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# The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion

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## Religious authority

### Scripture, tradition, charisma

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#### Introduction

All human groups need some authority, some generally accepted means of resolving at least the major questions, merely to persist without disintegrating. However, authority is not a simple concept. It is not necessarily linked with power in any hard sense, although there are cases where the religious and secular realms may be so intertwined that the religion may take on some form of secular coercive power. Good analogues of religious authority are provided in the medical or academic fields. A doctor, for example, has authority: he is authorised by his training and professional expertise. With true authority he can say 'you must' or 'you must not'. Likewise an academic may have authority: her authority arises from her superior knowledge of the subject, which enables her to say 'this is so' or 'this is not so'. To maintain her credibility, she must continually vindicate this authority by evidence of competence, her ability to formulate new ideas, her capacity to stimulate students to new insights. Before clarifying further the kinds of authority influential in religious communities, some preparatory remarks are in order.

Religions are not all the same. There are distinct categories like 'primal' religions; the archaic religions of Egypt or Mesopotamia or Greece; and the founded ('world') religions like Islam. Furthermore, different religions within a single one of these categories can have surprisingly diverse internal dynamics; the role played by theology in Christianity, for example, is played within Judaism by law. Further, it is a mistake to presume any particular religion is a monolithic entity. Christianity has its divisions into Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox branches, to name just three, and in each of them authority is exercised significantly differently. Islam embraces Sunni, Shi'ite, Ahmadiyya, Ismaili – these branches all have different understandings of precisely where authority lies. But most importantly, religions are not static; they exist in living communities enduring through time, and thus continually change. Some of these changes can be profound. For example, we now think of Judaism as a religion centred on a book, but it was not always so. Judaism was for centuries centred on a sacrificial cult in the temple; it was the destruction of the first temple (587 BCE) that heightened its emphasis on its scriptures, and the definitive destruction of the third (70 CE) that carried this process to its ultimate conclusion. Other religions have undergone transformations just as profound. Zoroastrianism has been in turn the state religion of the Persian Empire, the religion of an oppressed and marginalised (and largely uneducated) minority under Muslim domination, the religion of a wealthy sector of modern India, and now increasingly the religion of influential professionals of a diaspora scattered throughout the West. The religion – its expression, its embodiment, its self-understanding – has not

remained unaffected by these changing contexts. And the elements of authority within a religion, the way they are balanced, perceived, experienced, are among the things that have changed. This may be so, even if formal appearances mask this. Bishops have been authority figures within Christianity from its early years. Now, they would most naturally be perceived as part of the administrative bureaucracy. But they were not always best understood in that way. Medieval Europe was not a bureaucratically governed society; effective authority was exercised through the personal presence of an itinerant ruler, the exercise of patronage, the bonds established with dependents, the power to work miracles, the ceremonial projection of sacrality. In the last resort, a medieval bishop's authority may have more closely approximated the charismatic power of holy men (Mayr-Harting 1990: 124). Thus the office has persisted, but the kind of authority exercised has changed greatly.

These are some of the complications we will have to bear in mind in what follows. These factors will prevent us distinguishing neat categories of religious authority, or making any simple identification of certain forms of authority with particular religions. They will also prevent us from reaching much in the way of hard conclusions. However, even after this disclaimer, we can still raise many questions and shed some light in the general area of religious authority. In this chapter, we will focus on the three significant elements of scripture, tradition and charisma. We will ask in what way they are authoritative, how they are perceived to exert their influence, how their power is experienced and whether they function independently or in combination.

### Scripture

We have already observed that different religions may have different internal dynamics. This is crucially so in the matter of sacred texts. Scripture (with cognates like 'écriture', 'scrittura', 'escritura') is a Western term (etymologically, from the Latin *scribere* 'to write') with its roots in the Christian West, and with its original reference to the Christian Bible. Initially, as 'Holy Scripture', the reference was exclusively to the Christian Bible, carrying connotations of inspiration, revelation, perhaps inerrancy. It is only in the last 150 years that the term has come to be applied in a less metaphysical and more descriptive sense to the sacred books of other religious traditions. (Max Müller's fifty-volume edition (1879–94) of *The Sacred Books of the East* was a milestone in this development.) Sometimes the connotations of the word as traditionally used in the West have been much less fitting when applied to other traditions. If the term is not unduly distorting when applied to the other founded religions of the Near East, to Judaism and Islam, its suitability to Eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism is less obvious. It is only in recent decades that serious efforts have been made to allow for the subtle distortions likely when a concept taken from one tradition is applied to others.

Nevertheless it is obviously characteristic of many religions to have sacred texts – which we will follow current convention and indiscriminately call 'scripture'. If we ask what it is that constitutes these particular texts scripture or sacred, we quickly see that it is not a matter of form or content. There is no essence, or intrinsic formal quality, or even set of family resemblances, that characterise all these diverse texts. As regards content, the diversity is enormous – from the hymns (*gathas*) of Zoroaster to the letters of Paul, the law codes of Deuteronomy and the sacrificial rituals of the Vedas. Even beauty or profundity is not an essential characteristic. Undoubtedly many have this sublimity – taken to its ultimate in Islam with its doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'an (*i'jaz al-Qur'an*) – but alongside the sublime we can find other parts which may be genealogies, crude hagiography or fairly

banal chronicles. It would be hard to list any criteria of form or content that could isolate precisely these texts and not others.

Likewise, authorship does not provide a criterion for elevating a text to the status of scripture, for here too there is enormous diversity. Although some (like the Qur'an) are intimately linked to the founder, others are by subsequent leaders (as is much of the Sikhs' *Adi Granth*), others have authors who are completely unknown (the case for a large part of the Jewish scriptures). In the case of the Hindu religion, with no individual founder, the scriptures are believed to have no author at all, not even God.

No, to label a text 'scripture' essentially involves none of these things. What makes a text or texts scripture is something of another register altogether, namely the text's relationship to a community. It is this relationship that is constitutive. Scripture is a relational term, like husband or mother; it has meaning only in relation to another. It is the community's persistence in according it an authoritative position in its life that constitutes a text scripture. Hence, as Smith well puts it, scripture is not an attribute of texts, but a 'human activity'. And it is an ongoing activity. 'No doubt, their scripture to a mighty degree makes a people what they are. Yet one must not lose sight of the point that it is the people who make it, keep making it, scripture' (Smith 1993: 18–19).

Thus authority over a community is built into the idea of scripture. Yet the various scriptures may exert their authority in many diverse ways. Scriptures (or parts of them) may provide the main prayers that adherents utilise throughout the day. In some forms of worship, the scriptures may become a sacred object; thus Jews may dance with the Torah in the synagogue. Most traditions have all kinds of significant popular uses – many Muslims use the Qur'an as a protective device against evil, even using a potion made from mixing water with the ink used to write a Qur'anic charm. Some religions regard scripture as the supreme source of their 'doctrine' or 'morals' or 'law'. However, a scripture's influence can be much more subtly pervasive; it is not always conscious or direct. Anyone familiar with medieval Europe will understand the role of the Bible in providing the source material for most European art; in this way the biblical narratives provided the images that fed the imagination and moulded cultural life. Within Islam, although pictorial representation is generally shunned, Qur'anic calligraphy has played a similar role. In such various ways, focused and diffuse, explicit and implicit, hard and soft, scriptures mould and direct their particular communities. The ability to guide and influence is there by definition, from the mere fact of being scripture.

However, for any living community the context changes over time. We have already drawn attention to the changes Zoroastrianism and Judaism have undergone in history, but change is universal. Islam has changed from a desert religion to the religion of the Abbasids and the Umayyads and the Ottomans. Christianity has transformed itself from a Jewish sect to the Byzantine state religion, to the cultural soul of Europe, to the religion of Latin American peasants. Continuity through change is a problem for any religion, and scripture is often one of the key things enabling the community to negotiate major transformations, providing the means of rendering changes explicable and manageable, thus ensuring some experience of identity over time.

### ***Historical consciousness***

The complexity of this process has become obvious only in relatively recent years. What has disclosed the complexity is the rise of a radical new perspective, historical consciousness. At its heart is the awareness that everything is relative, or related to the context in which

it arose or in which it exists. Nothing human is supra-temporal, supra-cultural or supra-historical. Everything human is culturally conditioned. Where such a consciousness has taken root (notably in the West, especially Western academia), it has had important effects on the understanding of the past in general, and in particular has affected our attitude to historical texts.

✓ It has altered our attitude to past 'authorities'. By and large, previous ages were incredibly respectful of past authorities. C.S. Lewis says of the European Middle Ages that they were 'ages of authority'.

If their culture is regarded as a response to environment, then the elements in that environment to which they responded most vigorously were manuscripts. Every writer if he possibly can, bases himself on an earlier writer, follows an *auctour*, preferably a Latin one. This is one of the things that differentiates that period ... from our modern civilisation.

He remarks later of medieval people: 'They find it hard to believe that anything an old *auctour* has said is simply untrue' (cited in Nineham 1976: 45). The traditional Christian attitude to the Bible must be seen in this light, as part of a cultural disposition. That it is broadly cultural rather than narrowly religious is obvious from the fact that the same attitude was shown to classical authors. Indeed the Roman poet Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70–19 BCE) is an example of someone in the past whose work became almost mystically revered. It was repeated, commented on, embellished, used as an oracle, put into catenae and all sorts of legends grew up around the author. Virgil's writings, or (more correctly) what Virgil is supposed to have written, became part of the mental furniture of the European Middle Ages. Another example of an *auctour* given unquestioned status is Galen (131–201 CE), one of the founders of the Western medical tradition. He had described an organ in the human body called the *rete mirabile*. It is recorded that when medical dissection began, and this organ was not found, it seemed far more probable to those first clinical anatomists that there had occurred an organic change in the human body since his time than that Galen had made a mistake (see Nineham 1976: 268).

In the West, that attitude to the past has now changed radically. We can conveniently date the stirrings of change to about the time of the founding of the Royal Society, which received its charter in 1662 (Newton was to be its president from 1703 to 1727). The Royal Society's motto was: 'Nullius in verba'; in other words, 'We refuse to be bound by the words of any authority, however venerable or sacred' (Nineham 1976: 61). This change in mentality was linked to the rise of science, but came to be accepted far more widely. The newer understanding is succinctly encapsulated in Marx and Engels' reference in the 1848 Communist Manifesto to 'the burden of all the dead generations weighing like a nightmare on the mind of the living', and equally in Thomas Paine's claim that 'the vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies' (Paine 1798: 9).

✓ An understanding of this change of mentality is crucial for the modern academic study of religion, and for understanding the role of scripture in particular. The 'clash of science and religion' arose not because Darwin had discovered a truth that 'disproved' some 'biblical' truth. The clash arose because the rise of science depended on a new view of truth; no longer as something revealed *back there* and enshrined in a text to which those coming after must continually refer. Now truth was seen as *out there ahead*, to be discovered by

hypothesis, experiment and verification. Another cultural shift was at play here too. One of the reasons for the earlier respect for *auctours* was that most ages have been very aware of their own inferiority in regard to the past. Previous ages almost by definition deferred to their predecessors, sometimes because of the sentiment expressed by Plato: 'The ancients are better than we, for they dwelled nearer to the Gods' (*Philebus* 16c). With this perception, it was well nigh impossible to think of questioning the categories with which those earlier cultures had worked. However, it is much harder for the beneficiaries of the industrial and technological and information revolutions to 'feel' that previous ages were their superiors.

It is worthwhile unpacking some of the consequences of this new attitude to the past. Obviously, it tends to heighten the otherness of the past. Whereas even in relatively recent times people might have seen naturally the connections and similarities with antiquity, historical consciousness tends to flag up the strangeness, the discontinuities, the differences. When the world of a text from the distant past is perceived as so very different from our own, to take such a text as normative becomes much less natural, and the easy submission to a text, no matter how traditionally authoritative, less spontaneous. This is in marked contrast to many epochs that have naturally and spontaneously looked to the past for guidance.

Besides, quite often historical analysis has disclosed that a text was not really saying what it was claimed to say. This is not primarily because modern research shows that a text has been totally misunderstood (although this cannot be ruled out; the Zoroastrian *gathas* are a nightmare to interpret). It is much more likely that historical study shows that the traditionally accepted 'scriptural meaning' is just one among many views extractable from different portions of the scripture. In most cases, this is because although unicity (the presumption of one coherent interlocking whole) is almost invariably attributed to scripture, scripture in the vast majority of cases is in fact a compilation of pieces of quite diverse provenance. A rigorous historical approach often reveals that what has been taken to be *the* meaning has resulted from privileging one segment, and reading the whole through the spectacles provided by this privileged segment. In these cases it is evident that the scripture is far from self-interpreting: it is tradition or the living community that has been influential in ensuring that *this* is the received meaning of scripture. Examples abound, but the point is succinctly captured in this vignette of Africa's response to Christian missions:

Protestant missionaries introduced the Bible to Africans as the ultimate earthly authority, but were bewildered when their African converts selected their biblical data so differently, highlighting the complex rituals, revelations through dreams and visions, the separation between clean and unclean animals, the practice of polygamy, the descent of God upon prophets, miraculous healings and exorcisms, and so on.

(Hastings 1979: 70)

All these things so peripheral for the missionaries are just as clearly in the Christian Bible as the images, motifs and narratives that the missionaries stressed. It was only when other 'readings' were proffered that it became obvious that the received reading was a highly selective interpretation, even if traditionally authoritative.

Further, historical analysis often reveals that what the text has been traditionally taken to mean is, on closer inspection, found to be a later idea retrojected back into it. Judaism provides a classic example. The Mishnah and Talmud are widely viewed as commentaries on the Tanakh (the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings). They are presented in that way, as comment on or elaboration of the earlier text. On deeper inspection, however, the secondary

or derivative appearance is revealed as just that – an appearance arising from the framework imposed on them. In fact both the Mishnah and the Talmud are deeply original works; in some cases their novelty is quite startling. It is the prior assumption that they must be expounding the ‘more authoritative’ Tanakh that has obscured this. In fact, rather than seeing it as a commentary on a preceding scripture, ‘one might suggest rather that (the Mishnah) presents as it were that preceding scripture, if at all, as a commentary on itself’ (Smith 1993: 114).

### **Authorship**

The Mishnah and Talmud were the creation of so many (the former collated by Judah haNasi, the latter produced by the Amoraim) that they might be considered genuinely community products. But gifted or charismatic individuals within the community must often be viewed in the same light; the contribution of individual commentators has often been enormous. Their works, too, are often not best understood as commentaries at all, but more adequately as remarkably creative developments which might well have been celebrated as such except for the overriding assumption of the priority of the scripture, an assumption that functioned to disguise any innovation as a deeper elaboration of the text. Consider Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE). His influence on subsequent Christianity is unparalleled, even though much of his influence is disguised by the fact that he did much of his theological work in terms of commentaries or homilies on scripture. His influence is so great that what subsequent Christian tradition has often understood as Paul, is really Augustine’s reading of Paul. When subsequent Christians thought they were harkening to scripture they were in fact harkening to Augustine’s understanding of scripture. Augustine’s role or influence is underestimated because in the received understanding of scripture the canonical author Paul should be regarded as authoritative.

In Judaism, this phenomenon is perhaps even more salient. Until well into the twentieth century the Tanakh was hardly ever published without a key commentary, normally by Rashi (1040–1105 CE), Radak (1160–1235) or Ramban (1194–1270). It was through the often highly original lenses provided by these great commentators that the Tanakh was read. One observer perceptively catches the dynamics here: ‘The bulk of Jewish literature is in the form of commentary on Scripture, whether this form is always justified or not (often the pretense of commentary disguises a full-fledged original personal viewpoint)’ (Greenberg, cited in Smith 1993: 117).

Much the same could be said within Islam of jurists up to the Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–89 CE), of countless gurus within the Hindu tradition, and of masters within the Zen tradition. Under the rubric of interpreting their respective scriptures they were providing their community with new resources to meet new situations. In many cases they would have positively repudiated any idea that they exercised an authoritative role within a tradition, seeing themselves as simply servants of the text. But they were obviously far more than that, as historical criticism reveals.

The scripturalising of a text, therefore, has in many cases obscured as much as it has revealed the dynamics operative in the life of the religious community. By dint of scripturalising a text, the community has committed itself to presenting novelty in the form of exposition of or commentary on ‘what was there already’ in the community’s scripture. In many cases this commitment has the effect of reducing the scripture almost to a *tabula rasa* on which the community can read what it wants to or has to. Barton has referred to this quality of ‘semantic indeterminacy’ of sacred texts. ‘Sacred texts ... tend to be semantically

indeterminate, for they have to be read as supporting the religious system to which they belong, even at the expense of their natural sense' (Barton 1997: 61). The classic instance of this is in the Christian interpretation of the Jewish scripture as Christian. This was the result of a certain combination of presupposition and need: 'They [the Jewish Scriptures] were ostensibly the absolutely authoritative divine revelation; but in reality they functioned as a *tabula rasa* on which Christians wrote what they took (on quite other grounds) to be the meaning of Christ' (ibid.: 19). That this is more than something uniquely Christian is evident from the fact that the sectaries of the Dead Sea saw the Jewish scripture as referring to their Teacher of Righteousness (see especially their Habbakuk Commentary).

### **Interpretative techniques**

This tendency to find in the scripture whatever the community needs for its continuing development is remarkably widespread. This is in effect the purpose of all forms of figurative or non-literal interpretation, namely to enable the community to find there what it must. In many traditions this approach has been taken to considerable lengths, often through elaborate theories of multiple senses of scripture. In Christianity, there were sometimes as many as seven, but most often four: the literal, the allegorical, the moral and the anagogic (or related to the end times). Judaism had its system of *pardes*, from the different forms of exegesis: *peshat* (literal), *remez* (allusive), *derash* (homiletical) and *sodh* (mystical). Islam has its *ta'wil* to explore symbolic and inner meanings (especially prominent in Shi'i and Sufi or mystical contexts). Once again, it is significant that this whole trajectory (through Judaism, Christianity and Islam) actually has its roots outside religion and in the world of classical literature. The techniques of allegory were introduced into the classics to avoid having to find in Homer and Hesiod meanings (the natural or common sense meanings) that were considered unworthy of them by scholars who looked back to them with awe and reverence. These approaches flourished in Alexandria, whence Philo introduced them into Judaism, Christian Fathers (again most notably of the Alexandrian school) adopted them, and later they found their way into Islamic scholarship. These multiple senses of the text, with the 'literal' not necessarily the most important, persisted right through until the rise of modern historical consciousness, when (at least in the West) the literal tended to become all-important, and the others largely fell away.

### **Layers of scripture**

The scripturalising of a text has thus obscured much of the activity of the community in creatively addressing new issues and contexts. The theories constructed to explain the elevated role of scripture have most often reflected what was thought should have been the case, rather than what in fact was the case. Historical research has laid bare what was in fact occurring as the community utilised its scriptures. An additional aspect of this phenomenon is that the books that matter (in our sense, have authority) are in many cases not the theoretically acknowledged scripture at all, but others. In some religions there are evident layers of sacred books. The Avesta, Qur'an and the Tanakh are recognised in their respective religions as scripture par excellence, but these religions have other texts (respectively the Pahlavi texts, Hadith and Mishnah) as a subordinate or supporting layer. Historical criticism may reveal that in some cases it is not the primary but the secondary layer that is more authoritative. Much popular Hinduism is of this kind. In entire swathes

of India the Mahabharata (especially the *Bhagavad-Gita*) and the *Ramayana* are far more significant than the Vedas, even though the former are *smṛti* ('that which is remembered'), the secondary and derivative scriptural category, and the latter *śruti* ('that which is heard', namely by the seers) or scripture par excellence. Indeed, for Hinduism on Mauritius, the really authoritative works are the theoretically very subsidiary Ramcaritmanas of Tulsi Das and the religious poems of Kabir, as remembered by the indentured labourers taken there.

In all these ways, where on the face of it scripture seemed determinative and frequently enough was claimed to be determinative, it is at least as helpful to see the community determining its own shape in response to new needs, but portraying these responses as derived from the resources of the sacred text. It seems to be an essential element of scripture that it be used in this way.

### **Necessary reappraisal**

This radical reappraisal arising from historical awareness does not mean that scripture is no longer of any significance for those religious communities where historical thinking has taken root. After all, the most fastidious historical scholar may worship in scriptural forms, and meditate on scriptural texts. For his or her personal religious life (indeed for the spiritual life of the community), all sorts of processes may be fruitful. One can do other things with scriptures than situate them in their context, find their 'original' meaning, analyse them historically (although the historical approach has become so dominant in the West that restricting significant enquiry to these issues is a real danger, particularly for academics). Nevertheless, in the West, it is widely agreed that if it is historical questions that are at issue – and the nature and extent of scripture's impact on a religious community over time is such a historical question – they must be answered with the strictest historical warrants. In such cases, even a believer cannot merely repeat the accepted doctrinal position in the face of historical evidence to the contrary.

No one should be in any doubt about the extent of the rethinking required by the rise of historical consciousness. (I repeat that in discussion here is the narrow historical point of the nature and extent of the influence of scripture on the community; broader questions of the impact of scientific or historical thinking on religion itself are beyond our present scope.) Two important Christian theologians, in an article entitled 'Scripture and Tradition', begin:

Until recently, almost the entire spectrum of theological opinion would have agreed that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, together with their doctrinal interpretations, occupy a unique and indispensable place of authority for Christian faith, practice and reflection. But this consensus now seems to be falling apart.

(Farley and Hodgson 1985: 61)

They then rethink the traditional view, in light of such considerations as have been raised above. Their conclusion is that the accepted theory is 'actually inappropriate' to Christianity 'when properly understood' (*ibid.*: 62).

It is Christianity and Judaism that are most affected by historical criticism because their centre of gravity has long been in the West, and the dominant strands of both are by and large committed to a general cultural relevance (as opposed to cultural isolation). Other religious traditions have been affected differently. Some have rejected the whole historical approach (Muslims tend to see the attempt to submit the Qur'an or Hadith to the same historical

criticism as other books as yet another Western attempt to denigrate Islam). Some other traditions, still largely cocooned from the 'corrosion' of historical criticism, have been able to carry on relatively unchanged. Yet even in these latter instances, they have not proved totally impregnable; many have sizeable diasporas in the West, and their young, learning at school to approach texts historically, inevitably begin to address their scriptures in the same way.

This last point highlights a further complication hindering a simple correlation between kinds of authority and particular religions. We mentioned above the different attitudes to scripture within a single religion. Protestants have differed from Catholics (the difference usually expressed in the terms of precisely our problematic – 'Scripture versus Tradition'); Mahayana Buddhists differ from Theravada Buddhists; Shi'ites from Sunni Muslims. But the twentieth century saw a new phenomenon. Now Judaism and Christianity have a totally new division, between those who accept the legitimacy of historical criticism, and those who do not. In the West, most mainstream Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant, have come to accept it (officially as late as 1964 for Catholics). However, most Christians are now found in the Third World, where most are pre-critical and can maintain an unselfconscious attitude to scripture virtually impossible now for their Western co-religionists. In a further complication, some in the West positively deny the legitimacy of applying the historical approach to scripture, seeing this as destructive of Christianity itself. This is indeed a third and different stance, for such fundamentalists are not so much either critical or pre-critical as anti-critical. Despite the frequent claim of these fundamentalists to preserve the traditional attitude to scripture, their stance is every bit as modern as the critical approach to which they are reacting. Here then we have a profound three-way split within the one religion in attitudes to scriptural authority (and indirectly tradition).

## Tradition

We should be clear what is being claimed here. We are not arguing that academic historical study of religion has 'destroyed' the authority of scripture in the sense of rendering scripture superfluous. The scriptures remain important, even where they are now understood to exert their influence as an originating repository of the images, myths, symbols, metaphors, narratives, laws, persons and paradigms that have given the community its identity, recalled it to its roots, anchored its legal structures, linked it with its founder, provided its classic access to the divine, created its general cultural ambiance, suggestively guided it through history, and exercised a crucial role in facing new challenges. These are, of course, the functions that scripture always played, although so often something rather more was claimed. So, in one sense, historical consciousness has merely brought theory into line with practice. Scripture has always functioned in a way that involved the living community. It never functioned in some absolute, unqualified, mechanical way, even though this was often presumed in theories about scripture (understood as blueprint, charter, constitution, inspired revelation, timeless word of God). You cannot talk of the authority of scripture apart from the religious community on its ongoing historical journey (that is, apart from its tradition). You cannot talk of authority, scripture or tradition in isolation. Graham has well expressed it: 'A text becomes scripture in living, subjective relationship to persons and to historical tradition. No text ... is sacred or authoritative in isolation from a community' (Graham 1987: 134).

It should be obvious that this historical consciousness has affected the understanding of tradition as much as of scripture. The awareness of inevitable change that constitutes this historical consciousness reveals that tradition persists only as a continual process of

reinterpretation. The role of tradition, too, has been discovered to be anything but simple. In 1983 Hobsbawm and Ranger edited a remarkable book showing that so many 'time-honoured' and 'immemorial' traditions have been rather recently invented. They describe the overmastering impulse, beginning about 1870 and peaking around 1900 and spreading right across the world, to invent traditions in every aspect of national life – in politics, education, recreation as well as religion (again we meet a phenomenon broadly cultural rather than narrowly religious). National festivals, stamps and statues, anthems and flags, uniforms, military parades, monuments and jubilees are all quite modern. The creation of national symbolism where none before existed was not unconnected with the changing context. In the West there arose an urgent need to popularise traditional institutions as politics became mass politics. (The ritualism of the British monarchy increased in inverse proportion to the political power of the sovereign.) 'Traditions' were taking hold quite widely; around that time the British began to invent native 'African traditions' such as tribal divisions and customary law. Hobsbawm and Ranger's book focused on a particular period and Britain primarily, but it made a serious point of wide application; so often, in claims about the past, far more is going on than meets the eye. Very often the claim 'this is our tradition' is not a statement about the past at all (just as the claim 'our scripture says' is not necessarily a statement in any strict sense about the meaning of a document); it is a statement about the present – most often a statement of what the present might, or even should, be.

## Charisma

I have spoken above of the living community, without specifying how a community operates. Here, obviously, due allowance must be made for the influence of the gifted individuals within a community, and we naturally move to our third focus of religious authority, charisma (from the Greek *charis*, 'grace' or 'favour', although the word is not widely found in profane Greek, the roots of our concept being in St Paul). The currency of the concept in contemporary study of religion comes from Weber, who treated the phenomenon at length (Weber 1978). Weber's concern was to distinguish types of leader: traditional, rational-legal and charismatic. The third type is based upon the perception of followers that an individual is endowed with exceptional (even divine) qualities. (Thus the concept of 'charisma' is just as much a relational term as 'scripture'.) Weber's ideal-type charismatic leader possesses authority based on his own qualities rather than on tradition or rational considerations. He offers a new revelation and way of life, demands obedience to his mission, and imposes new obligations. Charismatic leadership is unpredictable, personal and unstable, and hence normally must become 'routinised' if the mission of the originator is to persist.

This kind of authority is found most purely in shamanism or primal religions generally. In many religions of Africa, the most obvious religious figures are the healer-diviner, the witch and the medium. Some healer-diviners may be considered to have come by their skills through learning from their predecessors, but usually all three are considered to derive their exceptional gifts from the spirits. Some, particularly the spirit mediums, can even be taken over by their indwelling spirits in ecstatic trances. It is this possession that gives the charismatic religious figure his or her authority. Although charismatic authority is regarded with some suspicion in the increasingly bureaucratised West, it should not be thought that charisma is restricted to 'primal' religions. For one thing, for many scholars of religion it is the founders of the world religions that are the classic examples of this phenomenon. In Jewish tradition, Moses has been considered to have been endowed with the prophetic

gifts to such a degree that he was 'the greatest of the prophets'. Jesus taught 'as one having authority, and not as the scribes' (Mk 1,22). Muhammad is understood to have possessed more *barakah* (blessing) than any other man. ('*Barakah*' is an important Islamic concept generally.) The Buddha was said to have had an aura surrounding his body, bringing all he met into submission. For another thing, it is the charismatic leaders of New Religious Movements (NRMs) who constitute a key focus of contemporary religious research.

Frequently charisma links with the other sources of authority considered above. As noted earlier, charisma must become routinised into standardised procedures and structures if the group is to persist beyond the life of the figure who triggered it, but in themselves charisma and tradition tend to tug in different directions. So charisma and tradition inevitably enjoy a somewhat conflictual relationship. With scripture, however, charisma often has an almost symbiotic relationship. Many charismatic leaders of NRMs ground their authority in texts. Someone like David Koresh of the 1993 Waco tragedy, in which 86 people died in a stand-off with US law enforcement agencies, possessed authority not just because of personal qualities, but because he was able to convince others that he was part of the end-time events supposedly predicted in scriptures. (His Branch Davidians were an offshoot of the millenarian Seventh Day Adventists.) American televangelists, the focus of so many studies of charisma, depend upon their own gifts but at the same time take care to anchor their authority in scripture. Scripture actually functions to reinforce their personal charismatic authority. Gurus of many religions win and hold their following to the extent that they are seen to reveal the 'real' meaning of scripture.

### An example

As a concluding illustration of several of the foregoing points, consider Sikhism. The founder of Sikhism was Guru Nanak (1469–1539 CE), who was succeeded by nine other Gurus. The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1675–1708 CE) decreed that the line of Gurus would stop with him, ultimate authority being shared thereafter by both the Panth (community) and the Adi Granth (also known as the Guru Granth Sahib, the collection of writings of the Gurus – and some precursors – assembled essentially by the fifth Guru but given final form by the tenth).

Historical criticism shows that Guru Nanak, the undisputed founder of the religion, discounted outward observance, teaching that true religion is interior, and liberation is achieved through inward meditation directed to Akal Purakh (the 'Timeless Being') who reveals himself in the *nam* or divine name, and brings liberating karma, when transmigration comes to an end. This is achieved through *nam simaran*, a regular discipline of inner meditation that focuses on the omnipresence of the divine name. Such teaching was current among the Sants of North India at the time, thus 'effectively destroying any claims to significant originality' (McLeod 1989: 23). However, over time circumstances transformed Sikhism. The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, institutionalised the community in the *Khalsa* in 1699, and began the formation of its special code of conduct (*Rahit*), which evolved throughout the eighteenth century. Over this time what had been a religion of interiority assumed an ever more exterior identity, marked particularly by uncut hair and the bearing of arms (militancy had first developed under the fifth, ninth and tenth Gurus especially). Under British occupation, a reform movement begun in the late nineteenth century attempted for the first time to distinguish Sikhs from Hindus. The self-understanding and marks of identity established over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are still determinative today.

The Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth*, is given enormous respect. Its mere presence constitutes any room or building a *gurdwara* (temple). No one may sit on a level higher than the lectern on which it is placed. Sikhs marry by circling it four times. Daily prayers are derived from it. Yet paradoxically, 'Within the Panth itself knowledge of the actual contents of the *Adi Granth* is very limited' (ibid.: 88). A second work, the *Dasam Granth*, had in the eighteenth century almost the same respect as the *Adi Granth*; now 'the *Dasam Granth* as a whole is seldom invoked and little understood' – probably because 'the material which dominates the narrative and anecdotal portion ... is scarcely consonant with the preferred interpretation of the Sikh tradition' (ibid.: 90–1). On yet a third level of scripture are works by two distinguished Sikhs of the Guru period, Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal. Both 'are explicitly approved for recitation in *gurdwaras* and as such they constitute a part of what we may regard as an authorized Sikh canon' (ibid.: 92). In practice, however, both are 'seldom read or heard' (ibid.: 94), probably because their spirit and content are so different from what the *Khalsa* came to be. A further class of scripture comprises the *Janam-sakhis*, cycles of narratives of the first Guru, very hagiographical, often miraculous. 'Although they have never been accepted as sacred scripture, their immense popularity has conferred on them a major role in the sustaining and transmission' of the Nanak tradition (ibid.: 97–8) – in our sense, made them enormously authoritative. Still another set of works, known as the *Gurbalas*, concentrates on tales of the two warrior Gurus, the sixth, Hargobind, and particularly the tenth, Gobind Singh, whose ideals inspired the eighteenth-century *Khalsa*. There is yet other literature, notably of the Singh Sabha or nineteenth-century reform movement, that offer the traditions reinterpreted in the light of Western ideals, but there is no space to elaborate on them here. I have merely outlined this history and this range of texts to illustrate the complex ways in which the community has regulated itself and (something slightly different) claimed it was regulating itself. The community has transformed itself over time. The 'traditional' practices and self-understanding have evolved in accordance with changing conditions. Revered and theoretically decisive scriptures are unstudied and neglected, because of their lack of harmony with later tradition; other books, not part of any canon, are far more influential or authoritative in determining the life of the community, because so compatible with later tradition.

Sikhism is a religion that is quite specific where authority lies: it is virtually undisputed that the mystically present Guru persists equally in the Panth and the *Adi Granth*. This theoretically precise doctrine, however, leaves much unresolved. Radical ambiguity persists in the translating of mystical authority into actual decisions. The *Adi Granth* provides 'little specific guidance on issues relating to the *Rahit*, and differences of opinion quickly emerge whenever the attempt is made to apply its general principles to particular cases' (ibid.: 75). However, in practice, the Panth has learnt to live with 'a radically uncertain theory of ultimate authority' (ibid.: 77). Undoubtedly there are stresses and strains, and certain issues continue to trouble the Panth, but the evolving tradition in most cases offers sufficient guidance to preserve an ongoing identity. We might complete our illustration by noting that it is the historical approach that enables scholars to establish the community's development (we have here followed McLeod, but our point about authority within a community is not narrowly dependent on his reconstruction), and to understand individual books in the light of particular contexts; yet Sikhism itself tends to reject this approach. However, the young Sikhs of the Western diaspora increasingly find such a historical approach unavoidable.

## Conclusion

Religious authority, in practice, is thus a very complex reality. Understanding its various forms is rendered more difficult because so often the accepted theory does not so much reveal as obscure what is going on. We have drawn attention to three aspects or elements: scripture, or sacred books; tradition, or the living community itself as it survives through time; charisma, or exceptionally gifted individuals. Although it is legitimate to consider these separately, we have discovered so often an extremely complex interplay, not made less complex because so often the religion itself claims that there is in question a simple and transparent process. Here, as frequently elsewhere, theory can be one thing, practice another.

## Summary

All human groups need some generally accepted means of resolving major questions, and for religious groups scriptures or authoritative texts, tradition or accepted precedents, and charismatic or gifted individuals have generally performed precisely these functions. These elements operate in very complex ways, often working together. They often function at considerable variance from the ways in which a religion claims they operate. The rise of historical consciousness over the last few centuries has revealed both the complexity and the variance. This chapter outlines the complicated and interrelated workings of scripture, tradition, charisma, with some examples from major religious traditions.

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- Weber, Max, 1978, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, especially I, 241–5; II, 1111–56.

### **Suggested reading**

Barton, John, 1997, *People of the Book*, London: SPCK.

A brief treatment of many of the issues, focusing on the Christian tradition.

Graham, W.A., 1987, 'Scripture', in M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan; and London: Collier Macmillan.

Succinct summary of the issues.

Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger, Terence (eds), 1983, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shows the problematic nature of 'tradition'.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell, 1993, *What is Scripture?* Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press.

A magisterial treatment of all the issues involved, covering all traditions.

Weber, Max, 1978, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, especially I, 241–5; II, 1111–56.

The classic treatment of charismatic leadership.