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Scriptures

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SCRIPTURES

Introduction

Interchangeable with holy/sacred book, “scriptures” is the English language term that is still popularly used to refer to a text or collection of texts deemed to be of special if not unique origins, authority and power. Users of the term also tend to assume that “the Bible” of the Jewish and Christian traditions represents either the only instance of such or the example par excellence among some others. A popular linguistic and rhetorical placeholder among cultures of Indo-European origins, the English term originally simply meant (from the Greek graphe/-ai, ta biblia; Latin, scriptura/-ae; Hebrew, ketav/-uvim) and continues to mean “writing”/“writings” (German, schrift; Italian, scrittura; French, ecriture). But precisely as it is a baseline reference to a collection of writings, or a book, the term is reference to nothing basic or simple; rather, it is freighted shorthand for the most significant site around which turns questions and issues having to do with things that matter most and are society-ordering and culture-determining. Wider experiences, more information and perspective—of and about others—have caused the narrow notions and assumptions to be questioned and rejected. Both popular and critical scholarly discourses have come to recognize the cross-cultural if not near universal representation of such texts; but only very slowly have a few critics wrestled with

scriptures as a general social-cultural category and phenomenon as part of comparative theoretical analysis.

Reference Works

There is no complete accessible collection—not to mention critical edition--of what could be claimed to be the enormous number of all pertinent texts, in English, or in any other language. There are only more or less valuable and more or less limited collections based on denominational or cultural/civilizational categories and interests. Far too numerous to list here, they can be accessed through standing categories. They are of mixed and limited value to the needs of the student of comparative scriptures. Given the enormous complexities of the comparative and critical investigation of scriptures and the social pressures against it, the very idea of a complete critical collection of texts may be unrealistic.

The one project that has come closest to reflecting a near comprehensive collection is the fifty-volume collection Sacred Books of the East (1879-1910). (Almost all of the collection can now be accessed online at sacred-texts.com.) A project directed by F. Max Mueller, premier philologist and one of the primary founders of the modern comparative study of religion, the collection contains texts from traditions around the world—notably excepting the Jewish and Christian texts that constitute the Bible. The very idea of the collection is important—it reflects what may be called the "invention" of "world religions," chiefly characterized by a collection of center-ing texts called scriptures. It also represents a major

development in modern critical consciousness in recognizing the existence and status and comparability of special status books of traditions beyond those of the West. Nevertheless, the exception of Jewish-Christian texts from the collection raises a question about the ultimate critical assumptions that obtained--among conservative contemporaries, if not with Mueller himself.

Mueller, F. Max, ed. Sacred Books of the East, translated by various Oriental scholars. 50 volumes, including index. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879-1910. Translations of major texts of major traditions--with notable exception of texts of the Jewish-Christian Bible.

Sacred Books of the East Online. [www.sacred-texts.com] Makes accessible almost all texts of the Sacred Books of the East collection.

Anthologies/Textbooks

A few recently published anthologies are available in English translation and are textbook-friendly: Fieser and Powers 2008; Kenneth Kramer 1986; Young 1993; and van der Voorst 2007. All represent selected collections. None is a critical edition.

Fieser, James, and John Powers, eds. 2008. Scriptures of the World's Religions. 3d ed. New York: McGraw Hill. Fairly wide range of selections makes it useful for textbook. There is no critical analysis.

Kramer, Kenneth, ed. 1986. World Scriptures: an Introduction to Comparative Religions. New York: Paulist Press. Wide range of selections. And useful critical comments.

Young, Serenity, ed. 1993. Anthology of Sacred Texts by and about Women. New York: Crossroad. Unique collection, with clear agenda. Useful selections.

Van der Voorst, Robert E., ed. 2007. Anthology of World Scriptures: Western Religions. Belmont CA: Thomas Wadsworth. Wide range of selections.

Van der Voorst, ed. 2007. Anthology of World Scriptures: Eastern Religions. Belmont CA: Thomas Wadsworth. Wide range of selections.

General Overview: Modern Critical Studies and Bibliographies

Critical treatments of scriptures across traditions are, not surprisingly, very few. The late nineteenth century developments in critical consciousness regarding religious texts and traditions inspired a few first wave attempts in the early to mid-twentieth century in Europe, mostly in French and German, to address issues across lines of traditions and communities. These works represent various degrees of critical comparative sensibility; they were not of lasting influence. These and a few scattered later works can be identified in the critical discussions and extensive notes/bibliographies in Leipoldt and Morenz 1953; Lanczkowski 1956; Graham 1987; Smith 1993; and Masuzawa 2005.

Graham, William A. 1987. “Scripture.” In Encyclopedia of Religion. Vol 13. Edited by Mircea Eliade. New York: MacMillian Publishing Company. Good discussion of modern critical discussions. Useful bibliography.

Smith. W. C. 1993. What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach. Minneapolis: Fortress 1993. A near “classic”--has set the tone and defined challenge for the next generations of critics. Comprehensive notes and bibliographic information.

Lanczkowski, Guenter. 1956. Heilige Schriften: Ingalt, Textgestalt und Ueberlieferung. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhamer. Solid research. Summarizes scholarship of earlier generations of European scholars.

Leipoldt, Johannes, and Siegfried Morenz. 1953. Heilige Schriften: Betrachtungen zur Religioinsgeschichte der antiken Mittelmeerwelt. Leipzig: Harassowitz. Basic research on ancient Mediterranean cultures, with nod to wider comparative perspectives.

Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. Invention of World Religions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. A wide-ranging and provocative discussion. Provides critical perspective on world religions as scriptural religions.

Collected Essays

A few collections of essays on the subject, covering multiple traditions and issues across the traditions, have come to be considered important in classroom

use: F. F. Bruce and E. G. Rupp 1968; Doniger O'Flaherty 1979; Denny and Taylor 1985; Levering 1989; and V. L. Wimbush 2008.

Bruce, F. F., and E. G. Rupp, eds. 1968. Holy Book and Holy Tradition. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmanns. Contains a few solid essays that provide basic information and critical perspectives.

Doniger O'Flaherty, Wendy, ed. 1979. The Critical Study of Sacred Texts. Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union. Wide-ranging comparative perspectives by a respected Indologist.

Denny, Frederick M., and Rodney L. Taylor, eds. 1985. The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective. Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press. Mostly well-written essays that provide basic information. Last essay on oral traditions represents breakthrough in usual discussion.

Levering, Miriam, ed. 1989. Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective. Albany NY: SUNY Press. Well-researched and theoretically sophisticated essays by vanguard in area of comparative studies.

Wimbush, V. L., ed. 2008. Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. Wide-ranging essays by mixed-field and mixed-disciplinary group of scholars. In departure from the usual, essays are organized questions and issues, not traditions.

General Overview: Wilfred C. Smith and the Modern Raising of the Basic Question

It was not until the 1970s and 1980s when historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1971; 1980; 1989) began in earnest his trenchant questioning of the assumptions behind the study of the Bible as part of the academic study of religion and pursued his own investigation of the concept of scriptures was critical discourse about scriptures re-charged, broadened, and opened up. His pointed question that is also the title of his major work, What is Scripture? (1993), summarizes decades of isolated and mixed-quality scholarship on the subject and represents the most comprehensive and critical single-authored treatment of the subject in English. --it has set the terms for scholarly discussions for the last thirty years or so and now represents as much consensus in thinking about the subject as can be obtained. Smith argued that scriptures are not the same as texts; the term names (or covers up) complex relationships; whatever else may be referenced by the term, it cannot, apart from the beliefs, attitudes, declarations, and engagements of groups of people, be presumed to have independent existence or have a quality or characteristic that should be called "holy" or "sacred."

Smith, W. C. 1971. "The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible." In Journal of American Academy of Religion. Vol 39. The provocative essay that sounded the clarion call for a different academic and scholarly orientation.

Smith, W.C. [1980] 1993. "The True Meaning of Scripture." In What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach. Minneapolis: Fortress. This essay anticipates Smith's major work.

Smith, W. C. [1989] 1993. What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach. Minneapolis: Fortress. Near classic treatment in its articulation of the fundamental problems and issues.

Beyond Smith: Extending the Basic Questions and Issues

So with broader perspective but also sensitivity to western biases, critics influenced by but going beyond W. C. Smith (Graham 1987; Levering 1989; Folkert 1993; Patton 1994; Holdrege 1987; Katz 2000; Wimbush 2008) have come to consider "scriptures" a cross-cultural complex social-cultural phenomenon, for which in our time—but not exclusively in historical terms--the most recognized and assumed material object or symbol is a book or collection of books held to be of special (divine) origins, power, and authority. The question should be raised whether the term should not also be used—with appropriate qualifications and caveats—to refer to other objects, such as masks, stones, wampum. What is most important, of course, is the function and uses of such objects.

There should be no denying that today the most recognized and accepted representation of scriptures is the text. Smith's pointed question is still the right one for us to consider. But it was and remains only a springboard: for our times the question must now be exploded into several other questions, problems, and issues. Among these questions and issues are epistemology, identity formation, social power, literacy, communications, freedom, agency, transformation, alterity. The list of such questions and issues cannot here be made comprehensive. It is important

that it be recognized that what is basically at stake is power as knowledge or knowledge as power; that is, the phenomenon of scriptures has to do with claims or assumptions about the dynamics, translation or performativity of power as knowledge. So books become the sites around which swirl various issues having to do with knowledge--what sort of knowledge is important, if not of supreme importance; what prescriptions, proscriptions, or regimens are required to access to such knowledge; the ultimate source of such knowledge; the media or mediators through whom or through which such knowledge is communicated; how such knowledge is interpreted and used; and who is empowered or authorized to vouchsafe legitimate appropriation of such knowledge. We have to do here not so much with a book or with books, not so much with the simple interpretation of a book or part of a book, but with the social psychology and ultimate politics and power relations and dynamics of knowledge and the communication of such that are associated with literacy and the book.

Although functions associated with the phenomenon for which scriptures is shorthand may have been in play since human beings began to organize themselves, these functions are most clearly evident in the dynamics and politics of the major complex civilizations and empires of the ancient world and in the later development of transnational and cross-cultural book religions of modernity. Scriptures can be put in sharpest relief in connection with the development of systems of writing and literacy associated with complex societies and their social-cultural dynamics.

Among the developments that followed from and were spurred on by the situation and conditions that the writing civilizations and extensive empires put in place were those formations we now recognize and refer to as "otherworldly" religions. What "otherworldly" meant that would be evident to an outside observer was not that these formations were somehow beyond time and space or beyond history, but that they were universal, that is, they were culturally transferable and translatable, they could be made to mean across territorial and cultural boundaries. They were so on account of their orientation to and investment in writing and on account of the translatability and transferability of things written-- in the languages of empires, of course. Insofar as these formations were in this and in other respects otherworldly they represented a type of ideological social power (Mann 1986; Mazusawa 2005). Such "power of the written" (Goody 2000) was due to their self-definition around and preoccupation with their specially valued written texts—their "holy" scriptures or "holy" books.

The expanded questions and issues about scriptures that respect both complexity and the basics cannot be exhausted here but should include the following:

- Phenomenology: What are scriptures? If they are not to be collapsed into and defined simplistically as text or writing, what is the phenomenon for which the English term "scriptures" is shorthand? If not text, then what--animal, vegetables, minerals? What is being referred to? What is being assumed or presumed?

- Setting/Situation/Practices/Performers: Original and Ongoing: How, when, under what circumstances did scriptures first become evident? And in what ongoing and typical settings or situations are scriptures to be found? What groups or types of persons typically engage or are authorized to engage scriptures?

- Material and Expressive Forms and Representations: How are scriptures represented? In what materiel(s)? Through what expressive forms? With what types of practices, rituals and performances are scriptures associated? How are scriptures engaged?

- Social Functions/Needs: What psychological and social functions, benefits and needs are met through scriptures? Are scriptures always understood by individuals and groups to be a good or benefit? Why? What types of individuals and groups and societies invent and are found engaging scriptures? What consequences are put in place from such invention and engagement? What sorts of power relations and dynamics are created and sustained in relationship to scriptures? What do inventors and readers/users/performers of scripture understood themselves to be doing? What do observers of those engaged in scripturalizing and performing scriptures see? How is the difference to be explained? What does the difference mean for human claims about knowledge, communication, relationships, power?

Levering, Miriam, ed. 1989. Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective. Albany NY: SUNY Press. Theoretically sophisticated essays all that model research in comparative scriptures.

Folkert, Kendall W. ed. John E. Cort. 1993. Scripture and Community: Collected Essays on the Jains. Atlanta: Scholars Press. This project, with its focus on a particular tradition yet sensitive treatment of parallels to and differences from other traditions, models the type of work that needs to be in comparative scriptures.

Holdrege, Barbara A. 1987. Veda and Torah: Ontological Conceptions of Scripture. Albany: SUNY. A well-researched and well-written project in comparative studies, foregrounding Jewish and Hindu traditions.

Patton, Laurie L., ed. 1994. Authority, Anxiety, and Canon: Essays in Vedic Interpretation. Albany: SUNY Press. Solid wide-ranging essays with Vedic tradition as baseline. Essays generally reflect sensitivity to work of comparison.

Katz, Steven T., ed. 2000. Mysticism and Sacred Scripture. New York: Oxford University Press. Essays raise number of issues that put scriptures in comparative perspective.

Wimbush, V. L., ed. 2008. Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientation to Cultural Phenomenon. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. This collection of essays is actually organized around the sort of questions raised here.

Mann, Michael. 1986. Sources of Social Power: from the Beginning to A.D. 1760. Vol 1. New York: Cambridge Universty Press. Part of a massive multi-volume project on the nature and history of power, including "religion" as part of "ideological" power.

Goody, Jack. 2000. The Power of the Written Tradition. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. Essays written by internationally known expert on traditions around literacy and writing.

Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. The Invention of World Religions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Compelling argument about the context in which "world religions" and their scriptures were invented.

First Set of Questions: the Phenomenon

The first set of questions is the most basic—and the most disturbing and unsettling. It includes the question that asks the obvious. It includes the question that the young observant and curious and wide-eyed child would ask. It is the quest to know not so much the content or lexical meanings of texts but the meaning of seeking meaning—and orientation, power, and whatever else may be pertinent or compelling--in relationship to texts. The nature of the knowledge sought and the means by which such knowledge is sought, that is, the nature of the relationships to objects or persons as part of the pursuit of knowledge, is the heart of the issue to be fathomed.

Whatever we mean by reference to scriptures as phenomenon is related to peoples' claims that they are being addressed and informed by and hearing and responding to the gods and goddesses. The speaking may be more or less direct; it may involve one or more levels of mediation, one of more priests, preachers, elders, scholars, diviners, shamans. What is happening when people make claims that gods and goddesses "speak" to them? In connection with such claims there are ramifications for knowledge and cognition, communication and power, all constituting the basis for the structuring of human relationships and determining human perception of what is significant, what is real, what is true and good, what is powerful. They include the phenomenon that we have come to refer to as scriptures. Of course, that not all persons ever agree that each effort benefits all, much less equally or in the same way; this much is clear enough from human history. Yet notwithstanding skeptical and cynical responses and even resistance to any one instance of what can be understood as and termed scriptures, there seems to be evidence of the persistence (J. Z. Smith 1982) of those collective human efforts to invent and use scriptures. Why is this the case? What is it about what the term scriptures refers to that makes it so compelling and perduring across cultures and the passage of time?

Because we are confronted first and foremost with human claims—about knowledge in relationship to rather weighty, sometimes inscrutable matters—we are dealing with (types of) social imaginaries (Appadurai 1996), dispositions, attitudes; we are not faced with an isolable thing or the essential characteristics of any thing or any material object or person; we are faced with a complex set of

social-psychological structurings and power relationships and dynamics having to do with knowledge. Scriptures are not the same as texts; the latter are inert without a group agreeing--and then necessarily forgetting that they have agreed--to make of texts (or other objects) the site for the negotiation of things that matter. So scriptures are made real and compelling only in relationships to objects or persons. And through such a relationships or dynamics, involving shared assumptions about a range of issues, human relationships are structured and the truth about those relationships and the reality in which they take place is determined. Scriptures are about what people think and imagine and invent and make assumptions about—regarding communication practices and power relations and dynamics--that result in claims about special (types of) knowing. It is the claim not only about the truth of everyday life but also the mysteries of things (Stendahl 2006), the "untying of the knot" of riddles and puzzling events and situations (Hasan-Rokem and Shulman 1996).

Scriptures seem to be shorthand for those collective efforts—with their protocols and rituals and performances--to discern, define, negotiate and control the puzzling, the enigmatic and the frightening and eventually nearly all aspects of human life. As such, scriptures represent human instrumentality, human ingenuity, human inventiveness, and human expressivity and performativity by which a human benefit or good is assumed to be realized. This suggests that it is better to think of scriptures as dynamic or activity as opposed to a thing or object. This activity that may be termed "scripturalizing" (W. C. Smith 1993) may indeed involve special uses and considerations of and assumptions about objects.

Smith, J. Z. 1982. “Sacred Persistence: Towards a Redescription of Canon.” In Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Provocative essay by respected historian of religion about what may have motored scriptures as phenomenon.

Hasan-Rokem, Galit, and David Shulman, eds. 1996. Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes. New York: Oxford University Press. Essays focused on various historical cultural uses of riddle. A few essays bend the argument in the direction of writing and scrupturalizing.

Smith, W. C. 1993. What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach. Minneapolis: Fortress. A near “classic” in the critical analysis of comparative scriptures.

Stendahl, Krister. 2006. “The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture.” In Presidential Voices: The Society of Biblical Literature in the Twentieth Century. Edited by Harold W. Attridge and James C. Vanderkam. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. A presidential guild lecture that raises for western biblical scholars pertinent issues and challenges, including some implications of comparability of their scriptures to other scriptures.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Essays about communications, knowledge, difference, and power in the modern world.

Second Set of Questions: Settings and Situations, Practices and Performers

The second set of questions has to do with the settings and situations—original and ongoing--in which scriptures are found and engaged, the nature of the engagement or practices associated with scriptures, and the types of persons who engage scriptures.

Was there ever a particular originary moment or originary place for scriptures? Is there now a type of specific setting and situation in which scriptures are to be found? Yes and no--regarding the originary moment. Yes, the extent to which we think of scriptures in narrow terms—that is, only in terms of texts. In this respect we ought to think about the ancient Near East of five thousand years ago as the general matrix in which complex writing systems first for the sake of trade and commerce and registering and inventorying items for various purposes and then for what we now in the modern consider strictly religious interests were developed. Also, within the same broad expanse of time, we should take note of places such as China and Mesoamerica where mythic stories were first written down.

But if we think of scriptures in broader terms, as a phenomenon historically threaded through, inclusive of, and--perhaps, given our situation in history--even overdetermined but nevertheless not exhausted by writing or text, the whole issue of an originary moment or place or situation changes quite a bit, in fact becomes almost a moot point. Then we might be open to seeing how other objects, including human figures and officers, have functioned in much the same way, that is, as symbols or sites for important social-cultural communications, negotiations, and the

like. Various objects—stones or pebbles, sticks, head figures, and so forth--have historically been part of divination and other ritual practices in cultures around the world. (Consider the Shoshona, Zulus, the Yoruba.) These objects were designed to provide orientation, knowledge and security.

Settings for rituals and performances in connection with non-portable objects range from the special space or environment of the diviner or shaman or scribal teacher/scholar to hearth and home, the school, and so forth. There may be special places and times set aside for the ritualization of a community's search for special knowledge. (Peek 1991; Fernandez 1986)

Yet there is no universal expectation or requirement regarding setting or situation in the communal effort to divine knowledge. With the invention of writing and the association of divining special knowledge with texts, there is evidence, over a period in time, of change, as was necessary or certainly appropriate, in the direction of a loosening and broadening of expectations regarding setting or situation. In other words, the setting/situation for the communal search for knowledge gradually and inexorably expanded in ways that reflected the reach of texts and textuality. The latter did not necessarily effect or represent the radical disenchantment of the world and thereby make ritualistic settings and situations meaningless; rather, they represented a more complex development—not merely expanding but de-localizing, in effect, universalizing (that is, making transcendent), the knowledge as well as the site/setting/situation for the accession of knowledge. And as the knowledge and site for its accession are structured they made no less

ritualistic and no less a matter of enchantment. It is reasonable to argue that the invention of writing and the engagement (divination) of texts have represented as much a re-enchantment of the world as much as disenchantment. The re-enchantment we sometimes call scriptures or scriptutalizing.

Now as to the matter of who engages scriptures—not so much what type of society in our own time has access to and uses scriptures (nearly all can be assumed to have had and have scriptures, in some respect), but what particular types of persons or figures within a society have been and continue to be specially authorized to engage scriptures and thereby establish their meanings. And of course, "meaning" in connection with texts especially, must be at the least bivalent: there are those who control the meaning of the letters and words as units that constitute the object that is the text and the meaning of seeking meaning in connection with the object that is the text.

Who are those who stand as guarantors of the reality and legitimacy and power of scriptures? Who are those who set up and preside over the rituals and performances that represent the engagements of scriptures? Who are those who determine not only the ongoing day to day interpretations that come from engagements and importunings and protocols and rituals (that may be associated with scriptures)—including, lexical and content meanings in the cases in which scriptures are engaged in relationship to texts—but also the meaning of the whole phenomenon of scriptures as system by which a society gains special knowledge?

Those who are the inventors and keepers of scriptures, with authority to determine interpretations, are elites and, depending upon the nature of the society and its place in history, called by titles—shaman, magician, medicine man, priest, obeah, griot, scribe, exegete, and so forth. The titles reflect the power invested in the figure. To be sure, certain skills and powers are expected to be on display. But it is more likely in most situations that the skills and authority follow the assumption of office. The positions are historically typically hereditary—following the lines of relationship to a chieftain or in more complex societies the relationships to particular social order and membership in different families or tribes or orders noted for the cultivation and monopolistic identification with certain skills, practices and performances.

In almost all societies the authoritative figures are male, reflecting the privileging of males in whatever is the power structure. With rare exceptions males are granted the prerogatives and privileges, including training in the dominant arts and literacy, of the structure. A male-dominated system of accessing and communicating knowledge that defines and determines the orientation of society throughout history is no surprise. What may occasion surprise is that in the modern world, especially across and within the scriptural cultures and civilizations, there is no end to this gendered arrangement. Most evident and troubling is the intensification of the arrangement in many places.

With the invention of writing and the focus of scriptures around the text the (male) authoritative figure becomes the scribe, the priest, the scholar, shaman,

magician. Although it may be assumed that writing ushered in democratization of participation in and engagement of all aspects of society, including those functions that have to do with scriptures, the actual situation is mixed. Across almost all societies, the history of preventing women and non-elite males and females--obviously including all among the colonized and enslaved--from learning to read and write in the standard or conventional languages, or in some cases, in some periods in history, severely circumscribing and restricting their learning experience and registration of skills, had the effect—intended or not—of naturalizing (a type of) gender-specific authority and power having to do with scriptures. Whether before writing and texts and in relationship to texts, scripturalizing has always been and remains even today a predominately elite and male domain. The elitist and male-dominated character of scriptures continues to inspire political readings—of content of the texts and of the phenomenon itself (Young 1993; Wimbush 2008).

Wimbush, V. L. ed. 2008. Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. Collection of essays that include attention to this and other basic questions having to do with comparative scriptures.

Peek, Philip M. ed. 1991. African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Essays written by experts on divination systems in different regions of Africa that model comparative research and provide bridge to scriptures as systems of knowledge.

Fernandez, James W. 1986. Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Fascinating essays about play and performance in culture, including suggestive arguments regarding riddles, divination, and puzzlement and the quest for knowledge.

Young, Serinity, ed. 1993. An Anthology of Sacred Texts by and about Women. New York: Crossroad. Through selection of texts and contextualization arguments, this collection represents much needed feminist-critical perspectives on comparative scriptures.

Third Set of Questions: Materiality and Expressive Forms

The third set of questions has to do with the materiality and expressive forms and types of engagements of scriptures. First, regarding materiality, can scriptures be reduced to materiels, to matter? Does it matter that scriptures have to do with matter? Does it matter what kind of matter?

That all societies have some mechanism or protocol for accessing knowledge about things that matter most is clear. That many societies set up such mechanisms with a centering object (or person) is evident. And that some—most?--within a society may want or need or be influenced or to want or need to confuse such an object with the knowledge itself or power cannot be denied as part of human history of consciousness and sensibilities and power dynamics. Although a thoroughgoing and consistent critical perspective makes it impossible to confuse the projected

center objects as the ultimate goal, the uses of the objects are nonetheless important as windows onto the consciousness and orientation of a society, important as data of a sort for the dynamics of social transformation.

Forms of engagement and forms of expressivity of scriptures are determined by type of materiality and the setting and situation and their attendant structuring power relations. What human beings can do with any objects can also be done with the center-ing objects—with the different stipulations that obtain in differently defined situations. So scriptures--as texts--can of course be read (alone in silence or aloud or as part of a gathering); translated (from one language to another); (literally and otherwise) re-inscribed; re-printed (in vernacular languages or idioms or on the body or other objects); exegeted (in the context of a school, religious or not, by devotees or by self-styled "secular" philologist-humanists); memorized; chanted or rapped about; danced to; worn on the body; carried aloft in worship processional; held open by the preacher during exhortation; placed in/as the ritual center in the worship gathering space and genuflected to; rhetorically used in prayers; ritually touched in different ways and at different times; used as register of important information (rites of passages, and so forth); used as place for holding secrets; even ingested. And so on. Scriptures are somewhat veiled deflecting speech used to communicate, to manipulate, to influence, to inspire and challenge, to control.

It is also the case that scriptures can—even in the wake of the invention of writing and printing—be made to appear in many different forms and as different types of gestures. Especially because of the "power of the written tradition" (Goody

2000) to determine the courses and modes of communications, structure reality and power relations, the persistence of other non-literary types of objects and expressiveness is noteworthy. They suggest a type of resistance, a refusal—in this case, a refusal to be too tightly textualized or script(uraliz)ed, over-determined, and reined in through the protocols and gestures and politics of textualization.

The continuation, indeed, persistence of rich oral traditions in spite of and alongside and in relationships to the power of the written in highly literate societies is a rather surprising reality. Sub-, anti-, and para-literary traditions of discourse and communications with their complex relationships to standard, conventional modes are popular in many places in the world, both far beyond and in the middle of the dominant "first" world (Gundaker 1998). This freedom to scripturalize through different forms and types of expressions in a world in which power is registered through written languages and discourses of power is also registration of power and agency. The profoundest meaning in that world in which power of the written is taken for granted is found in the alternate form and in the alternate gesture.

Goody, Jack. 2000. The Power of the Written Tradition. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. Essays written by internationally known expert on traditions around literacy and writing.

Gundaker, Grey. 1998. Signs of Diaspora, Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America. New York: Oxford University Press. With special focus on African diaspora, this book is a provocative project with implications for comparative analysis in issues around literacy.

Graham, William A. 1987. Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A project on comparative scriptures project, with particular focus on the complex relationships between orality and literacy, using Islam as special focus.

Fourth Set of Questions: Social Benefit or Good

Now regarding the final set of questions and issues, it must asked, what are scriptures for? What purpose(s) are they claimed or made to serve? Why do collectives of human beings (seem persistently to) invent and engage what can be called scriptures? Why are the sites we may call scriptures so freighted and fraught with intensities and anxieties? What individual and social interests and needs are they made to address? Are scriptures always intended to be a personal and social good or benefit? What is that good or benefit? What personal, social-psychological, and political issues are scriptures a response to? Is it fear? Powerlessness? Fear of powerlessness?

All of these and other issues may be relevant in any discussion about the interests and needs served by the invention and uses of scriptures as phenomenon. In a return to a theme broached at the beginning of this article, I suggest that knowledge--accessed and communicated as power--is what has been and remains primarily at issue for human beings; and scriptures as phenomenon would seem to represent symbol, concept and site for the quest, accession and communication of knowledge as empowerment. Knowledge here has to do with that by which human

beings orient themselves, that in which they find security. Although the actual processes and protocols and physical sites for the knowledge quest may have changed over long periods in the development of human organization, consciousness and sensibilities, it is not so clear that the actual basic interest in or impetus behind the quest has changed. For a long period in human history, among most people, there has been interest in getting perspective on and orientation to basic and recurring (but also sometimes unique) experiences, relationships and ventures—love, war, intrigue, tragedies, hunting successes or failures, catastrophic environmental events, simple or catastrophic health issues, and so forth—that represent the riddles, puzzles, enigmas of things and of existence. With an understanding of humans' quest for knowledge as power as basic, the appropriateness and analytical and heuristic advantage of seeing scriptures as a subset or type of divination systems should be made clear. What is at stake in such systems is the establishment of an epistemology around which a community can be ordered, its priorities and values established and reaffirmed (Kort 1996). Depending upon where one stands and how one is identified in the society, the ordering can of course be benevolent or malevolent. Because it represents the working out and reflection of a collective epistemology—what can and should be known and how to know it ad communicate it--and the ordering, the power relations and dynamics that such epistemology is understood to inspire, the system always seems imperative and always seems to be a social benefit and good (Peek 1991).

Yet accepting scriptures as social benefit or good does not answer the final set of questions; it raises yet more problems and questions. Human history seems

to provide evidence of at least two rather different, conflicting types or perspectives on and uses of scriptures understood as social benefit or good. One type—of use of scriptures--emphasizes the legitimization, protection and security of the current structures and arrangements. This use is associated with the exercise of control and the frustration and undermining of change. Scriptures are used as symbols of the center, as guardians of traditionalism, as the canons of social structure. They are made to provide the illusion of a stable frozen center that was always in place and that is currently in place on the basis of special origins and authority that cannot be fathomed or questioned or even understood.

The social benefit that is understood to be gained from this perspective has to do with social binding, formation, identity, security, canonization. The benefit is assumed at different levels of sociality—from small communities to modern nations. It shows itself in displays of patriotism and in nationalization efforts. What seems to be at stake is control. And control is effected through the binding and orientation that scriptures are made to structure. Scriptures are made to help with orientation to the larger physical and social worlds as well as within the individual. They are made to help effect personal, social and political stability.

The protocols and machinery--and machinations--of scholars, political and military and religious leaders make scriptures work for the sake of the conservative stabilizing interests. Consider the varied uses of scriptures—in (other) texts held to be foundational or center-ing sites; on public buildings (literally inscribed); in the founding impetus and purposes, missions, and curricula of schools and academies at

all levels; in all cultural-artistic forms of expression; in the politician's rhetorics; and so forth. Consider how scriptures are used to establish baseline authoritative thinking about reality—of all things important. It is in many places in the civilizations of the scriptural religions even today usually imperative to position oneself as "scriptural" (or "biblical," or "according to the Qur'an"), and so forth relative to an issue, in order to gain social and political advantages.

And in the very languages that people speak and read—especially those "classical"/canonical languages of dominant extensive civilizations and empires that most of the people are forced to engage—can be found one of the most powerful mechanisms by which a people come to know and are thereby empowered. Examples here include Latin Christian and Islamic empires. A complex relationship obtains: that which is deemed scriptures in the form of text is engaged through a language; such language, by virtue of its association with empire, makes the text powerful and makes it capable, on a grand extensive scale, of mediating scriptures, of becoming "the language of the gods" (Pollock 2006). As the empire extends itself, it does so not only through military campaigns, but also through deployment of language, writings, scriptures. And as language and writing, including scriptures, necessarily move freely, with their own momentum and force--at times in support of and at other times in spite of the interests and anxieties of empire--they become universal and transcendent, reflective of a type of independent force or power (Mann 1986).

It is no accident that when writing and texts as we now know them are integrated into the center-ing epistemological systems, scriptures are made to provide not only the most popular name for and description of the phenomenon, but also its form and to some degree the terms by which we engage the phenomenon. Over time, in connection with the invention of writing, the narrowing of the terminological reference, the form, the material and texture, the nature of engagement—these have had a profound impact on the phenomenon of scriptures: the latter has been overdetermined and hijacked: it has come to be associated more narrowly with textuality and with the conserve-ative politics and orientations and practices that textuality demands.

What we now call exegetical practices represent the means by which the knowledge on which society is based and around which it is organized is actually communicated and made legitimate. Scriptures should be understood as a tensive and elastic concept with a complex history that stretches back before the invention of writing and texts/textuality, which then takes on definitive and limited form and concept as it is threaded through text. So the concept of exegesis or interpretation must be understood as being just as complex. Whether as part of the ancient world machinery of shamans, diviners, and magicians in the village, and scribes and clerics at court; or as part of the modern religious tribal apologetic discourses within or outside the academy, professional exegetical practices represent one of the most important developments for the uses of scriptures. These practices were invented with the intention of confirming the status quo; they have been and remain almost always as part of a program in social binding and consolidation and control. Apart

from any details in the knowledge that is conveyed, the most important message is the mechanism of communicating knowledge. Once it is communicated that genuine, acceptable, authoritative, canonical knowledge is conveyed in such a manner, through such a process, or type of person, with certain identity, background or patrimony, or skills (facility in the "language of the gods") few other issues matter.

The point of the mechanism is to insure the social benefit that involves upholding the structure by which reality, as defined by dominants, is ordered. Exegesis takes the jumble of message that come from scriptures and makes them intelligible and compelling; it does not question the mechanism or the order behind the mechanism. Many strategies and tricks are employed in order to make the translation work. This means effecting a certain illusion about the whole mechanism, the allusion that knowledge or truth is channeled in this way.

The other social benefit or good that is associated with the use of scriptures has to do with de-centering, upending, destabilizing the order and arrangements of the world and providing impetus for the construction of a different reality, an-other world. Put differently, this benefit represents a particular type of quest for a particular type of power. The type of power sought is basically social power in order to deconstruct and reconstruct the world and one's position in it. The nature of the quest for such power can be understood in terms of intellectual and psychological conflict and warfare. In such a quest scriptures--on either side of the invention of writing—represent a contested site, not that which should ever be taken for granted. Those who come to a point of seeing the imperative of an-other world

question and reject the pronouncements of the official and authoritative exegetes. Because scriptures are understood to sustain the world, it is also understood that in order to create another world scriptures must be differently engaged.

There is some irony in this situation: the very existence of exegetical practices, that is, practices through which the status quo is legitimized and by which the ingenuity of the human mind is reflected in interpretation and communication of obscure and difficult matters, also makes it possible for mimetic oppositional interpretations to emerge. With the emergence of such mimetic practices is also the emergence of a different community, an alternate "reading formation." This makes scriptures a most important device through which a people, especially a dominated people, facilitates, performs, mimics, in this case, scripturalizes its own empowerment and agency (Llewellyn and Sawyer 2008).

Pollock, Sheldon. 2006. The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Massive and comprehensive project on the ramifications of spread of Sanskrit as somewhat official language on Indian subcontinent. Very useful comparison with spread of Latin throughout Europe.

Kort, Wesley A. 1996. "Take, Read": Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press. With focus on Calvin and

Calvinist traditions, this book analyzes scripture-reading as cultural practice--with many implications for cross-cultural analysis.

Mann, Michael. 1986. Sources of Social Power: from the Beginning to A.D. 1760. Vol 1. New York: Cambridge University Press. Part of a massive multi-volume project on the nature and history of power, including "religion" as part of "ideological" power.