

Manufacturing Religion in the Anthropocene

Discourse, Religion, and Christian Origins

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Abstract

The article sets the essays that constitute the two-part theme issue, Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam, in a broader theoretical framework. The framework employed here is the work of Russell T. McCutcheon and Willi Braun that emphasise the human manufacturedness of both the concept “religion” and the practices and discourses that go by the descriptor “religion.” The essays collected here in this theme issue collectively perform the double act of historicising the concept “religion” as well as the constituent operations of religion-making.

Keywords

manufacturing religion – Anthropocene – anthropocentric study of Christian origins – theory of religion – historicising religion – invention of tradition

1 Manufacturing Religion in the Anthropocene

The two elements in the title, “manufacturing religion” and “Anthropocene,” connect two complementary, synonymous concepts: “manufacture” as in *made by human hand*, and “Anthropocene” as the designation of the geological period characterised by the impact of humans on the physical world, but here used creatively, metaphorically, to indicate *how what we know of the world follows from how the world is constructed by being significantly impacted by human interventions, interactions, and signifying practices*. In the context of this essay, and of the original conference out of which it grew, the two terms are connected to a third element – *religion* – as the domain in which this specific site

(or example) of human manufacturing and world construction plays out.¹ The two elements of *manufacturing religion* and *Anthropocene* also connect two scholars of religion whose scholarship shaped the conception of the Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam conference: I refer to Russell McCutcheon and Willi Braun – *Manufacturing Religion* was the title of McCutcheon's published PhD thesis, while the term "Anthropocene" evokes Willi Braun's self-description of his approach as a "plea for an *anthropocentric*, human-focused study of religious practices."² As an entry into the collection of essays constituting this two-part theme issue it is worth considering the combined thrust of their almost three decades-long collaboration setting a trend in critical study of religion and Christian origins, embedded as their work was in broader circles of scholarship, which made their work reverberate through specifically defined communities of scholarship.³

- 1 The conference, Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam, was held 30 June to 1 July 2023 at the University of South Africa, with invited keynote speakers Willi Braun (University of Alberta), Robyn Faith Walsh (University of Miami), and Russell T. McCutcheon (University of Alabama), with South African scholars participating: Gerhard van den Heever, Pieter J.J. Botha, and Chris de Wet (at the time all from the University of South Africa), Auwais Rafudeen (University of South Africa), and Nycholas Oliveira (then University of Pretoria). The conference followed on an earlier online webinar with the same title held on 4 March 2022. The webinar was conceived to interact with three important new publications in the fields of Christian origins studies and Islamic studies, i.e., Willi Braun, *Jesus and the Addiction to Origins: Toward an Anthropocentric Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, NAASR Working Papers (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2020); Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108883573>; and Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton, NJ; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2020). Hence, the connection between Christian origins and Classical Islam in the webinar title. The conference itself (which went under the same title as the webinar) was a wider exploration that went beyond the original focus on the three mentioned publications. The conference ensued in a theme issue of this journal – published (as a result of practical circumstances) in two parts, as Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam – Part 1 (*Religion & Theology* 31, no. 1–2 [2024]); and Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam – Part 2 (*Religion & Theology* 31, no. 3–4 [2024], this issue). The combined theme issue contains contributions that were not originally presented at the conference but were thematically related to the theme such that they were included in the theme issue (the essays by Edwards and Lagioia in Part 1).
- 2 Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003 [1997]); Braun, *Jesus and the Addiction to Origins*, xi (my emphasis). See also McCutcheon's description of his long-standing collegial connection with Braun since their days in graduate studies, "Editor's Foreword" in Braun, *Jesus and the Addiction to Origins*, vii–ix.
- 3 Of note: the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), of which Willi Braun was president 2008–2011, and the circle around Jonathan Z. Smith and Burton L. Mack

To set the scene: In the Preface to *Jesus and the Addiction to Origins* Willi Braun sets out the agenda that has animated his work (as evidenced in the essays collected here that span his career in the academy) as follows, and it is worth citing at length:

The basic premise of the argument that the essays make in concert is that all human performances that present themselves as religious are human productions. There is no more-than-human substance or kernel in these products, no divine inspiration or revelation, no connection to superhuman knowledge or authority, although such connection is usually claimed by these products or by humans who treasure and revere them. That is all to say, as Maurice Bloch, Bruce Lincoln and many others have argued, there is nothing special, nothing extraordinary about human behaviors and constructs that claim religious status and authority. They are fundamentally human and so the scholar is engaged in nothing more or less than studying humans across time and place and all their complex existence that includes creating more-than-human beings and realities.⁴

in the Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins Consultation in the Society of Biblical Literature (running from 1995, later becoming the Redescribing Christian Origins Section that is still current) and which resulted in a number of volumes of collected essays, to wit, a theme issue in *MTSR* 8, no. 3 (1996), especially Burton Mack's programmatic essay, Burton L. Mack, "On Redescribing Christian Origins," *MTSR* 8, no. 3 (1996): 247–269, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006896X00350>; and Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller, eds., *Redescribing Christian Origins*, SBL Symposium Series 28 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004); Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller, eds., *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*, Early Christianity and Its Literature 5 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011); Barry S. Crawford and Merrill P. Miller, eds., *Redescribing the Gospel of Mark*, Early Christianity and Its Literature 22 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2017). McCutcheon's work also stands in the sign of redescription, see the essays that more or less bookend his career: Russell McCutcheon, "Redescribing 'Religion' as Social Formation: Toward a Social Theory of Religion," in *What Is Religion?: Origins, Definitions, and Explanations*, ed. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Brian Courtney Wilson, Studies in the History of Religions 81 (Leiden; Boston, MA; Köln: Brill, 1998), 51–72; Russell T. McCutcheon, "Introduction: An Experiment in Redescription," *Relig. Theol.* 25, no. 3–4 (2018): 155–160, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-02503001>; but he is most known for what became labelled as the "Alabama experiment," see his introduction on this in Russell T. McCutcheon, *On Making a Shift in the Study of Religion and Other Essays* (Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2022), 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110721713>, and how he sets out the types of questions this type of scholarship is concerned with, particularly in the "Afterword: Five Examples," in the same volume, 189–203, but in general his many volumes of collected essays (a number edited with contributions from mostly younger scholars), as well as the scholars involved with the Culture on the Edge blog (<https://edge.ua.edu>) from which circle emanates regular publications, such as – for instance – the "Fabricating" volumes in the Working with Culture on the Edge book series and the Culture on the Edge book series, both series published by Equinox Publishers.

4 Braun, *Jesus and the Addiction to Origins*, xi.

This statement characterises the first set of essays in the volume, essays concerned with “Generalities,” or issues of definition and theory. In this preface Braun reiterates (though in different wording) the point made in the introductory essay (“Religion”) in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, situating the “‘life’ of religion within the complex fabric of active interests of people in the real world. ... [the concept religion – GvdH] retrieves not invisible things, but conspicuous *arts de faire* or what we can simply term discourses – a term used most capaciously to include ‘not only verbal, but also the symbolic discourses of spectacle, gesture, costume, edifice, icon, musical performance, and the like.’”⁵ The second set of essays, “Particularities,” then proceeds to retool the study of early Christian literature and discourses into an “anthropocentric study of religion,” that is, treating the case studies as exemplifying the artifactual remains of communicative actions, or to put it differently, as discursive formations doing social, cultural, and ideological work in context. And thus, what is at stake in a study like this is to investigate how “religion” as concept word, as taxonomiser, as “floating signifier” (so Braun) gets filled with referential content in the course of its use in discourse, as well as how religion/s and religious discourses and practices get historicised, that is, disassembled into its/their constituent operations: in the course of redescriptive studies on religion and Christian origins a number of these have regularly featured – mythmaking, invention of tradition, social formation, identity formation, cultural performance and accrual of social and cultural cachet, spatialising practices, materialising practices, to name a few. It is this double act – historicising the concept “religion” as well as the constituent operations of religion-making – that connect the work of Braun and McCutcheon.

In the course of a long and productive publishing career, from the first monograph (*Manufacturing Religion*) to the latest (*Dialogues on Religion – and its Study: A Critical Edition*)⁶ Russell McCutcheon has engaged in intensive – and often contentious – debates on how “religion” is signified on all levels, from folk use of the concept to scholarly theorising on religion, how “religion” is used to

5 Willi Braun, “Religion,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London; New York, NY: Cassell, 2000), 11. The essay is republished in *Jesus and the Addiction to Origins* as “Religion: A Guide” (3–16). In this essay he repeatedly uses the phrase *arts de faire*, which derives from Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley; Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2002), denoting ordinary, mundane practices, human ways of doing things. The last part of the citation comes from Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4.

6 Russell T. McCutcheon, *Dialogues on Religion – and Its Study: A Critical Edition* (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003331520>.

do social-definition and ideology-authorising work. Describing his own work as an “ethnography of scholarship” McCutcheon is intensely interested in the way “religion” functions as collective noun, or as a concept word that works as taxonomiser, that is, as classificatory tool to assemble (according to obtaining theoretical frameworks, invested ideologies, and the interests and pressures of social, historical contingencies) ranges of practices; discourses – and pragmatics and contexts of discourses; and theories, etc., into this container category.⁷ In the study of religion this has become a site of intense contestation.⁸ The literature is too exhaustive to comprehensively document here, hence only a very few remarks, but it bears pointing out that similar arguments have been made elsewhere – and have equally generated much animus. For example, Brent Nongbri’s *Before Religion* provides a full history of the emergence of the concept “religion” since the onset of the era of European colonisations of the New World (following on from Jonathan Z. Smith’s famous essay “Religion, Religions, Religious”), arguing that “‘religion’ as a sphere of life ideally separated from politics, economics, and science is not a universal feature of human history. ... rather, the act of distinguishing between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ is a recent development.”⁹ Similarly, Daniel Boyarin and Carlin Barton in *Imagine*

7 The classic *bête noire* in this regard is the (in)famous phrasing by Jonathan Z. Smith, “... *there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization,” Jonathan Z. Smith, “Introduction,” in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi, see further below. For an example of the critical (and negative) reception of McCutcheon’s work (and this type of approach in general), see Nickolas P. Roubekas, “Review of *A Modest Proposal on Method: Essaying the Study of Religion*, by Russell T. McCutcheon,” *Relig. Theol.* 22, no. 3–4 (2015): 385–390, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-02203006>.

8 For an overview of the debates on how religion is defined and how such definitions shape the practice of the study of religion, as the state of debate at the time (2017), see Gerhard van den Heever, “Beyond the Insider: Outsider Perspective – The Study of Religion as a Study of Discourse Construction,” in *Religion in Motion. Rethinking Religion, Knowledge and Discourse in a Globalizing World*, ed. Julian Hensold, et al. (Basel: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2020), 141–164, esp. 145–148. See the recent response by Brent Nongbri to accusations by Kevin Shilbrack of being antirealist; Shilbrack argues that religion is a transcultural and transhistorical reality and that those who deny this are antirealists. Since Shilbrack targets Nongbri’s work and especially *Before Religion*, the article challenges some of Shilbrack’s readings of *Before Religion*, Brent Nongbri, “Imagining Science: Ancient Religion, Modern Science, and How We Talk About History,” *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 100, no. 3 (2024): 199–224, <https://doi.org/10.51619/stk.v100i3.26535>.

9 Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2013), 2–3. The Smith essay: Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–284.

No Religion, arguing from Josephus (for Second Temple Judaism) and Tertullian (for second-century Christianity) that while there are numerous words used to reference practices that we would now label “religious,” an abstract concept of religion did not exist. Boyarin extended this argument with his follow-up monograph, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, which gave rise to a partly heated debate in the Marginalia Review of Books.¹⁰

The acrimony surrounding this kind of historicising of the concept “religion” arises from the misreadings and misinterpretations of Jonathan Z. Smith’s famous, much cited, though mostly misunderstood statement that “... *there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.” One should read the *whole* first paragraph of the “Introduction” to *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*:

If we have understood the archeological and textual record correctly, man [*sic*] has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion. That is to say, *while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious – there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary: expertise, his foremost object of study.¹¹

Note that Smith *does not say* that there are no data (and neither does McCutcheon nor Nongbri nor Boyarin and Barton, something they have at times been accused of) – *there is a staggering amount of phenomena that ...*

10 Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016); Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, Key Words in Jewish Studies (New Brunswick, NJ; London: Rutgers University Press, 2018). I commented on the Marginalia debate in Gerhard van den Heever, “Revisiting the Death/s of Religions,” *Relig. Theol.* 29, no. 1–2 (2022): 151, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10038>. The book review forum can be found here: <https://www.marginaliareviewofbooks.com/post/daniel-boyarin-s-judaism-a-forum>.

11 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi, my emphasis.

and here is the important twist ... in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, might be called religious, but that there is no universal, transcendent, transhistorical essence called “religion” (or the “sacred” or the “holy” or the “numinous”) that at times irrupts into human history – there is no thing behind the word. Hence, the emphasis on putting the study of religion squarely within the frame of the politics of scholarship (or as McCutcheon phrases it: the “ethnography of scholarly practice”) but also calling into question the distinction between primary and secondary sources, primary sources are what they are only through the secondary study of them, and that this being the case, the study of secondary sources (as the reception sites where primary source data are *manufactured into this or that*) is the proprium of the study of religion. Both these aspects run as a golden line through McCutcheon’s work. In fact, the study of religion is the study of the history of the study of religion, which kind of envisioning scholarship is most clearly displayed in the co-written volumes, *Religion in 50 Words: A Critical Vocabulary*, and *Religion in 50 More Words: A Redescriptive Vocabulary*, where the critical terms for religious studies are shown to still encode their historical contexts of use.¹² Hence, the redescriptive study of the critical terminologies still structuring the field of religious studies as its conceptual matrices is the pathway into any productive meaning-making of what it is we study. Ergo, an archaeological dig through the history of disciplines and fields of study with their structuring vocabularies and conceptualities is core to the study of religion in general and what is implied to be the purpose of this theme issue. That is what it means to historicise the discourse of a field of study, i.e., to “study the fabrication processes” as opposed to “studying the fabrications.”¹³

McCutcheon’s work abounds in examples of how he unpacks his agenda of the “disassembling” of religion, but I will stick to two more recent citations:

My initial hope is that they capture, one last time, some of what can be gained from studying whatever it is that we define as religion as a mundane (but nonetheless interesting, for any number of good reasons) aspect of everyday culture and history – an approach that resists the urge to reserve a special, undefined something that eludes our critical exami-

12 Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 Words: A Critical Vocabulary* (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022); Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 More Words: A Redescriptive Vocabulary* (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022).

13 Russell T. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common e.g.* (Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2018), 14, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110560831>.

nation. But also, I hope that they inspire readers to do a little comparative work of their own, looking initially for a few manageable and familiar instances, as exemplified above, that, after a little digging and some creative thinking, can be shown to contain features also found in the claims, practices, or institutions that are regularly found in the seemingly set apart things that usually make their way into the scholar of religion's writings and classes.¹⁴

Responding to caricatures of his work,¹⁵ McCutcheon has this to say:

But for those willing to see our work, as scholars of religion, as being *but one component of wider, cross-disciplinary studies of how people signify their worlds* – and here we return to the two-fold effects so nicely named in this notion of fabrication – then my proposal may be curious and worth considering. For the challenge of the approach that I outline is to be able to entertain that the rhetoric of specialness is itself rather mundane but effective and thus interesting nonetheless.¹⁶

Announced in this last citation is a further implication of McCutcheon's work, namely, that the study of "religion" across all the sites where it is posited, claimed, and discoursed, serves as example of normal human performances and ways of signifying their worlds – the study of religion serves as the "e.g.," the "for example." For this reason, McCutcheon could characterise the essays in a theme issue titled "Studying Religion in Culture: Experiments in Redescription," as studying religion – "*but not really*."¹⁷ What the essays in this theme issue do, is teasing out and illuminating those conceptual processes that constitute the bedrock for theory formation in the broader field of humanistic studies, including the study of what we would conventionally label as "religion." This allows for historicising the concept "religion," but also allows for seeing the processes that construct the concept as well as the "phenomenon" as normal cognitive and conceptual "events" that characterise ordinary history-making on the ground in a multitude of (often contested) social contexts. Thus, what was

14 McCutcheon, *On Making a Shift*, 203.

15 McCutcheon has been variously called deconstructionist, reductionist, and nominalist (the latter because his work is seen as only concerned with the word "religion"), none of which is applicable to his writing.

16 McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion*, 7, my emphasis.

17 McCutcheon, "Introduction," 157.

at stake was the foundation for a conceptual architecture of the study of religion, such that what comes in view are normal processes of culture-making, identity performance, discourse, and all of these with a view to the broader conversation that is the human sciences. Or as McCutcheon interprets the essays of Willi Braun in *Jesus and the Addiction to Origins*:

[M]ost of which are on topics in the study of early Christianity but, come to think of it, none of which are solely or even mainly on that topic; instead, at least as I read them, each invites the reader to consider an e.g., sometimes in depth and in detail, as a way to think through a problem that we also see elsewhere in the field, usually a problem in method or a problem in theory – *how* we do what we do and *why* we do it in the first place. For nothing considered here is self-evidently important; rather, its importance always derives from the relationships in which we place whatever it is that we're studying, the specific questions that it helps us to answer, and the general things that we learn that can be applied elsewhere.¹⁸

This two-part theme issue of *Religion & Theology* opens a door to performing this double act of historicising the concept “religion” as well as the constituent operations of religion-making.

2 Double Acting: Historicising “Religion” and the Operations of Religion-Making

The first two essays of the theme issue introduced the double act of historicising the concept “religion” as well as the operations of religion-making. In looking back on “Three Decades of *Manufacturing Religion*,” Russell McCutcheon emphasises the enduring relevance of paying attention to matters of classification and definition in the study of religion.¹⁹ The article highlights how the institutionalisation and operationalisation of understandings of “religion” have social effects, and thus, that the study of religion investigates nothing transcendental or *sui generis*, but rather ordinary human social actions and events scholars manufacture their objects of study. Using the 2012 “Nones of the Rise” Pew Research Center Report as example, McCutcheon demonstrates how scholars manufacture their objects of study. McCutcheon reiterates his

18 “Editor’s Foreword,” in Braun, *Jesus and the Addiction to Origins*, viii–ix.

19 Russell T. McCutcheon, “Three Decades of *Manufacturing Religion*,” *Relig. Theol.* 31, no. 1–2 (2024): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10070>.

long-standing focus in his academic work, ever since his published doctoral dissertation (*Manufacturing Religion*, 1997), on the specific ways that this word “religion” is often defined by scholars, especially those in the still dominant hermeneutical tradition in the field of the study of religion – seeing religion as unique, set apart in some regard from all other aspects of social life, and thus something that cannot be explained but, instead, only interpreted (even appreciated) for its deep meaning and therefore abiding significance.²⁰ In the course of his academic career and numerous publications, McCutcheon has shown little interest in studying religion itself, and much more interested in religion as a discursive formation. In his words:

[C]ontrary to claims often made about it [McCutcheon’s published work – GvdH], I do not deny that religion is, or better put, *becomes* a force in the world, since the discourse on religion, operationalized in a variety of ways and settings, has ensured that “religion,” “faith,” “spirituality,” etc., have been very useful tools for classifying and then organizing and, yes, ranking certain sorts of human behaviors, thereby creating the impression of distinct and timeless meanings and identities. ...

McCutcheon demonstrates time and again how socially and politically useful the concept “religion” is, even if undefined or only vaguely defined, to wide assortments of social actors, including scholars of religion – “practical implications attend the sorts of names that scholars and others give to various acts, persons, and situations.” Hence, defining religion or working with an uncritical, assumed folk understanding of religion is not innocent.

Willi Braun makes a passionate plea for a critical historiography in his essay, “The Oldest Past of Christianity: Dead or Alive?”²¹ Braun argues that just as religion is manufactured or invented, so is tradition and history. He argues his point by gesturing to the contemporary very popular genre of histories-as-invented: invention of tradition, nature, time ... to which can be added, Scotland, Africa, religion, monasticism, sacred tradition, world religions, Judaism, the biblical scholar, culture, folklore, deconstruction, and prehistory.²² The point? We are

20 See Aaron W. Hughes and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *What Is Religion?: Debating the Academic Study of Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021) for continuing recent debates on defining religion and how the field of religious studies is still structured around these definitional questionings.

21 Willi Braun, “The Oldest Past of Christianity: Dead or Alive?,” *Relig. Theol.* 31, no. 1–2 (2024): 11–28, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10071>.

22 Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Past and Present

immersed in and surrounded by discursive formations: realities, especially complex realities as they are imbued with meaning, do not lie in our path like stones to trip over, they are manufactured products of discourse. The past, or history, is one more such a discursive formation, one might even say, discursive artifact to emphasise its artifactuality. This starting point is worked out with reference to history as a discursive construction, the past as fictioned in the present. The past does not exist independently of historical practice.²³ As the members of the Wild On Collective put it:

Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Jan Willem van Henten and Anton W.J. Houtepen, eds., *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition: Papers Read at a NOSTER Conference in Soesterberg, January 4–6, 1999*, Studies in Theology and Religion 3 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Invention of Religions*, trans. Martha Cunningham (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2019); Daniel F. Caner, “Not of This World: The Invention of Monasticism,” in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Oxford; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2009), 588–600, <https://doi.org/10.1111/b.9781405119801.2009.00047.x>; John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul*, Taubman Lectures in Jewish Studies (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Mark Currie, *The Invention of Deconstruction* (Basingstoke; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Stefanos Geroulanos, *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession with Human Origins* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing, 2024); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011); James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, eds., *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007); V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, African Systems of Thought (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988); nonfictioness, “The ‘Invention’ of Folklore in the Nineteenth Century,” *Nonfictioness*, 6 June 2019, <https://nonfictioness.com/folklore/the-invention-of-folklore-in-the-nineteenth-century/>; Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2009); Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, revised and expanded. (Chicago, Ill./London: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

- 23 See for instance the recent work in critical historiography, John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 5th ed. (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2009); Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2006); Alun Munslow, ed., *Authoring the Past: Writing and Rethinking History* (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2012); Alun Munslow, *A History of History* (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2012); the entries “Constructionist History,” and “Representation” in Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2000); Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder, “Theses on Theory and History,” *#TheoryRevolt*, May 2018, <http://theoryrevolt.com>; Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder, “From the Authors of the ‘Theses on Theory and History,’” *In the Moment*, 10 July 2018, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2018/07/10/from-the-authors-of-the-theses-on-theory-and-history/>.

Critical history recognizes all “facts” as always already mediated, categories as social, and concepts as historical; theory is worldly and concepts do worldly work. ... This then forces them to confront the way that what constitute the “facts” in an historical argument are bound up with the social conditions, the circumstances of the historian, and the range of acceptable questions asked of the past at any given moment in time.²⁴

History is a tool for ideological persuasion and ideological criticism in the chaotic, disputed and contested present. This understanding of historiography should inform and shape the scholarly discourse on Christian origins, highlighting the performativity or mythic character of conventional reconstructions of the historical Jesus and the formation of early Christianity, in which sacred apologetic texts are employed as ethnographic sources. What is called for is to take leave of the “stance of the faithful,” and to reorient the study of the history of Christian origins away from a “protectionist *doxa*” towards a critical historiography that understands early Christian history as invented or manufactured.²⁵

What the project of a reimagined critical historiography and the formation history of early Christianity can look like, can be seen in recent work by Markus Vinzent, in which he inverts our conventional views of the *unfolding*, one can say, progressive revelation, of the Christian tradition in its literary artifacts from the first century onwards, by locating all the literary production of what we now call the New Testament in the second century.²⁶ And this as a result of the work

24 Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder, “Theses” (thesis III.4). See also Gerhard van den Heever, “Travelling Theories,” *Religion and Theology* 29, no. 3–4 (2022): 175–194, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-02903001>, for how historiography is embedded in and arises from social conditions and existential exigencies of the historian.

25 For the use of the phrase “protectionist *doxa*” see Stephen L. Young, “‘Let’s Take the Text Seriously’: The Protectionist *Doxa* of Mainstream New Testament Studies,” *MTSR* 32, no. 4–5 (2019): 328–361, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341469>. For how reconceptualising history and historiography can alter how we conceive of the history of Christianisation of the Roman world, see Gerhard van den Heever, “Twilights of Greek and Roman Religions: Afterlives and Transformations – A Response,” *J. Early Christ. Hist.* 10, no. 2 (2020): 108–142, esp. 109–120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2021.1928526>.

26 Markus Vinzent, *Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108647052>; Markus Vinzent, *Resetting the Origins of Christianity: A New Theory of Sources and Beginnings* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009290470>; Markus Vinzent, *Christ’s Torah: The Making of the New Testament in the Second Century* (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003378303>. See also his contribution, “Two Bricks of History Turned Upside Down –

of the shipowner-would-be-bishop in Rome, Marcion of Sinope. As I made the point elsewhere:²⁷ Markus Vinzent repeatedly insists on viewing the career of Marcion as the inception point of Christian written tradition-making. All the evidence we have for proto-collections of writings (principally a “Pauline” ten-letter collection, and the one gospel of Marcion – the *Apostolikon* and the *Evangelikon*) comes from the time of Marcion (late 130s to late 140s teaching in Rome) – “we have no written evidence of descriptions of Jesus’s life dating from before Marcion’s time to which he could have referred”;²⁸ Marcion being also the first to call the proto-collection the “New Testament” and for a long time the only person to do so. All the authors explicitly referring to and interacting with Marcion’s “canon” – e.g., Polycarp of Smyrna, Irenaeus of Lyon, Dionysius of Corinth of the second century, and Tertullian in the early third century²⁹ – as a group testify to the central importance of what emerged in the literary activity of Marcion. To make matters even more intriguing, Marcion himself decries the fact that others have plagiarised his Gospel and published new versions of Jesus’s life under “their” names but in the process also changed the contents, meaning, and direction of what the gospel narrative should be (as he complains in his *Antitheses*).³⁰

Vinzent’s is essentially a critical historiography that takes seriously the material artifactuality of what is believed to be the “manifestation” of the “unfolding” Christian tradition in its discourse formation. It is also a history that fully

Facts and Evidence,” in the volume Julia Seeberger, Sabine Schmolinsky, and Markus Vinzent, eds., *Beyond the Timeline: Resetting Historiography*, SpatioTemporality/Raum-Zeitlichkeit 16 (Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1515/978311157610>.

27 In a forthcoming publication, “The Gospel of John and Civic Space,” in John S. Kloppenborg, ed., *Early Christianity in Civic Space*.

28 Vinzent, *Christ’s Torah*, 74.

29 I mention only a few. The list is long, it reads almost like a “‘who’s who’ of second- and third-century Christian history. If, as present scholarship tends to think, Marcion produced hardly anything and the collection of the New Testament that he put together was nothing but an assemblage of older and existing texts in which ‘he did not alter anything,’ how and why did he become the target of interest and criticism for generations of Christian teachers and writers, while the text that he was supposed to only use and derive his theology from remained unnamed and unblamed?,” Vinzent, *Christ’s Torah*, 38. To note is the fact that, of all these authors – from the Apostolic Fathers right through to Eusebius, the other early historians, and beyond – we have none of the original manuscripts, and they all have complex manuscript histories, which as Vinzent demonstrates, show extensive editorial histories. The material evidence for writings and debates appears only later, sometimes much later, than the events and debates referenced, and then in highly edited and emended versions in transmissions of veritable instability.

30 Vinzent, *Christ’s Torah*, 43, the reference to Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* IV.4.2.

upends a history of Christianity that is nothing more than a faith restatement of the linear historical progression of the making of Christianity, what is also called the Big Bang theory of Christian origins, or the Luke/Acts–Eusebius picture of the formation of Christianity.

3 Materialities of Identity-Making

Nycholas Oliveira, Robert Edwards, and Alessandro Lagioia provide examples of the materialities of invention of tradition and identity-making.³¹ Oliveira problematises the unproblematic view of the early textual tradition of Christianity as a uniquely revelatory medium evidencing an early homogeneous (proto-orthodox) community. In this instance, he considers P72 (the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex, one of the Bodmer papyrus codices), a manuscript that contains an unexpectedly strange mix of texts that defies easy characterisation as Christian collection.³² What the manuscript does do, is open a window on to the complexities of social formations in fourth-century CE Egypt, suggesting that the manuscript evidences ways in which Egyptian Christians navigated their complex social contexts and socio-cultural realities. (That the Bodmer papyrus codices are spread over numerous holding institutions testifies to the problematic nature of the acquisition of such manuscripts, exacerbating problems regarding recognition of provenance, which in turn means that it is often impossible to say anything with certainty about the social work performed by the texts in their settings of origins.)

Robert Edwards directs the attention to the formation of tradition through the construction of authorities to serve as beacons in the formation of what has come to be known as orthodox tradition. It was not an automatic, instan-

31 Nycholas L.D. Oliveira, "Manuscript Mystique: P72 a Canon of Petrine Authority for a Proto-Orthodox 'Community?'," *Relig. Theol.* 31, no. 1–2 (2024): 29–56, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bj100072>; Robert G.T. Edwards, "Canon Lists of Church Fathers in Early Christianity," *Relig. Theol.* 31, no. 1–2 (2024): 57–76, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bj100069>; and Alessandro Lagioia, "The Bull, the Cave and the Angel: A Widely Circulating Hagiographical Text (BHL 5948)," *Relig. Theol.* 31, no. 1–2 (2024): 77–91, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bj100075>.

32 It comprises the following writings in order: The Protoevangelium of James (Nativity of Mary), a correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians (3 Corinthians), the 11th Ode of Solomon, Jude, Melito's Homily on the Passion, a hymn fragment, the Apology of Phileas, Psalms 33–34 (lxx), and 1–2 Peter. The BMC forms part of a larger collection, known as the Bodmer Papyri, which is a heterogeneous library of manuscripts that contains both Christian and classical Greek literature.

taneous process – it evolved over centuries, and exhibited variations in recognised authorities.³³ As Edwards puts it: Although not as common as biblical canon lists, these lists of church fathers attempt to vest ecclesiastical authority in the figures listed. In fact, various authorising list-making did service in this period – the eventual established canon of Scripture is just one such project in Late Antiquity and should be understood as one aspect of the growing imperialisation of Christian tradition into a parallel state. There were two overarching strategies for listing church fathers, namely, linking individual fathers' authority to their involvement in authoritative church councils, and compiling lists of names that were meant to be representative of the church's antiquity and catholicity. Inventing tradition and authorising past went hand in hand. The result was to vest divine sanction and revelatory presence in the councils and their canons: the big ecumenical councils were seen to be peculiarly sacred, and after the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), the idea developed that its decisions could not be reformed, and it was assumed, rather than formally stated, that ecumenical councils, once recognised to be such, could not err. The Council of Nicaea was regarded as an especially sacred council.

In the context of the growth in hagiographic traditions in Late Antiquity, the complex text known as the *Liber de apparitione Sancti Michaelis in Monte Gargano* (an eighth-century text preserving a much older account of a miraculous apparition) formed the basis for the foundation history of the oldest sanctuary of Saint Michael the Archangel in Western Europe, located in the current town of Monte Sant'Angelo in the province of Foggia (Puglia, Italy). An enigmatic text, mystifying the historical contexts obtaining pertaining to the origins of the angelic apparition and the foundation of the cult, nevertheless it can be pointed out that the cult of St. Michael the Archangel played a role as symbol of protector and deliverer of the local communities against their enemies. After the Lombards took control of the Gargano, the cult and its symbols were incorporated into their royal ideology. One may be adventurous and imagine – play with the idea – that the foundation of the cult of St. Michael the Archangel says something important about the formation of Christian tradition: of the earliest “revelatory events” on which Christianity grew, all are equally lost in the mists of history, and the textual evidences and textual traditions are, like those of the cult of St. Michael, equally late, with little or, at least, problematic relationships to the “founding events.” What matters, in the

33 The essay of Edwards should be read in conjunction with an essay previously published in this same journal traversing the same ground, Robert D. Heaton, “Toward the New Testament Canon as Fourth-Century Invention: The Scriptural List of Athanasius and Its Reverberations,” *Relig. Theol.* 30, no. 1–2 (2023): 30–54, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10049>.

final analysis, is not the putative founding event or apparition, but the culturing and institutionalisation of cult practices and traditions into lived religion and identity performances. Cult can exist even if its founding may be considered (or known to be) fictional. And thus, a word on history and cult foundation: during the building of the Bramante façade of the St. Peter's Basilica in 1617, wooden relics were found that were believed to be fragments of the True Cross. In honour of the event Claudio Monteverdi wrote a moving five-part motet. Probably nobody now believes that these were relics of the True Cross – the relics probably don't even exist anymore if they ever did. The motet, though, has been preserved and is performed regularly. "The historical belief which was the occasion of its composition is now discredited, yet the music is no less delightful, nor at all diminished in quality or value."³⁴ Historicity and historical veracity are not necessary conditions for the existence, functioning, meaningfulness, and longevity of cults.

4 Plausible Conditions, Social Cachet, and the Gospel Writers in Their World

According to John S. Kloppenborg, Christ assemblies were early adopters of bookish practices – preserving and creating knowledge derived from books, at first the Jewish Scriptures and then their own writings, forming textual communities. The bookish practices of early Christ groups may have had special appeal to the literate elite, who treated the possession and use of reading materials as a marker of elite culture.³⁵ Inheriting the practice from antecedent Jewish custom, Christ-cult groups and associations were heavily invested in letter writing, communication exchanges, and network establishment in service of providing mutual support and advice (going by a range of descriptors: exhortation, paraenesis, scriptural exegesis, and theological exposition), that is, in service of social formation-and-maintenance, and identity-making-and-maintenance.³⁶ In this

34 Stewart Sutherland, "History, Truth, and Narrative," in *The Bible as Rhetoric: Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility*, ed. Martin Warner, Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 106.

35 John S. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2019), xiii.

36 Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Library of Early Christianity 5 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986); Cavan W. Concannon, *Assembling Early Christianity: Trade, Networks, and the Letters of Dionysios of Corinth* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108155373>; Thomas Johann Bauer, "Letter Writing in Antiquity and Early Christianity," in *A Compan-*

material context, textual practices constituted the site for the display of wealth, status, and virtue in the fiercely competitive social scene of the High Roman Empire.³⁷ Gospel writers and Gospel composition-and-publication processes should, in light of the plausible conditions of literary production under which Christian writers also laboured, be understood as of a kind with elite literary production (even if one situates the Gospel writers in the range of non-elite cultural producers).³⁸ In her essay, Robyn Walsh sets out in more material terms the making of Christian discourse, and in very concrete details surmises the construction of Christian textual tradition (focusing on Gospel writing) not as Christ assembly or ecclesial projects, that is, as if they somehow arose from, or were collectively composed in communal settings (as conventional understandings of the composition of book-length Christian writings like the Gospels still imagine the process to be situated) – they were elite projects.³⁹ The way in which the Gospels emerged as artifactual byproducts in the course of strident debates in the second century, suggests that the Gospels should not be considered as community texts or sermons produced for the consumption of association-like cult groups. It makes a world of difference to situate the production of the Gospels (not only the canonical Gospels but also the apocryphal gospels and acts) within the context of the broader industry of book production. But this is precisely where the making of written book-length Jesus traditions or novelistic fictions should be imagined concretely, as in the same social context where would-be intellectual *arrivistes* or *nouveau riches* in search of social and cultural capital as the first proponents of Stoic philosophy in the very snobbish literate culture of aristocratic Roman imperial society were to be located.

ion to Byzantine Epistolography, ed. Alexander Riehle, Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World 7 (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2020), 33–67, esp. 46–52 (“Early Christian Letters”), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004424616_003: “The Roman imperial period was the golden age of the letter – literary and non-literary alike – among the Greeks and Romans. Early Christianity also participated in this literary heyday: the movement itself actually developed through letter-writers, generating both real letters and literary epistles. Functions of letters in (early) Christianity included religious and moral instruction, theological propaganda, pastoral care and counseling, and the exercise of (official) authority within church leadership” (46).

- 37 Jeremiah Coogan, “Meddling with the Gospel: Celsus, Early Christian Textuality, and the Politics of Reading,” *NovT* 65, no. 3 (2023): 402–403, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685365-bja10044>, referencing W.A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 38 Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*.
- 39 Robyn Faith Walsh, “*Helluari Libris*: On Stoicism, Distinction, and Early Christianity,” *Relig. Theol.* 31, no. 3–4 (2024), in this issue, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10077>.

Through an erudite exposition of book and literate culture in the early Roman Empire, and especially the reception of Stoic philosophy, Walsh traces the search for, attainment, and maintenance of social capital and status. It is particularly the reception of Stoicism, seen as low status, low class philosophy that makes it such an apt comparandum for the emergence of early Christian book culture as located within a class of aspiring would-be elite authors and striving intellectuals. She focuses on the concrete material aspects of this culture formation, and thereby provides a whole new way of conceptualising the emergence of Christianity as a literary phenomenon and written tradition, and a whole new way of thinking about the origins of the Gospels as books. Framing the concrete making of written early Christian Jesus traditions in terms of Bourdieu's concept of the attainment of distinction and social capital, Walsh shows how shared values (and relying on similar/the same social "resources") not just explains but effectively aids understanding the Jesus movements as not just primarily concerned with faith, inspirations and visions, but as actual human beings not above language and culture, not infatuated with normativity or Christology but as actual subjects concerned with making their way in elite Roman society. It is a proper redescriptive investigation, dismantling Romantic notions of how religious movements originate, connect, and grow. The importance of "bookishness" in early Christianity is shown to have facilitated not only differentiation, but also distinction (as cultural currency), especially to those who were reputationally or functionally on the margins of society. This is a much more "properly" historical interpretation than just reclaiming "truth," "real" belief, and "divine interventions" as the drivers of the growth of Christianity. In this, Robyn Walsh redirects our imagination of the historical growth of early Christianity.

5 Stealing, Collecting, Editing, Printing ... and the Remaking of a Tradition

While tradition-making and invention of tradition within Christianity were the topic in the earlier essays by Lagioia and Edwards, the focus shifts to the remaking of Islamic tradition in Auwais Rafudeen's contribution, "On Sensibilities and Shamsy's 'Rediscovering': Beyond the Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition."⁴⁰ Following Ahmed El Shamsy,⁴¹ Rafudeen traces how the

40 Auwais Rafudeen, "On Sensibilities and Shamsy's 'Rediscovering': Beyond the Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition," *Relig. Theol.* 31, no. 3–4 (2024), in this issue.

41 Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020).

collection, printing, and editing of Islamic texts transformed the intellectual heritage of Islam. The history of the transformation of Islamic heritage in the nineteenth century is the history of the rise of print culture in the Arab world, particularly in an Egyptian context, and, even more tellingly, throws light on how Muslim reformers used this culture to reintroduce long forgotten classical Islamic works – a process which they deemed crucial in view of what they felt was a very problematic postclassical status quo and through which they substantially transformed the then hegemonic intellectual tradition. What is often overlooked, and this is a result of conventional silo-ised studies of history, is that this process occurred at the same time as similar changes resulted in a redefinition of Christianity in Europe. There is thus a broader implication that begs comparative theorising. Almost contemporaneous to the historical processes El Shamsy describes, a similar development took place in the Christian West – since the Renaissance, but especially since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the race to collect ancient Christian manuscripts (often through similar processes of division of manuscripts, illegal sales and acquisitions as El Shamsy describes), to collate and making critical editions took a similar form as in the Islamic world.⁴² It was a world in which European scholars traversed the Middle East in proper Indiana Jones fashion to obtain, buy, hoodwink into parting with manuscripts, and sometimes just steal manuscripts in order to build collections of the earliest textual traditions of Christianity. Although patristic texts had been known before, all the big series of early Christian texts (Greek, Latin, Coptic, Syriac, from the second century through the early Middle Ages) came into being in this period as the desire for critical editions took hold. And it had a similar effect as with the rediscovering of the classics in Islam: the explosion in the availability of other texts (critical editions or more popular translations) like Old and New Testament apocrypha, pre-canonical versions of texts that later became canonical (including the Dead Sea Scrolls with respect to the Old Testament; many unknown gospel fragments or divergent versions of known Gospels), the collection known as the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Coptic Gnostic library, early Christian literature encompassing a wide range of texts from the

42 See, for example, the often destructive and illegal manner in which manuscripts were obtained, and the problematic manner in which the editing and publication processes proceeded, Roberta Mazza, *Stolen Fragments: Black Markets, Bad Faith, and the Illicit Trade in Ancient Artefacts* (Stanford, CA: Redwood Press, 2024). See also Brent Nongbri, *God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2018) for the often haphazard manner in which the ancient Christian codices were bound and how little one can actually say about the original provenance of the constituent documents of such bound collections.

Apostolic Fathers to church fathers, all these almost completely redrew the contours of how one should now conceive of Christian origins, the formation of early Christian tradition, and the social histories of early Christian cult groups and movements (in fact: it puts in question what Christianity *is*); not to speak of how early Christians related to their Graeco-Roman context and religious heritage and continued to be bound (more or less) to their Jewish heritage. The significance of this history lies in the way in which the rediscovery of the heritage of the tradition funded renewed valuation of tradition, a process that led to the *ressourcement* that was one of the mainstays of the big renewal process in Catholic theology (the *nouvelle théologie*) that led to the Second Vatican Council.

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