On the wall of my father’s study hangs an eighteenth century Scottish basket hilt sword. As a child I learned that it had been used at the battle of Culloden in 1745 by a Scottish ancestor. However, it was not until I was older that my father felt able to trust me with the full details of the sword’s provenance. The ancestor who used the sword was indeed Scottish. But he fought not on the side of Bonny Prince Charlie, but on the winning side. How else would the weapon have remained in my ancestor’s possession?

My ancestor was a lowland Scottish Presbyterian. Like the majority of Scots fighting at Culloden he fought under English command. He was, moreover, probably a volunteer, unlike the Highlanders, most of whom were victims of a feudal society which demanded military service to their Laird. At Culloden many Scots, lowlanders and highlanders fought against the Young Pretender for religious reasons. They were Presbyterians and the prospect of rule by a Catholic was intolerable. The Rebellion was not simply a war of English oppression against Scots, though terrible oppression followed on from the English victory. The Rebellion was a Scottish civil war. All this may be true, but, I confess, in this instance the truth is less appealing than the myth because it is less romantic. My childish romanticism vis a vis my Scottish ancestry is evidence of the success of an invented tradition.

This paper falls into three parts. Firstly, I will explain the term ‘invented tradition’. Secondly, I will glance at the invention of traditions of British Methodist clerical dress. Of particular interest will be the ways in which the invention of traditions of clerical dress arose from and supported changing perceptions amongst British Methodists of the theological status of the ordained Ministry. The third section will address the question you will already have begun asking yourselves about the relevance of invented traditions for systematic theology. Is it possible to invent a theological tradition, and if it is, does such invention exist in the development of Methodist theological traditions?
The Invention of Tradition is a delightful book, but it serves a serious purpose. "Traditions", writes Eric Hobsbawn, "which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented" (IT p.1). The most obvious example is the pageantry which surrounds the British monarchy in its public and ceremonial manifestations. The Royal opening of the British Parliament, for example, was a ritual devised by a worried Gladstone to address the unpopularity of the British monarchy. 'To speak in rude and general terms' Gladstone confided to his journal 'the Queen is invisible and the Prince of Wales is not respected'. His success, and that of others, in inventing a role for the monarchy is indicated by current dismay in Britain at the unpopularity of the Royal family which is, in fact, merely a return to their traditional position.

By "Invented tradition" Hobsbawn understands 'a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past' (IT p.1). Like the example I have just alluded to, invented traditions in general are normally responses to novel situations which take the form of references to old situations.

In this sense tradition and custom are distinguishable. Custom allows change up to a point, but requires that such change be placed in the context of precedent. The difference between custom and tradition is well illustrated in an English court of law. Custom is what judges do, tradition is the wigs and robes etc., that ritualise their substantive actions. Such traditions only become meaningful when they cease to have any practical use. The wearing of wigs in an English court only becomes a tradition in this sense when English gentlemen ceased daily to wear wigs, a fashion development, incidentally, for which Mr. Wesley can take some little credit. Some traditions, to be sure, have a technical rather than an ideological purpose. Wearing a riding helmet is sensible enough. But wearing a riding helmet in combination with hunting pink makes a quite different kind of sense.

In his entertaining and informative contribution to the volume on the invention of the Highland tradition of Scotland Hugh Trevor Roper begins by imagining a formal gathering of Scotsmen. In such gatherings, the kilt is worn, woven in a tartan whose pattern and colour indicate the clan to which the wearer belongs. If music is

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indulged in, it is played on the bagpipes. However, such ‘traditional’ Scottish paraphernalia is as invented as my childhood interpretation of Scottish history.

In the early eighteenth century a family of English Quakers were prominent as ironmasters in Furness. In 1727, and running short of timber, Thomas Rawlinson made an agreement with Ian MacDonnel, Chief of the MacDonells of Glengarry, to build a furnace on his land where there was a plentiful local supply of wood. To run his furnace Rawlinson employed local Scottish labour and immediately encountered a problem. Traditional highland dress was an ankle length cloak tied up with a belt. This proved to be an unwieldy outfit for men working with fire. Rawlinson, with a local tailor, therefore invented the philibeg, or small kilt, whose ready sown pleats kept it away from dangerous sparks. The kilt was thus invented in the eighteenth century by an Englishman.

Similarly the bagpipes. When the Bonnie Prince departed the shores of Scotland for the last time the farewell lament was played on the traditional instrument of highland Scottish culture, the small harp, now traditionally identified with Ireland.

As Roper shows, a great deal of the romanticisation of Scottish Highland culture was deliberate invention. Much to blame was Sir Walter Scott, who participated in the mid-eighteenth century invention of clan tartans, another late innovation. Such invention was a conscious response to English cultural incursions into Scotland, an invention of identity. One colourful figure forged poems by a wholly fictitious Gaelic poet to add romantic credibility to the idea that there was a lost poetic Gaelic tradition.

Other examples of the invention of tradition are legion. In addition to Hugh Trevor Roper’s essay on the invention of the Highland tradition of Scotland, The Invention of Tradition contains essays on the invention of a Welsh past which included the deliberate romantic invention of Eisteddfods and of Druidism. There is an essay on the invention of the British Monarchy as a deliberate attempt to revive a discredited and unpopular British monarchy in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Other essays deal with British Imperial India, with Africa, and with the mass production of traditions in Europe. More recently questions have begun to be asked about the invention of Celtic spirituality. Very interesting, but, you must be wondering, what has this got to do with Methodist theology? (Indeed, I have been wondering that myself). Answer: Methodist traditions too have sometimes been invented as a result of and in support of developments in Methodist theology. The relation between liturgical dress and a theology of ordained Ministry will serve as an example.
The Invention of British Methodist liturgical dress.

In an enjoyable pamphlet published by the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship Norman Wallwork offers a critical history of Methodist Liturgical dress from 1786-1986, titled Blackbirds and Budgerigars. Wallwork traces the progress of Mr. Wesley’s preachers from their beginning to a growing self-consciousness of an identity as true presbyters of the universal church.

When Wesley died in 1791 there was no clear single identity for his preachers. Some Methodist preachers were, like Wesley, Anglican clergymen. A handful of others had been ‘ordained’ by Wesley. Still others had been ordained by Thomas Cooke, or by other ordained preachers. Finally, there were those who had not been ordained at all but who were, nonetheless, in full Methodist Connexion. The privileges and responsibilities of all these categories of preachers were identical.

Following Wesley’s example, his preachers adopted a distinctive style of dress, comprising stockings, breeches, a black riding coat and a linen clerical band folded at the neck (an item of dress probably originally designed to stop grubby beards besmirching shirts and coats). Unless they were in Anglican orders, preachers wore the same costume in study, street and pulpit.

Two preachers however, in 1792, at the request of their Chapel Trustees, donned gowns and bands to read the Anglican liturgy in a Methodist service. Their local Vicar complained, and a debate ensued in the 1793 Conference which led to two resolutions. The first banned gowns, cassocks, bands and surplices from all Methodist pulpits. The second stated that the title Reverend should be dropped, and with it any distinction between ordained and un-ordained brethren. For some years, liturgical dress was dismissed as ‘priestly flunkeyism’. Only fifty years later Conference was awash with complaints from Methodist laity against preachers wearing gowns.

By 1840 Jabez Bunting was speaking up for the use of the gown. His argument was that some preachers were already wearing gowns in Britain and overseas. By now, the debate was becoming heated. One reason was the growth of the distinction between ordained and lay preachers, and the jealousy of the latter towards the former. But the sanction of common practice could no longer be ignored.

In this century the more formal of Wesleyan Ministers took to wearing a clerical frock coat in the pulpit, and a clerical shirt with a stiff linen collar while fulfilling

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their other duties. In the 1960's and '70's, the growth of local ecumenism led to Ministers wearing both cassock and gown, as well as a growing, and to Wallwork at least, a disturbing variety of innovative clerical costumes. Cross fertilisation with American United Methodists, and Anglicans, led to the introduction of coloured preaching scarves. Cassock albs, concludes Wallwork, may be the only decent way out of this confusing melee of costume.

In many documented cases of innovations, historical precedents were cited to justify the departure from normal practice. But the real reasons for change surely lie elsewhere. Mr. Wesley, in spite of several subsequent attempts to demonstrate otherwise, was muddled in his theology of ministry. What we know best is the argument he invented to justify ordaining presbyters for America. But his theological understanding of orders of Ministry can hardly have been known or well developed, otherwise the startling variety in status of his preachers in 1791 could hardly have been permitted. Even today it is arguably technically possible for a British Minister to be accepted by Conference into full Connexion without proceeding to ordination. Reception into full Connexion and ordination in British Methodist practice continue to be distinct events.

One final and more personal example here. I trained for ministry at Wesley House, Cambridge, where my father had trained forty years before me (though without his basket hilt sword, then still a possession of his very Scottish father). My father was told he had to wear a clerical shirt to preach in. Two generations later I was told I must not wear clerical dress prior to leaving college. The change in practice was due to the increasing level of shared ministerial training with Anglican ordinands. The understanding at Wesley House in the late 1940's was that Methodist ministerial students were Probationer Ministers. But when Methodists and Anglicans trained alongside one another, such a theology of ministry could not be sustained. Methodist students had to be seen, like their Anglican colleagues, as ordinands, and clerical dress had now to be discouraged. In this way a theological development was accompanied by a change in practice, and conversely changes in practice had to be supported by a shift in the theology of Ministry.

The fact that the practices and beliefs which arose in Britain are not universal Methodist practice only serves to enhance the point that invented traditions meet a need. Where needs differ, so do the practices that arise to meet them.

It is not only Methodists who invent theological traditions. The idea that Anglicanism is not a Protestant religion, for example, but a via media between Protestantism and Catholicism is an historically identifiable invention of the Oxford
movement as the memorial to the Bishops martyred for their Protestant faith a few yards from here testifies. Such theological developments may not be bad, but they ought honestly to be identified.

**The invention of theological tradition**

Invented traditions can be misused and abused, as well as used. In his introduction to *The Invention of Tradition* Eric Hobsbawm offers two reasons why historians should be interested in invented traditions. Firstly, he suggests, identifying invented traditions is important because they can serve as indicators of problems that might not otherwise be recognised. Invented traditions provide clear evidence of changing perceptions, beliefs, values and culture. Secondly, invented traditions throw light on the way their inventors viewed the past. Invented traditions *use* history to cement group cohesion, to give identity. Invented traditions can also provide tools for deliberate and innovative social engineering.

In both these justifications for the study of invented traditions Hobsbawm raises issues that should be of theological interest. One of the fruits of both black and feminist theologies is that the question of *interest* has been put on the agenda for biblical hermeneutics. In whose interest was this passage written? Whose interest does this interpretation serve? What in this reading of Scripture or tradition is eisegesis, and what exegesis, is a crucial theological question.

Invented traditions need not be bad things, any more than change or innovation are necessarily bad. It is not my intention, nor that of the essayists in *The Invention of Tradition*, to suggest that where traditions can be shown to be invented, they have necessarily been invented wilfully to mislead, or with malign intent, though sometimes this is the case. Returning momentarily to the invention of traditions of clerical dress for British Methodist clerics, for a Church to develop its theology of Ministry is not only necessary but right. Wesley has been dead over two hundred years. It is both to be expected and hoped that our theology of ministry will have some consistencies with his, but also some differences. As the late great Gordon Rupp noted about changing fashions in British Methodist clerical dress: ‘Perhaps it is an advantage that from being blackbirds for two centuries, we now begin to look like budgerigars’. Certainly that is Norman Wallwork’s conclusion. ‘It does not harm the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ one whit’ his study concluded ‘if we dress like traditional Christian presbyters and preachers. If we do so, however, let us get it right. For in so far as these things mattered to Mr. Wesley at all, he would have got it right,
and probably seen to it that we did as well’ (BB p.23). There is not necessarily anything wrong with theological innovation. My simple point is that where such change takes place, innovation should not be dressed up in the clothes of historical authority, not even when those clothes are alleged to have once belonged to our sainted father in God.

Traditions are important to Methodists. In an introduction to the papers of the seventh Oxford Institute Douglas Meeks noted that ‘the future of Methodist and Wesleyan Churches are put in jeopardy because of a widespread forgetfulness of their traditions’ (p.10). Remembering Methodist traditions is important, he continued, ‘only because they help us to remember Jesus Christ’ (p.11). But it does matter if those traditions can be demonstrated to be merely the result of recent invention.

To their credit the papers of the Seventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies spoke of the future of Methodist Theological traditions. The reversion in the title of this Institute to the singular ‘Wesleyan theology’ is, in my view, a symptom of our need as Methodists engaged in theology to invent a single Methodist theology. But, as you all know better than I, Mr. Wesley wrote so much in his long life that many of our theological predilections can find some authorisation in his written legacy.

Consciousness of our need to invent traditions may well lead us to be more cautious about justifying our own theological conclusions by reference to Mr. Wesley’s confused and confusing theological scribblings. Why should Wesley continue to be such an important authority for our theology? In whose interest is the maintenance of a distinct Methodist theology? What role does it play in a theological environment where identity is power? Just as clerical dress was invented to give a clear sense of identity to Methodist Ministers struggling for a role in a society dominated by the Church of England, might it be that our recourse to Wesley’s theology is playing a role in establishing our identity, and does this matter? Relative to the theme of our Institute (finally !), these are questions of the use of power, the power of traditions. Questions about the power of tradition assist readers to identify what in their reading is eisegesis, and what exegesis. This is equally true of reading biblical texts and theological traditions. Is it at all possible that we as Methodist theologians invent theological traditions, and authorise them according to equally invented historical traditions, to serve some personal agenda? Is it possible that in our discussions of the trinity in the past two days what we have been engaged in is the invention of novel interpretations of the trinity which we have advertently or
inadvertently authorised by reference to invented interpretations of historical theological precedents?

Hobsbawm’s final introductory comment on the study of invented traditions is that such study is laudably interdisciplinary. ‘It is a field of study’ he writes, ‘which brings together historians, social anthropologists and a variety of other workers in the human sciences, and cannot adequately be pursued without such collaboration’. Why should not systematic theological investigation of invented traditions, at least as a hermeneutical task, not be added to his list.

Finally, what might the implications of the existence of invented traditions have to do with perhaps the most extraordinary invented Christian tradition of them all, the doctrine of the trinity? It was a doctrine which, as Athanasius knew all too well, had powerful political uses.