Illuminating the Half-Life of Tradition: Legitimation, Agency, and Counter-Hegemonies

Gregory P. Grieve and Richard Weiss

There have been few attempts within the field of religious studies to articulate the particular force of tradition. 'Tradition,' for example, is absent in a recent compilation of Critical Terms for Religious Studies, which does not neglect to include that common foil of tradition, 'modernity' (Taylor 1998). Sociologists and historians have paid more attention to the concept of tradition, but this literature has not often been taken up in religious studies. It is a strange neglect, given that much of the field of religious studies is organized according to religious traditions. In the study of South Asian religions, for example, many scholars have rightly questioned the usefulness of Hinduism as a category, yet these reflections have not been extended to the more general notion of "tradition." Perhaps accepting and conflating the dichotomies of science/religion and modernity/tradition, scholars of religion have rarely interrogated tradition as a distinct feature of religious activity. Here we do not provide an account of this scholarly history, but rather hope to make a contribution to a better understanding of what is entailed in calling something a tradition.

Religious studies' employment of the concept of tradition arose in the great cultural explosion marked by the contact of the West with its global others. And while the scholarly and social environment has shifted, so that many of the presumptions that made it such a powerful rhetoric no longer hold, the category of tradition staggers on in the half-life of its former glory. The essays presented in this volume illuminate how the rubric of "tradition" may currently operate in the field of religious studies. Using a critical comparative framework, the goal of this volume is to suggest that tradition is a fundamental category in the historical and comparative study of religion. Key questions include "How is tradition actively constructed rather than passively received?" and "What issues are obscured by uncritical comparative/historical uses of the category?" Historicizing Tradition begins from the premise that religious traditions are social projects, often deliberately constructed to serve particular ideological ends.¹ The volume

¹ This book originated in a session held at the American Academy of Religion conference in Atlanta in 2003. The panel was organized by Gregory P. Grieve and Richard Weiss and included papers by Jason A. Carbine, Frederick S. Colby, Susanna Morrill, and Greg Johnson. Developed versions of the former three papers appear in this book.
also presumes that scholarship about tradition itself is ideological in the sense that the academic analysis of tradition may often tell one more about scholars and scholarship than about the people it is supposedly describing. In short, to build upon Eric Hobsbawm’s (1983) now foundational text, not only tradition, but traditional scholarship, is invented. Or, to place our assumptions in the rubric of this volume, to illuminate tradition’s half-life, one needs not only to historicize tradition but also to problematize traditional historiography.

A Sociology of Tradition

Marx’s notion of tradition is a good place to start our discussion, not only because of the influence of this particular passage but also because he articulates a prevalent notion of the force of tradition.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. (Marx 1978, 505)

While for Marx tradition is comprised of static structures which bind subjects to inevitable action, the authors in this volume view tradition as dynamic, the “circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past” themselves negotiated, reformulated, abandoned, reinvented, and concealed. Even as the past constructs the present, as Marx rightly argues, the past is also remembered and configured in the present, a process over which some individuals, and some societies, have more control than others. What Marx neglects to mention is that for many, this “nightmare” of tradition is a refuge into realms of human experience over which actors can continue to exert control. Indeed, tradition, reconfigured by contemporary agendas, is precisely that realm of human practices and forms of knowledge that communities consider to be their own. It can be challenged by actors outside that community, or neglected by the youth internal to that community, or, worst of all, rejected by traitors within the specified community in favor of the traditions of an external, “foreign” community. Duty and loyalty to one’s own tradition are celebrated as the recognition of the harmonious conjunction of personal essence and social forms of knowledge and practice.

To foreshadow and orient the following discussion, here we will briefly set out our notion of tradition, which will become more clear in its general contours in the extended discussion that follows. Formulations of traditions and community affirm a synchronic bond between actors and extend that bond into the past, into a diachronic community. Thus, traditional action involves reverence towards past action, actors, practices, and knowledge as holding a value that cannot be, or at least has not been, superseded. Traditions, however, are not only about the past but also about the present over which the past is seen to retain its relevance; thus we have living traditions, which also provide a model for future action. In valuing the past, a traditional orientation will tend towards conservatism rather than innovation, but it is not as static as it appears or claims to be.

Adherence to tradition is both a commitment and a duty to a community that existed in the past, exists in the present, and will continue to exist as long as its members do not abandon it. In other words, actors often consider their traditions to be timely, relevant in all times, and at the same time this attribute paradoxically becomes the grounds for a claim to the timeless of tradition, its eternal essence. Adherence to tradition is an orientation towards an imagined timeless community, some of the desire to submerge one’s personal identity into a larger community that transcends that individual. The desire for tradition is thus also a desire for immortality.

The Duration of Tradition

Any evocation of tradition marks an attempt to forge a connection with the past. Many have therefore concluded that it is essential for a tradition to have actually been transmitted from one generation to another. Edward Shils, for example, argues that tradition must span at least three generations, and that anything passed down for less is not tradition but fashion (Shils 1981, 15). The problem with this sort of argument, we feel, is that it does not give due attention to the way traditions change, as they always do, both in their actual content and in their interpretation. Traditions are never static, but always changing with historical circumstances. The analysis of tradition as constant across generations would necessitate the impossibly imprecise task of measuring meaningful change.

Furthermore, it seems to us that Shils has missed Weber’s crucial analysis of tradition as a type of authority. The assertion that a particular practice connects present actors to past actors, an assertion that is meant to garner authority for that practice, is more important than whether or not past actors actually engaged in that practice. The agency of tradition lies more with those who accept prior knowledge than with those who pass down knowledge, which is merely to say that the activity of making and perpetuating a tradition is more an activity of the living than of the dead.
What is required, then, is an account of tradition that considers its synchronic employment as a strategy of legitimation, where we understand synchrony as a position in complex historical contexts. Tradition gains its authority from its context, in which the important parameters are, following Bruce Lincoln's account of authority, "the conjunction of the right speaker, the right speech and delivery, the right staging and props, the right time and place, and an audience whose historically and culturally conditioned expectations establish the parameters of what is judged 'right' in all these instances" (Lincoln 1994, 11). The synchrony implied by this sort of "conjunction" is not that of Saussure or Levi-Strauss; it is not an ahistorical "pure" synchrony which determines history, but itself constructed through history and therefore it is in constant flux.

The Consciousness of Tradition

Especially from the perspective of the Enlightenment, tradition is viewed by some as a realm of action that is followed without thought, blind imitation of the past. In his typology of meaningful action, Weber describes traditional action as largely unconscious, as "determined by ingrained habituation," as "a matter of almost automatic reaction to habitual stimuli which guide behavior in a course which has been repeatedly followed" (Weber 1978, 24–25). Thus, it is hardly meaningful action at all. In fact, his equation of habit with tradition is almost complete: "The great bulk of all everyday action to which people have become habitually accustomed approaches this [traditional] type" (ibid., 25).

If Weber's primary representation of traditional action was as imitation or habit, a radically different view is presented by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their influential examination of "invented traditions."

"Invented tradition" is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. (Hobsbawm 1983, 1)

The language of invention, an antonym of imitation, has the advantage of registering traditions as actively and consciously engaged and constructed by historical actors. However, we feel scholars too often underestimate the conser-

---

2 As Marshall Sahlins points out, one must attend to the "cultural life of the elementary forms" (Sahlins 1985, xv).

3 See for example the "left-Hegelian" Max Stirner's idiosyncratic Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum (The Ego and Its Own—a more literal translation might be The Individual and his Property). For an English translation see Stirner 1995.
for the very criteria that qualify one’s acceptance into a community, tradition becomes ideological.

We consider tradition to be a primary form of culture in the sense that the Comaroffs, following Gramsci, define it, as “the space of signifying practice, the semantic ground on which human beings seek to construct and represent themselves and others—and, hence, society and history. As this suggests, it is not merely a pot of messages, a repertoire of signs to be flashed across a neutral mental screen. It has form as well as content; is born in action as well as thought; is a product of human creativity as well as mimesis; and, above all, is empowered” (Ibid., 21-22). Insofar as it is the ground on which social identity is based, providing the content which defines communities, tradition is one of the most important cultural forms in forging communities. It differs from other modes of cultural production in that it is guided by a particular orientation to history which ascribes authority to the past.

The Ideology of Tradition

If the Comaroffs’ distinction between ideology and hegemony is analytically valuable in distinguishing different poles of the modes of tradition, it also suggests historical processes and shifts. Because tradition is never “purely” ideological or hegemonic, the place that it occupies on this continuum will shift with time and place. Radical historical shifts will tend to turn hegemony into ideology, resulting from critique and engendering further critique, a process especially common with the intervention of a new force that is pursuing hegemony. Hobsbawm and Ranger likewise note that the invention of tradition is most prevalent in times of rapid social change (Hobsbawm 1983, 4). One common effect of cultural interaction, then, is often to illuminate hegemony, to enable reflection on criteria of authority. This consciousness of the underpinnings of authority is often the basis of a critique of that authority, leading to new formulations and justifications. While this might have beneficial effects, in that such conscious reflection on things previously taken for granted is one of the essential components of learning, cultural interactions are always concomitant with distinctions in power. While the “unveiling” of authority is never complete, neither is it evenly and mutually affected in the encounter of two societies.

Like Louis Althusser’s treatment of ideology, the essays in this volume are concerned more with the “practic-sozial function” of tradition rather than with its epistemological status (Althusser 1996, 231). Traditional statements do not simply reflect or represent reality, but they also structure the way humans discern meaning. That is, traditions themselves structure consciousness, history, and memories—they provide the representations through which actors come to understand their worlds. Because explicit formulations of tradition actively construct human experience, they are more than cynical instruments (implied by “invention”) with which one social group manipulates another. As Althusser holds for ideology, those who formulate the character and contents of a tradition are “caught by it, implicated by it, just when they are using it and believe themselves to be absolute masters of it” (Althusser 1996, 234). While traditions are themselves constructed and modeled, they at the same time provide the models for a variety of practices and conceptions. Traditions are, to borrow Geertz’s language of “cultural patterns,” models of and models for. They “give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves” (Geertz 1973, 93). Actors perpetuate, and allow themselves to be shaped by, traditions because they perceive them to be at least partially true. Tradition is not only something constructed by prior subjects, but also contributes to the construction of subjects, insofar as it is prior to them.

Tradition and Belief

The relationship between people and tradition has been often viewed as motivated by belief. For example, Hindus are often said to worship an image at a temple because they believe that a divinity is instantiated in that image. Belief in this sense is a cognitive act, a considered judgment that something is “true” according to some relevant criterion of authority. This sort of belief is certainly a goal of all formulations of tradition—they must appear to be credible to be successful. However, there are some problems with making belief the sole, or even the primary, link between people and their traditions. Not the least of these, and perhaps the most problematic in analysis, is the difficulty in attributing belief to particular actors. How do we know whether someone really believes what they say? Belief is an internal, cognitive state, and so it is invisible to the analyst, unlike words and actions, which can be examined.

Belief itself, it seems to us, cannot be separated in clear ways from motivation and interest. When traditional medical practitioners, for example, assert that their forebears formulated a medicine that imparted immortality, they never do so solely because they believe it, but also because such assertions confer value to their practice. Statements about tradition do not just represent “real” processes as our modern sense of “belief” requires, but are also meant to accomplish particular sorts of work. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in tracing a history of the notion of belief, points out that its medieval English connotations were close to its German counterpart, the belief, that is, “to hold dear,” “to give allegiance, to be loyal to, to value highly” (Smith 1977, 41). It is this older sense of belief that more closely describes the intensions of formulations of tradition—not to provide an objective representation of things, but to instill the sentiments of affiliation, loyalty, and duty in a targeted audience.
Donald Lopez distinguishes between believing something and believing in something (Lopez 1998, 22). To believe something is a cognitive, reflective act, a particular relationship forged between a subject and an external object. To believe in something is a creative, performative act, in that the statement of belief itself creates its object. To affirm that “I believe in you” confers value and confidence on the person addressed. It is this latter sense of belief that accurately describes the relationship between people and traditions. Formulations of the origin, history, and nature of traditional practices and knowledge might be phrased most accurately as “I believe in myself,” as they are meant to confer self-confidence and self-respect. Formulations of tradition, then, are acts of self-creation in that they specify both the value of the self, and also the nature of the self.

The Essays in This Volume

Although the volume’s essays cover a wide range of historical and geographic locations and have been written by a truly global representation of scholars and activists, our goal is not simply a revelation of heretofore unexamined or marginalized groups. Nor do we seek to apportion praise and blame, judging past academic approaches against the often seemingly arbitrary standards of our own time. Rather, the volume is both a moment of self-reflection on how the concept of tradition has been key in constituting the academic study of religion, and an effort in charting the future employment of the term. The volume maps the history of tradition in three interwoven strands. The first section traces how traditional authority is legitimated and legitimizing. The second section underscores how discourses of tradition are used by historical agents, especially for (re)constructing identities. The final section maps the often mutually dependant mobius interaction between tradition, modernity and the West.

Tradition, Legitimation, and Authority

The opposition between others’ passive, unthinking tradition and our active, rational modernity has become such common currency that its constructed nature has been all but forgotten. Yet, where was this concept originally minted? How and why was tradition assigned such passive authority? In the volume’s opening essay Michel Deslandes argues that the cliche of the traditional passivity begins in the battles—both historical and historiographic—between scripture-believing Protestants and the Catholic practices based in apostolic succession. The debate is focused by John Calvin (1509-1564) as “truth versus custom,” and proceeds through a series of humanistic histories that attempt to deconstruct Catholic institutions by demonstrating their changing and changeable nature.

These deconstructive histories in turn engender counter-reformation arguments that demonstrate the underlying unchanging nature of Church institutions. This deadlock is finally broken in the nineteenth century with the advent of paleontology that completely dissolves the given world view. In reaction, tradition is reformulated in a cultural sense as an underlying organic structure that passively conserves the past. Ultimately, argues Deslandes, in the twentieth century, the assumed passivity of tradition leads scholars to perceive religion and religious practice as innately conservative. Such conservatism can either be spun utilitarianly as superstition, or romantically as a utopian vision.

The two essays that follow turn to how the tradition’s conservative rhetoric has been used in specific historical examples to legitimate social practices. First, Frederick Colby, in “The Rhetoric of Innovative Tradition in the Festival Commemorating the Night of Muhammad’s Ascension,” describes pre-modern Islam, arguing that while tradition is often posed by both scholars and participants as unchanging, it can be used to legitimate reformation agendas. For instance, as Colby shows, while the Islamic reformist Ibn al-Hajj claims to support the universal and unchanging traditional festival practices, he in fact promotes a vision of change in which the Night of the Ascension becomes celebrated in a new and radically different fashion.

In “The Golden Age of Muslim Spain: Religious Identity and the Invention of a Tradition,” Aaron Hughes turns to historiography. He argues that the concept of a “Golden Age” provides a prism through which interpreters legitimate their own ideological conception of the “essence” of Judaism. Some of these constructions hold up the Jewish experience in medieval Spain as a beacon for modern Jewish emancipation. Others, however, regarded the cultural and intellectual achievements of such elite Jews as inauthentic and therefore far removed from true Jewish piety. What all of these constructions share though, is the assumption that there was a “Golden Age” of Muslim Spain and that, however defined, it provided important lessons for modern Jewish existence. Ironically, then, Spain’s “Golden Muslim Age” was imagined and re-imagined because it provided various scholars/reformers with a Jewish model with which to propose various changes within their own tradition.

The next two essays, those by Félix Ulombe Kaputo and Titus Hjelm, demonstrate how tradition’s authority is a “gun for hire,” called upon to strengthen existing conservative customs or to legitimate new religious movements. In “Central African Women: Victims between African and Christian Traditions,” Ulombe Kaputo traces women’s victimization since the colonial period. He argues that in Central Africa, Christian religious traditions have strategically reaffirmed traditional patriarchal practices to economically marginalize women. As early as 1900, Methodists, followed by other American and British congregations, started their infiltration of the continent, “redefining and re-bordering” religious and geographical frontiers. From that time, it was obvious that missionaries were not simply “Christian;” they were primarily interested in
assisting colonial powers by furthering capitalist institutions. A key strategy in the spread of capitalism was the use of religion to legitimate local patriarchal customs. In the last decades, this has been further intensified through the dramatic spread of American Pentecostal Churches. Ulombe Kaputo suggests that by examining past Christian conquests and by questioning struggles over the place of tradition of Central African women can be improved in the face of the promises and threats of globalization.

Unlike Ulombe Kaputo’s description of a reactionary use of tradition, in “Tradition as Legitimation in New Religious Movements,” Hjelm shows how tradition can legitimate alternative religions such as the Finnish neo-pagan community. Hjelm’s focus is on the sociological processes where tradition is invoked for the purpose of legitimating emergent forms of faith and religious practice. He argues that “tradition” becomes a strategy that is used in giving weight and credibility to the religion in question. For example, the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON) has in some cases benefited from being identified with a “legitimate” Indian tradition, whereas doctrinally more controversial movements, such as Wicca, have had to recourse to more active communication of the background of beliefs in the eyes of a suspect popular image. Such external pressure brings about internal change. For instance, in Finnish Wicca this has resulted in what Hjelm terms the “new rise of tradition.”

Tradition, Agency, and Identity

The volume’s second section, consisting of six essays, maps the interrelationship between tradition, agency, and identity. While each essay describes a different historical case, the essays are unified in their desire to dispel the assumption that tradition is just imitation of prior practices and discourses. While varied as to methodological approach, the essays view traditions as rule-governed models that inculcate behavioral values and norms in such a way as to make those practices, values, and norms, even and especially those of relatively recent origin, appear continuous with the past. As such, the practices and discourses of tradition described are theorized as powerful instruments of communal self-positioning.

Susan Morrow’s “Women and the Book of Mormon: The Creation and Negotiation of a Latter-Day Saint Tradition,” asks how contextualized agents use tradition to define themselves, especially when a tradition may at first blush seem to be against their interest. How, in a religious text such as the Book of Mormon, which stresses fatherhood and patriarchal authority, does one create a positive women’s identity? Morrow turns to the case study of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) member Martha Cragun Cox. She argues that Mormon women such as Cox did not simply accept the patriarchal focus of the Book of Mormon; they actively interpreted this new scriptural tradition for their own circumstances. Morrow shows that religious groups are made up of multiple, shifting, and continually negotiated traditions. She suggests that “traditions” can never be fully grasped, because individuals and groups are always adapting them to fit personal, historical, and cultural circumstances. “They are the ever-shifting foundations upon which religious communities stand” (see below p. 142).

Essays by Jason Carbine and Richard Weiss explore the social and cultural purposes for which specific contextualized agents use tradition. Carbine concentrates upon the creation of continuity, while Weiss reports on rupture. In “Shwegyin Sāsana: Continuity, Rupture, and Traditionalism in a Buddhist Tradition,” Carbine argues that contextualized agents often conceive of tradition as a dynamic tension between continuity and rupture. Regardless of history, colonialism, modernity, or socio-political agendas, tradition is seen as a means to overcome ruptures. To illustrate this position, Carbine elaborates the Shwegyin Sāsana’s two conceptions of rupture. The first, nirvāṇa, is a permanent rupture in one’s successive rebirths and is considered positive. The second concerns the decay and rupture of the lineage and is perceived as negative because it terminates knowledge about the ways to reach nirvāṇa. Carbine argues that the monks use such traditionalism to prevent the lineage rupture from ruling the day, and thus allow that at least a few may break through to nirvāṇa.

In “The Autonomy of Tradition: Creating Space for Indian Medicine,” Weiss explores the ways in which contextualized agents have sought to carve out an autonomous space for their practices by constructing boundaries that shape a unique South Asian medical tradition. He suggests that the assertion of autonomous medicine uniquely developed and suitable for the Tamil people was developed as a strategy to counter cultural imperialism. Because their practices were under attack as unscientific or forged, these practitioners delineated a sphere of unique tradition within which they could reject the scrutiny of outsiders. As such, tradition becomes an autochthonous ground, a site over which a social self can exercise control. Weiss suggests that, because of this crucial need for self-definition, the relations between traditions often take the form of rupture, compelling discourses characterized by critique and defense.

The next three essays in this section deal more directly with theoretical approaches to the study of traditions. While varied in the theoretical models they propose, each clusters around the “insider/outsider” problem. In “Whose Tradition? Conflict Ideologies in Medieval and Early Modern Esotericism,” Koekko van Stuckrad describes the emergence of “first theology” in early modern Europe. He argues that first theology was a discursive strategy for formulating alternative genealogies of knowledge and identities that went beyond the usual scriptural ones. These debates included intense arguments between Muslims, Christians, and Jews over competing definitions of “tradition.” While offered as contrasts, self-definitions of tradition in these debates were made in mutual dependency to one another. As von Stuckrad argues: “Like identities, traditions are not found but negotiated in a complex process of cultural exchange” (see below p. 223). He argues that these debates show that the notion of tradition
should not be used as an *a priori* analytical category of etic historiography, but should only be employed in reference to its emic meaning and function.

Lee Rainey, in “Confucianism and Tradition,” argues that the Confucian concept of tradition has been defined and shaped by the history of Western and South East Asian scholarship. In the West, tradition has been used to paint one’s way out of the “Is Confucianism a religion or philosophy?” conundrum. In contrast, in Singapore, Taiwan, and China, tradition is posited as a pure past that represents Confucian teaching, Chinese culture, and national identity. Rainey concludes that all of us interpret, translate, and understand ancient “traditions” based on our prejudices, which may be more ingrained and problematic than we previously had thought.

In the section’s final essay, “Dispatches from Memory: Genealogies of Tradition,” Earle Waugh argues that the academic understanding of tradition should be based upon the action of memory. He suggests that memory allows for a model for cultural retention, as well as situates tradition studies in the larger compass of human knowledge. Waugh constructs a method that consists of the dialectic relationship between *traditum*—which is bound up with the validation of local personal memory, and *traditio*—which is the social interpretation of that memory. Such a model, he suggests, is constructive for comparing religious memory across cultures and for creating a method beyond the “one-dimensional historical” view that currently dominates the discipline.

**Tradition, Modernity, and the West**

By confronting the notion that tradition is timeless and unchanging, one also detangles the underlying assumption that places “traditional peoples” in the sad passive position of being opposed to the dynamic charge of Western modernity. This opposition does not necessarily mark the contemporary relevance of different forms of knowledge and practice, but rather it emerges from the encounter of societies with divergent notions of what qualifies as effective knowledge. Indeed, the rubric of tradition as a marker of community has become one of the most effective means through which colonized peoples have challenged the hegemonic claims of Western knowledge.

The final section of the volume untangles the Gordian knot created by the mobius interaction between tradition, modernity, and the West. In “Histories of Tradition in Bhaktapur, Nepal: Or, How to Compile A Contemporary Hindu Medieval City,” Gregory Grieve maintains that most academic conceptions of tradition tend toward a romantic-histioricist view that posits tradition as a passive ontological essence that will, over time, develop into “modernity.” From this perspective, the people in the Nepalese city of Bhaktapur are seen to neither have tradition nor make tradition but rather, as traditional. The false dichotomy between tradition and modernity breaks down, however, when one examines tradition as it is understood emically in Bhaktapur, where people tend to use the term to describe effective everyday social practices that are compiled from past generations. Grieve glosses this second understanding of tradition as “genealogical.” Unlike the romantic understanding of tradition, the genealogical model is neither the seeking of pure origins nor the plotting of an evolutionary timeline. Instead, like a “history of the present,” a genealogical tradition chronicles the pragmatic use of those past social practices that are currently effective, and they are not necessarily at odds with modern practices. Traditional practices are just one choice among many.

Ira Robinson, in “Hasid and Maskil: The Hasidic Tales of an American Yiddish Journalist” argues that Samuel Rocker (1865-1936) was not simply the modernizing force within the Jewish community that he would appear at first blush. For beyond his persona of “Samuel Rocker” the American Yiddish journalist, he was also “Reb Yehoshua [Joshua] Rocker,” author of a book on the Talmudic interpretation of the Bible as well as two books of Hasidic tales. Robinson maintains that Rocker served as a cultural mediator not simply between the Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their new country, but also between these Jews and their religious past. Robinson argues that Rocker attempted to use the power of the Hasidic tradition, not to oppose modernization as such, but to demonstrate that there were different paths other than a forced acculturation into the American “melting pot.” By portraying the leaders of nineteenth-century Hasidism positively in the way he did, he sought to show that the Hasidic tradition had continued relevance in the here and now. For Rocker, there was something in Hasidism and its story that could speak to his contemporaries, and help them as they engaged in the vital balancing act between the Judaic tradition and Western civilization that characterized all of modern Judaism.

In “Re-Orienting Tradition: Radhakrishnan’s Hinduism,” Michael Hawley deals with two main areas: Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan’s understanding of Hindu tradition and the tradition of orientalism. He argues that Radhakrishnan’s interpretation of Hindu tradition is not only informed by, but often perpetuates and therefore further entrenches, orientalist images of India. Hawley suggests that an informed understanding of Radhakrishnan’s thinking about Hindu tradition needs to be grounded in an understanding of India’s colonial past and of his encounters with Western-constructed knowledge about India. Hawley maintains, that in the process of responding to his encounter with the West, Radhakrishnan appropriated and reinterpreted many of those orientalist images of India and of Hindu tradition against which he sought to argue. Because of this, Radhakrishnan’s understanding of Hindu tradition is not only informed by, but in fact perpetuates and further entrenches these images of India constructed during the colonial period. This is significant, because Radhakrishnan’s understanding of Hinduism draws our attention to the fluid and dynamic nature of tradition as a
either in embarrassingly acknowledging the orientalist and romantic past as something we do not do any more, or in waiting for a newest theory as a panacea to a diseased legacy. Simply acknowledging the past becomes an apology, and waiting for redemption by theory ignores the present. Nor is it enough to simply “get back to work”—this reproduces the positivist rhetoric of historical progress, whose mirror image is the concept of tradition we are attempting to call into question. Instead, what the essays in this volume show is that more than some pollutant, which still lingers in the very skeleton of religious studies, tradition can be analyzed as a strategic tool of cultural critique. Tradition is an important category for examination because it focuses the historical, social and political nature not only of religion, but of human society writ large. It is by the glow of tradition’s half-life that these essays should be read—an illumination in which both theory and historical detail are used to invert the field of religious studies’ dominant structures of knowledge and power without simply reproducing them.

References


