. Of the twenty-seven writings generally included in the New Testament, in fact only seven are unanimously accepted by modern scholars as genuinely carrying the name of their original author. All others are attributed to such iconic names of emerging Christianity as Paul, John, James, and Jude.

Attribution to Western sources continued through the ages. In chapter 8, Susanna Åkerman presents one of the most influential misattributions of the early modern age, the creation at the beginning of the seventeenth century of the *mythos* of a secret brotherhood, the Rosicrucians. In 1614, a booklet with the title *Fama Fraternitatis* was published in the German city of Cassel, ostensibly by the Laudable Order of the Rosy Cross. This mysterious society claimed to be composed of pious individuals who were aiming at a “universal and general reformation of the whole wide world.” Soon other “Rosicrucian” writings began to circulate. The documents were, by many readers, believed to be authentic texts disseminated by an actually existing secret society. People with interests in esotericism and alchemy, in particular, sympathized with the message, and produced a voluminous corpus of literature, extending the ideas of the purported Rosicrucian brotherhood, and syncretizing them with their own innovative ideas. A century after the publication of the spurious Rosicrucian texts, interest in their contents and in the possibility of a religious reform led to the formation of actual groups claiming to build on a Rosicrucian heritage.

Besides the prevalence of such “local” misattributions, religious history in Europe and America is unusual in its avid interest in non-Western, non-Christian sources. Doctrines and practices are spuriously attributed to such places as esoteric Egypt or ancient India. The practice of projecting one’s beliefs on to such exotic others is perhaps particularly prevalent in modern times. New Age practitioners will, for instance, claim, whether rightly or not, that their practices originated in places such as Japan (reiki healing), India (chakra balancing), Hawaii (certain styles of massage), Native America (sweat lodges and medicine wheels), Siberia, and other unspecified areas populated by native peoples (shamanism). The main nineteenth-century precursor of much New Age lore, the Theosophical Society, was founded by people who similarly attempted to revive ancient wisdom from India, Egypt, and the mythical continents of Atlantis and Lemuria.

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Although globalization is generally reckoned as a force of the (post)-modern world, and the geographical scope of imaginary history may have widened, it should be stressed that exoticism of this kind is by no means an unprecedented phenomenon. The Greeks were arguably the first to display an intense curiosity about other peoples, an interest that exploded in the Hellenistic age with its wide-ranging contacts. Increasingly, the authority of exotic others was invoked to explain innovations in Hellenistic religious culture. Greek authors tended to blur the distinction between religious elements that truly were of Eastern origins and Greek Hellenistic innovations mistakenly ascribed to their neighbors. The sources indicate that astrology was brought to Greece by the Babylonian priest Berossos; they also suggest that many specific elements of Hellenistic astrological lore, claimed to be of Egyptian or Iranian derivation, were Greek and Roman creations. Later authors, from Rome via the Christian West and beyond, into the post-Christian pluralism that increasingly characterizes the West, have continued the trend. When Renaissance authors such as Ficino and Pico della Mirandola attempted to chart the genealogies of their emergent esotericism, Egypt and Iran were still invoked as the fountainhead of wisdom.

Zarathustra has for more than two millennia functioned as a purported source of religious insights. In his contribution (chapter 9), Michael Stausberg recounts just some of the frequent attributions to the Iranian sage. Serving as something of a cultural icon, the name of Zoroaster (as he is regularly called in Western sources) could legitimate a wide variety of astrological and magical practices. The story of how the “Zoroastrian” corpus was created contains a final, ironic twist. The Zoroastrian community itself never considered Zarathustra as the author of its sacred writings. Influenced by Western conceptions of authorship and perhaps by age-old projections of literary conceits on to the semi-legendary figure, Western scholarship has colluded in creating an invented sacred tradition. Many contemporary researchers have insisted on Zarathustra as the author of the Gāthās, the oldest parts of the Zoroastrian canon, but do so on speculative grounds.

ENTERING THE TEXTUAL CORPUS

If a text which has never previously been quoted by anybody or commented on by any author is nevertheless claimed to be ancient, there need to be mechanisms by which that document can be introduced into the generally accepted corpus. In predominantly oral societies, the problem will not

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always have been acutely felt. The bulk of the sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad and anthologized in vast collections of hadith is a case in point. According to the self-understanding of the Islamic tradition, the community of followers of the Prophet transmitted hadith orally. The Prophet was said to have opposed writing them down, as did many of the leading companions. Collections of hadith needed to be gathered from those who claimed to remember verbatim what Muhammad had said, or at least to have heard the saying from a reliable source. With only uncertain written records dating from the earliest period of hadith transmission, this procedure may have lent itself to spurious attribution. To this day, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars argue over questions of historical authenticity: is much of the material fictitious, as many Western scholars of Islam have tended to suggest, or are there good reasons to assume that these skeptical conclusions were unnecessarily negative?⁵

When previously undocumented texts are introduced in a culture with a strong tradition of literary documentation, historiographic narratives emerge to explain and justify the sudden appearance of new documents.

The text can appear on the scene as a translation of a previously unpublished manuscript. A misattribution can easily pass unnoticed, since the document in question is new to its readers. In the High Middle Ages, the wave of translation of Aristotelian texts introduced into the canon of Western literature a number of misattributed writings. Compendia of cosmological doctrines such as the *Liber de Causis*, which we now know is the translation of a mid-tenth-century Arabic compilation of Neoplatonic maxims culled mainly from Proclus, were surrounded by an aura of immense prestige by being attributed to Aristotle.⁶ After all, when so many new works of the Stagirite were being introduced to intellectual circles in Europe, why should this specific text be regarded with particular suspicion? Even Thomas Aquinas accepted the attribution, and produced a commentary on the text.

The category of the previously unpublished can, for an unsuspecting readership, be difficult to tell apart from the entirely spurious. One of the most publicized cases of a text claimed to have been translated from a previously unknown original is the *Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* presented by the Russian war correspondent Nicolas Notovitch (b. 1858).⁷ The story goes that Notovitch, during a trip on horseback through the Himalayan region, fell and broke his leg. He was brought to the Hemis monastery in

⁵ See Burton, *Introduction*, for a discussion of the issues involved.

⁶ Fidora and Niederberger, *Von Bagdad nach Toledo*. ⁷ Beskow, *Strange Tales*.