In institutionalised forms of esotericism from the eighteenth century onwards the construct of tradition is often connected to claims of legitimacy and authority, a fact that is perhaps most obvious in masonic initiatory societies. The question of legitimacy, or regularity as it is often called in Freemasonry, can be seen as a central discourse in this type of organisation, a discourse which often is used in a polemic fashion. Throughout the history of Freemasonry a large number of organisations have been branded as “irregular” or “clandestine” by the so-called “regular” Grand Lodges, but there has always been some confusion regarding which organisations are to be labelled as irregular forms of Freemasonry. According to some, the term only applies to non-regular organisations that claim to “make” Freemasons; that is, organisations that work the three Craft degrees of Freemasonry, while others include so-called High degree systems, or even organisations that are similar to those of Freemasonry but that do not make any formal claims of representing Freemasonry. Sometimes, the term “fringe masonry” is used for the latter groups, a term that was coined by Ellic Howe in 1972 in his study of certain obscure organisations active in England at the end of the nineteenth century. Howe defined fringe masonry in the following manner:

The term ‘fringe Masonry’ is used here for want of a better alternative. It was not ‘irregular’ Masonry because those who promoted the rites did not initiate Masons, i.e. confer the three Craft degrees or the Holy Royal Arch. Hence they did not encroach upon Grand Lodge’s and Grand Chapter’s exclusive preserve.

The definition is clear enough in theory, but in practice Howe was not consistent in using the term. While he was right that Rites such as the Order of Ishmael and the Royal Oriental Order of the Sat B’Hai

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1 I wish to thank Jan A. M. Snoek for his valuable comments and suggestions for this chapter.
did not confer the three Craft degrees, it is another matter with the
*Rites of Memphis and Misraim* and the *Swedenborgian Rite* which in
contrast have claimed to work the Craft degrees and should therefore
be termed “irregular”. The line between irregular and fringe masonry
is often hard to draw, but for the present purpose I will use irregular
masonry for both Craft and High degree variants of Freemasonry that
are not recognised by the regular Grand Lodges, while fringe masonry
is used for groups that make no pretensions of being masonry, but
whose rituals and organisational structure are based on those of Free-
masonry, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. However,
the division between “regular” and “irregular” forms of Freemasonry is
an emic construct that is directly linked to the question of *power*: who
has the *right* to claim to represent genuine Freemasonry? Since it is not
my intention to discuss the claims of regularity of the various forms
of Freemasonry, but rather the construct of tradition and its import
to Freemasonry, these terms are problematic since they are tenden-
tious. From an etic or outsider perspective it is thus perhaps better to
use the terms “conservative” and “liberal” Freemasonry, whereby the
former refers to “regular” and the latter to “irregular” Freemasonry,
but without the implicit biased connotations.

Both liberal and fringe masonic groups have developed strategies
of legitimacy, often based on those of conservative Freemasonry, as
a means to validate themselves, to *prove* that they are authentic. Per-
haps the most important of these strategies is the construct of tradi-
tion. In this chapter I will thus discuss the construct and function of
tradition in conservative, liberal and “fringe” forms of Freemasonry.
I will begin with a brief discussion of the concept of tradition in reli-
gious discourse, and then examine the significance of tradition and
regularity in Freemasonry. Finally, I will analyse three different types
of authority in the construct of tradition in masonry: rational legal,
traditional, and charismatic authority. The final part can be seen as an
exploratory attempt, in which I endeavour to expand the applicability
of Max Weber’s classification of three types of authority.

*The Concept of Tradition*

It could be argued that the concept of tradition stands as a central
discourse in all religions and that it rests upon the assumption that the
originators and the transmitters of religious beliefs and practices are