

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Religion

College of Arts and Sciences

2010

Disposing of Non-Disposable Texts

James W. Watts

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/rel>



Part of the [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), and the [History of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

James W. Watts, "Disposing of Non-Disposable Texts," in *The Death of Sacred Texts: Ritual Disposal and Renovation of Texts in the World Religions*, ed. Kristina Myrvold. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, pp. 147-59.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

The Death of Sacred Texts

Ritual Disposal and Renovation of
Texts in World Religions

Edited by

KRISTINA MYRVOLD
Lund University, Sweden

Farukhan:
ASHGATE
2010

Chapter 8

Disposing of Non-Disposable Texts: Conclusions and Prospects for Further Study

James W. Watts

The chapters of this volume document that many religious communities practice rituals for disposing of sacred texts and that even more exhibit some concern for their proper disposal. The fact that such rituals regularly take the form of funerals points to widespread recognition of an analogy between sacred texts and people. I think the attention these traditions devote to the disposal of sacred texts brings to light a typical way of thinking about many other kinds of books and texts as well, though certainly not all. As one way of analyzing the practices and beliefs documented so thoroughly in these chapters, I will discuss the general problem of book disposal as well as the analogy between humans and texts in the context of a theory of textual ritualization. This will lay the basis for suggesting some directions for future research to build on the path breaking contributions of the studies presented in this volume.

Non-Disposable Books

Books are hard to throw away. Though produced in mass quantities at low prices like so many other disposable commodities, books exert a grip on our imaginations that ensures special treatment. Many families socialize their children from an early age to cherish and collect books, even before they are able to read them for themselves. Public education reinforces and universalizes this socialization. Libraries are venerated as the “hearts” of schools and universities. Mass media celebrates authors for their creativity and scholars for their expertise, documented by the titles and, often, display of their most recent book. Governments invest resources in archival depositories to ensure that all the books produced in their countries are preserved. Disposing of books thus transgresses inhibitions reinforced by family, school, media, and government.

Nevertheless, books must be thrown away. They are produced in such quantities that they cannot all be preserved nor are they all needed. Their pages and bindings wear out or, more commonly these days, their contents go out of date. It is cheaper to buy a new copy than repair an old one and more useful to buy a revised edition than to continue using the old version. Yet the ubiquity of old reference books and tattered paperbacks in rummage sales and used book stores testifies to the

cultural inhibition on disposing of books. A librarian tells me that, because of public outrage at reports of libraries throwing out books, they have carried their worn-out, duplicate, or out-of-date copies to the dumpster at night, under the cover of darkness (Wendy Bousfield, personal communication).

Destroying books arouses deep antipathies stoked by memories of political and religious suppression by book burnings. Such concerns do not just reflect modern political history, such as the bonfires of the Nazi party. Memories of ancient book burnings lie at the roots of Chinese culture (*Shiji* 87:6b–7a, in De Bary 2009, 117–18) as well as the Jewish (1 Maccabees 1:56–57) and Christian religions (Sarefield 2007). Less frequently remembered is the fact that suppression of books succeeded in virtually destroying the Manicheans (Gulácsi 2005, 30). Concerns over the possible loss of texts have manifested themselves historically in the apocalyptic eschatologies of both Indian Jains and Japanese Buddhists, as Balbir and Moerman point out in this volume. Older yet are the anathemas inscribed in ancient Near Eastern royal inscriptions and religious epics against anyone who might destroy or modify their texts – evidence that concern for textual preservation may be as old as the textualization of narrative itself.

Contemporary expressions of outrage over the intentional or unintentional destructions of libraries – such as the burning of the library of ancient Alexandria in 48 BCE or the collapse of the Cologne city archives in 2009 (Curry 2009) – usually focus on the loss of information. To address this concern, university and government libraries build more and larger buildings to house collections exploding in size due to the growth in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century publishing. These have recently come to include warehouses for off-site storage that measure shelf-space by the kilometer (Jeffries 2007). One commentator noted the inaccessibility of books in such facilities and opined that “they’re our era’s equivalent of pharaonic tombs ... time capsules” (Manaugh 2007).

The urge for book preservation is not much constrained by the fact that some texts are so ubiquitous that their complete loss is unimaginable (for example, the scriptures of several large religions). This observation suggests that factors other than information preservation are at work here. The concern for book preservation involves respect for culture(s), veneration of traditions, and, at its root, the preservation of cultural values. There is therefore an inherent tension in most literate cultures between the idea of a book or enduring text on the one hand and the possibility of its disposal or destruction on the other.

Of course, there are certain kinds of media, some in book (codex) form, that are designed to be disposable and are easily treated that way: newspapers, magazines, telephone books, and so on. Thinking about such disposable media casts the distinctive iconic nature of non-disposable books into sharper relief.

There is nothing new about disposable written media. They have existed since the invention of writing. In fact, writing was probably invented in ancient Sumer with short-term use in mind, namely to produce sales receipts in malleable and reusable clay. Ancient scribes also wrote letters and receipts on broken pottery shards (ostraca). Other transient written media have included

wax tablets and chalk-boards. The invention of movable-type printing in Europe was quickly employed to mass-produce disposable broadsheets containing news, advertisements and songs. The mutability of contemporary electronic texts therefore has very old precedents.

Why can some texts and books be disposed of easily while others cannot? The telephone book provides an instructive example of the difference between disposable and non-disposable books. The difference does not lie in either the number of copies published or in the degree to which they are instantly recognizable. The phone book’s physical and economic ubiquity over the past century is undeniable, as Paul Collins noted in *Slate Magazine*:

The humble phone book spent the 20th century as the prince of print jobs. ... The phone book is the one book guaranteed to be present in every household, no matter how little else the occupants read. Even in a vacant apartment, you’ll still find old phone books in the kitchen cabinet. ... Last year, according to the industry group the Yellow Pages Association, approximately 615 million directories were printed in the United States alone, generating revenues of \$13.9 billion. (Collins 2008)

But Collins points out that “the phone book’s ubiquity has given it an invisibility. ... [D]espite being the most popular printed work ever, there’s never been a single scholarly monograph on the phone book” (Collins 2008).

Those observations go to the heart of what makes a book iconic. It is cultural attention focused by rituals. By “ritual,” I mean practices that draw attention, in this case to books, to make people conscious of how they are using and reading them (following the ritual theory of Jonathan Z. Smith 1987a, 193–95; 1987b, 109). Religious processions with scriptures, political oath ceremonies, and textual amulets all ritualize the physical form and image of books or other texts. But people also ritualize books – that is, they draw sustained and conscious attention to them – by interpreting their meaning (in scholarly articles and monographs, among many other media) and also by performing the text through recitations, songs, art, theater, and film. People in different cultures, times, and places ritualize different books to different degrees along each of these three iconic, semantic, and performative dimensions (Watts 2006).

Phone books, however, are ritualized in none of these dimensions. Not only does their semantic form and cultural significance remain uninterpreted, but the idea of “performing” their text or contents is ludicrous. As to their physical form, no one protests if they are burned, mutilated, or otherwise destroyed (unless it is out of concern for environmental impact). By the analysis employed here, phone books are among the most disposable of books.

Disposable books may also help us grasp the likely effects of transforming texts into digital media. To the degree that a book simply serves as an information source, it can be replaced by computer searches without readers feeling any loss. Online phone directories have become readily available and will likely replace

material phone books entirely within a generation. Sacred texts have also been adapted for the new media but with very different prospects for the material books. Biblical texts, for example, were digitized and marketed in electronically searchable forms even sooner than phone books. The difference between phone books and Bibles lies not in the degree to which they have been transformed and accepted in electronic form, but rather in the fact that the disappearance of physical Bibles is unimaginable because of their ritual uses. It is impossible that e-readers will ever replace traditional codices in liturgical processions and other ritual uses along the iconic dimension, because computers and other kinds of e-readers do not represent particular texts but are generic containers for any content. As a result, the transformation of scripture into electronic texts has elicited no protests from the devout that I can find, unlike the widely voiced concerns that meet the transformation of literary texts into electronic form. To the degree that people ritualize books and other texts along the iconic dimension – that is, to the degree that they pay conscious attention to how they look and feel, how they carry them and their own posture as they read them – such iconic books will remain major features of human cultures. The iconic status of various kinds of material books preserves and even enhances their appeal in an age of digital information.

Non-disposable books are supposed to preserve their contents for the future. In contrast to disposable texts, concerns for their preservation have always motivated the production of iconic texts. These concerns appear explicitly in many ancient texts that prohibit their own destruction and mandate their preservation and even oral reproduction (see Moerman Chapter 4 on the *Lotus Sutra* and Balbir Chapter 6 on such colophons in medieval Jain texts).¹

By offering the possibility of preserving knowledge, culture, and religion, books play a central role in forming and reproducing individual and corporate identity. Authors create in their works an authorial voice that replaces their embodied personas in the minds of readers and has the potential to long outlast them. Cultures establish and perpetuate the canon of their “greatest” authors to claim their voices as authentic representatives of the culture. Sacred texts establish the authoritative voice of a religious tradition and implicitly or explicitly represent it as the voice of deity. By internalizing and reproducing these voices, readers identify themselves with that culture and/or religion. By claiming the books, they define their own identities. Preserving books then seems vital to preserving religious and cultural identity.

Texts by their nature reinforce a widespread human tendency to distinguish material form from essential nature. Readers distinguish the “contents” of a text – its linguistic form and thematic message – from the particular material in which they find it. We usually discuss Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, for example, without much attention to which edition we read it in or whether it was bound

¹ See also the conclusion of the ancient Babylonian Erra epic; Deuteronomy 6:6–9 and 31:11–12 in the Hebrew Bible; and the New Testament book of Revelation 22:18–19.

with other pieces of literature. In this sense, texts readily transcend the material book in which they are read.

Such textual transcendence bears a more than analogous relationship to religious transcendence. Though individual copies of texts may wear out or be destroyed, the transcendent texts can last forever so long as copies are reproduced and/or preserved. Their potential for infinite reproduction and eternal preservation provides a practical and demonstrable form of immortality. Conscious of our heritage from previous generations, we cherish old texts as relics that connect us to the past. Conscious of our own mortality, we hope that “our” books will live on indefinitely. Depending on the kind of texts in question, they represent an author’s hopes for immortality, a nation’s desire for permanence, or a religion’s claim to eternal truth. The traditional codex book makes that realistically possible and verifiably true of many texts that have been preserved for centuries and even millennia.

One might think that this transcendental quality of texts would render their individual material manifestations inconsequential, that when texts appear in very many copies, destruction of individual copies would not threaten their existence and so receive little resistance. This practical observation conflicts, however, with the deeply engrained socialization that books represent essential cultural and religious values. Therefore calculation of a book’s utility has very little to do with its symbolic value. That is true not just of individual iconic books but of the category of non-disposable books as a whole. Most human societies inculcate in people the belief that books incarnate the values of their culture and religion, and should therefore be cherished, preserved, and reproduced.

The Ritualization of Sacred Texts

In contrast to disposable books and texts, even secular books such as novels and encyclopedias gain their non-disposable status by being ritualized. They may be ritualized along one or more of three dimensions. In the case of novels, it is their interpretation (the semantic dimension) that is most frequently ritualized through exposition in school and university classes and commentary in book reviews and other forms of literary analysis. The more a particular book receives such semantic ritualization, the greater its status as literature becomes. Poetry is frequently ritualized in the performative dimension by readings. Publication of collectors’ editions of “classic” literature in leather bindings or the like ritualizes works of literature in the iconic dimension by making them appear valuable and venerable. Other genres also elicit one or another of these kinds of ritualization to establish their texts as worthy of preservation and dissemination.

Religious communities ritualize particular books as sacred texts or scriptures (I use the terms as synonyms here), but with this difference: they tend to ritualize them in all three dimensions. That is a distinguishing feature of scriptures/sacred texts. Sermons, study classes, and oral and written commentaries ritualize

their semantic dimension. Readings, recitations, drama, and art ritualize their performative dimension. The iconic dimension can be ritualized by decoration of the book itself through calligraphy, illuminations, and special covers of various sorts, and also by displaying, processing and venerating it.

Of course, there is great variation in how and to what extent people ritualize scriptures both within particular religious traditions as well as between them, and practices change over time. My claim is simply that religious communities ritualize their sacred texts in all three dimensions in one way or another and it is this that distinguishes them functionally as sacred texts/scriptures (Watts 2006). As Schleicher also observed about Jewish practices:

It is through this ritual use that the holiness of the Torah is further established and maintained. In other words, an isolated focus on the textual content of scripture to explain its holy status is far from sufficient to elucidate its holy status and influence as a phenomenon within the world of religions. (Schleicher Chapter 1)

The rituals of disposal described in this volume ritualize the iconic dimension of sacred texts. The chapters document both a widespread concern for ritual disposal of scriptures as well as the great variety among religious traditions regarding both the form of the rituals and the frequency with which they are actually performed. And, as several chapters note (Svensson Chapter 2; Parmenter Chapter 3; Balbir Chapter 6), expressing concerns about how to dispose of sacred texts does not necessarily translate into routine performance of disposal rituals.

Nevertheless, some common themes show up in discussions of scripture disposal from almost every religious tradition surveyed in this volume. The most prominent is an analogy commonly drawn between the disposal of a sacred text and of a human body. Muslims, Jews, and Christians urge burial of worn-out sacred texts because burial represents the respectful ritual for treating the dead. Sikhs provide a “respected pyre” for cremating sacred texts in a ceremony explicitly analogous to a funeral. When Jains, Hindus and some Jewish rabbis distinguish scripture disposal from human burial on purity grounds, the analogy to funerals nevertheless remains operative in how they distinguish the disposal rituals from ordinary funerals. In the case of medieval Japanese Buddhism, concerns for the afterlife often motivated the elaborate reproduction and preservative burial of sacred texts.

Ordinary funerals provide a ritual means for emphasizing the continuing value of this particular human life and of human life in general despite the destruction of the material body. Its destruction raises anxieties about the preservation of the person’s transcendent soul or value. The habit of treating books as material incarnations of transcendent meanings makes them particularly powerful emblems of this conundrum. Therefore the ritual establishment of transcendent value despite material destruction also lies at the heart of scripture disposal ceremonies, so they tend to take funerary form. Conversely, afterlife beliefs often invoke the trope of textual permanence in the form of a heavenly “Book of Life” or something similar

that preserves the names of the saved and/or a record of every human’s deeds. This theme of afterlife expectations permanently inscribed in supernatural texts appears among Jews, Taoists, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs (see Parmenter 2009).

The original union of transcendent value and immanent form presents less of a problem, whether in the form of people or of books. Hence neither birth nor book creation are as often ritualized as are disposals of bodies and sacred texts. While Jews, Sikhs, and Japanese Buddhists ritualize the creation of at least some sacred texts, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians rarely do so. Regardless of the circumstances of the book’s creation, however, all the traditions surveyed here use rituals to establish and maintain the status of scriptures/sacred texts. Most such rituals take place within regularly scheduled services of worship, but several traditions also set aside annual festivals for celebrating their scriptures (for example, Judaism’s Simhat Torah and Islam’s Lailat al Qadr; for the Jains’ celebrations, see Balbir Chapter 6, and for those of the Sikhs, see Myrvold Chapter 7).

Disposal of sacred texts therefore evokes certain typical religious themes regarding spiritual transcendence and physical immanence. That said, it is surprising that the dichotomy of body versus mind or soul does not show up frequently in this volume’s discussions. Perhaps that is because adherents of these traditions have put relatively little effort into theorizing the nature of sacred texts. The contrast between transcendent contents and immanent material form has rather been worked out in practice through ritual. As a result, two themes that crop up repeatedly in the preceding chapters have to do with rituals involving purity and with relics.

Pollution and purity practices remain undertheorized in religious studies. Forty years ago, Mary Douglas famously defined pollution as “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966, 44). That summary works especially well for sacred space which, in very many religious traditions, must be protected from polluting substances in order to preserve its holy state. Thus the purity of people and objects, including sacred texts as Schleicher noted above, must be maintained in order that they can be brought into the sacred space. However, the holiness of certain objects can be so conventional that their relationship to sacred space does not come into consideration. Then the issue becomes instead the relative place of sacred and profane matter, with concern that the former always receive the more honorable place and reverent treatment. In the case of some scriptures, the relationship between sacred object and sacred space can even be reversed. Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs often claim that what makes a space sacred is precisely the presence in it of scriptural texts.²

² This is especially the case for Sikhs who define their house of worship, a *gurdwara*, precisely by the presence in it of the Guru Granth. The Ark containing the Torah scrolls is also the holiest part of a Jewish synagogue, whose space is frequently defined as sacred because of their presence. The Muslim case is much less obvious because a *masjid* functions fundamentally as a house of prayer whose rituals emphasize recitation of Qur’anic verses, rather than physical manipulation of the book. Nevertheless, a recurrent theme in news stories

Scriptures are by definition “sacred” texts, a classification which therefore inevitably raises anxieties over their potential desecration (see Watts 2009). Svensson (Chapter 2) describes above the widespread Muslim belief that one must be ritually pure to touch a Qur’an. Balbir (Chapter 6) points out that Jain books come with colophons or, more recently, stickers instructing readers to show them respect by preserving their purity. Broo (Chapter 5) notes that Hindu scriptures should not be burned because, in contrast to human bodies, they are considered pure. They should therefore be buried on analogy to the funerals of some saints. Parmenter (Chapter 3) points out that suggestions for proper disposal of Christian Bibles draw explicit analogies with the ritual disposal of other consecrated objects, except among Protestants, who have no such analogues but must cite Jewish practices or customs for disposing of national flags and Christmas trees instead. Yet invariably the authors in this volume who mention purity concerns for sacred texts also emphasize the diversity and inconsistency of purity practices involving scriptures, as well as frequent disagreements among religious authorities over their importance and application. These inconsistencies and disagreements stem from the fact that purity concerns over sacred texts tend to be generated by pious laity. The mostly ad hoc pronouncements of religious authorities reflect their origins in responses to lay concerns.

The three-dimensional model of scriptures can help illuminate this situation by drawing attention to the fact that the iconic dimension is most accessible to laity. Whereas scholars and clergy control the semantic dimension of interpretation by virtue of their expertise, and skilled speakers often dominate the performative dimension of public reading, recitation, and dramatization, lay people can readily access a physical book, especially in the modern era of mass publication. The material book comes under their complete control, unlike interpretation and even performance which to a lesser or greater degree are monopolized by experts. Even illiteracy does not interfere with ritual manipulation of the material text. As a result, devout lay people often feel particularly responsible for the physical treatment of sacred texts in their possession. Scholars, clergy and liturgists, by contrast, feel greater responsibility to the semantic and/or performative dimensions of scriptures which fall under their purview and which they regard as more important. Therefore their rulings on reverent treatment of physical scriptures are usually afterthoughts prompted by lay concerns.

The other common theme in most of the essays presented here involves analogies between sacred texts and bodily relics, in which books are treated ritually like relics. The most pervasive employment of these practices seems to be in Mahayana Buddhism where texts are frequently placed in the foundations of stupas in place of bodily relics of the Buddha (see Moerman Chapter 4). Hinduism, by contrast, downplays the significance of material books, yet Broo (Chapter 5) is

about mosques damaged or destroyed in recent years due to warfare in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have been protests that complain most bitterly about the destruction not of the buildings but of the Qur’ans that they contained.

able to draw attention to at least one example of a Hindu temple site surrounded by shrines (*samādhi*) for relics that includes a book *samādhi* as well. If one disposes of sacred texts by storing them, such storage sites may themselves attract worshipers as shrines, as has happened to a cave containing thousands of worn-out Qur’ans in Pakistan (Boulat 2001). Parmenter (Chapter 3) describes a ritual variation on this theme: in early Christian worship, the procession of the Gospel book to the altar containing holy relics reproduced a funerary procession. Of course, many traditions regularly display bodily relics for veneration rather than or in addition to burying them in shrines. In the same way, books associated with particular saints may be treated as relics of that saint just like their bodily remains. Broo describes this kind of Hindu relic book which is displayed as a relic of the saintly person who wrote, copied or owned it. Svensson (Chapter 2) notes similar displays of Qur’ans owned by important Muslim figures. In medieval Ireland, Gospel books associated with venerated saints were encased in book shrines and also displayed for the veneration of Christian pilgrims (Brown 2003, 77).

I must observe here that such practices are hardly limited to religious traditions. Secular institutions regularly treat particular books (and other objects) in precisely the same manner, though they avoid the religious vocabulary of “relic” and “veneration.” The most prominent secular reliquaries are museums and libraries, though private collections also perform this function. The objects they collect and display or store attain their status either as intrinsically rare or important (the first kind of relic mentioned above) or from their association with important people and events (the second kind of relic), but they call them “collector’s items” instead. Historically, of course, museums and secular libraries developed out of religious institutions which they continue to imitate, for the most part unconsciously. As has often been observed, they function as shrines of national or secular culture. Books put on exhibit by museums and libraries are removed from ordinary use, just like sacred texts treated as relics. Display ritualizes their iconic dimension to the point that the text can no longer function in the semantic or performative dimensions (Watts 2006). Nobody, for example, labors to interpret a Gutenberg Bible or tries to perform a play from an original First Folio of Shakespeare. Here belief in the transcendent nature of a book’s contents allows people to distinguish it from its particular material incarnation. So long as the contents are readily available in non-relic copies, the relic text can be exhibited for its historical importance and/or distinctive material form. Sellers of rare books often behave like traders in relic body parts: just as saints’ bodies get dismembered and widely distributed, so also rare manuscripts get separated into single pages and sold individually. Books in codex form present notorious problems for exhibit since only one pair of pages can be displayed at any one time. Dismembering them not only maximizes profits for dealers but also allows collectors to frame and display one side of every page like a work of art.

The proper treatment of books is also a secular concern, though again expressed in non-religious vocabulary about their “defacement” or “damage” rather than “desecration.” The belief that books serve as containers for preserving cultural

values generates anxiety over their malicious or accidental mutilation. Librarians in particular have reason to advocate careful treatment of the books in their care and so display warnings against marking in books. Instances of intentional mutilation of rare copies either for purposes of profit or spite catch the attention of news media. However, the widespread availability of a particular book can allay concerns for its mutilation to the point of recommending annotations of personal copies. That is common practice with textbooks, but some religious groups also approve of underlining, highlighting and annotating personal copies of sacred texts. In some communities of evangelical Christians, for example, marking up personal Bibles is such a common practice that those holding clean copies may be suspected of insufficient attention to their devotions. In this case, the personal alteration of Bibles has also become ritualized.

My point is that the book practices of religious communities can be understood as extensions of the book practices of their wider cultures. These practices reflect the inherent understanding of books and other texts as physical repositories of meanings and values that transcend their particular material form. Religious communities generally elaborate and exaggerate the ritualization of books found in secular culture, but not always in the same ways. Traditions for handling other sacred objects without desecrating them inform how sacred texts get handled. Religious groups with established traditions of relic veneration find such practices particularly applicable to relic texts.

One might suppose, however, that the ritual production of sacred texts purely for the sake of burying them must exceed any possible secular analogue. In his chapter on Japanese Buddhism, Moerman describes the medieval practice of writing elaborate copies of the *Lotus Sutra* in order to bury them in funeral ceremonies. The goal was to preserve them through the coming time of ignorance of the Dharma, as well as to offer the individual who sponsored their creation hope for an afterlife. Burial in this case represents not disposal but eschatological preservation, a kind of “time capsule” as Moerman notes. However, exactly the same language was used by Manaugh (2007) of the British Library’s new warehouse to store “nil to low use material.” *The Guardian* described it as “262 linear kilometres of high-density, fully automated storage in a low-oxygen environment ... meticulously constructed to house things that no one wants,” hence a “tomb of tomes” (Jeffries 2007). The stated rationale behind laws establishing copyright libraries is, of course, the preservation of information, which though currently unwanted might someday be needed. The status of “someday” in that rationalization is more than vaguely eschatological. Positively apocalyptic is the Long Now Foundation’s efforts to preserve a record of 1,500 human languages etched microscopically on a nickel “Rosetta disk” designed to last 50,000 years – ten times the entire history of written language to date (Rose 2008).

By the labels “eschatological” and “apocalyptic,” I do not mean to imply that the fears of information loss motivating these projects are unrealistic: as a fully socialized member of twenty-first-century Western culture, I too find the prospect of an information apocalypse very likely and am convinced of the real harm of

widespread language extinctions. Just like medieval Japanese Buddhists, we who inhabit contemporary secular cultures fear the loss of our cultural capital in the near future and are making expensive and time-consuming efforts to preserve it in more or less inaccessible forms. Applications of modern technology and engineering to these problems are not new. In the early years of the nuclear arms race, the US Constitution and Declaration of Independence were moved into the Rotunda of the National Archives in Washington, DC, where they could be displayed under protective glass during the day and lowered into bomb-proof vaults under the building at night. The Ancient Biblical Manuscripts Center in Claremont, California, stores archival copies of its microfilm and digital files in a vault deep in the Sierra Nevada mountains. These facilities were built to withstand both natural and human threats to the documents’ preservation. I suspect that such examples of extreme measures for text preservation could be multiplied many times over.

These examples are not meant to disparage modern efforts at text preservation but rather to show that veneration and preservation of the material text remains an essential aspect of the cultural function of books. Preservation of physical books and other texts remains a secular as well as religious eschatological concern. Lay and scholarly interests unite around the cause of text preservation, though often the particular books of interest to them are different. While the American public is more likely to be interested in the manuscripts of the nation’s founding documents in the elaborate Rotunda, professional historians are more likely to be interested in more obscure documents in the vaults of the National Archives. The financial stability of libraries and museums often depends on their skill at catering to both interests. Thus the Archives building in Washington was built with two main entrances: on one side is the grand entrance for tourists while on the opposite side of the building is an equally impressive entrance for researchers.

The Socio-Politics of Book Disposal

The three-dimensional model of scriptures thus permits a socio-political comparative analysis of the “death of sacred texts” in various cultures. The difference between professional and lay interests in sacred texts can provide a framework for understanding criticisms of book veneration practices within religious communities. Critiques of using books as amulets and relics date back to antiquity (for example Jerome in the fourth century CE) and do not reflect uniquely modern presuppositions, but rather the interests of scholars and educated clergy who emphasize the importance of the semantic interpretations of sacred texts in which they themselves are experts. I suspect that the scholarly and non-scholarly sides of this dispute are easier to distinguish in earlier eras than in modernity when mass education obscures the distinction between them. The values of literary scholarship have now been internalized by many but hardly all members of the

public. Thus the debate among Sikh bloggers that Myrvold summarizes in Chapter 7 reflects a long-standing dispute in many traditions.

Despite their interpretive authority, scholars have rarely been able to enforce attention to the semantic dimension of scriptures alone. Powerful lay interests usually insist on some socially privileged book rituals, such as their use for political and judicial oath ceremonies, because manipulation of the iconic text conveys political and religious legitimacy. Though political legitimacy does not seem to be at stake in book-disposal rituals, several chapters of this volume nevertheless mention significant lay involvement in them. A Sikh businessman took the initiative to develop and fund an institution for reverently cremating sacred texts of the Sikh and other religious traditions (Myrvold Chapter 7). In many other traditions, lay sponsors supply the funding to create and maintain sacred texts, often in hopes of specific recognition both in this life and/or the next. They also play key roles in the rituals surrounding the disposal of such texts.

Further research should test this observation about the typical interests of lay people in ritualizing the iconic text in contrast to scholars' focus on ritualizing its semantic dimension through interpretation. Does field observation of particular communities confirm the lay-orientation of purity concerns for scriptures and other sacred texts, or not? Tensions within communities and traditions over veneration of sacred texts also bear closer scrutiny. Are criticisms from clergy and/or scholars aimed at all iconic ritualizations of texts, or particularly at private rituals over which they have no control? That is, are public scripture rituals exempt from aniconic criticisms?

This essay's claims regarding continuity between secular book practices and religious ones should also be checked against the distinctive practices of different cultures. Do those differences between cultures and traditions carry over from religious texts to secular ones and vice versa? That is, can the claim of continuity between secular and religious book practices be demonstrated at the level of the life of a religious community within its specific cultural contexts?

Finally, the clear analogy between books and humans that is drawn by the book-disposal rituals of the many traditions documented in this volume bears further research. Is it expressed in other book rituals or practices? If so, do these practices confirm that the root of the analogy lies in the recognition that books, like humans (it is believed), have a transcendent as well as material nature?

Bibliography

- Boulat, Alexandra. 2001. "Keeper of the Koran." In *Time*, October 3. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/koran/>.
- Brown, Michelle P. 2003. *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality, and the Scribe*. London: The British Library.
- Collins, Paul. 2008. "The Book of the Undead: Why won't phone books die?" In *Slate Magazine*, March 21. Retrieved from <http://www.slate.com/id/2187035/>.

- Curry, Andrew. 2009. "Archive Collapse Disaster for Historians." In *Spiegel*, March 4. Retrieved from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,611311,00.html>.
- De Bary, William Theodore (ed.). 2008. *Sources of East Asian Tradition: Premodern Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Gulácsi, Zsuzsanna. 2005. *Mediaeval Manichaean Book Art*. Leiden: Brill.
- Jeffries, Stuart. 2007. "Inside the Tomb of Tomes." In *The Guardian*, November 24. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/nov/24/architecture>.
- Manaugh, Geoff. 2007. "The Future Warehouse of Unwanted Books." Posted at *BLDG/BLOG*, December 1. Retrieved from <http://bldgblog.blogspot.com/2007/12/future-warehouse-of-unwanted-books.html>.
- Parmenter, Dorina Miller. 2006. "The Iconic Book: The Image of the Bible in Early Christian Rituals." In *Postscripts 2* (2–3), pp. 160–189.
- Parmenter, Dorina Miller. 2009. "The Bible as Icon: Myths of the Divine Origin of Scripture." In Evans, C.A and Zacharias, H.D. (eds), *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*. pp. 298–310. London: T.&T. Clark.
- Rose, Alexander. 2008. "Macro to Micro Etching." Posted at *The Long Now Foundation*, November 3. Retrieved from <http://blog.longnow.org/2008/11/03/macro-to-micro-etching/>.
- Sarefield, Daniel. 2007. "The Symbolics of Book Burning: The Establishment of a Christian Ritual of Persecution." In Klingshirn, W.E. and Safran, L. (eds), *The Early Christian Book*. pp. 159–173. Washington: Catholic University of America Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1987a. "The Domestication of Sacrifice." In R.G. Hamerton-Kelly (ed.), *Violent Origins*. pp. 191–235. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1987b. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Watts, James W. 2006. "The Three Dimensions of Scriptures." In *Postscripts 2* (2–3), pp. 135–159.
- Watts, James W. 2009. "Desecrating Scriptures. A Case Study for the LUCE Project in Media, Religion and International Relations." Posted at *Religion, Media and International Affairs Program*, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. Retrieved from <http://sites.maxwell.syr.edu/luce/jameswatts.html>.