
Methodology and a World of Commentary

This book assumes that Jonathan Z. Smith was right when he claimed that “all religious discourse is commentary”—a statement that I take to mean that whatever is said in religion is said *back* to something that was already said and, equally important, is said with words that were already said somewhere else, in some other time, in some other situation, and with other meanings.¹ In a basic sense, language can’t be otherwise since meaning is always a question of evoking something more or less already known, with words whose referents have been well established in other contexts. Within the sphere of religion, however, recognizing meaning’s dependence on recycled language ruins the assumption that religious language, and the meanings it seeks to deliver, come from the transcendent beyond. Thus, Smith’s claim short circuits the assumption that language of the transcendent must itself come from the transcendent, for instance, as found in the standard evangelical claim that the Bible is “the word of God,” or in the faith among some Buddhists that the Mahāyāna sutras were spoken by the omniscient Buddha and not written by Indian and Chinese authors.

Smith’s statement resituates religious language so that instead of appearing as a glowing reflection of divinity—and thus quasi-divine itself—it now reveals itself to be a long-term resident in the prosaic, if packed, “house of language” that humans have inhabited ever since we began to talk. In this view religious discourse is fathered not by the transcendent beyond but by the chain of ancestral linguistic precedents that, in an unthinkable dense web of articulations, stretches back to our cave-and-savannah days, and in particular, back to that moment when our grunts, moans, and shrieks turned into words that had the ability to refer to things seen and unseen. This,

then, is the most interesting part of Smith's comment: the various religious claims that seek to situate their laws and truths beyond human history have a terribly thick terrestrial history.

Fetishizing Tradition as Art for the Masses

In the following close readings of Buddhist and Christian texts, I accept Smith's position that all religious discourse is commentary—and fully embedded in a specific historical context—but I also assume that the religious language in these particular texts is not the direct expression of the authors' personal convictions. Instead, I approach these discourses as *artistic creations* fashioned to produce certain effects in the listener or reader.² This is, of course, simply another way of saying that these texts are not diaries or “memos-to-oneself,” but rather full-fledged media events, designed for public consumption.³ Seen in this light, these texts—as artistically designed public statements—*have to be read for their management of their own consumption*, which, arguably, is one of the most basic criteria of artistic production. Thus, these texts were not composed through the simple procedure of externalizing meanings that were pre-existent *in* the authors, but rather they were produced thinking about how religious statements would look in the eyes of potential readers or listeners. Hence, in a certain sense these texts were written from the outside of the text looking in, with the text's form and content shaped by the anticipated demands of public reception. In other words, we can't avoid the conclusion that these texts *are about the people who are to consume them* since it was their desires and their notions of authority and history that were to be engaged, redesigned, and made livable in new forms.⁴

In treating these texts as art products, I naturally read the narratives for their intersubjectivity, and by *intersubjectivity* I simply mean that the authors of these works thought about how readers would think about the presentation of truth and tradition in these literary products, and organized the development of the text's contents accordingly. In short, I'm thinking about these religious discourses as determined by the place where they are to take root—in the human subject—and this seems like a wise choice since with a bit of reflection it becomes clear that the texts aren't strictly about objects of religious faith—God, the Buddha, heaven, nirvana, and so on—but rather about getting human subjects to imagine these objects in certain prescribed ways, ways that have everything to do with how they used to conceive of other sublime items that ruled their symbolic worlds

before texts such as these showed up. Naturally, then, however radical these texts might have been in their rewriting of (old) tradition, their main topics, gestures, and tropes remain completely involved with (old) tradition.⁵

Switching to this art-based model of interpretation seems useful, but there is another problem to consider here since once we agree that these authors must have been thinking about how the readers would receive their work, they had to have also been thinking about how those readers *already* thought about (old) tradition, the law, history, and so on, since these were the principal religious elements that the authors hoped to reshape in the readers' imagination. Consequently, in order to move readers from the old form of tradition to the new form, as defined by the text, an author would have to get hold of the reader's confidence, the reader's desire, and the reader's current working image of (old) tradition, all in order to blend these items into the new configurations of religious meaning, as provided and sanctioned by the text. If we assume that this was the task at hand in composing these works, then each of these authors would have had to have not just a working knowledge of his anticipated reader, but also of his reader's sense of his place in tradition and history in order that that (old) package of self and tradition could be effectively overhauled. In effect, when we come across a text that fetishizes tradition, we have to prepare ourselves for engaging it in a manner that respects the interplay of five figures—author, audience, text (as new site of authority), and the two forms of tradition, old and new. In this pentagon of relay and reference, the most difficult figure to reckon is the author who has put himself in charge of handling these new modes of recognizing truth, authority, and closure against the background matrix of old tradition.

A further point worth considering is that it isn't just that such an author had to have been passably adept at objectifying images of (old) tradition and then manhandling them into new forms; he also had come to terms with the *limits of acceptability* in moving his audience from old to the new forms of tradition. In fact, we ought to say that the old law (of tradition) was rewritten under the "law" of public acceptability in the sense that the public's current appraisal of themselves and their place in history, as imagined by the author, was a defining force in the scripting of these new legal arrangements. Thus, narratives that fetishize tradition have to work not just with the elements of old tradition, and not just with the very specific kinds of desires that held old tradition fast in the imagination of his audience, but also within the horizons of what current public desire could countenance in terms of a newly formulated law.⁶ In all this, the point isn't just to keep track of how items are being recycled as they are

reinscribed in new narratives, but also to keep an eye on that general tissue of desire that is being tugged and twisted this way and that, as the authors moved key items around, knowing that each discourse object was always already tethered to a set of commitments and expectations.

While approaching these texts in this manner seems logical and even unavoidable, it upsets a number of assumptions that have shaped religious studies in the past century. For instance, and picking an example from Christianity that likely will be familiar to most readers, if we approach the Gospel of Mark as art in the sense explained above, then we have to jettison the pious assumption that the author was simply reporting what he had heard or what he believed to be true. And, likewise, we can't continue to imagine that he wrote his narrative with no thought given to controlling and shaping the future reception of his message, or without trying to build an image of new tradition that would overcome (old) tradition in the imagination of the reader/listener. Instead we have to treat him as a full-fledged author engaged in all the intersubjective thinking mentioned above, and, of course, intent on seducing his audience into a new view of tradition, authority, and salvation.⁷

Naturally, once we opt for treating the text as a seduction, we need to put aside the naïve assumption that the author was only reflecting a community's belief, a reading strategy that should have been abandoned long ago, once it was realized that the Gospel of Mark was designed to convince readers and listeners of things that they *didn't already believe*; thus, obviously, the narrative couldn't be a reflection of a pre-established community of believers. In place of these dead-end approaches which are more theological than theoretical, we should adopt a reading strategy that is thoroughly intersubjective and dialectical in the sense that the Gospel of Mark—and the other texts that I will be analyzing here—be read as art products, constructed by authors who expected their texts to hang in “public galleries,” where random readers and listeners would have a chance to read or hear them, and, if all went well, interpret them in a manner organized and controlled, to some degree, by the author.

Perhaps because thinking about such complex modes of composition is fairly bewildering, we have chosen to imagine that our ancestors didn't take the trouble to think like this either. Or, and this seems more likely, isn't it the case that because these authors have *cleverly hid their cleverness* that we readers have opted for a most inartistic approach to their art? Whatever the case, it seems that we have more or less lobotomized these authors such that we step past the text-as-art problem to imagine, in our most naïve moments, that we are hearing Jesus, God, the Buddha, or Master

Huineng talk to us without any artistic interference. What could be more exciting? And, of course, this is exactly what each of these texts asks of us as they essentially say, “Don’t look at me as an art product imbedded in a certain historical era; see me instead as a ‘mere’ conveyor of timeless sacred language that was produced elsewhere, an ‘elsewhere’ that is in fact the deepest Real of the universe.” Actually, this very act of *looking away* from the art of the text is a crucial element in accepting the text and its reports of transcendental realities. Functionally, then, one’s ability to leapfrog over the text as art to imagine that one has stepped into contact with the Real of the universe—receiving the voice of God, his Son, or the Buddha—is completely parallel to the hope of leapfrogging over mundane reality to win the salvation that these voices offer. That is, one can only become mystical, if one reads/listens mystically. This fact seems *not* to have been lost on the authors since the texts considered here loudly proclaim that faithfully—naïvely, that is—receiving the message about these new forms of salvation is the cause of winning that salvation.

This urge to look past the art of these texts is all the stronger given our current historical situation where these texts have won huge followings for themselves. Presumably, to treat them as curious artworks risks insulting half the world’s population in the present, along with the billions of deceased people who have lived and died taking these art products as reliable, nonfabricated accounts *of* reality. In short, given all the devotion and violence that has come with these texts, it is hard to treat them as willfully constructed media gambits. And, yet, given the past two thousand years of blood and belief that happens to be our inheritance, it seems *all the more worthwhile* to read the Gospel of Mark next to, say, the Gospel of Judas, to get a clearer sense of the fully experimental and deeply contingent quality of *both* these works of art. That is, once we see how *ad hoc* the writing of tradition was, we will be in a better place to see that creativity for what it was: a rather unbridled and unsanctioned experimentation with the reinvention of tradition. Not surprisingly, all these texts explain their right to discourse on the final nature of reality, and yet this very claim of legitimacy is part of the text’s *lèse majesté vis-à-vis* older traditions, and inseparable from the larger authorial intention of projecting an, as yet, unsanctioned account of divine law out into public space. In coming to understand these dynamics, one gradually comes to see how “illegal” the creation of the (new) law was: Who after all gave “Mark,” Paul, or the Mahāyāna Buddhist authors the right, literally, to take the law into their own hands? The key obstacle blocking this vision of the invention of tradition is that *as one falls for the text’s seduction, one concludes that there was no seduction in the first place, a*

fact that, naturally, puts believers at a distinct disadvantage in evaluating the mechanics of these works.

That some of these new and experimental accounts of the divine law then succeeded in “living” in history, down to the present, is of course another layer of happenstance. Under slightly different circumstances, these narratives might not have survived into the modern era, or might have arrived with no more importance than the works of Mani. It just so happened that these texts took hold and that very success has made them harder to think about. While we can’t duck the weight that comes with the historical success of Christianity and Mahāyāna Buddhism, we still can, in some measure, return to these texts to ask how it all got started—at least in terms of identifying the symbolic structures that organized their reinventions of tradition.⁸

Turning back to reconsider the origins of the doctrines that so shaped our notions of the reified Self appears all the more important at the beginning of the twenty-first century since it seems very likely that neuropsychology and related fields are going to completely overhaul our rather medieval notions of self, meaning, and desire. More exactly, once we are forced away from the unadmitted transcendentalism that animates most human thinking, and in particular begin to face the difficult task of making sense of human selfhood without postulating a solid core to the self, then we are going to need interpretive strategies that explore how it was that just these images of the transcendental Self were created with literature, the heady recycling of tradition, and the orchestration of enduring desires that hold such visions together. That is, as the flattering image of the reified, independent Self—an almost extraterrestrial Self, it would seem—begins to evaporate with advances in “brain psychology,” we will have to go back and reconsider how it was, historically, that text and reader fit so well together as to produce just that giddy sense of the transcendental Self.

Crucial to note is the fact that while our ancestors experimented—wildly, it would seem—with rewriting the law, tradition, and modes of salvation, we latter-day readers have inherited those texts somehow thinking that they were never invented. Thus, in arguing for high levels of creativity and irony in the authors of these tradition-reforming texts, I am also hoping that we might ourselves regain a measure of those same powers and, in particular, that confidence whereby life and its meanings can be reinterpreted and resculpted as one sees fit. In sum, in granting the authors of these texts the powers of reinventing tradition, I am suggesting to my readers that we all have such powers in varying degrees.

The Doubly Present Past

To begin theorizing the creativity at work in these texts, let's return to that perspective in which we note how these narratives that repackage tradition are part of time, history, and tradition as it was developing—as all cultural items are—and yet were designed to rework the way their audiences would experience time, history, and tradition. Read this way, as they fetishize tradition, these texts both speak from within the historical sequence that is tradition and yet also try to rise “up” out of that matrix of tradition to turn around and refigure tradition for their audiences.⁹ This model imagines a two-step process whereby an author *first* arrives at a practical understanding of three things: 1) recent history—the real past, as it was lived by a people that we could call “Public1”; 2) the traditional texts or stories that attempted to narratize that past in some meaningful manner for Public1; and, 3) Public1's current experience of those two elements: lived history and the traditional narratives that sought to explain that history. *Then*, the author attempts to present to Public1, in miniature form, all three of those elements—the real past, the traditional texts/stories, and the public's experience of tradition—as an incomplete arrangement, or as a patent failure, that can and should be overcome in accord with his new narrative. The author's art project succeeds when Public1 ceases to see itself within the horizons of the old paradigm, agreeing with the author that the old constellation of history-narrative-tradition—now seen in miniature in the new narrative—was a failure that can only be righted by taking hold of the author's new narrative that explains that failure. At that moment Public1 has become Public2 and is on its way to forging a new style of being traditional.¹⁰

Since the details can be confusing, let's go back to a foundational point: these narratives involve themselves with lots of doubles. The Christian and Buddhist narratives treated here all work in terms of presenting the reader with two images of tradition. Thus, the new mode of living history that is offered is, in part, a theory about (old) tradition and its failure to perform this basic task of rendering lived history religiously significant. In part, then, the new mode of making meaning will be generated in explaining why the old mode of making meaning wasn't sufficiently meaningful. This might seem simple enough at first, but it brings with it the implication that *the new form of religion is itself about religion* in the sense that its articulation of meaning and transcendence focuses on its precedent and rival, and consequently it is stuck finding meaning in the other's lack of meaning, or rather, making religion out of (supposedly) bad religion.¹¹

If pointing out this doubling sounds unnecessarily complicated, consider if it isn't the case that the main theme in the Gospel of Mark is built around a series of personages looking at tradition in its two forms: 1) its "old" Temple form; and, 2) its new form in Jesus, and his promises of salvation-by-faith-in-the-narrative-that-he-lives-in. As the story develops, narrative personages—the voice-from-Heaven, John the Baptist, the ill, the insane, the possessed, the disciples, Moses and Elijah, the Jewish authorities, Pilate, and the Roman centurion—having been presented with either form of tradition, are shown making choices about tradition's real locale, and then, depending on the "accuracy" of their assessment, they either benefit directly or face dire and imminent threats. Thus, the entire narrative works around presenting not just two images of tradition, but also showing the reader the consequences of reading these two images of tradition correctly or incorrectly. Thus, *as one reads Mark, one learns how to read the two forms of tradition, and learning this technique of dealing with doubled tradition is presented to the reader as the essence of his or her own religious work*. Actually, each of the texts considered here works in a similar manner such that generating a "reading" of old tradition is crucial for giving birth to the new, with the audience's view of the two forms of tradition controlled by presenting, inside the narrative, figures who perform just this function of correctly distinguishing old tradition from new tradition, thereby both winning salvation and proving that this kind of reading is all it takes.

The Law of Desire and Truth-Fathers

In addition to sorting through this layered doubling in these texts that fetishize tradition, we are also going to have to pay attention to two other basic elements in these narratives: desire and truth-fathers. As for the desire, given their distance from "old" established tradition, with its well-developed social and institutional base for managing the reception of tradition, it seems that the authors of the new narratives had at their disposal but one technique in their effort to generate adherence to their new textual programs: the ability to incite and direct their audience's desires. Writing to evoke the audience's desire naturally leaves the author in a position of solicitude vis-à-vis his audience since, in the end, it is from the reader's desire that he must fashion both his new version of tradition and the reasons for its acceptability. In light of this dialectic between writing and the desire of the reader/listener, we ought to recognize that these narrative worlds emerged

in such a way that the new versions of tradition and desire come wrapped around each other—an unexpected outcome since we tend to think of tradition, and its laws, as the opposite of new forms of public desire, rather than its manager or helpmate.¹² At any rate, coming to understand this play of desire and the law, as found in narratives that fetishize tradition, opens the door for a new appreciation of the “psychology of religion.”¹³

The second avenue of investigation, and it turns out to be crucial for organizing the audience’s desire, focuses on the presentation of images of the truth-father. The truth-father is that figure who, though distant and transcendental, supposedly owns truth and tradition—God, the Buddha, the perfect Zen master, and so on—but also supposedly has the power to pass on truth and tradition to other spokespersons. Obviously, this image of the truth-father functions to secure the desire of the audience insofar as the changes wrought to (old) tradition by these new formulations are “underwritten” by appeals to this sort of truth-father who appears above the fray and thus able, from his zone of supposed ahistorical transcendence, to validate the rewriting of tradition, the law, and history.

What is perhaps harder to see is that the truth-father reproduces more than new versions of traditions since the newly converted believer is regularly offered a new religious identity defined by winning a new familial relationship to the truth-father, for instance Paul’s “sons of God” (Gal. 3:26 or Rom. 8:14) or the common enough Mahāyāna title “son of the Buddha.” Given the prominence of this familial rhetoric we have to say that the truth-father is, on the one hand, imagined to *hold* tradition in a timeless manner, free of any kind of contamination by time, interpretation, and so on, and yet on the other hand is also taken to be the entity who *reintroduces* pure tradition into the mess of history, language, and interpretation such that believers feel legitimate in accepting this language and, as a consequence of accepting this new language, feel legitimate in inhabiting their new family of truth. Of course these two functions work together since there is something of a genetic sequence here in which the timeless truth-father is imagined to father the (new) tradition whose seductive rhetoric then refathers the (believing) subject, who in that act of belief gains the conviction that he or she has just now entered into the truth-father’s final family. Naturally, getting the subject to believe that this is possible, and that the acting truth-father is both traditional and yet now finished with (old) tradition, is the crux of the narrative’s task.

This set-up also implies that the normal reading subject is being treated as though he or she has a keyhole-like place where new tradition can insert itself and, following the metaphor, open the subject’s door into a new tran-

scendental sphere. Of course, this opening forth to the transcendental is spoken of differently in Buddhist and Christian texts, but basically the framing is the same with the new version of tradition providing the human subject with the chance to stop being an old-style human subject, cruelly ensconced in time, contingency, biology, and the house of language, in order to join or rejoin the transcendent where all such matters are resolved. All this refathering by the truth-father's gift of new tradition, then, has to be understood precisely as the means by which the subject comes to believe in a final form of his own subjectivity, a form defined by being transcendent, of and from the transcendental father, and at one with the perfect version of tradition.

Once we admit that in both Buddhism and Christianity, the truth-father, as presented in literature, has as his task the "transcendentalizing" of the human subject via the gift of new tradition, then we also are ready to admit that the truth-father and the human subject form something like a pair, with each defined by the other—a fact already made obvious by the familial language employed by either tradition to depict that rapport. That is, the truth-father functions as something like the human subject's "other half," fundamentally completing the human subject as defined within the system. Thus, we bump into a rather interesting paradox: God and the Buddha, for as transcendental and otherworldly as they are supposed to be, are defined by a very human and this-worldly orientation—they exist to serve us, to make us who we were always supposed to be.

Eyes Wide Open

In approaching these texts with the above themes in mind, what is new and presumably controversial in my discussion is that I am assuming that the authors of these texts had a fairly clear idea of what they were doing as they reinvented tradition. Previous readings of these texts have done their best to minimize the author's self-awareness in this process of reinventing tradition. My position, as just detailed, is that these authors came to understand how religious rhetoric lives with a people, and it was *only* with this knowledge that they could invent new religious rhetoric that not only could fulfill this role but also could explain why the prior mode was outdated. Crucial for this mode of reading is the assumption that the author is both part of his community's lived history—and quite aware of its historicizing apparatuses—and yet is also at some ironic distance from that shared symbolic world. Hence, it is only from such a "middle distance" that he can see the ensemble of history-tradition-public as it had been configured in the past

and feel confident enough to rework it into new and creative patterns for the future. I am suggesting, in effect, that these tradition-overcoming narratives were constructed by a certain kind of “religious genius” that figured out how hands-on religions work *and* how to recreate those “realities” in the new floating world of narrative where these old functions were effectively duplicated and rendered superfluous.

Though we will see a parallel between what these authors have “seen” in the process of objectifying (old) tradition and what they ask their readers to “see” as they are taught to reread (old) tradition as a failed enterprise, we will also note that a fundamental divide exists between the vision of the author and the vision of the audience, since, while the author provides his audience with a facsimile of the skill he has learned in objectifying (old) tradition, he never objectifies this invention itself or gives his audience insight into the literary artwork that makes these new visions back onto (old) tradition appear plausible in the eyes of the reader/listener. In fact, for the readers of these texts there is an interesting dialectic between seeing and blindness since the narratives are fully mediated events intent on delivering a sense of vision onto the final nature of tradition and reality, and yet for this sense of vision to be reproduced via language, audiences need to look past the literary architecture that was put in place to give just this sense of direct vision. Consequently, as mentioned above, we have to admit that part of the art of these narratives is to disappear as art.¹⁴

Actually, the power of these narratives to avoid being objectified as artful creations that objectify old tradition shouldn't be underestimated since, in the case of Christian studies, it wasn't until quite recently—the late 1970s—that the narrative quality of these narratives was finally accepted and then only by some in the field. And of course, this discovery only came after two millennia during which these narratives were read as uncreated accounts of reality. To begin to think through the layers of ingenuity and intersubjectivity in these texts completely undermines their supposed sacred nature, but it begins to reveal more about the history of human thought and the crucial role that artistic creation has played in molding who we have become, a topic that I will take up again in the conclusion.

Chapter and Verse

To explore the dynamics of fetishizing tradition, I begin with a reading of Paul's Letter to the Romans—after a somewhat involved discussion regarding how best to historicize early Christian literature. Given the fairly scattered

prose style in the Pauline epistles, it might be assumed that Paul wasn't relying on narrative in his explanation of how the new version of tradition supplanted—and fulfilled—(old) tradition.¹⁵ However, closer consideration makes it clear that Paul's arguments are set within the encompassing narrative-based claim that God gave the world the gift of his only Son, Jesus, in order to enact a new covenant.¹⁶ Thus, though his letters lack the formal structure of a story, Paul's position still is narrative-based in the sense that this new covenant is positioned as a half-completed drama that Paul is asking his audience to finalize by accepting this narrative of Father and Son as historically factual, and thus, ironically, no man-made narrative at all. Thus, when Paul claims that God reproduced and then destined his progeny to a sacrificial death, he is generating a narrative that becomes the foundation for his most basic demand on the reader: believe me when I recount this Father-Son narrative, and you will be saved because, along with giving us his Son, God also gave us the new law which explains that accepting this narrative of Father, Son, and new law, is the only way to fulfill the law *qua* tradition.

Chapter 2 considers the form and function of the Gospel of Mark, which is a more standard narrative with plot development, tension, resolution, and an omniscient narrator. While some of Paul's assumptions are at work in Mark, much is different too, suggesting that early notions of Jesus's death as God's sacrifice were recast, especially after the fall of the Temple in the Jewish-Roman War (66–73). In fact, though the Gospel of Mark follows Paul's fundamental claim that accepting the narrative explaining the twin arrival of the Son and the new law is the way to fulfill the new law, the author of Mark has managed to weave into his account of God's sacrificial gift a very different narrative in which it is claimed that Jesus's death was not just a sacrifice but also a murder perpetrated by the representatives of old tradition.¹⁷ Generating an image of Jesus's two-toned death allows for the new-covenant logic to be joined with an explanation of the destruction of the Temple and (old) tradition. Thus, while we can say that Mark's narrative is relentlessly damning of the representatives of old tradition—the Pharisees, the scribes, the high priests, and the general population of Jerusalem—this damnation appears as a narrative expedient designed to make the fall of the Temple look like “just deserts,” and thus not something truly catastrophic and thereby fully resistant to being folded into a history of God's covenant-based relationship with humans.¹⁸

Concentrating on this dual process of reconstructing tradition *in narrative* and making it fully available *via narrative* seems like a good way to develop readings of Paul and the Gospel of Mark, but in so doing we will

also have built a platform for an interesting comparative discussion. Thus, chapter 3 turns to consider the case of the *Sūtra on the Land of Bliss*—a text in which the totality of the Buddhist tradition is forsaken on this planet and instead imagined fully available in another land: the Land of Bliss, located millions of miles to the west. Not surprisingly, one can only reach this land after death, provided one accepts the text's narrative and faithfully recites the name of the figure—the Buddha Amitāyus—who presides over that land. As with Paul and the Gospel of Mark, what is fascinating in this text is the play between the old forms of tradition and the text's narrative that gathers up key elements of old tradition and locates them in another zone where they are supposedly made available to the reader, provided he or she will accept the narrative as valid. What is different in this case is that this narrative seems to be working from earlier Mahāyāna narratives that, themselves, sought to fetishize tradition. Thus, this text represents a second-order fetishization of tradition that overcomes not just tradition, but also a budding Mahāyāna tradition of overcoming tradition that was already taking form in works, such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*, that sought to promote themselves as the essence of tradition in a gesture that scholars have dubbed “the cult of the text.” By following this track of literary innovation we get a more refined sense for how a tradition develops once it begins to hone the skills needed for reinventing tradition.

Chapter 4 considers the eighth-century *Platform Sūtra*. This Chan (Zen) text is particularly germane to a Christian-Buddhist comparison because in it the author has created a Chinese master, Huineng (n.d.), who claims to be a direct descendent of the truth-father of Buddhism—the Buddha—with that sonship undermining all other claims to legitimacy made by other figures in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. As with Jesus in Mark, the genealogical sameness between the truth-father and his descendent/s grounds the discourse such that the figure of Huineng can go about that familiar business of simultaneously negating prior forms of tradition and then regathering their essences into new forms, and in particular into the very text in which he is living and teaching.

This text, just like the *Sūtra on the Land of Bliss*, seems best read in a literary context wherein modes and models of overcoming past tradition had already been well explored. For instance, the narrative works hard at dethroning previous attempts to claim spiritual kinship with the Indian Buddha, just as it also works at marginalizing early Buddhist texts that sought to fetishize tradition into themselves, including the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Sūtra on the Land of Bliss*, and the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*. Thus, while modern enthusiasts assume that Chan (Zen) is the one religious tradition

beyond such basic struggles with tradition, time, and authority, this chapter will present ample evidence to conclude the opposite: Chan is the tradition in which new forms for overcoming tradition are worked out on a tradition that, itself, had already developed several workable models for overcoming tradition. A key issue here will be to reflect, again, on how images of pater- nity, legitimacy, and old and new tradition are wound together to produce a convincing and seductive narrative about the new locale of total tradition and its availability to the believing reader/listener.

Pierre Bourdieu's Account of Religious Rhetoric

Since I rely on it in the chapters to come, I want to close out my introduc- tory comments, with a brief description of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the structure of religious discourse, a position that focuses on the production of the image of authority and that sums up many of my above points.¹⁹ Bourdieu argues that the standard setup for religious authority requires three mutually reliant zones: 1) a deep origin of truth in the form of a past sage, saint, deity, or Being; 2) a means for moving that truth forward in time, be it through memory, texts, ritual practices, relics, or the regular reincarnation of the primal source in some contemporary form or body; 3) a contem- porary spokesperson for that primordial truth who is sanctioned to represent it in the present, interpret it, and distribute it to a believing public, who delegate to him just this power and legitimacy. In short, Bourdieu saw reli- gious authority always involved in a to-ing and fro-ing, shuttling back and forth as it does between its deep origins and its application in the present. Or put otherwise, in any moment of religious authority there is always an audience focused on the singular priest figure, who is expected to funnel the totality of truth forward into the group. Thus religious authority works when it performs the dual function of funneling the gaze of the audience onto the priest by convincing them that the priest funnels the fullness of truth onto them.

Bourdieu also points out that there is a certain kind of "social magic" that occurs when the audience is drawn to see this arrangement as uncon- structed and natural. This social magic is that moment when those who follow a form of authority or leadership forget that authority is in the eyes of the beholder and that they themselves are in charge of deciding what is and isn't authoritative. To effect this social magic, most systems involve themselves in one contortion or another in order to appear self-verifying. Thus, usually part of the explanation about the set of three zones will be

dedicated to explaining how the explanation of the three zones itself flows out of the sequence. It is no surprise then that it becomes terribly important to get self-verifying language to come out of the deep origin of zone 1 in order to explain that basic zone and, in full circular fashion, the language that explains that basic zone. Or, put in a pithier form: authority has to explain why it has the authority to claim authority. The beauty of this model is that it sketches the basic contours of a variety of religious discourses ranging from Christianity to Buddhism. In fact, it is hard to think of any religious system whose broad outlines don't conform to Bourdieu's model, and this may be due to the fact that his model articulates a fundamental antithesis between authority and time: authority is forever in need of proving itself, and to do so it creates both a timeless origin for itself and a conduit for moving that origin forward in time.

What Bourdieu paid less attention to was the fact that several religious traditions, notably early Christianity and certain "wings" of Mahāyāna Buddhism, produced texts that appear designed to deliver, in the very act of consuming a narrative, all aspects of this dialectic of authority. Hence, while I think Bourdieu's position is unbeatable for focusing a critique of any religious position, it needs to be adjusted for those special situations in which narrative and/or text come to stand as the sole purveyors of tradition. That is, we need to be ready to expand Bourdieu's position to account for those moments in religious history when we have phenomena, such as the "cult of the text" in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and what I call the "cult of the narrative" in early Christianity, when real institutions are not part of the equation defining and delivering the authority and legitimacy that Bourdieu's model predicts, and instead a new style of religious narrative emerges, one that fetishizes (old) tradition and takes on the role of moving the sanctifying past into the present.

With these issues of narrative, desire, authority, and truth-fathers briefly sketched, let's turn to the Pauline Letters to begin to see how these theoretical perspectives play out in specific readings.