Fakes and forgeries: Bishop Strossmayer and the vexed question of infallibility

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Philosophy and literary theory have made us familiar with the term: *hermeneutics of suspicion*. Nothing is to be taken for granted in a text – at least there are no assumptions beyond question. What relevance do such theories hold for us as librarian-cataloguers? Cataloguing conventions are predicated on the assumption that data is verifiable. We assume we know what an *author* is, or a *title*, and how to establish each of these, even if at times *publishers* confuse the issue. Collection management may turn into an exercise in literary detection, but we are sure we can find an answer.

Literary forgeries present us with an interesting predicament. How do we prove that they are forgeries and do our rules tell us how to describe them adequately? Curiously enough, some of the most famous of forgeries have been religious documents. Topping the list of *Top Ten Literary Hoaxes*[1] from the *Guardian Unlimited* several years ago was *The Donation of Constantine*, which bolstered the Papacy's temporal claims for several centuries. The Internet blogger who went on to top the *Guardian*'s Top Ten with a Top Twenty paraphrases: 'In *Lost Christianities*, Bart Ehrman describes four motives for forging literary documents in the ancient world: profit, malice, admiration, or to support one's views.'[2] Without proposing a 'hermeneutics of forgery', I think it fair to suggest that interpretation of a text and the authority conferred on it owe much to the reader's perception of its authorship – never more so than in theology.

Which brings me to the discovery I made in the course of some routine collection maintenance. Reviewing the library's pamphlet collection, I came across a pamphlet entitled *Bishop Strossmayer's speech in the Vatican Council of 1870*, which was unusual enough to arouse my curiosity. Having perused

1 'Top ten literary hoaxes' Guardian Unlimited, 15 November 2001, viewed 13 April 2007, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,594060,00.html>
2 Blog: Loren Rosson Blogspot viewed 13 April 2007, < http://lorenrosson.blogspot.com/2005/10/top-20-literary-hoaxes.html>

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it, I admit to a tiny niggling of suspicion, which sent me to the Internet and to several encyclopedias. I discovered that Bishop Strossmayer had certainly been at the First Vatican Council and was remembered as both an eloquent and controversial speaker. I also learnt, from both the Internet and the *Catholic Encyclopedia* - the 1907-12 edition on the web[3] was more forthcoming than the recent *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (2003) – that a forged speech had been circulated which had a persistent life in print and now was flourishing on the Internet.

So who was Bishop Strossmayer and how did it come about that a forgery was published in his name? Josip Juraj Strossmayer (1815-1905), the Croatian bishop of Djakovo (Bosnia and Syrmia), was prominent amongst the liberal bishops who attended Vatican I. Distinguished both as a religious and political leader, he championed the unity and welfare of Slav peoples within the Hapsburg Empire and was deeply committed to ecumenism, hoping to bring about the reunion of Eastern and Western Churches. His passionate support for Arts and Sciences led to the re-establishment of the University of Zagreb and he undertook vast building projects, including schools, academies, seminaries, libraries and the beautiful cathedral of Djakovo (significantly named St Peter's). At the same time he had 'ideas on the mission of the Church, the reformation of the Church's central government, the reorganisation of Europe, the liberation of Southeast Europe from the Turks'[4] – his involvements at a national and international level brought him friends and supporters such as British Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone.

Bishop Strossmayer was a leading opponent of the definition of papal infallibility at Vatican I. He was deeply disappointed by the failure of the Council (called to deal with the problems of the times) to address many issues which he regarded as important, including the freedom of nations and individuals, the freedom of the Church in the world and religious tolerance. His liberal and democratic tendencies brought him into conflict with the increasingly reactionary views of Pope Pius IX and the majority bishops who supported him. Pio Nono, initially moderate in his sympathies, found himself at odds with the *Risorgimento* which aimed to unify Italy. In the wake of the loss of all the Papal States (including the capture of Rome in 1870) he progressively centralized authority in the Church. He came to see liberalism as the source of antireligious feeling and turned against contemporary intellectual movements. Thus, though he strengthened the Church within, he cut it off from modern scientific thinking.

The really divisive issue amongst the bishops of Vatican I was the definition of the primacy and infallibility of the Pope. A ruling was made that a majority vote would decide all debates. Strossmayer was dismayed and spoke against this. His opposition to absolutism in the Church and his defence of consensus and 'moral unanimity' in the Council caused him to make procedural protests and to contemplate walking out of the Council. He was among the bishops who did not remain at the Council on 18 July 1870 to vote on the constitution *Pastor aeternus*, affirming infallibility.

The principal source for the proceedings of the ecumenical Councils is *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, familiarly known as Mansi (after one of the editors, G.D. Mansi). The best history in English is Cuthbert Butler's account based on the letters of Bishop Ullathorne, published in a second edition as *The*

3 'Joseph Georg Strossmayer' *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XIV, New York: Appleton, 1912, viewed 13 April 2007, < http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14316a.htm>

4 Sivric, Ivo. *Bishop J. G. Strossmayer: new light on Vatican I*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1975, 7.

Vatican Council 1869-1870.[5] Hans Kung, in his critical examination of infallibility, *Infallible?: an inquiry*, cites Mansi as the source for his discussion of Bishop Strossmayer's controversial speech[6] which broke up the Council on March 22 1870. Butler notes that this was the 'single real scene of the Vatican Council'.[7] Papal infallibility was not the issue here. Strossmayer spoke against the part of the prepared document *On the Catholic faith* which ascribed to Protestantism the discussion.[8]

Back to the pamphlet in our collection entitled *Bishop Strossmayer's speech in the Vatican Council of 1870,* described on the cover as *From an Italian version published at Florence. Reprinted from 'The Bible treasury' No. 195 August 1872.* A quotation may give the flavour of this pamphlet, whose contents are easily found on the Internet: 'the church has never been more beautiful, more pure, or

errors of the day such as rationalism, pantheism, materialism, and atheism. He maintained that these *errors* had existed before Protestantism and he defended the integrity and the faith of many Protestants who had opposed them, as well as speaking with admiration of the work of some Protestant writers. Butler comments that Strossmayer's protest bore fruit and the final version of the document was greatly toned down as a result of the more holy, than in the days when there was no pope'[9]. Sivric identifies this as the forged speech repudiated by Strossmayer which appeared also in Germany, England (in the *Guardian* of June 28, 1871), South America, the United States and even in Croatia. The Bishop wrote in a pastoral letter,

> *Several years ago an abominable speech, under my name, circulated almost over the whole world which (speech), by its form and contents is so strange to me, as is that place (Buenos Aires) where a fallen*

5 Butler, Cuthbert. *The Vatican Council 1869-1870: based on Bishop Ullathorne's letters*, ed. Christopher Butler. London: Fontana, 1962.
6 Kung, Hans. *Infallible?: an inquiry.* New York: Doubleday, 1983, 160-161.
7 Butler, op. cit., 238.
8 Ibid, 240.
9 'Bishop Strossmayer's speech in the Vatican Council of 1870' Mission to Catholics International Inc., viewed 13 April 2007 < http://www.mtc.org/bishop_s.html>

> *away priest penitently admitted that he had forged that speech, offering me satisfaction through his confessor... the speech caused not a small anguish to quite a few Catholics. (MANSI 53, 999).*[10]

This speech, (purporting to be Strossmayer's fifth oration of June 2) challenges the scriptural and historical bases for papal primacy and infallibilty. Butler asserts that the printed Acts make clear that no such speech was made at the Council by any bishop.[11] As it is readily searchable, I will not detail the content. Sivric identifies it by the five points in which the author summarizes his argument. It has been thought (the *Catholic Encyclopedia* entry on Strossmmayer claims as much) that the author of the forged speech was Dr Jose Augustin de Escudero, a Mexican former Augustinian monk. A copy of a magazine in which he declared himself the forger, together with a letter from his confessor were reputedly sent to the Bishop. According to the letter Escudero accepted Protestantism but later returned to the Catholic Church and married. An interesting note is to be found on another (admittedly less than authoritative) web site:

> *Update 8 April 2007. I have been kindly informed by George Medina that Escudero, whom Fr. Pedro Stollenwerk declared to be the author of the speech, was not responsible for the forgery. Escudero was in fact a noted Mexican politician, not a priest. Either way the fact remains that Strossmayer himself denies having made the speech. Fr. Stollenwerk appears to have been in error as to the identity of the forger.*[12]

10 Sivric, op. cit., 248-9.
11 Butler, op. cit, 423. 'Strossmayer's real speech on June 2 is in Mansi, IV (52), 391-404.'
12 'The Bishop Strossmayer forgery of Vatican I (1870-1871)' Sean's Faith Website, 8 April 2007, viewed 13 April 2007 < http://www.angelfire.com/ms/seanie/strossmayer.html>

Bishop Strossmayer was several times compelled by Church authorities to repudiate the speech, which he did indignantly, pointing out that they and all who participated in the Council knew it to be false, that 'my principles are basically different from those found in the spurious speech' and that he had never asserted anything 'which might undermine the authority of the Holy See'.[13] That he was asked to *refute* the document rather than *recant* suggests that nobody associated with the Council believed in the bogus speech, whatever the intentions in requiring his public denials. According to Sivric, there was a final twist: the Chuch authorities in Rome considered his repudiation of this forgery (which caused him so much annoyance in his life) as the sign of his acceptance of papal infallibility:

> *He (Strossmayer) accepted the Constitution (Pastor Aeternus) by protesting against the pamphlet 'Papa e Vangelo, discorso di un vescovo al Concilio' (MANSI 53, 997)*[14]

It might be hoped that libraries would have cast doubt on this spurious publication. Butler notes indignantly that a copy is found in the British Museum published as late as 1928, without any identification as a forgery.[15] Sivric records that it was published in 1967 in Belgrade in a selection of famous speeches.[16] The Internet ensures a renewed currency for the document – although it also provides a forum for challenging it. Butler identifies the forger's motive as hostility to the (Catholic) Church. Certainly the forger chose the name which had just the right *clout* and recent fame/notoriety to give the publication maximum impact. It is not the intention of this article to debate the issues of papal primacy and infallibility. But surely a precondition for dialogue, religious or otherwise, is a degree of confidence in the

13 Sivric, op. cit., 250.
14 Ibid, 251.
15 Butler, op. cit., 423.
16 Sivric, op.cit., 249.

authenticity of historical documents – and a *nose* for the 'inauthentic' ones. *Truth* is oddly served by deliberate falsification of sources such as may be encountered on the site Mission to Catholics International Inc. The Strossmayer article in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* is misquoted to make it appear that the Encyclopedia validates rather than condemns the spurious speech.[17] All mention of the forgery disappears into an elliptical 'black hole'.

How can we as librarians help to untangle such a web of claim and counter-claim? I submit that we have a course of action which flows from our rules and conventions. AACR2 states:

> *21.4C1. If responsibility for a work is known to be erroneously or fictitiously attributed to a person, enter under the actual personal author or under title if the actual personal author is not known. Make an added entry under the heading for the person to whom the authorship is attributed, unless he or she is not a real person.*

Doubt about authorship is sufficient in this case to justify removal of the main author entry for *Strossmayer, Josip Juraj, 1815-1905*. This is an acknowledgment that I cannot verify the author of the document. Further background detail might be added in the general note field.[18] In checking references to the document elsewhere I can exercise a degree of *suspicion*, endeavouring in so far as I am able to combat misinformation. After all, none of us would claim infallibility or inerrancy in our professional dealings, but as information managers we play a critical role in filtering 'misinformation' and 'disinformation', especially now when so much of it is at everyone's finger tips.

17 'Bishop Strossmayer's speech in the Vatican Council of 1870' Mission to Catholics International Inc., viewed 13 April 2007, < http://www.mtc.org/bishop_s.html>

18 Philip Harvey gave the following suggestions: 'I would suggest two other things a cataloguer could do here. A Note (Tag 500) detailing the history of the document and including all important names, dates and words would give clarification of its meaning and immediate access to all keywords, e.g. Strossmayer, Vatican Council, Infallibility, Mansi and the names of the suspects. An added title entry (Tag 246) for the cover title would catch the eye of the serendipitous, serious researcher.'

References

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Kung, Hans. *Infallible?: an inquiry*. New York: Doubleday, 1983.

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