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## The Three Dimensions of Scriptures

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**Abstract:** *This article proposes a new model for understanding the ways that scriptures function. Several big media stories of recent years, such as those surrounding controversies over Ten Commandments monuments in U.S. courthouses and Qur'ans desecrated at Guantánomo Bay, involve the iconic function of scriptures. Yet contemporary scholarship on Jewish, Christian or Muslim scriptures is ill-prepared to interpret these events because it has focused almost all its efforts on textual interpretation. Even the increased attention to the performative function of scripture by Wilfred Cantwell Smith and his students does not provide resources for understanding the iconic roles of scriptures. This paper addresses the gap by theorizing the nature of scriptures as a function of their ritualization in three dimensions—semantic, performative, and iconic. The model provides a means for conceptualizing how traditions ritualize scriptures and how they claim and negotiate social power through this process.*

## The Three Dimensions of Scriptures

The use and abuse of scriptures figured prominently in news stories of recent years (2003—2005). Courts and politicians in the United States led intense public debates over whether to display monuments of the Ten Commandments in public buildings. Tens of thousands of Muslims marched in streets around the world to protest news that American interrogators desecrated Qur'ans at the prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. These events and the media coverage that they generated demonstrate that Muslim, Christian and Jewish scriptures remain potent symbols in popular culture.

These controversies do not involve the interpretation of the meaning of these scriptures, nor even how they are to be learned or obeyed. They focus rather on the physical display and manipulation of scriptures. It is therefore not scriptures as texts or even as verbal performances that are at issue, but rather scriptures as physical symbols of religions, cultures, and ideas, that is, scriptures as icons.

Scholarship on religion and scriptures is ill prepared to discuss and evaluate these developments. Modern research has focused on other aspects of the phenomenon of scripture. Scholars have devoted the vast majority of their time and publications to explaining the origins and meaning of scriptural texts. Thus, to take biblical studies as an example, modern research has focused on describing the process by which the Bible was composed and the original meaning intended by its authors. Biblical scholars have also given considerable attention to the process by which the Bible became scripture. Such studies of canonization, however, still concentrate on the Bible's semantic form and contents, that is, on questions of when particular books became part of the Jewish and Christian scriptures and under what circumstances.

Some time ago, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a historian of religion, criticized biblical scholars for their preoccupation with origins, which he described as studying the Bible before it was Bible. He called for more historical and comparative studies of how the Bible *functions* as scripture (W.C. Smith 1971). In recent decades, many biblical scholars have in fact given more attention to the history of the Bible's interpretation. Some have even elevated subsequent meanings of biblical texts to the same level of importance as its original meaning to its authors. That begins to answer the challenge, but W. C. Smith envisioned an approach focused on more than just the history of interpretation. He advocated study of the Bible's religious functions and effects in comparison with the scriptures of other religious traditions.

It was left to some of Smith's own students to develop that approach. William Graham (1987), most prominently, argued that traditional scholarship on scriptures has ignored their *performative* function. He pointed out that the most characteristic uses of scriptures in various religious traditions and cultures have to do with their reading, recitation, and memorization rather than with their interpretation. Graham argued that such textual performances are just as important as exegesis, often more important, for understanding the cultural significance of scriptures.

Graham's study of performance was not comprehensive enough, however, to describe all the cultural functions of scriptures, or even all of their performative functions. His survey of the ways that texts are performed through reading, recitation, and memorization omitted or downplayed practices of performing the *contents* of scriptures. These take many forms, ranging from artistic depictions of scenes from scriptural narratives to the enactment of scriptural stories in dramas and, more recently, movies. Artistic and dramatic performances of scriptural contents have played prominent roles in Hindu and Christian cultures, among many others.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is without doubt the dominant mode of scriptural performance in modern Christianity and has been reinforced by the media revolution of the twentieth century. The changes wrought by new technology, however, are not as innovative as might be imagined. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century culture, at least in America, was already infused with imaginary recreations of biblical landscapes and the extravagant staging of biblical epics (Long 2003).

Graham's omission of this aspect of scriptural performance led him to misrepresent the last five centuries of Christian history. He argued that whereas previously most people's knowledge of scripture would have come through aural reception and oral recitation and memorization, such modes of oral performance have more recently been displaced by textual interpretation. That may have been true in some Protestant sub-cultures in some periods, but Graham's exclusive focus on performances of the words of texts obscured the fact that contemporary Christian culture remains infused and informed by scriptural performances. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most Christians' knowledge of the Bible is mediated by movies, music and art as much as by reading the text for themselves. Dramatic and artistic performances of scriptural contents as well as public readings and musical performances of scriptural texts remain primary modes by which scripture influences people. If one included these more creative forms of scriptural performance alongside textual recitation, comparative and historical accounts of the use of scriptural performances would present a more balanced assessment of contemporary culture.

Even with such an augmentation of the kinds of performances included in the study of scriptures as advocated by Smith and Graham, however, we are still in no better position to explain news about protests over desecrations of the Qur'an or court battles over Ten Commandments monuments. These conflicts concern neither scriptural interpretation nor performance. Something is still missing in the scholarship on scriptures, namely research on its iconicity. *Scriptures are icons*. They are not just texts to be interpreted and performed. They are material objects that convey religious significance by their production, display and ritual manipulation.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara A. Holdredge (2003, 144-46) presented an account of scripture in the W.C. Smith/William Graham tradition that recognizes the cultural importance for African Americans of performances of scriptural contents, as well as scripture's iconic role. Nevertheless, like almost all other interpreters, she found the most legitimate and legitimizing uses of scripture to involve the interpretation of their words: "It was the *content* of the Bible – not simply its status as a sacred object – that captivated the imagination of the slaves, catalyzing their devotion, nurturing their hopes, inspiring their visions, and fueling their rhetoric" (p. 147).

Martin Marty (1982) called attention twenty-five years ago to the Bible's role as "America's Iconic Book." He argued that, more than its contents, the book itself has become a dominant symbol in the nation's mental "carapace". Other scholars have noted the iconic function of scriptures in various periods and cultures. Karel van der Toorn (1997) pointed out that, in ancient Judaism, Torah scrolls functioned ritually in the same manner as divine images did in Babylonian religions. Rather than being the aniconic religion of modern scholars' imaginations, he argued that Judaism simply focused iconic attention on the scrolls themselves. Jacob Kinnard (1999, 2002) has documented book veneration in medieval Indian Buddhism. Its practice by the Buddhist Nichiren sect, Soka Gakkai, in contemporary Japan is well known. Michelle Brown (2003) described the devotional function of Christian manuscript illustration in medieval England. A survey of African-Americans' use of the Bible documented the book's widespread iconic use in addition to its contents being a source for interpretation (Shopshire, Mukenge, Erickson, and Baer 2003). Until now, however, there has been no comparative historical research that gathers these diverse studies into a more comprehensive analysis of the nature and function of iconic books.

Dorina Miller Parmenter is now engaged in research to construct a broader theoretical understanding of iconic books (see ... below). Starting with scripture's ritual manipulation and display in Christian traditions, she describes the parallel to Eastern Orthodox Christians' use of images of saints (icons) and scriptures. Both icons and scriptures are handled in rituals and displayed prominently, both receive veneration, both are believed to mediate divine presence. She is also studying the history of myths of heavenly books—divine documents in heaven that determine human destinies and prescribe religious practices. Such myths have their origins as early as the Babylonian and Egyptian cultures of the second millennium B.C.E. and remain pervasive in the modern era. Parmenter argues therefore that, like Orthodox icons, iconic scriptures are not only potent religious symbols. They are also believed to participate in a heavenly exemplar of which they are the earthly manifestations.

This research lays the basis for a better understanding of the scriptures in our news headlines. Clearly, iconic scriptures remain powerful motivators in contemporary cultures. New research into iconic books as a trans-cultural, trans-historical phenomenon should shed interesting light on current developments. The iconic aspect of scriptures, however, also needs to be understood in relation to scriptures' other religious and cultural functions. It is therefore time to develop an explanatory model of scriptures with the capacity to include all of their aspects and effects.

The history of comparative studies of scriptures cautions us that this enterprise can easily become a tool for inter-religious polemic and supercessionism, rather than for inter-cultural understanding. For example, the traditional Muslim recognition of the three "religions of the books" (Judaism and Christianity, in addition to Islam) creates a polemical hierarchy of religions that is a typical strategy in all three Western traditions. The idea of scripture has been used from antiquity as a religious yard-stick to measure the distance of other cultures from the epitome of divine "truth" in the Torah, the New Testament, or the Qur'an (Graham 1987, 47). Early attempts to provide more balanced comparisons between religious traditions nevertheless tended to export the Western

model. Thus Max Müller's massive series of books introducing nineteenth-century Europeans to "eastern" traditions presented them under the title, *The Sacred Books of the East*, to raise their status by analogy with Christian scriptures. Even W. C. Smith's comparative efforts to explore the functions of scriptures produced an evolutionary hierarchy of cultural development, with the Qur'an at the pinnacle: "The Islamic instance represents the notion par excellence of Scripture as a religious phenomenon," he argued, and though the processes of scriptural development continue a thousand years later in the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs and in the nineteenth-century *Book of Mormon*, Smith maintained that "none of these instances carry our development any further" (1989, 31, 32). Graham repeated these sentiments (1987, 52-53) and also reflected a distaste for popular iconic uses of scriptures: "Certain forms of Jewish and Christian treatment of their scriptures involve not only reverence for the physical text but even magical or quasi-magical uses of it that can only be termed bibliolatry", and he went on to cite examples in many religious traditions (1987, 61, 196 footnotes 17-18). Historical judgments thus easily reinforce the traditional self-congratulations of Western "scriptural" traditions. Theorizing about the nature of scriptures frequently falls prey to self-serving value judgments and colonial exploitation.

It is therefore understandable that many scholars suspect not only the methods but also the motives behind any comparative model of scriptures. Why compare the use of scriptures in different traditions at all when doing so runs such dangers? Why not study separately each community's use of scriptures in the context of only its own religious and cultural practices?

The importance of cultural context for understanding the functions of scriptures certainly cannot be overstated. As Graham has emphasized, "scripture" is a relational concept that can only be understood in its relationship to a specific group: "The significant 'scriptural' characteristics of a text belong not only to the text itself but also to its role in a community and in individual lives" (1987, 5-6). The long history of textual studies within the Western religious traditions also shows, however, the limitations of a single-culture approach, as W. C. Smith pointed out. A major value of comparative study is that it can bring to attention aspects of a religion that have been ignored, or consciously suppressed, by traditional scholarship. It is the fact that our deep traditions of scholarship on scriptures are nonplussed, not by newly discovered cultures or practices, but rather by scriptural practices in the heart of contemporary Western religious traditions such as those mentioned at the beginning of this essay, that illustrates the need for a broader, comparative study of the nature and functions of scriptures.

I believe that functional models of scriptures can be developed that address this need in a responsible and even-handed manner. The purpose of any such model should be to understand better those religious traditions that are self-consciously "scriptural" and to evaluate their claims about the role of scripture within their own tradition against historical and comparative evidence both within that tradition and outside it. In order to minimize the very real dangers that attend this enterprise, a successful model of scriptures should meet three criteria. First, it should provide several non-disparaging bases or scales for comparison within and between traditions to avoid the reduction of scriptural phenomenon to a single dichotomous scale easily susceptible to polemical manipulation.

Second, it should also be capable of accommodating the full range of religious expressions and uses of scriptures and resist the temptation to focus on textual interpretation just because that is easier for scholarship to understand.<sup>2</sup> Third, it should be able to explain in a non-hierarchical manner the relationship and distinction between scriptures and other, non-scriptural, writings and between scriptures and other, unwritten, religious traditions.

### ***Three Dimensions***

To meet these criteria, I propose a three-dimensional model of scriptures to explain their cultural functions and religious significance. The religious adoption and use of scriptures should be understood as a form of ritual. Religious communities ritualize scriptures along three different dimensions: a semantic dimension, a performative dimension, and an iconic dimension.

By describing these aspects as *dimensions*, I mean that all three forms of ritualization are intrinsic to scriptures and necessary to their nature and function. Scriptures have all three dimensions, but different religious groups and individuals ritualize the three dimensions to different degrees. The model thus provides a conceptual grid for comparing the ways that religious traditions regard and use their scriptures.

By describing the dimensions in terms of *ritualization*, the model explains the similarities and differences between scriptures and other books and writings. All books and writings exhibit semantic, performative and iconic dimensions at least to an incipient degree. Some secular texts (such as national constitutions and theatrical scripts) are also typically ritualized along one or two of their dimensions. What distinguishes scriptures, however, is that their religious communities ritualize all three dimensions.

In what follows, I will elaborate on these claims by describing each of the three dimensions of scriptures, then exploring the processes by which each dimension is ritualized before analyzing the claims to power made by ritualizing them.

The *semantic dimension* of scriptures has to do with the meaning of what is written, and thus includes all aspects of interpretation and commentary as well as appeals to the text's contents in preaching and other forms of persuasive rhetoric. This dimension has always received most if not all of the attention of scholars, for the very good reason

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<sup>2</sup> Graham noted that understanding scriptures requires taking the affective aspects of religious life into account: "seeing, hearing, and touching ... A sacred text can be read laboriously in silent study, chanted or sung in unthinking repetition, copied or illuminated in loving devotion, imaginatively depicted in art or drama, solemnly processed in ritual pageantry, or devoutly touched in hope of luck and blessing. In each instance, in very diverse and not always predictable but still very real ways, such contact with scripture can elicit in reader, hearer, onlooker, or worshiper diverse responses: a surge of joy or sorrow; a feeling of belonging or even of alienation; a sense of guidance or consolation (or the want of either); or a feeling of intimacy with or awesome distance from the divine. These kinds of religious response are important to an adequate understanding of what it means to encounter a text as scripture. Such aspects are difficult, perhaps finally impossible, for the scholar to get at in any systematic way, but to ignore them entirely is to omit a substantial portion of their reality" (1987, 6-7). He narrowed the focus of his own book, however, to analyzing only the performative function of scriptural texts.

that religious traditions themselves place great emphasis on scholarly expertise in scriptural interpretation. Most religious communities with written scriptures encourage many of their devotees to gain expertise in their interpretation, not only for personal devotion but also as a means for directing community behavior and for adjudicating conflicts. Insofar as the text is understood to be divine communication, its interpretation becomes a form of divination, usually the preferred if not the only legitimate means for determining the divine will. Religious leadership therefore depends, to a degree that varies from one tradition to another, on exegetical mastery of semantic meaning.

The *performative dimension* of scriptures has to do with the performance of what is written. As already mentioned, scriptural performances come in two major modes: performance of the words of scriptures and performance of the contents of scriptures. Performance of scriptural *words* includes many ritualized forms of public and private reading, as well as the memorization and recitation of texts. Often the words are sung in musical genres ranging from highly prescribed chants through choral oratorios to congregational hymns. Artistic displays of scriptural quotations, such as monumental calligraphy and inscriptions, should also be included under the category of performances of scriptural words, though these artistic examples have iconic aspects as well.

Performance of scriptural *contents* includes dramatizations of various sorts, including simple tableaux, street performances, staged dramas, and cinema. Artistic illustrations of scenes from scriptures also belong in this category. The two modes of performance often work in tandem to expose devotees to their tradition's scriptures. They hear the text read and sung, and also see it enacted in drama and art. Nevertheless, religious leaders are more likely to dictate precisely how scriptural words are to be recited than they are to control dramatic performances and artistic illustrations. Thus the first mode of performance tends to be regulated by religious traditions more than the second. As a result, drama and art often express creative appropriations of scriptures beyond the control of religious authorities.<sup>3</sup>

The *iconic dimension* of scriptures finds expression in the physical form, ritual manipulation, and artistic representation of scriptures. Scriptures often take special forms that distinguish them physically from other books: e.g. hand-written and "clothed" torah scrolls, jewel-encrusted gospel books, leather-bound bibles, bark sutras with lacquered covers, illustrated Sanskrit scrolls, etc. They are often displayed prominently on podiums or tables, hung on walls, or else hidden within special cases that call attention to them while simultaneously protecting them or even hiding them from casual view (e.g. synagogue arks). The Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth*, must be given its own room if it is kept in a private house—a way of simultaneously hiding and displaying the sacred text. The text of scriptures may be presented with distinctive typographies (e.g. red-letter

<sup>3</sup> To give just two examples: the depictions of the story of the binding of Isaac (the *Aqedah*, Genesis 22) in Jewish and Christian artwork developed independently and often at variance with the exegetical traditions, and have therefore often been criticized as incorrect (see Kessler 2004, 173-74). A contemporary example has been provided by Monica Jyotsna Melancon (2005), who noted that Dalit women in India use biblical role playing and story telling to "enable women to release themselves from androcentric interpretive processes. ... This process of acting out the text empowers Dalit women, whom society has trained not to act or to act in certain predefined ways."



bibles) or elaborate calligraphy (e.g. many Qur'ans), or illustrated with expensive hand-drawn illuminations. When copies of scriptures look too much like other books, their owners often find ways to give them a distinctive form anyway (such as bible covers in leather or with distinctive decorations). In these ways and many others, scriptures are often distinguished physically from others books.

They are often treated differently than other books. They are carried in religious processions, displayed to congregations, and venerated through bowing and kissing. Many traditions have rules governing how scriptures should be treated, such as requiring that they never have other books placed on top of them or that a person be in a state of ritual purity before touching them. They are also manipulated in political ceremonies—displayed or touched as part of oath ceremonies and waved in political rallies and protests. Of course, what can be venerated can also be desecrated, so books of scriptures are defiled and destroyed as a means of attacking the religious traditions they represent.

The distinctive forms and uses of scriptures makes them potent symbols in representational art. Saints and deities hold sacred texts in the artworks of many religious traditions. The artistic association of a deity with scripture legitimizes the scripture as authentic, and the association of a human with recognized scripture legitimizes the person's spiritual status. In recent (nineteenth and twentieth century) art, scriptures and other books have increasingly been depicted alone to represent various religious traditions or truth in general. Thus in the physical forms they take, in their ritual uses, and in their symbolic representations, scriptures function as icons.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Graham recognized the iconic function of scriptures, but subsumed it under its textual function to preserve a dichotomy between textual and performative uses. He thus contrasted the moderns' conception of a "holy book" with the oral/aural scripture that was once the "primary and pervasive mode of contact with the Word" (1987, 46). Graham identified the effects of textual and iconic modes in mutual opposition to performative ones: "Even when the Bible remains a powerful symbol of revelation and guidance according to its spirit rather than its letter, it is today much more easily conceived of as a documentary text than a voice of inspired utterance. It is more likely to occupy a visible and symbolic place such as the ark of the synagogue or a church altar, lecter, or home bookshelf than it is to occupy the time of the faithful in sustained reading, recitation, memorization, and study. The authority of Torah or Bible is as likely to stem from its status as a fixed, tangible, and visible book as from its theological status as word of God" (47). Textual modes of scriptural study, while legitimate in and of themselves, "limit our ability as scholars to grasp the functional roles of scripture in other historical contexts" (47). Though he described the iconic function of holy texts, Graham argued that mass production has made scriptures like any other book. "The cheap and easy availability of myriad versions of the Jewish and Christian scriptures has done much to reduce the special quality of the physical text as an object of reverence and devotion in and of itself. Scripture's presence as a bound volume in a living-room book-case, a church pew, or a hotel-room drawer may conceivably encourage Bible reading, but it also reinforces the primary image of scripture as but another printed book. . . . Consequently, we have some difficulty empathizing with persons for whom a copy of a sacred text was or is a seldom and wonderful thing, perhaps a magical and awesome thing, to be handled with solicitude and to which the proper response is reverential deference or even worshipful veneration" (46). I maintain, on the contrary, that the ubiquity of these bound volumes show that iconic veneration remains very high. Complaining that the ubiquity of Bibles diminishes their reverential quality is like complaining that the mass-production of icons reduces their spiritual effectiveness. Graham's value judgments become clear when he criticized fundamentalism for "objectifying Holy Writ" (46-47).

### ***Ritualizing Books***

My thesis is that scriptures are produced by ritualizing their three dimensions—semantic, performative and iconic—but these three dimensions are not unique to scriptures. All books and other texts participate in them. The use of any written document invokes the three dimensions at an incipient level. Most users of ordinary books, however, ignore the three dimensions of these writings as trivial.

Reading any book or other writing involves interpreting its meaning if it is to be understood. Understanding texts requires using their semantic dimension. That process of interpretation, however, usually occurs automatically and receives little attention when, for example, reading a newspaper or e-mail—or this essay, for that matter. Only when one becomes aware of one's lack of understanding does the process of interpretation receive attention, and then only until the problem is resolved.

The same thing can be said of the performative dimension of books and other writings. Writing is a visual code that must be translated into spoken or mental language. Any kind of reading is a kind of performance: it requires readers to translate visual letter forms into words, at least in their own minds. Again, this process usually occurs automatically unless one becomes aware of difficulties, such as when the typeface or hand-writing is obscure. Otherwise, the performative dimension of books and other writings remains an unremarkable feature of the reading process.

Before one can interpret a text's meaning, one must translate visual shapes into words, and that requires recognizing this physical object as a text. The text's physical shape, whether in the codex form of modern books or as a scroll or as a letter in an envelope, represents to viewers the possibility of reading its contents. The iconic dimension of books and other writings represents at its most basic level an invitation to viewers to "read me." This too is a trivial prerequisite to any act of reading. These physical shapes, however, also receive various other symbolic associations, such as of education, learning, and truth. As a result, books *per se* play iconic roles in very many cultures.

Though these three dimensions play intrinsic roles in the use of all books and other writings, they are easily ignored when their use is unproblematic. Drawing attention to them emphasizes seemingly trivial aspects of normal reading practices. By contrast, the ways in which religious traditions use scriptures draw attention to each of the three dimensions, giving spiritual importance to what is otherwise trivial.

Jonathan Z. Smith (1987b) noted that this is precisely the function of ritual. Building upon observations by Sigmund Freud and Claude Levi-Strauss, he argued that ritual calls attention to and makes intentional the ordinary practices of everyday life. "Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities placed within an extraordinary setting, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts" (J. Z. Smith, 1987a, 109). Thus ritual turns every-day routines such as washing oneself, entering and leaving a room, and eating meals into deeply meaningful practices by focusing attention on them, formalizing them

and, often, by prescribing precisely how they get done (similarly Bell 1992, 74, 92; for a broad survey of "ritual-like" activities under the categories of formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance, see Bell 1997, 138-169).

Applying J. Z. Smith's definition of ritual to the three dimensions of scriptures illuminates the relationship between normal books and scriptures. Scriptures are books or writings whose use in all three dimensions has been ritualized. The otherwise trivial practices involved in reading a book are, in the case of scriptures, given sustained attention. Semantic interpretation is ritualized by commentary and preaching.<sup>5</sup> Reading and dramatization both become ritual performances. The book's physical form is decorated, manipulated in public and private rituals, and highlighted in artistic representations. In each case, special attention is given to otherwise routine acts of reading. Thus religious traditions maintain the status of their scriptures by ritualizing normal features of books and other writings.

Of course, other kinds of texts may also be ritualized in one way or another. Nations ritualize the semantic dimension of their laws and constitutions by giving their interpretation prolonged attention through court decisions and legal commentaries, and their iconic dimension through public display and reproduction (Watts 2004). Nor is the ritualization of these dimensions limited to physical texts. Non-textual symbols and oral textual traditions may also be ritualized in similar ways. Oral epics are performed ritually in many cultures, both by recitation and by dramatization. They may also be subject to ongoing interpretive scrutiny that ritualizes their semantic as well as their performative dimensions. Oral epics, however, have no iconic dimension because they are not physical objects. Non-textual symbols, such as a cross or a flag, are subject to ritual manipulation and display (iconic dimension). They lack a semantic dimension, of course, but they also have no performative dimension because they do not encode language. (The origins of writing in pictographs illustrates the vexed problem of distinguishing precisely the boundary between pictorial representation and writing, but this is not an issue that I can engage here.) Therefore it is not primarily their semantic dimension that distinguishes scriptures from oral traditions and visual symbols. Scriptures differ from oral traditions because they are physical objects and so can be ritualized as icons. They differ from non-textual visual symbols because their words can both be interpreted and performed in highly ritualized ways. Scriptures can unite epic and totem in one and the same thing.

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<sup>5</sup> Many scholars, in particular, are likely to resist the notion that textual interpretation should be considered a form of ritual. But J. Z. Smith's definition of ritual as detailed attention to ordinary activities describes rather well the practices of academic interpretation. Scholarly exegesis tends to be rule-bound and require explicit location within particular traditions of interpretation, and its expression in conference papers and journal articles tend to take the form of highly formalized performances—all characteristic features of ritualized activities as described by Bell. Despite these points, discomfort at imposing the label "ritual" on scholarship will likely continue because Western culture carries a deep-seated suspicion of ritual as empty and meaningless behavior. The burden of ritual theorists over the last three decades, including Smith, Bell and many others, has been to counter this bias and insist that rituals not only convey deep and important significance to their participants, but also that human culture is saturated with ritualized behaviors. So by saying that scholarly exegesis in general, and scriptural exegesis in particular, is a ritual activity, I do not mean in any way to disparage its significance.

Only a book or other form of writing can be ritualized in all three of these dimensions. That distinguishes scriptures from other kinds of religious symbols and traditions. It does not, however, distinguish scriptures from other books and texts which, as I have noted, may be ritualized as well. However, the *more* a book or text is ritualized in *all three* dimensions, the more likely it is to be regarded as a scripture. Thus the functional identification of scriptures depends not on a difference in kind from other books and writings, but on the *degree* to which a particular book or writing is ritualized as text *and* as performance *and* as icon.

### ***Dimensional Variations***

Religious traditions that utilize scriptures ritualize their three dimensions to different extents. They sometimes emphasize different dimensions in ritualizing different books. For example, though one can find tendencies towards ritualizing all three dimensions of the various scriptures in Hindu traditions, these cultures usually ritualize the performative dimension more than the others. Recitation of the Vedic hymns from memory is so privileged that it has given rise to the belief that the fundamental characteristic of these scriptures is pure sound. This observation led Graham to state that "The unique Hindu case offers the one unassailable example of a highly developed scriptural tradition in which the importance of the oral word has been so central as to dominate and largely even to exclude the written word altogether over most of its long history" (1987, 66). Other Hindu scriptures, however, such as the Ramayana, tend to be performed through dramatic portrayals, sometimes lasting for days or weeks on end. This contrast in performative modes is formalized in Hindu thought by classifying scriptures into two categories: *shruti* "what is heard" (the Vedas and other Sanskrit traditions) and *smriti* "what is remembered" (myths, epics, and laws, often in vernacular languages). Since mastery of the Sanskrit Vedas has traditionally been monopolized by male Brahmins, other Hindus have used and celebrated the vernacular epics especially as their scriptures, though also employing priests who know the Vedas when they need them for special ceremonies. Popular performances of the Ramayana have been so influential that not just marginalized groups but also various political powers have appropriated their social influence.<sup>6</sup>

Jewish tradition provides more examples of how the three dimensions can be ritualized in different ways for separate books. The elaborate rules that govern the creation, handling and storage of a Torah scroll emphasize its iconic dimension, while great stress is also placed on proper performance of the text in public Torah readings.

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<sup>6</sup> For a historical summary and analysis of the power dynamics involved in the distinction between *shruti* and *smriti*, see Holdredge 2003, 147-51. The contents of the two categories of Hindu scriptures suggests that the kinds of performance given a particular scripture may, to some extent, be directed by the dominant genre of its contents. This observation applies not just to Hindu traditions: narrative genres (e.g. the Ramayana, the Gospels) tend to evoke dramatic performances and artistic portrayals of their contents, while hymnic and hortatory genres (the Vedas, the Adi Granth, the Qur'an, much of the Torah) are more likely to find expression in performances of their words through recitation, memorization, calligraphy, and the like.

However, the textual authority of Talmudic and Midrashic interpretation has often overshadowed that of the Torah, and the prayer book (*Siddur*) has often been almost as important for oral performance as the scroll of the Torah, though the kinds of performances they receive differ markedly from each other.

Muslims tends to ritualize all three dimensions of the Qur'an. The textual dimension receives great emphasis through interpretation and commentary, though many interpreters of Muslim practice argue that oral performance of the words of the Qur'an by recitation eclipses all other uses in importance.<sup>7</sup> Elaborate calligraphy of the Qur'an's text and monumental displays of its codex form, however, also elevate its iconic dimension, as do purity rules for handling it. The protests over its desecration in 2005 show how one dimension of a scripture may occasionally receive greater emphasis than usual for circumstantial reasons.

Sikh tradition ritualizes all three dimensions of the Adi Grandh to a very high degree. Temples serve as shrines to the scripture, which is treated with the utmost respect and veneration. Recitations of its words are a prominent feature of Sikh ceremonies, which occasionally include non-stop readings of the whole text over two days. Yet consultation of the meaning of particular scriptures also plays a key role in providing spiritual direction to individuals and communities.

Protestant Christians are famous for emphasizing the meaning of scripture, that is, proper interpretation of the Bible's contents. Conflicts with liberals over biblical interpretation and theology led to the development of Christian fundamentalism in the early twentieth century. Christians of all denominations continue to ritualize the Bible's semantic dimension through preaching, teaching (in churches and universities), scholarship, and a vast enterprise of popular and academic publishing. They also invest heavily, however, in ritualizing the Bible's performative dimension, most obviously in the ever-changing forms of Christian vocal music—much of it containing biblical texts as well as themes. As already mentioned, dramatic performances of various kinds also feature prominently in contemporary Christian culture and frequently evoke public controversies over the interpretive authenticity of particular films (such as surrounded the release of *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988 and *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004). Despite Protestantism's aniconic heritage that tends to obscure the iconic dimension from their awareness, evangelicals also ritualize the Bible's iconicity in many ways. Worshippers carry bibles to church and often in secular settings as well. In their hands, they function as badges of Christian identity, a visual role enhanced by special book covers that distinguish the scripture from secular books. Ministers carry bibles as symbols of religious authority, especially in portraits. Gifts of bibles mark rites of passage such as baptisms, confirmations, and weddings. In recent years, evangelicals have become increasingly vocal in objecting to any public slights to the Bible's iconic status in secular society.

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<sup>7</sup> Thus Daniel A. Madigan asserted that "Islam is also characterized by an almost entirely oral approach to its scripture. One finds no physical book at the center of Muslim worship; nothing at all reminiscent of the crowned Torah or the embellished lectionary. On the contrary, the simple ritual and the recitation of the Qur'an that forms part of it are carried out from memory" (2001, 3). See also W. C. Smith (1989, 32-35) and Graham (1987, 88-115).

These brief descriptions of scriptures in various traditions are very broad and superficial, for ritualizations of scripture within any religious tradition vary dramatically in kind and degree from time to time and place to place. Controversies over the proper use of scriptures often distinguish rival sects in doctrine and practice. Take Buddhism, for example: the training of Buddhist monks usually emphasizes rigorous study of scriptures to understand their meaning, thus ritualizing their semantic dimension. Yet lay people often sponsor recitations and publications as a means of attaining merit, thus ritualizing the performative dimension. Several sects in various periods have made one or another sutra the object of ritual veneration, thus ritualizing its iconic dimension. On the other hand, Zen schools typically downplay the significance of scriptures in any dimension. Thus the explanatory value of recognizing the three dimensions of scriptures does not depend on them being ritualized to the same degree in all times and places: they are not. It rather helps explain the religious tendency towards ritualizing scriptures in all three dimensions. It also provides a means for explaining the social effects of doing so.

### *The Powers of Scriptures*

Publicly ritualizing each dimension of scripture exerts different kinds of public power. Private ritualization produces various kinds of effects as well. So I conclude with some preliminary observations about the effects of ritualizing the three dimensions of scriptures on social position, on the persuasiveness of scriptures and their handlers, and on inner-religious conflict.

Ritualizing the semantic dimension of scriptures in public usually produces a claim to social *authority*. In disputes over doctrine or practice, the meaning of this or that scriptural text is cited to claim divine support for one or another position. Textual interpretation is used to justify opposing positions, and is also employed to arbitrate solutions. Those who, by persuasive skill or institutional position, wield the greatest exegetical influence in determining which text should apply to this situation and how it should be understood thereby gain authority to direct the community's beliefs and practices. As a result, in traditions with written scriptures, most internal controversy has an exegetical component. Communities privilege the ritualized interpretation of their scriptures' semantic dimension as the arena in which conflicts should be aired and settled. Hence the high premium placed by scriptural traditions on scholarly mastery of textual interpretation.

Ritualizing the performative dimension of scripture exhibits and conveys a sense of *inspiration*. Though claims for divine inspiration of scriptures are common, it is in their performance that they have an inspiring effect on an audience and, often, the performers themselves. Inspirational performances in public may involve recitation or dramatic display, or lavish artistic reproduction of either the texts (calligraphy) or contents (illustration) or both. Those who claim interpretive authority often display performative mastery as well. Preaching, though based in textual interpretation and its authority, becomes inspiring to the degree that it also performs the text, often through a virtuosic recital of a string of textual quotations and allusions. In this way, inspiring performances are regularly used to buttress interpretive authority. But non-clerical actors and artists frequently present performances of the contents of scriptures that inspire

audiences quite apart from, or even in conflict with, the concerns of institutionally authorized interpreters.

Ritualizing the iconic dimension of scripture serves purposes of *legitimation*. Elaborate decorations of scriptures and ritual manipulations of them legitimate religious ceremonies and institutions. Thus, for example, gospel books and bibles are paraded in church processions and placed in prominent positions on altars and pulpits to represent visually the legitimate source of the community's practices and beliefs. In portraiture, scriptures in the hands of rabbis, priests, monks, sages, ministers, imams, politicians, street protestors and soldiers all attempt to legitimate the person in that position or role. The most elaborate forms and ritual uses of iconic books are often created and displayed to legitimate the powers of governments (kings, courts, legislatures, and presidents). The legitimation conveyed by scriptures is most apparent in oath ceremonies by which public officials take office through the mediation of a book of scripture. Public monuments of the Qur'an or the Ten Commandments also evoke the image of scripture to legitimize the state. Conversely, those same monuments use the state's power, money, and influence to legitimate particular religious traditions, as do priceless jeweled bindings and elaborate calligraphies lavished on state-sponsored copies of scriptures. The display and manipulation of scriptures therefore legitimizes persons and institutions by ritually connecting them with a central symbol of the religious tradition.<sup>8</sup>

The terms "authority," "inspiration," and "legitimacy" are, of course, inexact and their connotations overlap, especially when used to describe scriptures. My purpose in distinguishing them here is not to claim strictly demarcated functions for ritualizing the three dimensions of scriptures, but only to indicate that ritualizing the different dimensions does exert different kinds of effects. Clearly, ritualizing all three dimensions reinforces each dimension's effects with that of the others to enhance the persuasive appeal of scriptures and their handlers.

### *Persuasive Scriptures*

The persuasive function of scriptures is another neglected topic in scholarship. Despite widespread devotional claims to the decisive influence of one or another scripture on many people's beliefs and practices, academic study of scriptures has focused on their literary forms, historical development, and doctrinal influence rather than on their rhetorical impact. In part, this omission may be due to the fact that many scriptures appear anything but persuasive to a casual reader. Their language is often difficult and archaic, even in vernacular translation; their literary forms can be hard for moderns to understand; and their contents frequently outrage modern sensibilities. To

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<sup>8</sup> Roy A. Rappaport's theory of religion emphasized the *indexical* function of rituals to demonstrate the participants' acceptance of the religious tradition, which he called the *canon*. He noted that objects manipulated in ritual may index the performer, such as offerings, or may represent the canon, such as ancient temples and churches that demonstrate the endurance of the liturgical order. Some items, such as the crowns of kings, "seem to be intermediate . . . . Such objects are themselves parts of the canonical order, but their manipulation is in part self-referential" (1999, 145). The iconic ritualization of scriptures provides another example of objects that reference both the "canonical order" (literally, in this case) as well as indexing those who hold, touch and read them in a self-referential manner.

readers outside the religious communities that treasure a particular scripture, that scripture often appears anything but persuasive. The claims of devotees that they find their scriptures enormously persuasive need to be taken seriously, however, all the more so if outsiders find the claim puzzling. What accounts for the persuasiveness of these texts? Can recognizing the three dimensions of scriptures help us understand how scriptures exert persuasive influence?

Persuasion is the traditional subject of the study of rhetoric. Therefore, noting the persuasive effects of ritualizing scriptures suggests looking to rhetoric for some analytical tools for understanding these effects. As it happens, there is an ancient model of persuasion that matches the three dimensions of scriptures described here very well. Rhetorical theory has since Aristotle (*Rhetoric* II.1.1-30) recognized three different circumstances that affect the persuasiveness of speeches: the persuasiveness of the arguments—*logos*; the credibility of the speaker—*ethos*; and the feelings of the audience—*pathos*. Various strategies can be used to enhance a speech's effectiveness in each of these three modes. A speech must communicate a carefully reasoned argument clearly for it to be convincing (*logos*), and for this purpose Aristotle developed the enthymemic or rhetorical proof. The argument will be more appealing, however, if the speech evokes, for example, the audience's sympathy towards a victim or outrage against injustice or fear of foreign attack (*pathos*). Yet a carefully reasoned speech that appeals to the audience's emotions may still fail to be persuasive if the speaker lacks credibility. Therefore, speakers must buttress their *ethos* by presenting an appealing demeanor, by behaving in an appropriate and attractive manner and, if possible, by carrying with them a reputation for honesty and trustworthiness. In Aristotle's words, they must demonstrate "good sense, good moral character, and goodwill" (*Rhetoric* II.1.9).

Though scriptures are not public speakers, ritualizing each of the three dimensions of scriptures enhances their persuasiveness in one of these three rhetorical modes as well. Ritualizing the semantic dimension through detailed interpretation and commentary emphasizes the special importance of these words and their possible meanings. Much of the burden of commentary and preaching is to show that the archaic language and antiquated ideas contained in many scriptures in fact do address contemporary concerns with realistic and appropriate ideas, instructions, and models for behavior. The infinite elaboration of the interpretive tradition that encourages more and ever larger commentaries by growing numbers of specialists trained in esoteric cultures and long-extinct languages further enhances the worth of scriptures. They give the impression that only texts of extreme value could possibly be worth the time and expense of such elaborate scholarly enterprises. The great religious authority credited to scriptures reflects long traditions of such enhancements of their *logos*.

Ritualizing the performative dimension through recitations, dramatic enactments, and the like prompts feelings of inspiration in those who hear and see them, and often in the performers as well. Through long exposure and communal reinforcement, people associate feelings of inspiration with the sound of a scripture's words, with the melodies with which its lines are sung, with the sight of its most famous verses, and with the dramatic and artistic portrayals of its stories. Ritualizing the *pathos* of scriptures in these ways promotes the idea that scriptures not only inspire but are themselves the products of



uniquely divine kinds of inspiration. Doctrines of scriptural inspiration develop from such emotional experiences and tend to grow in strength over time and in the uniqueness they ascribe to scriptures.

Just as speakers portray themselves to an audience as trustworthy by their dress and behavior, ritualizing the iconic dimension of scriptures through their decoration, ritual manipulation, and display demonstrates visually their *ethos* as scripture. The expense of lavish decorations portrays the great worth of the books. The scriptures' ritual display calls attention to them as objects to be respected and obeyed. Their ritual veneration presents them as material manifestations of divinity. All of these practices serve to legitimize the scriptures and, by derivation, those people connected in some way to them. Thus scriptures' iconic status enhances their own *ethos* and by association grants legitimacy to those in contact with them.

The rhetorical effect of ritualizing the three dimensions of scriptures is therefore to buttress claims for their persuasiveness. Devotees of various scriptural traditions commonly attest to the persuasive power of their scriptures. They like to tell stories of immaculate conversions, in which people adopted their religion only because of reading its scriptures. Belief in the persuasive power of particular scriptures have therefore prompted movements to expose as many people as possible to them by, for example, placing Bibles in hotel rooms and broadcasting Qur'anic recitations on radio and television.

It may seem odd to suggest that a book can be described by categories developed for public speakers. Yet ritual emphasis on the *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* of scriptures has the effect of giving them personas more like people than like books (see George Heyman ... below). For example, devotees describe receiving comfort from the physical presence of the scriptures and from the sounds of their words just as one might be comforted by the presence and conversation of a friend. Nor is this tendency to personify the scriptures restricted to private devotions. In a number of religious traditions, personification of scriptures has been formally expressed by close identification between the scriptures and the prophet who revealed them (e.g. Moses and the Torah, Mohammed and the Qur'an). Christians go further: the opening chapter of the Gospel of John equates the *logos* of God metaphysically with Jesus Christ. As a result, it is common for Christians to describe both Christ and the Bible as "the Word of God." Some Buddhist traditions venerate the wisdom (*prajña*) that leads to enlightenment in the physical form of a book. The scriptures used for this purpose all employ the term *Prajñāpāramitā*, "wisdom perfected," as part of their titles. Medieval Mahāyāna sculptures often depicted *Prajñāpāramitā* as a goddess (Kinnard 1999, 114-75). Though most interpreters have considered *Prajñāpāramitā* a real mother goddess, Kinnard argued that the sculptures reflect a more metaphorical understanding of wisdom as the "mother," that is, source, of enlightenment (1999, 127-30). Thus, the feeling of being persuaded by the scriptures has generated the sense that they are more than just texts. Their ritualization produces personal effects that lead to their identification with human prophets or supernatural personalities.

Scriptures, however, do not keep their persuasive effects all to themselves. They share their ritualized enhancements of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* with those who have special status as their interpreters, guardians, and performers. Religious leaders, scholars, and politicians find their own persuasive abilities enhanced from association with scriptures. Their words gain more authority by sharing the scriptural *logos*, their public performances become more inspiring by invoking scriptures' *pathos*, and the legitimacy of their positions of leadership is reinforced by the visible presence of scriptures' iconic *ethos*.

### ***Conflicts Over Scriptures***

Ritualizing the three different dimensions of scriptures provides religious communities with a large repertoire of strategies for responding to internal and external challenges. For example, historical study of the Bible has for two centuries challenged scripture's traditional interpretation in Judaism and Christianity. Yet the Bible's religious status within these traditions seems largely unaffected, much to the amazement of many observers. Recognizing the roles of all three dimensions of Jewish and Christian scriptures permits a more complete and complex understanding of these modern developments. The debates over historical criticism's claims remain restricted to the Bible's semantic dimension, which is the traditional forum for controversies over scriptural authority and meaning. In fact, sustained public arguments over the meaning and interpretation of scripture are themselves ritualized behaviors in J. Z. Smith's sense of ritual—calling attention to every detail of textual interpretation. The very vehemence of these debates and the media publicity about them ironically reinforces the impression of the Bible's importance and authority even as they challenge various traditional understandings of it. (On the role of biblical scholarship in maintaining the cultural status of the Bible, see Fiorenza 1999 and Wimbush 2003).

At the same time, ritualizations of other dimensions of the Bible continue and have even increased over the last two centuries, unaffected by the controversy. Increased liturgical use of scriptures (in Reform Judaism including greater performance of the Hebrew text), campaigns to encourage memorization of key portions, and Hollywood movie enactments of biblical stories reinforce its performative ability to inspire. Even in the academy, some philosophers, theologians and cultural critics have begun advocating a return to ostensibly more authentic practices of scriptural performance, influenced in part by the works of W. C. Smith and Graham. Thus Paul Griffiths (1999) excoriated the modern academy for "consumerist" practices of reading and wished for a return to the meditative uses of scriptures by medieval monastics, the *lectio divina*, Wesley Kort (1996) argued for retrieving the sixteenth century Reformers' use of scripture as a lens by which to view the rest of life, Catherine Pickstock (1998) maintained that medieval reading practices offer the only solution to the quandaries of post-modern epistemology, and Shlomo Bidderman (1995) argued that the idea of scripture should itself function as a primary category of philosophical reflection. Diana Walsh Pasulka demonstrates that the programs of Griffiths, Kort, and Pickstock represent a nostalgic attempt to retrieve a lost heritage (see ... below). Given the usual tendency of religious orthodoxies to exert control over verbal performance, it is not surprising that this nostalgic appeal for pre-modern reading practices has reinforced conservative trends in several fields. At the same

time, mass-marketing of inexpensive Bibles and media-savvy evangelistic campaigns have made the Protestant Bible one of the most recognizable religious symbols of Western culture. These developments have reinforced the legitimacy of this iconic scripture and also its public power to legitimate those who hold it. They shift the emphasis from its problematic semantic dimension to the Bible's performative and iconic dimensions. This illustrates how public ritualization of all three dimensions of scriptures makes them resilient to controversies about any one dimension.

Individual people also ritualize the dimensions of scriptures as part of their devotional practice, as do small communities. Such private or communal uses gain power by ritualizing scriptures as well, but the effects differ in kind and degree from the effects of more public ritualizations. Scriptural texts are widely used for personal divination through methods ranging from contextual interpretation to random selection. Frequently, they are searched for esoteric meanings unknown to others. Such secret knowledge can convey personal advantage (spiritually or temporally) and can also be marketed for economic gain (e.g. Michael Droznin's *The Bible Code*, which was listed on the New York Times bestseller list for thirteen weeks in 1997). As to the performative dimension, individuals frequently memorize scripture for personal spiritual benefit. Scriptural texts may also be recited as proverbs for rhetorical advantage or as spells for achieving instrumental results. The iconic dimension is manifestly ritualized when people display physical scriptures or parts of scriptures in their homes, carry them as amulets, or manipulate them to gain blessings or merit for individuals and families. In these and other ways, personal religious practice in many cultures ritualizes the three dimensions of scriptures.

Religious authorities often discourage some private uses of scriptures while trying to control others. On the other hand, private use frequently circumvents, even challenges, the public ritualization of scriptures. These disputes can express conflicts between entrenched social elites and dissident individuals, minority religious groups, or other disempowered population groups.

Thus the iconic use of scriptures by individuals and minority groups can pose challenges to the larger religious and secular cultures. For example, many non-Muslims in both Africa and India carry and manipulate scraps of Qur'ans as protective amulets (for Africa, see Goody 1971; Gomez 2003, 509; information for India comes from personal communication with my colleague Ann Gold). Such talismanic uses challenge the religious boundaries maintained by religious and academic authorities alike. Hebrew Israelites preaching on New York City streets sometimes wear bibles strapped to their waist like swords wielded in opposition to a corrupt society (research by Marshall Mitchell, summarized in Love 2003). In this case, the iconic books present an intentional challenge to the majority population of American society. Individuals and minority groups of various kinds can also employ the other dimensions of scriptures for self-empowerment in distinctive ways that clash with more broadly normative uses and applications. I have only hinted here at the ways that these practices and conflicts negotiate various kinds of social power by ritualizing the three dimensions of scriptures. They deserve to be explored in far greater detail to understand better the power transactions carried out through the ritualization of scriptures.

***Exception: Relic Books***

Examination of the iconic dimension of books and other writings draws attention to a category of texts that break the pattern described here. Though highly venerated iconic texts, they are not ritualized either in the semantic or the performative dimensions. I term such texts "relic books." Relic books are writings that are valued for being the *specific* objects that they are; they are in theory not reproducible. Examples would include most books on prominent display in museums, such as the earliest known copies of the Bible and the Qur'an, Gutenberg Bibles, Shakespeare's first folio and any valuable first edition, the autographs of the Declaration of the Independence and U.S. Constitution, and so forth. These objects are rare, if not one-of-a-kind, and are not reproducible, at least in theory. The effect of reproduction on the status of iconic books was observed by J. Z. Smith, who commented:

"Beyond this ordinary sense of the mythology of 'sacred book,' there is a second sense of sacrality that has yet to be studied fully; namely the sacred book as a sacred object, one that is always manufactured and all but infinitely reproducible, and, therefore, one to which there is almost never attached a claim of being 'original.' Some of these reproductions become themselves the subjects of narratives, as is the case, for example, of the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Stonyhurst Gospel and the cult of St. Cuthbert" (1998, 298).

The difference between the reproducible sacred objects of Smith's first sentence and the irreproducible gospels of his second needs to be emphasized and analyzed. Icons are less appropriate models for how the latter books function than are relics: both icons and relics are believed to mediate sacred influence, but the value of icons is that they are reproducible, whereas the value of relics derives precisely from the fact that they are unique. (Of course, because the demand for relics always outstrips the supply, the (re-)production of relics has long been the subject of scandal.)

Considered from the perspective of the three dimensions of scriptures, one can say that the iconic dimension of relic texts has grown so large as to eclipse the other two dimensions. Virtually no one worries about how to interpret a relic like a Gutenberg Bible, nor are relic books actually read (performed) very much, because they share their semantic and performative dimensions with other (non-relic) copies of the same texts. Relic books are valued for their iconic dimension alone. Thus their authority is not invoked to settle disputes over doctrine nor do people look to them for help in achieving performative inspiration. Instead, their chief function is legitimation. Unlike scriptures in general, relic books do not convey legitimacy to their owners, except in the form of prestige at being the owner of a famous object. (That prestige can be considerable and monetarily valuable. As a result, collectors often treat relic books like the relics of saints. Just as the bodies of dead saints are separated into small pieces to produce the maximum number of relics which are then displayed in elaborate, often framed, reliquaries, book sellers often tear apart relic books to maximize profits by selling their pages individually to collectors, who frame them like artwork for public display.) Instead of providing authority or inspiration, relic books rather legitimize the textual tradition itself. Their antiquity and/or rarity confirms the legitimacy of the reproduced texts, and this is how

they are chiefly used. Scholars consult relic books to authenticate details of the text, while public viewings of them serve to legitimate the prestige that the reproducible iconic text enjoys.

The Dead Sea Scrolls provide an illuminating example of the distinctive treatment accorded relic books, because modern culture treats some of these ancient texts as relics while using others primarily for interpretive purposes. The manuscripts dating from the third to the first centuries B.C.E. were discovered in the mid-twentieth century C.E. One quarter of them contain texts of the Hebrew Bible, the earliest biblical texts now in existence. They have been the object of intense scholarly comparison with younger biblical manuscripts in order to legitimize and correct the biblical text. The other three-quarters of the scrolls contain non-biblical and previously unknown compositions. They also have received intense scrutiny as important sources for the history and religion of Judaism in the last centuries B.C.E. Thus interest has focused on interpretation of the semantic dimension of the non-biblical scrolls, while the biblical scrolls function as relic books to legitimize the biblical text. The distinction is confirmed by the display of the scrolls in the aptly named "Shrine of the Book" at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem: a biblical scroll (Isaiah) receives pride of place in the central display. The dominance of its iconic dimension for both scholars and the public confirms its status as a relic book.

Relic books should therefore be considered the exception that proves the rule. Though they are themselves not subject to semantic and performative ritualization, they owe their exceptional iconicity to the fact that other, non-relic, reproductions of the same text are ritualized in all three dimensions. When particular books are readily available for semantic, performative, and iconic ritualization, a few special exemplars can be set aside to serve purely iconic purposes as relic books.

### *Conclusion*

This essay can only begin to unpack the implications of the three dimensional model for understanding the phenomenon of scriptures. It is, of course, only a model. The reality of religious practices and beliefs in the myriad of human communities that use scriptures will always exceed the ability of any single conceptual tool to reduce it to a few principles. I advance this model not to preclude other ways of analyzing the nature and functions of scriptures, but simply as one useful means for understanding the impact of scriptures on historical and contemporary affairs.

The power dynamics surrounding scriptures influence the politics and cultures, and of course the religious practices, of very many societies in the twenty-first century. To take only my two original examples, many people wonder why the treatment of an inexpensive, mass-produced book in a military prison should prompt such outrage when the prisoners themselves live under great duress. Many also wonder why American politics and media can get fixated on the appropriate placement of a granite monument containing scriptural texts when so many more pressing issues seem to demand resolution. By appreciating how the iconic dimension of scriptures conveys legitimacy,

we can better understand the religious passions and social forces aroused by such incidents.

I believe that the three dimensional model of scriptures proposed here illuminates the nature of peoples' stakes in these incidents, and in many other situations involving the semantic, performative and iconic uses of scriptures. Further studies of the three dimensions of scriptures are required to explore and define the extent and limits of its application.

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