

2-4-2001

Who Owns Tradition? Religion and the Messiness of History

Catherine Bell

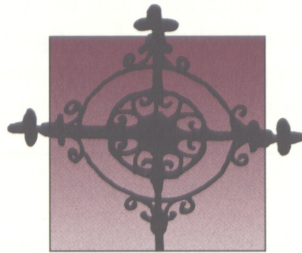
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/sc_lectures

Recommended Citation

Bell, Catherine, "Who Owns Tradition? Religion and the Messiness of History" (2001). *Santa Clara Lectures*. 24.
https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/sc_lectures/24

This Lecture is brought to you for free and open access by the Lectures at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Santa Clara Lectures by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

The Santa Clara Lectures



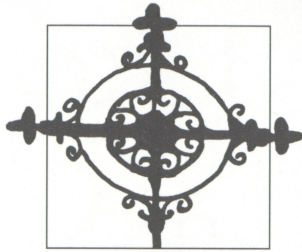
“Who Owns Tradition?
Religion and the Messiness
of History”

Catherine Bell

Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Santa Clara University

Public Lecture
Santa Clara Lecture
Santa Clara University
February 4, 2001

Vol. 7 No. 2



In 1994, through the generosity of the Bannan Institute for Jesuit Education and Christian Values, the Department of Religious Studies of Santa Clara University inaugurated the Santa Clara Lectures. This series brings to campus leading scholars in theology, offering the University community and the general public an ongoing exposure to debate on the most significant issues of our times. Santa Clara University will publish these lectures and distribute them throughout the United States and internationally.

The Bannan Institute for Jesuit Education and Christian Values
408-551-1951
408-554-7175 FAX
<http://www.scu.edu/BannanInstitute/>

Dear readers:

This lecture is printed in black ink to facilitate duplication for personal or classroom use.

Previous Lecturers

John Meier
Denise Carmody
Margaret Farley
David O'Brien
Francis X. Clooney, S.J.
Mary Jo Weaver
Ron Hansen
Pierre DuMaine
Phyllis Tribble
M. Shawn Copeland
John R. Donahue, S.J.
Bill Cain
Elizabeth A. Johnson
Klaus J. Porzig, M.D.
David Hollenbach, S.J.
Joseph Daoust, S.J.
Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M.
Robert E. Kennedy, S.J.
Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.

Santa Clara Lecture

Santa Clara University, Feb. 4, 2001

WHO OWNS TRADITION? RELIGION AND THE MESSINESS OF HISTORY

Catherine Bell

Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Santa Clara University

I. Introducing the Problem

The question of “who owns a tradition” is not a new one, but it is being debated today more clearly and more widely than ever before. It asks who gets to define a tradition, who speaks for it, whose interpretation is authoritative and, quite practically, whose books to read about it. Who defines “the Catholic tradition,” for example? Those who see it as a unique revelation transcending time or those who would point to the histories of many church institutions over the last two thousand years? Likewise, who is the authority on what constitutes “Buddhism”? Who should be the one to inventory what is most central to Hinduism, or provide the “real” history of Islam?¹ And with all these questions, are we asking whose definition is more correct, more legitimate or, perhaps, simply more dominant?²

Answers to the question “who speaks for a tradition” depend in great measure on particular orientations to history. I want to explore this question by focusing on three groups who, in their own ways, claim to speak for tradition. First, there are the scholarly types who more or less objectively chart a tradition as a more or less coherent entity over time. Second, there are the religious leaders, those with authoritative voices in religious institutions, who formulate what the religion is, its key events in the past, and appropriate attitudes and experiences in the present. And finally, there are the practitioners, the communities of people who are the current bearers of a tapestry of beliefs, ritual practices, popular notions, and shifting attitudes—all appropriated in ways that accommodate and shape their cultural worlds. These are not mutually exclusive categories of course, yet arguably any one person is apt, I think, to emphasize one of these roles over the others. In my comments tonight, I will try to do justice to all three orientations, but it should be no secret that I am more the scholar than the religious leader or practitioner.

If my question—who owns tradition—seems new to you, let me sketch out for you a scenario in which the question becomes very concrete. It may strike a chord of familiarity.

For almost two decades, I have taught a fairly wide variety of courses, but I find myself in a very similar position in almost all of them. Whether it is a class discussing the history of Christian scriptures or Japanese Shinto, I have to decide whose history to present. Next quarter I am teaching my course on Buddhism, and once again I have to decide on the textbooks and assignments, all of which involve decisions on “whose history”. Do I present the views of Euro-American scholars who can have very definite opinions on what constitutes Buddhism, even arguing that no such single, continuous tradition actually exists? Do I present the authoritative voices of the tradition itself, as in revered scriptures or the teachings of someone like the Dalai Lama—although which scriptures and leaders I choose will make a difference in what the class understands as Buddhism. Or do I present the current tradition as practiced by lay Buddhists today, what you will find “on the ground” so to speak and what you need to know to make sense of a visit to a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka, Dharamsala, Kyoto, or our own Bay Area neighborhoods. The practices at such places often seem to have little to do with what authoritative religious leadership or scholarship have to say.

All three groups—scholars, religious leaders, and practitioners—have different takes on what constitutes the tradition. Of course, the most functional solution for the classroom might be to present the question itself and something of all three perspectives. But the deliberate coexistence of multiple views of a tradition is a situation that leaves nothing the same. It is, in itself, full of tensions.

Here is a major tension. Whenever I present the history of Buddhist teachings or institutions, that is, the diversity of scriptures, teachings, and lineages, all of which may be considered Buddhist in the past or present, it can seem like I am trying to poke big holes in the tightly woven fabric of my students’ unconscious assumptions or idealistic expectations.³ And many don’t like it. Few want to hear about centuries of purely oral transmission, sectarian fracture and institutional fission, the late emergence of texts attributed to earlier figures, or rituals to advance one’s material welfare in the here and now. It is not what we like to imagine for Buddhism, or for any religion.⁴ When we come across it, we can feel a bit disappointed. Discussion of these topics seems to deflate the possibility of the truth, or validity, or even the clear identity of Buddhist ideas. We can idealize religion, and then history seems to act as the great despoiler of idealism—and perhaps even faith. Should that be? What is this idealism that we have made so delicate and vulnerable? What is this history that we have

cast so blunt and rough?

As you can imagine, the problem is not specific to Buddhism. Most Catholics do not really want to know the details of the history of the church as an institution. It is a rare group of Catholics that would find the overall history of the papacy anything but disillusioning—and no one wants to be disillusioned. If a scholar or priest or lay person should try to present this history, most Catholics would wonder what he or she is up to. Doing history in this context tends to become part of the wrangling of liberals with conservatives, so pursuit of knowledge of the institution's history ultimately seems politicizing. In the Catholic church, as well as many other traditions, church leaders and scholars often see themselves in opposing camps: for scholars, church leaders are in denial; for church leaders, scholars are suspected of rude attempts at "gotcha."⁵ Practitioners can feel poorly served by both groups.

II. The Scholars

Let me describe what I think scholars are up to. In the 18th century, the writing of history began to recast itself as a formal discipline, self-consciously embracing scientific principles. Like chemistry and physics, it was thought that history could uncover laws and the fundamental causes of things.⁶ History could "explain" how events happened, just as the laws of Newtonian physics could explain the movement of bodies. In this view, there are "facts," objectively knowable, which when organized in an unfolding narrative sequence can describe the causal relationships behind events. Historians may argue over which facts are the important ones, or which conclusions are justified by the facts, but there has been a great deal of consensus on the goal of doing such history. This is the "modern" view of history. It still generates useful and interesting arguments, and remains a basic assumption behind much of what we think and read today.

For example, the last twenty years has seen a very vigorous debate—among a very small group of scholars—over how to date the emergence of Daoism in China. Should we date this tradition from the appearance of its most famous text, the *Daodejing*, long thought to be authored by someone named Laozi about the fifth century BCE? Of course, new archeological discoveries are revealing this text to be several centuries later than that, much more a synthesis of multiple works, and its author, Laozi, a fairly deliberate creation.⁷ We have long tended to date traditions like Daoism from the appearance of a foundational text, perhaps because "the book" is so important in Western religions—and so important to what historians themselves do. But another group of historians has argued that there is no such thing as the religious tradition of

"Daoism" until the establishment of an organized ritual community in Sichuan about the third century CE.⁸ For these scholars it is important that priests in the Daoist lineages found throughout the Chinese-speaking world today invoke the latter definition, although most of our textbooks and all of our popular notions hold on to Laozi as founder.

Writing about the history of Christianity, scholars often present views quite different from those of church leaders and current practitioners. As an example there is the latest in the "quest for the historical Jesus" project. In a series of conferences held over the past decade, dubbed "The Jesus Seminar," a small group of scholars concluded that very few of the statements attributed to Christ in the Gospels were likely to have been spoken by him.⁹ Other scholarly studies debate the social and economic make-up of early Christians communities, or the activities of similar sects of the time, attempting to re-construe the very worldly reasons for Christianity's appearance and spread in its first few centuries.¹⁰

In recent years, however, the modernist assumptions behind how scholars do history have generated what is called the "postmodern critique." This critique argues that the narrative histories assembled by scholars for the last few centuries have not been nearly as objective as they thought. Rather, these histories are shown to have always reflected the cultural and political context of the scholars and served various self-interested concerns—sometimes rather blatantly. So many 19th century histories of Hinduism or African religions were written in ways that justified colonization and even conversion. Some post-modern analyses show that a whole set of interlocking forces can shape our conventional notions of a tradition. For example, when European Enlightenment philosophers first wrote about Chinese Confucianism, they had rather incomplete sources of information, but they also selected what they wanted from them. In particular, figures like Voltaire and Rousseau wanted to trump the European churches and Christian piety of the day by showing that it was possible to have a rational, ethical system with moral power but without superstitious beliefs.¹¹ So postmodern analysts today are showing how early European understandings of Confucianism were thoroughly wedded to the church—state conflicts so important in Europe at the time. The major source used by the Enlightenment philosophers were, of course, the writings of the 16th to 17th century Jesuit mission to China associated with Matteo Ricci. With the hindsight of several centuries, and much more familiarity with Chinese historical literature, we can now readily see how these Jesuit accounts of Confucianism were also shaped by their conscious and unconscious agendas. In particular, some early missionaries argued that real Confucianism was not to be found in the semi-degenerate practices of the day, but in the pure,

ancient texts which, according to Jesuit translations, spoke of a single, absolute God in Heaven—just like Christianity.¹²

Postmodern accounts of the history of Western scholarship on Buddhism are equally revealing of the biases we can carry and the extents to which we can take them. Early Protestant translators were quickly convinced that the Buddhism they encountered in Asia was a corruption of a pure, primitive Buddhism—and they set out to reclaim this lost tradition themselves by explicitly translating texts rather than consulting any living Buddhist teachers.¹³ Indeed, these early scholars particularly noted that the Buddhism of Tibet—with its rituals, images, incense, and hierarchy—perverted the purity of primitive Buddhism just as the Catholic church perverted that of primitive Christianity. Indeed, they tended to see Tibetan religion not as Buddhism at all, but as something they labeled “Lamaism.” From the early 1600s into the 1900s, scholars continued to analyze various Buddhisms through stereotypical contrasts between Reform Protestants and their view of the Roman Catholic Church—that is, rational, non-ritualistic moralism versus devotional, ritually-elaborate authoritarianism. Needless to say, such biases made understanding the historical facts, even finding them, much more difficult.¹⁴

The implications of the postmodern critique are also the subject of debate, of course. Some scholars have argued that the rejection of claims to objectivity can be taken too far, appearing to foreclose even the possibility of objective history. And if all history is subjective, culturally determined, and shaped by self-interested agendas, then anyone’s views—of Christian history or Buddhist history—are just as valid as any other. In that case, what do you say to those who deny the Holocaust, or offer historical rationales for white ownership of the land in South Africa, or cast an early inaccessible Buddhism as Protestant in spirit and later developments as degenerate Romanism? For this reason, scholars today are seriously arguing what to mean by objectivity and facts, and how to understand and counter their own inevitable biases.

While religious leaders tend to see scholars as trying to undermine religion, most modernist and postmodernist scholars today do not see themselves as using history to undermine or threaten a religious tradition. On the contrary, they are very likely to see themselves as champions of the tradition—that is, champions of the “real” tradition, as they define it. In this role, however, they are compelled to challenge all other definitions of tradition—so postmodernists argue with modernists, and scholars argue with the definitions of religious leaders and lay practitioners. But when scholars blithely suggest that religious leaders are in denial over the facts of their institutional history, they too can readily over-simplify. Scholars define “tradition” by looking for the facts of

institutional and ideological continuity over time. But religious leaders are doing something rather different.

III. Religious Leaders

Religious leaders have the task of formulating a religious persuasion based on revelation, unique insight, or a sacred story. In doing so they need to organize things in two ways. On the one hand, they present a body of doctrines and beliefs as a timeless and coherent whole. On the other hand, they take pains to show that this holism is tightly tied to the key sacred events of the past. Indeed, it is by defining a timeless holism tied to the central events of the past that religious leaders formulate an “on-going” religious tradition. In this formulation, historical continuity is not a major emphasis—either for purposes of accuracy or legitimacy. Rather, a living, relevant understanding of tradition is built on the plausibility with which a set of ideas is presented both as a timeless body of “truths” relevant today and as nothing less than “the truth” revealed in the past.

Scholars may fuss about whether Christianity is really any one consistent thing, or whether it is accurate to think of Buddhism or Hinduism as coherent holisms—and in doing this they will find good evidence of the variety and discontinuities of the historical record. But they are not pulling the sheet back to reveal the small man operating the Wizard of Oz. To be a functioning religious tradition, I am arguing, does not require historical continuity, and the lack of it does not invalidate a tradition. For religious leaders, all it requires is the self-conscious link of the here-and-now to the all-important-then-and-there. This is what makes a tradition vital, renewable, the past made in the present where it can shape its world.

It is well-understood by theologians that a religious tradition is generated by fresh formulations that create relevant links to the key events of the past. If there were no innovative interpretations, the events of the first century CE would be locked in time and irrelevant to later ages. Every religion has interpretive strategies to ensure, in effect, a type of “on-going revelation”:¹⁵ through Jewish law, *Torah* continues to provide the main guidelines for orthodox Jewish life today; through theology, the mystery of Christ is still grasped as a dynamic event for Christians today; through the continuous emergence of new sectarian perspectives, the implications of the message of the Buddha are probed to reveal a new recognition of the essential message.

Understanding tradition in this way *does* mean that we are never dealing with a pure and complete message that was gradually compromised by time, trans-

mission, and all-too-human representatives. Of course, religious leaders often underplay the degree of innovation in which they are involved. They can falsely imply that nothing has changed over time, that no interpretation has been necessary. The most dynamic traditions, however, are those that recognize the way they put themselves together—often in the face of discontinuities that can leave scholars perplexed.

Another corollary of this view of religious tradition concerns diversity. Diversity actually feeds the dynamics of a religious tradition, even though this may sound odd. Central ideas are formulated primarily through difference and conflict. Difference and conflict are the natural result of ideas becoming important to more communities. Other ways of interpreting and appropriating will heighten the demand on all sides for clearer positions, tighter holisms, and more plausible links to the revelatory events of the past. While some formulations will become more persuasive, or more dominant, while others more marginal or localized, the stuff of diversity is the raw material *and* the context for the formulation of tradition by religious leaders.

IV. The Practitioners

Practitioners are my third group offering a view of tradition. They are the communities that consider themselves to be Catholics, Presbyterians, Unitarians, Quakers, Pureland Buddhists, or Sunni Muslims, etc. Their definitions of tradition are not usually explicit or official, instead they emerge in a culture of practices, customs, and attitudes.

For practitioners, tradition is incredibly regional, even local. Practitioners are inevitably organized in groups that quickly develop a form of cultural distinctiveness. Each exists just independently enough in their own minds to be able to assume that their way of doing things is perfectly right and natural. Communities that develop a great deal of interaction with other communities will have formulaic ways of understanding their differences that protect identities. Irrationally prejudicial formulas are common. Sometimes interaction can lead to a fair degree of influence and blending, but even in the presence of concrete influence, such interaction can heighten the impetus for a distinctive local identity. Tension and friction are the result. For most practitioners, the “tradition” is not the international body in its social or theological forms—for example, “the Church” or “the Mystical Body of Christ.” Rather, tradition is all the ideas, imagery, conventional practices, and local leadership that support and sustain how the community goes about doing things.

Not only is the understanding of tradition invoked by practitioners particu-

larly ahistorical, it is also much less concerned with the overall coherence of practices and ideas that is so important to religious leaders. In most religions, practitioners are likely to downplay doctrinal matters and emphasize imagery that is personally compelling with little regard for coherence. So my Irish grandmother could be fixated on the Mother of Christ to the exclusion of any other part of Catholicism, including sacraments, scripture, and certainly the authority structure. Or, the ubiquitous focus of ritual life in the Buddhist villages of Burma, northern Thailand, and Laos today can be the wonder-working Upagupta, whose cult is never mentioned in the early scriptures and was officially denigrated when it appeared in the 12th century.¹⁶

The tradition of practitioners can even involve a type of quiet resistance to any higher leadership that sees the community as just one among others. Local groups are more accepting of the leadership exercised by a national or international religious organization when the governing hand is rather lightly extended. Yet even then, local identity and autonomy is reinforced in many quiet ways.¹⁷ Some of this resistance can be seen in the various ways such communities can ignore important injunctions. I grew up in a Catholic community that generally ignored papal injunctions on birth control, with people saying things like: “I know the pope is a good man, but he just doesn’t understand these things.” There are profound theological implications in that statement that no one wanted to draw out. The same people who may be devoted to the pope as a very personable figurehead, an icon of religious sensibility, or powerful media image, are also apt to identify important religious experiences outside the traditionally-approved mode, that is, experiences unmediated by their religious leaders. Every time a community sees the Mother of Christ in the window of another bank or apartment house, or the face of Christ in the gnarled bark of a oak tree, and most recently oozing holy oil—all immediate examples for those who live in Santa Clara county—you have practitioners exercising independence over how the sacred is to be experienced—claiming, in fact, that it can be experienced rather directly and immediately outside the ritual life of the church. It is an old tension, of course, and not peculiar to American Catholicism: the more the ability to speak to and for God is vested in formal offices, the more popular claims to direct access will arise, whether they are meant as challenges or not.

For religious leaders, tradition basically means timelessness—a coherent, holistic truth that in its essentials is one with the truth laid out in foundational events no matter how distant they may be. For practitioners, however, tradition is the taken-for-grantedness of current local practice. Links to the past are assumed, but not explicated and explored. The emphasis on one’s own world of experience and what sustains it is most important. So, the definition of tra-

dition found among practitioners readily conflicts with the definitions of scholars and religious leaders. But most practitioners are not particularly concerned to notice or call attention to areas of overt conflict.

V. Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate the simple idea that there is no one way to define a tradition. Tradition is not simply an enduring historical entity, or the presence of Truth in time as defined by religious institutions, or just what a community of believers takes it to be. Each one owns tradition—and so no one owns it. But, you might ask, is one of these definitions ultimately better than the others, or are they all in fact equal? I think it is most accurate to recognize that they exist for different purposes. Any one person, like myself, is apt to make use of different definitions on different occasions. It is also useful, I believe, to recognize that the way scholars, religious leaders, and practitioners each put together their understandings of tradition means that they can easily talk past each other or generate a fair amount of tension when they don't talk past each other.

After recognizing the structural differences in how tradition can be defined, as well as the legitimacy of these differences, it is still necessary to go one or two more steps. Specifically, I want to draw attention to the way in which the historical record, even when contested, is becoming increasingly important for religions in the modern world. In the emerging globalism in which we all have to locate ourselves, our communities, and our beliefs, there is constant and non-trivial interaction between the religious leaders and practitioners of different religions and cultures. In its most benevolent form, as a type of generalized influence, the interaction of equally weighted traditions in proximity to each other means that they will inevitably influence each other's basic self-definition. Whether they have much or little in common, there is incentive to emphasize what they share and perhaps begin to see such shared ideas as more central to their identities than they may have been before. There are less benevolent forms of interaction, of course, as when traditions have major areas of overt conflict. But if they are talking, and not just battling each other in the street, it is the historical record, assembled and debated by scholars from all directions, that is being called upon to mediate their differences. The historical record can seem a relatively neutral ground, less under the control of any particular tradition. So it is becoming more important *simply* to how religions today coexist. In part, the historical record appears relatively neutral because it is outside so many traditions, but also because, at its best, it thrives on affording debate and corrective revision of the facts.

Here is an illustration of the trend I am talking about. The Dalai Lama, a key but not uncontested spokesperson for Tibetan Buddhism, is called upon to represent Buddhism in a world in which multiple Buddhisms must coexist, coming together and interacting much more often and fully than in other centuries. In this context, Buddhist leaders' sense of the essentials they share and the significance of their differences takes on new forms. In a recent publication for Western audiences, the Dalai Lama presents Buddhism as a single, coherent holism; but at the same time he argues that the formulations of Tibetan Buddhism are not simply late developments or degenerations; rather, they are the ultimate realization of the original presentation of the Buddha.¹⁸ Of course, he is clear, those other Buddhisms associated with South and East Asia have their own very real, but perhaps more partial, contributions to make. In laying out the truths of the First Turning of the Wheel of the Buddha's Teachings, the truths of the Second Turning, and the truths of the final Third Turning, the Dalai Lama both defines a Buddhist tradition in terms of several broad commonalities *and* gives pride of place to ideas that distinguish the Tibetan tradition. A Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, or Sri Lankan Buddhist leader could never have written this book or been the intended audience for it. This book represents, I would argue, an early style of engagement in a global conversation among Buddhist leaders. On the one hand, the Dalai Lama's book invokes a language for talking about Buddhism that goes beyond any particular interpretive tradition. It casts the whole as a single, impressive "world religion," marked by more unity than disunity. On the other hand, in the process of establishing these unities, the Dalai Lama has to make sense of the differences. As Buddhist leaders deal more directly and explicitly with their particular differences—such as the institution of the Dalai Lama itself—it will be interesting to watch how global and local Buddhisms come to be defined. Certainly, in publications and presentations over the last 15 years, the Dalai Lama has been very unassertive regarding some of the specific doctrinal ideas behind the authority of his office. To avoid pushing on this front is increasingly natural and instinctive in a world where his office is very difficult for a non-Tibetan Buddhist to recognize or understand.¹⁹

There are other conversations going on, however, in which the role of the historical record is more pronounced, with powerful ramifications for local and global Buddhism. These conversations are attempts to call Buddhism to account for specific local responsibilities and to rise above the cultural pressures that might distort its adherence to the essentials thought to be shared with others. So Buddhists from one corner of the world are addressing Buddhists of another by calling attention to the involvement of Japanese Buddhist leaders in the ideology of colonial expansionism in pre-war Japan²⁰; or the role of highly nationalistic monks and monasteries abetting civil war in

Sri Lanka²¹; or the invisibility of poverty, misogyny, and social oppression to Buddhist institutions in Thailand.²² In all such cases, Buddhists are asking each other in an increasingly global dialog: “Isn’t Buddhism something other than this? Can’t we be *more* Buddhist?” In this way, of course, the definition of Buddhism enters another stage.

A more familiar example is found in the recent Vatican statements on Catholic and Christian relations with Jews.²³ This has been a contentious issue, some would say since the beginning of the Christian tradition,²⁴ but particularly with the enormity of the Holocaust—and the emergence of global forums in which an accounting can be demanded and not easily ignored. In responding to the distrust between these two traditions, this pope has not only taken the personal route of praying as a Jew at the wall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. He has also explicitly engaged the historical record—at least in part. Acknowledging big sections of the historical record is vital to a constructive dialog between these two traditions. Offering apologies as evidence of internalizing the meaning of this history, that is the stuff with which a tradition can reformulate or redefine what it is. While the contributions of John Paul II’s 1998 *We Remember* and 1999 *Memory and Reconciliation* have been judged partial by some Christians and Jews, it is particularly interesting to note the historical accounting both within these documents and in the evaluations of them.²⁵ There have been appeals on both sides to the theological ideas that Christians and Jews hold in common, and yet in the face of their differences and the specific issues of contention between them, it is the historical record that offers the hope of reformulating what each is as a tradition—in its own eyes and in the eyes of the other. In effect, the use of history here enables the Catholic tradition to transform itself, to break with the anti-Semitism of the past, to banish one type of historical continuity, and become more of what it now sees as central to its identity—witnessing to Christ by virtue of love for all people, some (being) particularly close brothers and sisters. This is a recasting, a revitalization, a redefinition of tradition.

John Paul II has not only demonstrated the need to use history today. In his acknowledgment of Catholic historical failings, such as the more distant Inquisition and the more recent failure to protest adamantly against the horrors of the Third Reich, he has also demonstrated the problems of dealing with an historical record. It is hard to admit mistakes while maintaining certain notions of authority. This pope has seen a way to do this, in part, by nuancing where exactly the fault lies. His statements acknowledge the culpability of sons and daughters of the Church, but do not attach culpability directly to the Church itself. Yet he does state that the Church takes on the weight of these faults for the sake of purification and renewal. This may not be a statement of full admission of guilt, but it is one that takes responsibility.

I should emphasize that appealing to the historical record as a neutral medium for dialog with another religious tradition or subtradition, and finding in that a means for reconfiguring the tradition itself—well, nothing about this is easy or instinctive for any religious community. Before the demands that accompany modern religious diversity, it was not particularly needed. So despite the railing of scholars over the last two centuries, religions do not have a lot of experience with this form of historicity. Now that it is becoming not just unavoidable, but useful to invoke history as a neutral medium for certain interactions, we should *not* conclude that history wins out over religion. Rather, it means that religious definitions of tradition will find an historical consciousness increasingly helpful, if sometimes sobering, for the challenges of living in a multi-religion world. Some traditions will fight a few of the implications of this historicizing and dialoging—as John Paul II has followed his apology for Christian failings with a reiteration that Christian commitment to the uniqueness of the truth of Christ and the universal mission rooted in him must not be diluted by ecumenical goodwill.²⁶ But global diversity is the new context for being religious; it is not going to go away; no one religion is going to dominate it; and all will be changed by it, sooner or later. To be, lovingly, our brother and sister’s keeper in this world today, we have to learn how, in what way to be a keeper of our brother and sister’s religion. If our religious traditions are vital, they will probably see in this the opportunity to find a dimension of the original revelation that has never been so directly glimpsed before.

In the end, is history the despoiler of idealism? Are my students, among others, correct to wish to avoid the history of what they want to think of as a purer truth? If history is the despoiler of idealism, then our idealism is built in a very narrow and ultimately inhuman way—inhuman because it denies the relevance of so much human experience. If history is hard on truth, then our notions of truth must be fragile constructions rather than robust insights. Idealism is, of course, a very human trait; we can and do idealize many things. But to live by an understanding of truth requires something beyond idealism. Paul the Apostle spoke to this, as you know, in his familiar admonishment that being called to a life in Christ means putting away the things of a child, and ultimately embracing “difficulty” and “complexity” with courage and vision.²⁷

It has been said that a “scholar can hardly be better employed than in destroying a fear.”²⁸ Well, I do not pretend to have destroyed any of the fears we have of history. I have tried, however, to address them as directly as I can and to argue for a view of both history and religion that does not pit them against each other in the ways convention has so long demanded. History cannot simply be an “expert’s” view of what should be identified and traced in time.

Religion is not simply people telling bad history. And truth is not a pure and complete message dropped into the human morass where it is nibbled and twisted and pulled to pieces. History is something to be achieved; an interpretation of the determinative events for any situation is always a goal and a challenge. History can bring a needed corrective to the isolation within which many religious traditions have traditionally formulated their self-understandings. The growing embrace of history that we see today provides the medium in which religious people will increasingly work out what it means to be an American Catholic, an American Jew, a Japanese Buddhist, or a continental atheist. You know it will feel "messy" while we are all in the thick of it, but in exchange for an idealism of absolutes held tightly to our chests, we will be reassured that the full range of human experience is being caught up, addressed, taken into account, and appreciated.

- ¹ For a recent discussion of these questions see the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, 4 (December 2000), which has 12 articles on "Who Speaks for Hinduism?"
- ² There is a some scholarly analysis of the notion of tradition, effectively beginning with Edward Shils, "Tradition." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13 (1971), 122-59; and *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981). But also see Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967), S. N. Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change and Modernity* (New York: Wiley, 1973) and, a bit more recently, Jocelyn Linnekin, "Defining Tradition: Variations on the Hawaiian Identity," *American Ethnologist* 10 (1983), 241-52. Also see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- ³ Mark Edmunson notes that "[a]ll good teaching entails some kidnapping; there's a touch of malice involved" (59), in "My First Intellectual," *Lingua Franca* (March 99), 55-60.
- ⁴ On Euro-American nostalgia for "other" religions see Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*. Tom Conley trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
- ⁵ For example, see Peter Steinfel's account of the denunciations by church leaders' of the Catholic Theological Society of America as a "wasteland" and "not even Catholic," among other things. "Belief: How much dissent is too much?," *The New York Times* (June 19, 1999), B6.
- ⁶ For a useful discussion of modern and postmodern approaches to history, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W W Norton, 1994).
- ⁷ Harold D. Roth. *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Anna Seidel. "Chronicle of Taoist Studies in the West 1950-90," *Cahiers d'Extreme-Asia* 5 (1989-90), 223-348.
- ⁸ Michel Strickmann. *Le taoïsme du Mao Chan-chronique d'une révélation*, Mémoires de l'Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, Collège de France XVII (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981).
- ⁹ See Robert W. Funk, trans. et al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1997) and Robert W. Funk, ed. *The Gospel of Jesus: According to the Jesus Seminar* (1999).
- ¹⁰ See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997).
- ¹¹ Lionel M. Jensen. *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 8-9. Jensen's work has caused a flurry in the field by arguing that these Jesuit interpreta-

tions of Confucianism were powerful enough to influence even the way Chinese intellectuals subsequently understood Confucianism.

- ¹² Jensen, p. 123; D. E. Mungello. *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: Hawaii Press, 1985), 266, 305.
- ¹³ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed. "Introduction," *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 1-29.
- ¹⁴ Donald S. Lopez, Jr. *Prisoners of Shangra-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 15-45.
- ¹⁵ Paul Tillich is particularly explicit on this in laying out his method of correlating existential questions and revelatory answer, *Systematic Theology* 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).
- ¹⁶ See John S. Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in Northern India and Southeast Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992).
- ¹⁷ A classic ethnographic study of this resistance is Stephen Feuchtwang's *The Imperial Metaphor: Popular Religion in China* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- ¹⁸ Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism: An Overview of Its Philosophy and Practice*. Geshe Thupten Jinpa ed. and trans. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995).
- ¹⁹ Of course, the doctrinal basis of the institution of the Dalai Lama is also criticized by the Chinese government using very standard secular and modernist assumptions.
- ²⁰ Brian (Daizen) A. Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997).
- ²¹ S. J. Tambiah. *Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991).
- ²² Tavivat Puntarigivat. "Toward a Buddhist Social Ethics: The Case of Thailand," *Cross Currents* 48, 3 (Fall 1998); Chatsumarin Kabilsingh. *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991).
- ²³ For an analysis of these events in the context of 19th and 20th century Vatican-Jewish relations, see Garry Wills, *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 11-69.
- ²⁴ See James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword—The Church and the Jews: A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).
- ²⁵ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (Vatican City, March 16, 1998); International Theological Commission. *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (December 1999).

²⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (September 6, 2000).

²⁷ I Corinthians, xiii, 11.

²⁸ Clifford Geertz. "Anti Anti-relativism," *American Anthropologist* 89, 4 (December 1987), 935-39.