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**The Gospel of Thomas and the Thomasine Tradition**

*Introduction*

Scholarship has a tendency to be fascinated with traditions due to their capacity of freezing and transmitting valuable information with the purpose of raising possible questions regarding particular cultural and religious trajectories. This is also the case of the so-called Thomasine tradition: “research on Thomasine Traditions continues and will continue for a long time. The Steering Committee of the Thomasine Traditions Group is convinced its work has improved and furthered studies in this very important aspect of early Christian movement. It has placed in focus a tradition whose accessibility has been increased immensely through the find of the Nag Hammadi Library in the year 1945. The *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2), the *Book of Thomas* (NHC II,7), and the *Acts of Thomas* are a corpus of texts showing clear relations of an intertextual nature (if they are not the products of a single community) of unparalleled importance for the understanding of a small and now lost branch of Christianities”.¹

However, before asking what is or could be a ‘Thomasine tradition’ one should provide a compelling plural perspective on the main texts upon which scholars have based their assumptions, from the *Gospel according to Thomas*² to the *Acts of Thomas*³ and the *Book of Thomas the Contender*.⁴

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The research so far has shown that no one would state that there are enough or solid historical proofs in order to claim that such a scholarly construct could have a historical reality. A specific Thomasine tradition has its place only within the realm of the scholarly imagination as a construct which is meant to fill in an internal gap within the nascent conventional Christian world. This gap presents itself as an imaginary product: is a scholarly construct, a blanket concept designed to catch similarities and to freeze differences in order to connect different types of texts.

Tradition

If the general question would be “what is a tradition?” then this already opens an indefinite series of avenues in order to tackle the question which is at work behind the question “what is the meaning of the Thomasine tradition?” This question presupposes two strands. First, the Thomasine tradition was specific for a certain community, and second, this construct had and still has a strong meaning for the scholarly world involved in research of the Thomasine writings. However, this roughly implies something which is not happening in reality: there are no scholars who study all the supposed Thomasine documents concomitantly or at all with a view to developing a theoretical framework for the Thomasine tradition. This fact is helpful to


understand that the main spokesmen of a Thomasine tradition had no grasp of all textual realities proposed by such a plural textual environment.\(^5\)

An accepted general approach on the concept of tradition such as that of Edward Shils, who in 1981 has published an important book called *Tradition*, has managed to provide some guidelines for further approaches of this multilayered concept.\(^6\) Shils illustrates how the concept of tradition was ‘thought of’ and ‘used.’ For Shils, one has conceived tradition as a dimension of the social structure.\(^7\) Tradition means anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present.\(^8\) Any tradition is but a sequence of variations about themes received and transmitted.\(^9\) And finally, tradition is the accumulated understanding of a text.\(^10\) Shils’ perspective emphasizes some of the possible lines of description for that which has generally been coined as ‘tradition.’ Starting from this general point of inquiry and following Shils’ ideas, one can address two preliminary questions: 1. How is it possible to announce a tradition? No scholar representative of the Thomasine tradition has yet questioned if it is possible to speak about such a particular tradition. They have just spoken about it as if there are no counterarguments or as if they can create a story to match the historical reality. 2. How does one arrive at a point so as to propose a tradition? The wealth of documents which bear the name Thomas is the reason why this tradition exists. However, no hints were given on how one has arrived at such an idea as the Thomasine tradition. By building up on the name of Thomas the scholarship has succeeded in ignoring the textual realities and in promoting a ‘new’ tradition.

After several past attempts to survey the Thomasine research,\(^11\) this new enterprise explores here how it was possible at all to accept such a hypothesis. One has to follow the tread of

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\(^{10}\) Edward Shils, *Tradition*, p. 17.

interpretation ‘from’ the Gospel of Thomas (hereafter Thomas), ‘through’ the dialogue called the Book of Thomas the Contender until / or the romance called Acts of Thomas. This approach is necessary since the understanding of Thomas as a text is scholarly linked with the so-called Thomasine tradition to which it is believed to be an incipient and trend setting component.

Scholarly works on Thomas have constantly employed problematic umbrella-concepts such as ‘community’ and ‘tradition’ as operational. By default, these general concepts raise complex sets of questions because instead of being means for a proper historical interpretation of the ancient texts, they were mostly used with the intention to prove or contradict various modern scholarly theories devoted to big frameworks of thought. Within these frameworks Thomas has its own place.13

Gospel of Thomas and “Tradition”

With the Gospel of Thomas,14 we enter abruptly within the debates about the plural and multiform early Christian ‘communities.’ These debates are still in a tumultuous ongoing process. However, a textual analysis convincingly illustrates the discrepancies of the manufactured theories about ‘community’ or ‘tradition,’ which do not describe the particular social conditions of texts such as the Gospel of Thomas as well as the other texts discussed here.

What strikes the reader’s attention in such scholarly works is that the combination of various ideas from specific textual realities has allowed them to shape a construct in which the same ideas are ‘understood’ as forming a special type of singularity. Within the scholarly works

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13 By framework of thought, I mean the theoretical space created within the analysis of Christianitites, Philosophy, Ethics, and other worlds of ideas at work within Gospel of Thomas and in which this textuality was already at work.
the sets of ideas present in the Thomasine textualities were analyzed from two opposite directions. On the one side, these ideas were seen as part of their understanding of these textualities, and on the other side, they were merely used as reinforcements for their frameworks of thought. Such sets of ideas were pre-molded in order to be useful for the consolidation of the frameworks of thought already at work solely within their own particular scholarly conventional spaces. In the case of the Gospel of Thomas, one can read how the first narratives show detailed analyses of how the name Thomas has travelled within the scholarly works from a conventional space defined by the idea of the ‘apostle’ towards the more recent theological biased space circumscribed around the idea of the ‘saint’ Thomas.

Nevertheless, scholarly work implied the use of complex sets of methodologies in order to make the historical movement of early Christianity’s ideas more convergent to a binary framework of thought which works for all accepted systems of ideas. In a repeated and one-sided narrative manner, the results have been delivered as constructed religious communities, several types of Christians, specific differences and acknowledged similarities, and eventually all these aspects converge into one wide scholarly Jesus’ tradition.  

However, in this specific case one can ask why academic research shows such a strong desire to claim that behind this text should stand a community? And why should this community further develop a tradition, a school or even a special kind of ‘Christianity,’ which appears to be different from the conventional accepted Christianity?

The conventionally accepted and promoted image can be challenged only if the following questions are acknowledged as a task by and for the scholarship. Thus, what is a tradition in this fluid cultural context of nascent Christianities? How can one speak about a tradition in

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the period of nascent ‘Christianity’ or Christianities? How can one speak about one tradition as it were a singular and pure product in such a plural world of ideas? These questions are meant to direct the general reader to the main problem that circumscribes the topic of this paper and its particular aim, namely, towards the scholarly qualification of any analysis on topics related to the early Christianities as being balanced in-between the intertwined theological and historical approaches. Therefore, one should agree that the early Christianities have been a plural set of socio-historical phenomena. Consequently, one has to read such textualities as intrinsic parts of the diverse architectures of the historical process at work within heterogeneous ideological directions. Since the process of domestication of textualities that belong to the Other Christian rather than to the Canonical Christian is still at work today, any further research should avoid the deep-rooted phenomenon of intentional misreading.

The Gospel of Thomas belongs to the beginning of what is conventionally called Late Antiquity and within which numerous interpretative processes have marked this historical period. To asses better this plural document which is the Gospel of Thomas, it is necessary for us to make use of a variety of perspectives which would include as many angles as possible. Due to the complexity of ideas found in Thomas we should undertake a rigorous reading that will emphasize the dynamics of analysis unfolding in time, instead of a never-ending static narration of these theories. Such a complex approach will fossilize from the very beginning a great deal of the general recurrent statements present in the studies dedicated to the Gospel of Thomas and would allow for a proper reading of such a plural textuality.

While the reading on Thomas, established scholars have sought to delineate as clearly as possible some orchestrated fixations for the Gospel of Thomas (like dating of, language,
relationship with New Testament, belonging to the Gnostic thinking, and provenance)\(^{19}\) and have preserved a continuous state of uncertainty around this plural text. The trajectories of scholarly reading have become history in themselves and have entered within the self-accepted circle of academic themes, and they have become eventually one of the most powerful contemporary academic fixations. The path which scholars followed from the Gospel of Thomas to the so-called Thomasine traditions was short but very significant from numerous methodological points of view.\(^{20}\)

The Thomasine Tradition

It was Henri-Charles Puech in 1957 who connected the Gospel of Thomas with other texts with which it was supposed to share common traits.\(^{21}\) Since that moment, every scholar who sought to emphasize this aspect made use of Puech’s arguments and tried to strengthen his point of view. Consequently, the advancements in Thomas scholarship shed light upon the whole concept of the so-called Thomasine tradition but have remained within the narrow limits of Puech’s analysis until today. This means that this concept is based on the developments of contemporary scholarship’s discursive imagination and not on the intrinsic historical connections possible in-between these documents.

The process of labeling revolves and develops around the Gospel of Thomas. The Thomasine labeling is a scholarly construction and it is essentially a dynamic definitional practice. The main purpose of this construction is to achieve the knowledge of this textuality by using a kind of family resemblance. The scholarly work has managed to read only the exteriority of Thomas,

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rather than to undertake a minute research of each text and later on to be able to bring everything together. Moreover, all the textualities under scrutiny were not read with the intention of identifying a tradition, since their understanding has not been achieved yet. The Gospel of Thomas has proved itself to be an extremely complex text which has not been recognized until now as a plural textuality. However, when it is put in relation with Acts of Thomas it appears to be domesticated and easier to be categorized and situated somewhere convenient for various theoretical purposes. On the other hand, when the Gospel of Thomas is related to the Book of Thomas it raises different sets of questions, showing a quite different research agenda.

Further questions still linger on, such as: is it possible to establish a defining process of these texts as forming a compact logical tradition? One safe answer will be no. This defining

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process is fluid. These textualities are not convergent towards a religious community or something similar. Why is this necessary? The necessity of such detail resides in the clarity of the historical approach. Is there an added value to the research of early Christianity, Gnosticism, or any another ‘common’ convention of current research agendas? Yes and no. The historical research is not a rhetorical exercise. Early Christianity is not a category in itself. The research agendas are fluid, stratified and theoretical reproductive organisms. Is it possible to have a totally different integrative perspective on these texts? Any integrative perspective on these textualities reflects the views of the reader. The integration is within the early Christianities. How can we escape from the danger reminded by the words of Hobsbawn who emphasized that: “Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.”25 This danger will be always-already there to protect us from assuming that the process of domestication is something natural to accept.

The second aim of this paper is to identify this danger looming within the scholarship’s reading of ancient documents and to neutralize it by emphasizing new possibilities of reading the blend of discourses used by the scholarship on the Gospel of Thomas. In order to do so, one has to put forth a detailed overview of the assessments on the so-called Thomasine labeling. To begin with, one can explore below what has been constructed until now within these particular scholarly enterprises: (a) the trajectories proposed by Puech, Turner, Layton, Riley and Patterson and to identify how and why this scholarly construct emerges and evolves until nowadays; (b) the Thomasine tradition seen as a scholarly construct; (c) the internal debates around such complex concepts like tradition, community, readers, discourse, academic obsessions within the religious studies ‘programme’.

**Thomasine labeling**

The Thomasine labeling is an ongoing scholarly enterprise which progresses and entangles several types of theoretical constructs. This type of research shows in detail how it constantly rethinks itself, and it enables us to see how its earlier hypotheses are reenacted and former debates are constantly upgraded from different perspectives.

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During the definitional process of what could be called the ‘Thomasine labeling’ one can track the following logical steps implied in the definitional dynamic: (1) To identify the meaning of Thomasine labeling. An important part of the scholarly work is to become aware of what the researcher is doing, and moreover, how s/he is doing his/her work. There are more than methodologies involved in her enterprise, there are also agendas which are replicated and upgraded. (2) To detail the way in which we are able to explain the nature of Thomasine labeling. Any explanation adds details to the event under scrutiny, namely the nature of what is called Thomasine labeling. The series of details will allow the researchers to understand what they are doing when labeling these textualities together. (3) To outline the ways through which we are able to fix distinctly the Thomasine labeling. The reasons that the scholarly work puts forth allow pinning down the Thomasine labeling as a real scholarly enterprise. (4) To determine the boundaries of Thomasine labeling. These limits are within the margins of early Christianities. This aspect needs constant re-evaluations. (5) To make clear the outline of the Thomasine labeling. To be able to provide a clear description will enlarge and add value to the outline of Thomasine labeling. (6) To establish the meaning of Thomasine labeling. Only the proper historical research will offer viable reasons to the researcher of the Thomasine textualities to place his/her intention developed within the process of the Thomasine labeling. From the first step to the last one, the researcher of the early Christianities may identify his own awareness at work in reading textualities such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Acts of Thomas and the Book of Thomas. The whole dynamical process takes place within actions such as identification, specifics, demarcation, shaping, illustrating, and setting up the scholarly intentions.

In order to be able to provide a proper understanding to the Thomasine research we have to de-construct all the previous perspectives on the Thomasine tradition. We have to follow their internal design. The main reason to do this is to understand why they still fit comfortably within today’s research environment of the early Christianities. And, of course, retrospectively, one has to understand how these perspectives are working when are put in front of today’s examinations. This meta-step lets the researcher with the opportunity to claim a proper evaluation of such a research enterprise dedicated to the early Christianities. However, at a second level of examination, we have to understand that today’s evaluations are helpful only if one reads them as the latest results of the intertwined scholarly opinions already at work.26

The so-called Thomasine tradition, the theoretical construction as introduced by Henri-Charles Puech and constantly refined by other scholars until now, has gained important terrain within the research of the apocryphal literature. These developments make use of the same discursive

26 This is not a critique. The basic presuppositions of any critique on the research of the Gospel of Thomas at work today are responsible for activating this type of deconstructive approach and for enabling new avenues for future research.
elements (the name Thomas, Edessa, the twin motif, the Syriac language)\textsuperscript{27} that historically shed little light to the conversation on these three texts under examination. This enterprise exemplifies convincingly the ways in which ‘a’ tradition was put together from divergent smaller pieces, namely, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Acts of Thomas* and *Book of Thomas* (only revolving around the name of Thomas). However, such an endeavor is not without consequences for the research of these texts.

The theory on the *Thomasine tradition* was coined soon after the discovery of *Gospel of Thomas* when scholars established it almost as a sort of *claimed tradition*.\textsuperscript{28} In this specific case ‘claimed tradition’ means: a scholarly claim that, there, within the streamed discourses which belong to the early Christianities, a tradition is discursively imagined. Scholars have stated that such a tradition was possible and has existed somewhere in the Syriac linguistic geography. On the one hand, the discourse professed by scholars is deceptively an integrative one by bringing all these texts under the same umbrella. On the other hand, by employing such concepts they have distorted from the beginning the way in which these texts should be perceived bringing to life in this way a non-existent reality.\textsuperscript{29}

The problematic of traditions is a recurrent issue in the contemporary debates around texts, authors, and contexts. Traditions are often implied and textualities are put forth as witnesses of historical situations that remain unchallenged. Religious and non-religious figures are assigned as pivots of traditions or of similar inherited ways of reasoning. The complex multifarious set of circumstances, historical situations, social conditions, cultural mediums, religious milieus, flexible locations are significant traces in the processes of claiming traditions. One can realize, for instance, that such enterprises can be described not only departing from a religious figure


\textsuperscript{29} Their discourse is biased by the use of these concepts: by employing them the historical reality is distorted.
as Jesus to the gospel tradition(s) but also to the contemporary New Age mise-en-scène. The Gospel of Thomas is caught from the beginning of its research into a playground of a complex web of hypotheses, namely, date, language, relationship with the New Testament, Gnostic nature, provenance. Scholars have concomitantly used in their discourse the traditions contained in the Gospel of Thomas and/or the traditions which contain the Gospel of Thomas. This type of scholarly attitude is reputedly questionable because no reading of the scholarly works on Thomas allows one to arrive at this dichotomy between the traditions contained within Thomas and those which contain Thomas in itself. I mean Thomas as it is in its Coptic form. This methodological situation establishes a puzzling position on and for Thomas when it is read as a double witness within the Jesus tradition(s).

One may wonder if the label of tradition is operational in historiography. This surfaces as one of the most challenging questions raised here. Until nowadays no scholar engaged in the study of Thomas has managed to demonstrate that the label tradition is useful in historiography. Such a label as the Thomasine tradition has no use in the study of early Christianities due to its fictitious character. Being an invention, it cannot fill any historical gap. As it was already argued this should not be the case: “[…] the notion of ‘tradition’ should not be taken as an analytical category in historiography.” The reason why ‘tradition’ should not be used as an analytical category in historiography resides in its peculiarity to generate ‘alternatives’ which are far from being what is understood to be proper history. However, in general, the ‘claimed traditions’ are always in a state of competition within their own framework and, due to their situation of identity formation, also within their ecosystemic pluralism. One may acknowledge that identity and ‘tradition’ are always bound to the discursive processes of power at work within the Academia. Nonetheless, identity is tied to the processes of territorialization and deterritorialization visible within the fluid cultural continuum of the early Christianities. As von Stuckrad asserts, ‘traditions’ are constantly in a process of negotiation within complex

processes of cultural exchanges and there are no descriptions of traditions that can be conceived as neutral. He understands ‘tradition’ as being “an emic term that can be applied scholarly in a discursive way only, describing its varying uses, functions, and contexts. It is not a candidate for an etic term in religious studies. Although there are identifiable continuities in the history of religions, these continuities do not necessarily constitute ‘tradition.’ Instead, ‘tradition’ is the evocation and application, if not the invention, of a set of continuities for certain identifiable purposes”.


Henri-Charles Puech established ‘the connection’ between the Gospel of Thomas and Acts of Thomas starting from the peculiar form of the apostle’s name. After Puech published his insights, the advancements of the research were in the same vein, no one offered a solid, viable, alternative position. The theoretical puzzle of this so-called tradition was not complicated solely by the missing historical elements, but also greatly by the conventions used to create and preserve it. The scholarship developed a story around this entangled puzzle, a scholarly narrative that became the narrative in this specific case and about these particular texts.

The scholarship ostensibly has been playing with the space made possible by the missing element: the whole construction of the Thomasine labeling collapses ‘if’ there is no real

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historical connection between *Thomas*, *Book of Thomas*, and *Acts of Thomas*; ‘if’ *Thomas* is not from Syria, but *Acts of Thomas* is from Syria, and *Book of Thomas* is not from Syria; and finally, ‘if’ the name *Thomas* is just a co-incidence. However, these ‘ifs’ hide what appears to be the real problem: Thomassine labeling is a clear case of an indefinite basic conjecture: we have incomplete information at our disposal and no reliable proof has been yet found; or, it could be an undecidable conjecture: one, which due to the lack of proper evidence cannot be proven false by a counterexample, like, for instance, the missing historical elements.

*The first moment: PUECH (1957/1978)*

This research moment is the most significant one in the research of the *Gospel of Thomas* in general. By its premises it had influenced and determined the next paths which the research took. Puech’s authority as a towering scholarly figure grounded the beginning of the research on the *Gospel of Thomas* and validated the path at work at the end of 1940s. The theories of *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, the already old phenomenologies and the search for ‘origins’ expose a blanket of actions touched by the new intensities brought up by the newly discovered textualities such as those belonging to the *Nag Hammadi Codices*.

Puech connected his understanding about a tradition related to the name of ‘Thomas.’ From the beginning of his research on the *Gospel of Thomas*, he was careful when presenting *Thomas*. Puech analyzed and emphasized the name, ‘Thomas.’ He did this with some success on the market of academic ideas at the end of 1950’s. Puech expressed his view on *Thomas* before the so-called official publication of the Coptic text appeared. For him, the name Didymus Judas Thomas in the *Gospel of Thomas* had to be associated with the Christianity developed in eastern Syria, somewhere around Edessa. He connects the *tradition* with *Acts of Thomas* §11, and for him the literary relationship is demonstrated by connecting *Acts of Thomas* §136 with *Thomas* §2, *Acts Thomas* §147 with *Thomas* §22, *Acts of Thomas* §170 with *Thomas* §52, *Acts of Thomas* §14 with *Thomas* §37, and *Acts of Thomas* §92 with *Thomas* §22.36 In this case, at a
later reading, Patterson held that Puech did not develop “these observations into a thesis concerning the provenance of the Gospel of Thomas, most have taken the preponderance of the ‘Judas Thomas’ tradition in the East as decisive for locating the Gospel of Thomas there”.37 Not even a thesis!

The impact of Puech’s ideas on this aspect was tremendous, and they continue to be influential and unchallenged. One reason can be that the imagined projection used by him suits and does not disturb the accepted scenarios of the current scholarship.38


38 See James M. Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Story, on the French monopoly on the Gospel of Thomas and the Nag Hammadi Codices.
The second moment: TURNER (1972, 1975)

This second scholarly landmark in the history of the Thomasine research has more to do with the research of Nag Hammadi Codices than with accommodating Thomasine research within the general research environment. Turner searched for a theoretical place for the Book of Thomas within the already established market of ideas. John Turner studied the Book of Thomas thoroughly and has published his results in 1972 and 1975. However, by starting his research from the point left by Puech, he 'connects' the Book of Thomas with the Gospel of Thomas and/or the Acts of Thomas. Turner makes his claims about the Book of Thomas clearly “[t]his document, in company with the Gospel of Thomas and the Acts of Thomas, constitutes a witness to the tradition concerning the deeds of the Apostle Judas Didymus Thomas, the twin brother of Jesus, who figures prominently in the Book of Thomas the Contender. Because that tradition, and therefore much of the Book of Thomas the Contender, probably is at home in East Syria […]”. 39 He neither has any doubts nor does he provide any historical proofs about the existence of such a tradition. For him the sole missing element is the location - ‘probably’ in East Syria. This issue remains a topic animated more than ever nowadays. 40

John D. Turner also establishes their ‘common elements’ by placing them around the ascetic and syncretistic Christians with a mildly gnostic direction. 41 However, at least at the discursive level, this strategy creates the picture of a group, a different one from the dominant Christianity, but nevertheless a group. Turner’s reading shows without hesitation that ‘the dialogue,’ Book of Thomas is another representative of the Apostle Thomas tradition located in the city of Edessa. He thinks that all three works ‘share’ the ascetic theme, dualistic anthropology, the twin motif, and it is possible that due to these themes he founds the proofs for such a tradition. He further restates the echo of Thomas in the Acts of Thomas by using mainly Puech’s findings. 42

This oblique view is only an update of Puech’s and adds nothing to the discussion. However, it remains until now the standard scholarly image of the Thomasine tradition.

Thomas and the Thomasine Tradition

paradigm. Working on the Book of Thomas, Turner has placed it in-between the gospel (based on his reading of Thomas 13) and the romance, due to the fact that here the figure of Thomas is always at the center of the narrative. In Turner’s view these aspects represent a growing tradition centered on the Apostle Thomas, twin of Jesus, recipient of his words. One is able to identify a stratified tripartite issue which takes into account aspects such as location, direction, and setup. The scholarly work has assigned a location which gives enough strength in order to place this label in East Syria. The play in-between assumptions creates for the Gospel of Thomas, Book of Thomas and Acts of Thomas an uncertain situation.

The third moment: LAYTON (1987)

In his book, The Gnostic Scriptures, Bentley Layton begins the part dedicated to Saint Thomas re-proposing associations, ‘ancient tradition,’ and deserved ‘credit’: “Among the most intriguing works of ancient Christian literature are those associated with St. Didymus Jude Thomas, apostle of the East. According to ancient tradition Thomas deserves credit for the conversion of northern Mesopotamia and India to Christianity, and had the signal honor of being Jesus’ ‘double,’ i.e., identical twin”. However, throughout his work, Layton uses a great number of labels such as the Thomas tradition (p. 359), the Thomas literature (p. 360), and the school of St. Thomas (p. 360). However, he offers no explanation for these diverse labels. He also uses Thomas scripture (p. 361), and the Thomas works (p. 361). Why does he use all these labels? It appears that he is undecided about what this material is and where we should place it or in which order texts should be placed should follow. However, he still has a solution at hand for further use, the oldest one: Edessa. Nevertheless, does this bring further clarifications compared to the work done by Puech or Turner? Hardly, since the historical proofs are still missing. It is just a re-iteration of former opinions belonging to the accepted, but not historically argued, scholarly paradigm.


In a seminal paper from 1991, Gregory J. Riley somehow opened a different path of research by connecting Thomas and the Gospel of John, and imagined a Thomas community that looked

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at the apostle Thomas for spiritual legitimacy and created the Thomas tradition. Not long after Riley’s paper, Paul-Hubert Poirier had presented his disagreement with Riley’s interpretation on the Doubting Thomas pericope and had stressed the drawback of taking for granted the existence of pre- or extra-Johannine Thomas community. The scholarship on early Christianities developed a terminology which allowed the smaller communities to form and to fit into the greater community of Christians in order to suit their aims. Using the figures of Jesus’ disciples, communities such as Johannine, Petrine, Thomasine or Pauline were extrapolated from the texts and given historical reality. However, the readership of these texts only hypothetically formed such communities.

The fifth moment: PATTERSON (1993)

In his 1993’s book *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, Patterson merely reads and describes Puech’s undeveloped observations and then moves on and presents the ideas of Barbara Ehlers as “the only serious challenge to this convention” and mentions, of course, the inefficient answer offered by Klijn as a reply against Barbara Ehler’s opinion. Patterson claims something more than his predecessors who have dealt with this issue, namely he tries to understand Thomas tradition as a historical phenomenon. His imagined *Thomas Christianity* is a construct to which he wants to give some historicity. How does he accomplish this? Patterson is almost convincing when he states that the sayings from Thomas are without parallel in the synoptic tradition and stand for an argument for a history that is closely connected to the earliest phase of the Jesus movement(s).
Labels

After surveying these five major opinions about the possible connections or major hypotheses on Thomasine research, a first conclusion is that these opinions are not so different from one another nor do they contradict themselves. The ideas employed are refined variations of the same algorithmic complex. Nevertheless, the scholarly discourses related to the so-called Thomasine tradition belong to a particular research paradigm which embodies the scholarly work asymmetrically dedicated to textualities like the Gospel of Thomas, Book of Thomas, or Acts of Thomas. A simple enumeration of fossilized non-historical elements is enough to acknowledge that such research is empty of content. Since nowadays there is no attempt to challenge those perspectives mentioned above (tradition, community, Christianity, or school) one may believe that the scholarly conventions, which bias the research of the beginning of Late Antiquity, are influential enough to protect themselves and not to allow anything to deconstruct them.

The process of examining the labels together with the differences (and similarities) is necessary if one looks for a clear picture in Thomas on particular and the Thomasine research in general. However, do we need all these labels in order to grasp the meaning of this textual paradigm? Do we really need this type of reasoning on Thomas and the other texts involved? Why has this fixation on the issue of trajectories even emerged? The Gospel of Thomas, Book of Thomas and Acts of Thomas have entered within a particular scholarly paradigm and have not been read as diverse literary products belonging to specific time frameworks and locations. Their readings were intentionally entangled according to the research agendas (starting from Puech up to Patterson) which have emphasized only similarities and have avoided to point out differences. This type of inquiry had continuously attempted to propose a generic reading to all three textualities. However, the scholarly work has never established that only through the empty process of labeling these textualities are parts of a totality. And if such an integrative intention was on the research agendas already at work, then it has not achieved its goals until today.

Poirier (1996, 1997) and Sellew (2001) tried to provide tentative answers to the question: ‘what are we calling Thomasine tradition?’ Unfortunately, their research fails to stress the concept of community, which structurally goes hand in hand with it. Poirier has emphasized the lack of homogeneity of this so-called tradition and pinpoints strictly towards a ‘Thomas literary tradition.’ He does not take for granted a Thomas community and cannot distinguish a school of ‘saint’ Thomas. His engagement with the Thomasine tradition is encapsulated in this

Petru Moldovan

quote: “This inquiry into the Thomas tradition has so far been limited to a specific phase of its history, namely the portion which remains accessible through literary documents.” Sellew is also careful when he assesses previous scholarship on the Thomasine tradition and rejects constructions such as Thomasine community or Thomasine Christianity (see above Riley’s perspectives) due to the lack of historical evidence. Moreover, Sellew believes that “this sort of evidence need not point to anything beyond the existence of a literary influence (and presumably also an ideological influence) of one or two of these books on the others. Readers and authors can recognize and encourage these similarities and allusions without such features necessarily requiring a distinct community of Thomas faithful to be understood”.54

Thomaisne tradition

To tackle the concept of Thomasine tradition, within a nascent Christian ‘tradition’ and part of the later one, is not an easy task without enough historical elements and based only on scholarly conjectures that work only within a particular scholarly paradigm. All past and present theoretical frameworks have a weak foundation. The solution, if there is such a thing, lies in what these texts offer to the reader. These textualities will be read together only if the reader will still remain, in the future, mesmerized by the non-name (as it is known ‘Thomas’ is not a proper name) ‘Thomas.’ The scholarly works on these textualities have already examined them from the perspective of the name ‘Thomas’ (an apostle/Saint) for the importance of the name ‘Thomas’ (a literary topos scattered in different time frameworks and geographical locations). The whole scholarly enterprise around the non-name acts like a simulacrum of the famous analysis given by Derrida to Nietzsche’s Ecce Homo where “He [Nietzsche] advances behind a plurality of masks or names that, like any mask and even any theory of the simulacrum, can propose and produce themselves only by returning a constant yield of protection, a surplus value in which one may still recognize the ruse of life. However, the ruse starts incurring losses as soon as the surplus value does not return again to the living, but to and in the name of names, the community of masks”.

Community

The concept of community is necessary to establish the concept of tradition. Without a community, the existence of tradition, be this called ‘Christianity’ or ‘School’ is hardly possible. Everything takes the shape of a chain where one concept follows the another until nowadays. However, what exactly do we call Thomas community in a historical sense, and why? Patterson has emphasized the idea of having in mind a hypothesis about the Thomas community and reading texts from this perspective. By taking into account the article of Bruce Lincoln (1977), as Patterson does, one can easily see how a hypothesis will be the basis for a scholarly constructed reality. Nonetheless, there is no historical evidence for such a construct.

Thomasine Christianity

The concept of the ‘Thomasine Christianity’ is the most sophisticated of the concepts explored and it defies any historical reality. It implies already the existence of a community, and an already established Christian tradition which identifies itself as Thomasine due to its particular characteristics and endeavors or challenges. However, how ‘real’ could this scenario be? What is the Thomas Christianity? Patterson concludes that Thomas Christianity is situated against the world and Thomas Christians had no respect for authority – being itinerants they protested against the world. This ‘loaded’ discourse shows how the discursive practice on the Thomasine research paradigm developed and retained some of its previous ideas. It also unveils its meaning as an interplay of different accepted conventional labels currently at work in the Thomasine and early Christianities research. To Patterson “the communities of synoptic Christianity gradually settled into a more conventional style of living, Thomas Christianity did not. It continued the tradition of marginal social behavior as an expression of its negative evaluation of the world and of its hope in a salvation gained through careful attention to Jesus’ words”. One can ask where lies the strength of such scholarly discourse which proposes at most an imaginative exercise.

57 S. J. Patterson, The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus, pp. 155-156.
58 S. J. Patterson, The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus, p. 170.
Thomasine School

The concept of school was mainly employed by Bentley Layton (1987) who has accepted all the previous views on this matter. I am not implying that Layton used school as the *paideia.* At least not yet. What then is the Thomas School? Why does he have to label it as a school? Layton gives no explanation regarding this issue. He only strengthens the conventional chain initiated by Puech. The whole problem revolves again around the name. Thomas, the twin, which practically is not a name then and there.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to raise several questions about the necessity of using composite types of labeling such as tradition, community, Christianity, and school. Starting with the Gospel of Thomas the scholars have constructed a paradigm in which some of the possible trajectories were argued and / or given detailed ‘descriptions.’ However, one should admit that the Thomasine tradition is but a scholarly construct available within a specific and particular paradigm. It is at work within the readings of early Christian textualities. The implied ‘apostle Thomas’ serves as a blanket-concept for very different types of texts, such as *Gospel of Thomas, Acts of Thomas,* or the *Book of Thomas the Contender.* Why should these texts rather form a family than none? Why is it so easy to speak about tradition starting from these weak hypotheses advanced by scholars? Throughout the years, the scholarship has managed to develop a web of interrelations between these texts as if they were real descriptions. In fact, it is only after the entrance of the *Gospel of Thomas* on the research scene that the scholarship had started to expand the complex net of the so-called Thomasine tradition. One can notice that the scholarship used to employ *Gospel of Thomas* in a variety of ways (e.g. this text is at the same time a means for the understanding of the other early Christian literature or the historical Jesus, but it is also an object of study in itself) and at least on two discursive levels. This hermeneutical action disseminates a dangerous double meaning. Here the meta-discourse may

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60 This web of interrelations has a great significance for the development of this scholarly construct.
Thomas and the Thomasine Tradition

facilitate in-depth understanding of the scholarship’s work regarding the Thomasine tradition. Thomasine tradition, within the Thomasine research paradigm, is a scholarly construct which has been recently coined. As an ideal object for research, it exists only after the Nag Hammadi discovery; this makes it one of the newest trends of scholarship on Thomas. The path of the so-called Thomasine tradition should be studied using a mixture of approaches and looking into different hermeneutic levels. It is also prudent to follow the approaches forged by other disciplines within the Humanities together with those of Social Sciences in order to be able to cover the whole picture of this so-called tradition. Further analysis should reveal that we can do research without using of blanket-concepts and that it can be possible to widen our perspectives starting with the texts itself.

Abstract: The debates about various early ‘Christian’ communities are still in an incomplete and tumultuous never-ending process. This paper illustrates that the manufactured theories about ‘community’ or ‘tradition’ do not describe the particular social conditions of textualities such as the Gospel of Thomas. It is very common to the mainstream scholarship of the early Christianities to put together heterogeneous ideas and to understand them as forming a special type of singularity. This is, in our case, the idea of ‘apostle Thomas.’ The scholarly representatives have tried to use complex sets of borrowed methodologies in order to make

Resumen: Los debates sobre varias de las primeras comunidades “cristianas” todavía se encuentran en un proceso interminable incompleto y tumultuoso. Este artículo muestra que las teorías confeccionadas sobre la “comunidad” o la “tradición” no describen las condiciones sociales particulares de textualidades como el Evangelio de Tomás. Es muy común en la erudición predominante de los primeros cristianos unir ideas heterogéneas y entenderlas como conformando un tipo especial de singularidad. Esta es, en nuestro caso, la idea del “apóstol Tomás”. Los representantes académicos han tratado de utilizar conjuntos

61 The discourse analysis of the scholarship on Thomas is in an incipient state. Historiography could definitely help us with the know how in order to grasp the internal development of this scholarship and its trends.
the historical lines of flight of early Christianity ideas more appealing and to conceal the process of domestication of textualities as the Gospel of Thomas. They have intentionally constructed religious communities, several types of Christians, differences, and similarities; all these aspects have the purpose to join in one wide and domesticated ‘Thomaisne’ tradition. This paper aims to follow the lines of flight as they are programmed by the Thomas-scholars in order to deconstruct such approaches and to provide an alternative reading perspective detached by any kind of theological agenda.

Keywords: Early Christianities; Gospel of Thomas; Thomaisne tradition; Thomaisne labeling; Plural textualty.

complexos de metodologías prestadas para hacer más atractivas las líneas históricas de fuga de ideas del cristianismo primitivo y para ocultar el proceso de domesticación de textualidades como el Evangelio de Tomás. Han construido intencionadamente comunidades religiosas, varios tipos de cristianos, diferencias y similitudes; todos estos aspectos tienen el propósito de unirse en una amplia y domesticada tradición ‘tomasina’. Este artículo tiene como objetivo seguir las líneas de fuga tal como están programadas por los estudiosos de Tomás para deconstruir tales enfoques y proporcionar una perspectiva de lectura alternativa separada de cualquier tipo de agenda teológica.

Palabras clave: Cristianismo primitivo; Evangelio de Tomás; Tradición tomasina; denominación tomasina; Pluralismo textual.