

AAR

IN THIS ISSUE

Signifying (on)
Scriptures:
Text(ures) and
Orientations

A Roundtable
Conversation

Vincent Wimbushii
*Claremont Graduate
University*

Grey Gundakeriii
College of William and Mary

Tat-siong Benny Liewiv
Pacific School of Religion

Margaret Aymeriv
*Interdenominational
Theological Center*

Yan Shouchengv
*Nanyang Technological
University*

Nikky-Guninder Singhvi
Colby College

spotlight on TEACHING

May 2008

Published by the American Academy of Religion

Vol. 23, No. 3

Signifying (on) Scriptures: Text(ures) and Orientations

GUEST EDITOR: VINCENT L. WIMBUSH

From the Editor's Desk



Tazim R. Kassam
Spotlight on Teaching Editor
Chair, Department of Religion
Syracuse University
Director, Muslim Cultures
Program SU Abroad, London


His phrase “signifying (on) scripture” presses for a fresh *mentalité*, the thematics of which are sparked by the question: What work do we (scholars, practitioners, groups) make scriptures do as (a) religious, social, and cultural phenomena; and (b) sacred texts mastered in scholarly and other discourses?

The other side of the question of what work we make scriptures do is what, in turn, scriptures make us do through their production of social text(ure)s. These investigations therefore reach beyond philology, form criticism, and hermeneutics to focus as well on the sociology and political economy of signifying (on) scriptures.

For instance, biblical texts that promise liberation are *conjured* up (Aymer) in response to situations of oppression. Probing deeper into the social text(ure)s of darkneses in scriptures (Wimbush), however, pushes the analysis beyond the enchantment of being lifted up from the “darkness” of misery to excavate and reveal the darkneses (racial, political, etc.) that signifying (on) scriptures (re)creates.

Grey Gundaker underscores the betrayal of the practice of signifying (on) scriptures as books, which entitles peoples of the book, as well as their scholars and interpreters, to claim monopoly over meaning. Canons, classics, and scriptures prescribe and inscribe dominant social text(ures) such that vernacular material forms become “discredited knowledges.”

Similarly, the following conversation queries practices of signifying on materials and performances that act as gateways to scripture such as Kanye West’s *Jesus Walks*. The readings of scripturally inspired songs, spirituals, and gospels as populist folklore bring to the foreground the “scandal” of class, and the exclusions and closure of scriptures.

These and other critical issues are taken up in the following pages within the contexts of classroom pedagogy. 

“The other side of the question of what work we make scriptures do is what, in turn, scriptures make us do through their production of social text(ure)s.”

VINCENT WIMBUSH and I began a *conversation* about this issue of *Spotlight* at the inaugural conference on “Theorizing Scriptures” held in February 2004 at the Claremont Graduate Theological Union to launch the Institute for Signifying Scriptures.

The conference brought together an eclectic mix of international scholars, practitioners, and performers to begin what Wimbush describes as an *excavation* — a critical-inquiry into the many practices by which scriptures are and have been signified both in and outside the academy.

As guest editor, Wimbush chooses to structure this issue of *Spotlight* as a conversation between unlikely partners who practice different ways of signifying (on) scriptures. The potential frisson of multiple approaches is meant to encourage if not generate new frameworks for theorizing scripture.

The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Eugene V. Gallagher, Chair) sponsors *Spotlight on Teaching*. It appears twice each year in *Religious Studies News* and focuses on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

Editor

Tazim R. Kassam
Syracuse University

Guest Editor

Vincent L. Wimbush
Claremont Graduate University

Spotlight on Teaching
is published by the
American Academy of Religion
825 Houston Mill Road
Suite 300
Atlanta, GA 30329
Visit www.aarweb.org

Signifying (on) Scriptures: Text(ures) and Orientations

Guest Editor: Vincent Wimbush, Claremont Graduate University



Vincent L. Wimbush is Professor of Religion and Director of the Institute for Signifying Scriptures, Claremont Graduate University, in Claremont, California. His publications include *The Bible and African Americans* (2003) and the edited volume *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (2000).

THE TEXT that follows is part of an online conversation among five very creative and successful teacher-scholars: Grey Gundaker, Tat-siong Benny Liew, Margaret Aymer, Yan Shoucheng, and Nikky Singh. All are research associates of the Institute for Signifying Scriptures (ISS). The work of the ISS (<http://iss.cgu.edu>) is the catalyst for this conversation. Established at the Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California, in 2004, its agenda is to facilitate research and conversation about the work we make “scriptures” do for us. This agenda represents a rather different orientation to critical studies. It does not represent or privilege any one field or subfield; it represents nothing if not a scrambling and undermining of traditional approaches. It is focused not upon the boundaries of a field, tradition, or cultural grouping; it is structured around the pursuit of the problematics having to do with scriptures as phenomenon.

This different orientation includes: 1) A comparative approach; 2) Focus on peoples — that is, social textures, not texts per se — to allow what “scriptures” mean to emerge out of social arrangements, productions, and practices. The basic interest is not in lexical/content meaning or literary/rhetorical forms of texts but on types of relationships with texts, how such relationships contribute to social texturing, and with what consequences. The pursuit is critical history(ies) not historical criticism; and 3) There is the privileging of, but not exclusive focus upon, the experiences and practices of historically dominated peoples. This privileging is a means of facilitating the emergence and sustained critical attention to issues and problems — especially those having to do with power that have historically not been addressed.

Affiliation with the Institute of Signifying Scripture does not mean that all are always in agreement with the agenda or positions of ISS, or with each other about issues and problems and strategies. Nor does it mean that they all agree that the phenomenon of “scriptures” is worth professing as part of an interest in understanding the complexities of social-cultural formation. Rather, it begs new and ongoing critical orientation and excavation — within and across academic categorizations and sociocultural tra-

ditions. These teacher-scholars go far beyond the simple interest in the lexical and content-meanings, backgrounds, and literary-rhetorical representations of texts.

Located in different social-cultural and academic contexts, programs, and departments, and associated with different intellectual-political agendas and interests, they address the phenomenon of “scriptures” in their teaching and research on terms that are at some points different, in some ways complimentary, and at other times conflicting. The engagement is significant and bodes well for this intellectual-political approach and work.

The Institute for Signifying Scriptures has developed four focal areas described below. In their opening statements, the teacher-scholars in this conversation will each provide a response to the questions, problems, and issues raised below in relation to their own areas of teaching and research.

I. Teaching Scriptures

How should “scriptures” as cross-cultural phenomena be taught in the twenty-first century?

To create multidisciplinary, multifield conversations about — and eventually actual multifield, multimedia models for — how



— Institute for Signifying on Scriptures

“scriptures” as historical and perduring cross-cultural dynamics and phenomena can be discussed, debated, and taught in the twenty-first century.

II. Material-Expressive Representations of Scripture

How are “scriptures” represented in societies and cultures? To identify and analyze “scriptures” as new and ongoing but historically unrecognized types of material products and forms of social-cultural and embodied expressivities.

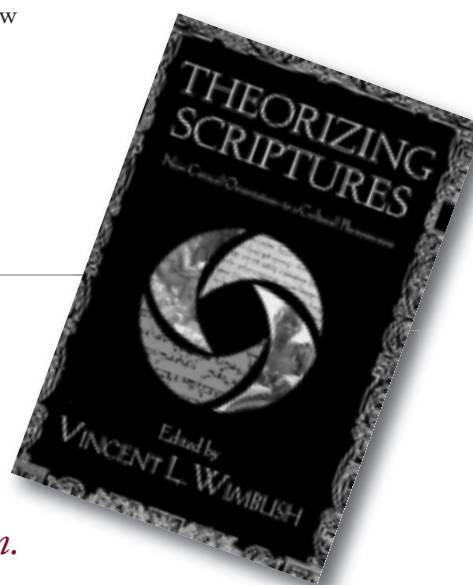
III. Ethno-Graphics of Scripture

In what circumstances and in what ways do groups make and reflect and use “scriptures,” and how are “scriptures” made to shape groups into “peoples”? To fully consider the local, national, and eventually worldwide collection of basic pertinent information about different groups (past and present; across and within; and in tension with existing ethnic and standing religious traditions) and their relationships to “scriptures,” and to analyze the material and expressive ways in which they create and use “scriptures” and thereby shape themselves as particular kinds of “people.”

IV. Psycho-Socio-Logics and Politics of Scriptures

Why do people invent and use “scriptures”? What are some of the large- and small-scale structural power dynamics and issues provoked by and refracted through the uses of “scriptures”? To excavate and examine the social-psychological (including “religious”) interests, ideals, values, needs, commitments, goals, ideals, behavioral regimens/disciplines, and corresponding power structures, dynamics, differentiations, and relationships involved in the engagements of “scriptures.”

It should be clear that the aim is to pursue central questions — the critical history, social psychology, anthropology, and power dynamics/politics — having to do with the formation, deformation, and reformation of human beings. The analytical wedge of “scriptures” presents unusual opportunities and challenges for the study of religion. RSN



Colleagues:

We begin a conversation on a different academic-intellectual orientation.

Given your teaching situation and research interests, is this orientation feasible for you?

How do you approach the teaching of scriptures?

Do the questions about signifying scriptures raised above relate to your teaching?

Why does critical reflection on the teaching of scriptures matter?

Is your approach consonant with the above agenda?

If so, in what respects?

If not, indicate how rapprochement may occur.

Grey Gundaker, College of William and Mary

Grey Gundaker teaches American studies, anthropology, and black studies at the College of William and Mary. Her publications include No Space Hidden: The Spirit of African American Yardwork (2004) and Signs of Diaspora/Diasora of Signs (1998).

TEACHING SCRIPTURES is integral to my courses as I introduce students to foundational knowledge systems of the African Diaspora, through written, embodied, and material forms that spill over into all four foci: teaching, expressive, ethno-graphic, and psycho-socio-logics and politics. These forms unfold within the broader cosmologies of African Atlantic theories and practices that circulate among diverse West and Central Africans, their descendants, and the European, Native American, and Asian peoples they have encountered, often under pressured and oppressive conditions, over the past 400 years.

“*To recognize the parts vernacular epistemologies and their scriptural manifestations play in orchestrating pathways toward well-lived life.*”

Almost without exception these forms and the cosmologies that inform them would be unrecognizable as scripture without the intervention of ideas like those that form the ISS's intervention into conventional academic discourses, which tend to characterize scripture as the key religious texts of major religions “of the book.” They have redirected our attention to *scripturalizing processes*: continuing emergent engagement and reworking through far-reaching codes, practices, and interpretive strategies of historically dominated peoples.

Unlike many colleagues in this roundtable discussion, I am not affiliated with a religious studies department and none of the courses I teach — African American Material Culture, African Art, Art of the African Diaspora, Exploring the African Diasporic Past — mention scripture in their titles or even use the term in their syllabi. Instead, I emphasize what anthropologists call “native terms” because these terms yield nuanced, locally significant information about how scripturalizing informs participants' lives.

My teaching guides students through the first steps they must take to vernacular epistemologies (Myhre 2006) that have been marginalized by academic and usually Eurocentric grand theories of literacy, meaning, politics, and economy. These steps involve learning: 1) To see (or read) in multileveled ways that break through/move beyond sight (or) reading constrained by alien premises and *a priori* categories; 2) To see the ordinary and extraordinary forms scripturalizing takes; 3) To relate specific instances to wider cosmologies; and 4) To recognize the parts vernacular epistemologies and their scriptural manifestations play in orchestrating pathways toward well-lived life. Although the illustrations below are specific to the Diaspora in the southern United States, the four steps above should be useful for teaching widely disparate content because they derive from two fundamental, interdisciplinary questions: 1) How does the world work such that any given phenomenon should be the case at a particular time and place?; and 2) What do we need to know in order to understand how the phenomenon makes sense?

The following images illustrate the first of these steps: multileveled seeing. Thus each image involves a form of visual pun or object-word play that challenges viewers to see more than one level in order to understand them. Figure 1 “describes” this type of seeing. Figure 2 is a sign with a similar message, but different history and form. Figure 3 is a visual pun based simultaneously in vernacular epistemology and the Christian Bible.



Figure 1. Bennie Lusane. Royston, Georgia. 1991

Lusane, a retired city worker, filled his yard with memorials to his ancestors, visual and material tributes to the first black nightspot in his county, which he and his wife ran, and “instructions” on how a mature person must be able to see in order to survive in a world that was often unjust and filled with ignorant prejudices.

This tall pine wears dark glasses with one lens in and one lens out, a recurring form in the Diaspora indexing sight in both the intersecting zones of spiritual and material reality. Since the glasses are themselves material and only fit two eyes, he echoed the shape below with figure-eight loops of plastic-covered antenna wires, making a sign of four-eyed vision as well. “Four-eyed” (and “two-headed”) are vernacular terms for the qualities of persons with special sight used in West and Central Africa and the Diasporic Americas. If one can see Mr. Lusane's statement, one is also on the path to applying such sight to other situations.

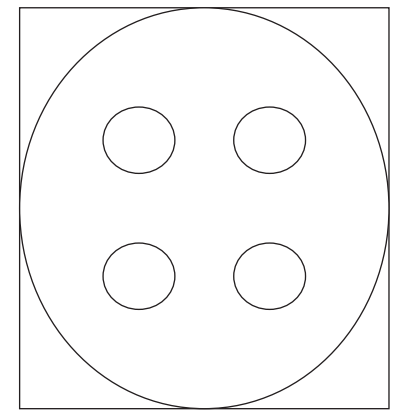



Figure 2. Diagram of the four-eyes sign

This graphic rendering of the four-eyes sign recurs in such diverse settings as the Nsibidi graphic system of Bight of Biafra peoples such as the Ejagam and Igbo, among U.S. and Cuban descendants and others with whom they have interacted, and by extension in representations of creatures such as the mudfish with spotted markings that suggest extra eyes.



Figure 3. The Axe of the Apostles. Reverend George Kornegay. 1993.

Bibliography

Myhre, Knut Christian. “The Truth of Anthropology: Epistemology, Meaning, and Residual Positivism.” *Anthropology Today* vol. 22, no. 6 (December 2006): 16–19. 

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF

Spotlight on Teaching

The Work of the Scholar/Activist Teacher

Guest Editors: Rebecca Alpert and Traci West

Past Spotlight on Teaching topics include:

Diversifying Knowledge Production: The Other within Christianity
News, Media, and Teaching Religion
Teaching Difficult Subjects
Reflections on a Teaching Career in Religion
Embracing Disability in Teaching Religion
Teaching with Site Visits
Teaching about Religions, Medicines, and Healing

For access to past *Spotlight* issues, go to www.aarweb.org/Publications/Spotlight/Teaching/indexmain.asp.

Tat-siong Benny Liew, Pacific School of Religion



Tat-siong Benny Liew is currently Associate Professor of New Testament at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. He is the author of *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New Testament* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), and *Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(text)ually* (Brill, 1999), as well as guest editor of the *Semeia* volume on *The Bible in Asian America* (SBL, 2002).

IN CONTRAST to Grey Gundaker's, my field is the study of the New Testament, so "teaching scriptures" — "scriptures" here in the conventionally narrow sense given the canonical status of the New Testament — is what I am supposed to do in every course listed under my

name. I would like to begin by raising some questions about "teaching scriptures," partly out of my own struggles as a New Testament professor, and partly in response to Grey's provocative comments.

My first question about "teaching scriptures" has more to do with the word "scriptures." While I generally do spend time in my courses talking about the process and the politics of canonization, I find it more and more necessary to begin to explore the process of "scripturalizing" as well as the definition of scriptures. After all, scriptures and canons are not the same thing, and there are traditions in which scriptures exist without necessarily any ideas of canon.

This is where, I think, a focus on scrutinizing "scriptures" as a critical idea — in terms of both practice and process — is right on target. What do we really mean when we use the word "scriptures"? While I am completely in agreement about the need to go beyond a rigid and narrow understanding of "scriptures" (like the books or literary texts that are included in the Jewish or Christian Bible), I also find it important that we develop some parameters or concrete ideas on what makes some texts — literary and otherwise — "scriptures." Questioning the narrow understanding without developing some parameters would render the term meaningless, for "scriptures" may end up including anything and everything.

As I find myself agreeing with Gundaker, for instance, that "scriptures" should not and cannot be limited to "key religious texts of major religions 'of the book,'" I also find myself wondering if she would actually consider the more general "four-eyes sign" and/or Lusane's particular memorial a type of "scripture." Human beings — even or especially "historically dominated peoples" — make meanings in many ways, with various forms, and for different purposes, but when and how do particular making of meanings become making of "scriptures"? If "scriptures" can be not only remade but also made — and if these can be done with and without an explicit use of the term "scripture" — then how do we know when and where "scripturalizing" — in the sense of making "scriptures" rather than making use of "scriptures" — has taken place? If we can agree that the conventional definition or understanding of "scriptures" is too narrow or rigid, can we agree on when an understanding of "scriptures" may have become too broad, vague, or undefined?

Gundaker's interesting and multileveled reading of Lusane's memorial also reminds me of one of the greatest difficulties that I have in teaching the New Testament. I am, in other words, moving now to problematize the first word in "teaching scriptures." Here is my struggle: some or perhaps even most of my students actually seldom read

and hence know little about the New Testament. A few of them may think they are familiar with the New Testament, but in fact they are not at all sure what is or is not in the New Testament, not to mention where and in what context a particular verse, episode, or passage may be found within the covers of "the Good Book." In fact, one may say this very lack of familiarity with the actual texts is precisely how dominated persons or populations may intervene by "inventing" scriptures. The emphasis on social texture and the experiences and practices of historically dominated peoples thus enriches more than just the study of texts per se. African Americans who were not allowed to read the Bible for themselves during the time of slavery have, for instance, ended up freeing themselves from the constraints of the printed word, and were hence able to use scriptures imaginatively and inventively for their purposes of resistance.

That is, however, not the only way through which resistance can take place. Another potential way to resist is to be faithful to a fault. This is, for example, how the African-American writer Richard Wright won his "first triumph" over his "lawgiver" father. When Wright was five years old, a stray cat was keeping his father from sleeping. In frustration, his father barked that Wright should kill the cat. Intentionally literalizing

See **LIEW** p.v

Margaret Aymer, Interdenominational Theological Center



Margaret Aymer is Assistant Professor of New Testament at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Aymer has two forthcoming books: *African American Biblical Interpretation*, (co-authored with Randall C. Bailey,) and *First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass, Darkness and the Epistle of James*. Aymer was ordained a minister of Word and Sacrament of the Presbyterian Church USA in 2004.

MY CONTEXT is that of a consortium of mostly historically black-controlled (and a couple of white-controlled) seminaries. I teach current and future pastors, most of whom have roots in the southeastern part of the United States. Our diversity outside of the various cultures of the southeast United States is due to students who come from the African continent, the Caribbean, South America, and Bermuda; we rarely get students from Asia, or of Asian-American or European-American backgrounds. Most of these students are affiliated with one of the above backgrounds; and the majority intend to do ministry writ large within the context of parishes, the armed forces, hospitals, and prisons.

For me "teaching scriptures" almost always means "teaching the Protestant canon of the Bible," and frequently "teaching the New Testament of that same canon." My courses tend toward the traditional questions of history, literature, and other "exegetical" methodological questions, questions quite beside the point of the questions raised by the four foci. However, even within these classes, I do try to push the point of scripture as a relationship between "texts" (rather literally, in my case) and communities; and I speak in terms of "if this text is to be scripture to your community," rather than in more ontological terms. This is made somewhat easier by the denominational differences among the students that can lead to different scripturalizing methods.

This semester, I have had occasion to develop a class that pushes the matter further, a class that encourages students to a metacritical analysis of *how* the Bible (read Protestant canon) is scripturalized. The question is this: what is it that we are actually doing when we take these ancient texts and name and use them as scripture? For what purposes and to what ends are they used? To what "darknesses" (cf. Wimbush) are they responding; indeed, what are they naming and/or creating as "darknesses" and how do the biblical texts function "scripturally" in response to these darknesses, if they do at all? To use another framework, to which the students responded very favorably, what and how are they "conjuring" in their scripturalizing of biblical texts?

These questions created, over the course of the semester, real discomfort among several students. They began to report an inability to attend Christian worship without wondering what was being "conjured" by the preacher and the community as they worshipped. And this, in turn, led to the self-reflective questions of what they themselves conjure when they step behind a pulpit to use the texts of the Protestant Bible as "scripture."

The first assignment for these students was to identify a reader of a biblical text as scripture. Half of them chose a pastor and/or church congregation as reader; of the rest, one chose a specifically Christian medium (Christian rap), one chose a political speech, and five chose "secular" uses of the biblical texts over a period of time ranging from the Harlem Renaissance to comedian Tyler Perry. The identification of readers/scripturalizers was the primary task as this drove the rest of their research into the biblical texts — both through ethnographic and/or historical study of how and why that text was being used and through exegetical study of the specific texts themselves.

As they progressed, they began to see the ways in which the Bible was used scripturally to invoke, conjure, de/re/transform communities and situations; and they began to realize, in engaging each others' work, that this use was not always in line with their presumed ethics and/or theologies of the biblical texts. That is, one could not always assume a "liberationist" use of the biblical texts within the black church, as they had come to believe; or, perhaps in a more nuanced sense, what "liberation" might look like and what "darkness" might entail varied widely depending on the reader's(s) interaction with the "world" and, as a result, with texts.

Toward the end, the inevitable problem arose: that of scriptures that are not biblical texts, or that are marginally connected to biblical texts. Two such instances emerged: one of a choreographer's use of spirituals as scripture and one of a community's use of Kanye West's *Jesus Walks* as scripture. These nuanced even further the questions of the class.

Much of the work was text-based, and my students provided few visuals; I will probably push them further along these lines the next opportunity I have to teach this class. Below are some selected quotations from their final papers.

"PCOD's use of Bible has indeed formed their world as a heterosexual, patriarchal, misogynistic, and slightly homophobic community. Members of the community have felt themselves trying to overcome a supposed darkness and it has led to great levels of emotional distress. It seems as if their interpretation of the Bible continuously conjures ways for individuals to be more holy and more righteous. Along the same lines, their use of the Bible seems to conjure hierarchy in God. The straighter you are, the closer to God you are; the gayer you are, the further from God you are."

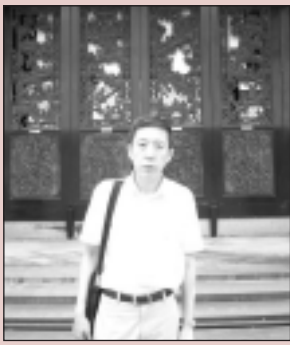
"Vincent Wimbush argues that flight ('deformation') is the first phase in the making of African American life in relationship to sacred texts. The people of the Vision Church understand the need for flight; they have fled the mainstream black church because its trauma of homophobia is palpable and persistent for them."

"Don't try to change the javelin. Stop responding. Changing Saul was not the goal. Some of you are still trying to convince people . . . that you can still be gay and Christian. You spend all your time trying to convince people you can be lesbian and holy. David never tried to change Saul's theology. Let people say what they want to say."

"In an analysis of my results I have realized that this song and many other songs that are similar to this style of messaging have become a ritual in the African American community. . . . Even when the song is biblical inspired or uses the biblical text, oftentimes it isn't used to represent the Bible itself, but is used to create a transformation to its listeners as well as the environment in which the song is played the most."

RSN

Yan Shoucheng, Nanyang Technological University



Yan Shoucheng, MA, East China Normal University and PhD, Indiana University, is currently an Associate Professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and a fellow associate at the Institute of History, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. His books (in Chinese) include *Intellectual Continuity and Change in Recent China*, and the edited Wang Fuzhi's *Siwen lu*. His forthcoming book is *An Exploration into the Thought and Scholarship in Recent China*.

THE FIRST THING I would like to tell my students is that we must keep in mind cultural differences; the Chinese tradition is very different from the Western or the Islamic one.

The Chinese word *jing*, usually translated as scriptures or classics, is more equivalent to the latter than the former. Those ideas which are very important in the West, such as transcendent God, the Creator, permanent soul, the other world, and so on, are lacking in the Chinese tradition. So the *jing* does not derive from God or heaven, and therefore is not so “sacred” as in the Western or Islamic traditions. According to the prominent modern historian Lü Simian, *jing* originally means the classics used in the ancient education system, which are actually the literature of the political documents, poems, divination books, books for rites, and so on; they are human-made instead of being said or transmitted by God.

Confucius used these classics, which used to be taught only to the nobles, as materials to

express his own views on society, politics, morality, religion, etc. In this sense he declared, “I transmit, I invent nothing.” As recorded by the great historian Sim Qian, Confucius also said, “It will be better to express my thought through concrete things than to convey it in empty words.” In other words, Confucius used “scriptures” as *modus vivendi* instead of authentic source of absolute truth. What Confucius spoke to his disciples (*ji*, i.e., “records”) and the commentaries by Confucius and his disciples (*zhuan* and *shuo*) were therefore regarded as more important than the classics themselves. For instance, the *Records of the Rites*, the collection of commentaries on the rites by Confucius and his disciples, was more widely read and considered more important than the “scripture” of the rites.

The commentaries of the *Book of Changes* are philosophically and religiously much more important than *jing*, which are actually no more than the oracle’s messages; later both the “ten commentaries” and the text of the *Book* itself became “scriptures” collectively. So in the Confucian tradition commentaries and “scriptures” are more often than not indistinguishable. For instance, Confucius’s *Analects* originally was not regarded as “scriptures,” but from the Former Han dynasty it became one of the most important “scriptures.” And in late imperial China, thanks to the Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi, a new corpus of scriptures, i.e., the Four Books, replaced the Five Classics to become the real “scriptures” for more than 700 years. This is also the case with the Taoist tradition; new “scriptures” were continuously invented, often attributed to ancient *xian* (immortals). In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, even the recorded sayings of Huineng, an illiterate Zen monk in the Tang dynasty, were titled “scripture” alongside all the sutras assumed to come from the Buddha himself.


Although the scriptures in Confucianism and other Chinese religions, unlike the Bible or the Koran, were not regarded as the only authentic source of absolute truth or for salvation, with the rise of the literati elites and accordingly the establishment of the “scriptures” learning, in addition to the worship of written words — which may be traced back to the shamanistic tradition about 3,000 years ago — toward the end of the Former Han, emphasis was gradual-

ly transferred from the “secret meaning and great principles” transmitted by Confucius to the ancient “scriptures” themselves. In the view of those Han Confucians, the Six Classics were not just historical documents — this view is exactly what Confucius held — but sacred words transmitted from ancient sage kings and therefore must be interpreted strictly literally. They consolidated their political and sociocultural dominance through the monopoly of “signifying scriptures.” Hence, scriptures (*jing*) were equivalent to civilization or culture (*wen*) for almost 2,000 years.

This tradition made the literati elites assume so much prestige and power for such a long time that even after China’s successive defeats in the encounters with the West after the Opium War, they still regarded the British and other Western people as “barbarians,” despite the fact that they knew well that the West was more advanced than China in wealth, power, science, and technology. The reason is that in their view the West was lacking in “civilization” (*wen*), which is epitomized in the Confucian scriptures (*jing*). Nevertheless, the ancient Chinese sage kings were not gods or demigods after all. As Mencius said, they are “simply the first to discover what is common in our minds.” So the learned scholar-officials were not able to have a complete monopoly of the practices of signifying the scriptures. With the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty a new approach emerged, which focused on getting the way by, in, and for oneself (*zide*) instead of the literal interpretation of the scriptures. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there appeared in China tense economic and social changes; more and more economic opportunities and easier social mobility were available for the common people; hence they got to attain more power in the discourses on the scriptures. At the same time the literate elites became less orthodox and more “liberal” in sociocultural matters, as witnessed in their attitude toward scriptures. Cao Duan, a Neo-Confucian scholar in the early Ming, even said that the Four Books are no more than the “rubbish left over from the sages’ mind-and-heart,” even though he still considered them to be the “carriers of the way.”

Moreover, the Confucian tradition has a hierarchical system of scriptures. Zigong,

Confucius’s disciple, once said, “Our Master’s views on culture can be gathered, but it is not possible to hear his views on the nature of things and on the Way of Heaven.” Among the Five or Six Classics, the *Poems*, *Documents*, and *Rites* — which are about cultural things — were taught to all students, but the *Changes* and *Annals of Spring and Autumn* were regarded to be on “the nature of things and the Way of Heaven” and therefore only to be taught to a small number of select students. In the Neo-Confucian era the Four Books were considered basic scriptures for all students, but the Five Classics were reserved only for those of higher level. From the sixteenth century on, with the increase of literate population, some “scriptures” other than Confucian were used to teach the lower classes. One example is the Taoist *Treatise on Response and Retribution* (*Taishang ganying pian*), which may have occupied the first place of all publications in late imperial China. It combines Confucian morality with the popular Taoist teaching that “curses and blessings do not come through gates but human beings invite their arrivals.” In this perspective the idea of “three-teachings-in-one [i.e., Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism]” came into being, as was characteristic of late imperial China. So the engagements with the “scriptures” became more diverse and complicated.

Last but not least, it must be noted that there is plenty of room in the Chinese religious tradition for interpretation and reinterpretation of the scriptures, Confucian as well as Taoist. For instance, the *Dode jing* (*Tao te ching*) has two totally different traditions of commentaries, one from the perspective of Neo-Taoist metaphysics and the other from that of religious Taoist mysticism. Almost all influential Confucian schools have their own system of commentaries on the scriptures, especially on the *Book of Changes*, which even has quite a number of Taoist commentaries. In summary, different groups of people have quite different ways in their engagement of the “scriptures”; this dynamism ran throughout Chinese history. It is still the case today, as can be seen from the fact that groups of people with different sociopolitical interests engage in the Confucian “scriptures” totally differently, for democracy, authoritarianism, or “new left” ideas. 

LIEW, from p. iv

his father’s remark, Wright lynched the cat. This is how Wright (1998) writes about what he did:

I had had my first triumph over my father. I had made him believe that I had taken his words literally. He could not punish me now without risking his authority. I was happy because I had at last found a way to throw my criticism of him into his face. I had made him feel that, if he whipped me for killing the kitten, I would never give serious weight to his words again.

In a way, as different scholars have proposed, one may go further and suggest that the tradition of Derridean deconstruction is nothing but a practice of close reading that capitalizes on a similar logic. That is to say, it is by an almost literalistic reading that deconstruction does its work of pulling the rug from under an author or a literary text. I am not advocating a literalistic practice of reading here, but only pointing to the need for and the value of reading closely and

carefully for the purposes of problematizing and destabilizing, whether it is the politics of literalism or the text of the New Testament. I am speaking therefore of not only the significance of ISS’s current project on the ethnologies of scriptural reading among communities of color that embrace scriptural inerrancy and/or authority, but also the importance of “teaching scriptures,” especially in terms of close reading. Put differently, questioning the idea of “scriptures” as texts does not — in fact, should not — imply that teaching close reading of scriptures as texts is inevitably or inherently obsolete, conservative, or dispensable. Just as Gundaker correctly emphasizes the need to read nonliterary and noncanonical texts in multileveled ways, I would argue that it is equally important to teach and learn how to read a literary and canonical scripture like the New Testament closely, especially since close reading has become in many ways a lost art among today’s students. The challenge is: how does one *teach* that?

I hope I will not be distracting too much from Gundaker’s work here with my next

question, because I do think that it is extremely important that we go beyond the conventional understanding of “scriptures.” I do wonder, however, if her reading of Lusane’s memorial may not also become a way to teach the text of the New Testament as scriptures in other textual ways. This desire on my part actually is related to the question “How should ‘scriptures’ as cross-cultural phenomena be taught in the classrooms of the twenty-first century?” Again, I am focusing here more on the idea of “teaching” than that of “scriptures.” That is, how do I, as a New Testament teacher, teach the New Testament cross-culturally, especially as “scriptures” have become more and more identified with a literary text even when North American culture is arguably become less and less print based.

This question becomes even more complicated and perhaps compelling when one considers not only our shrinking globe, but also scholars’ concern with “historically dominated peoples.” I am thinking of peoples who, culturally speaking, have not learned and still do not learn by reading a

literary text. As I alluded to earlier, this may well be an increasingly “global reality” with the so-called millennial generation of North America, even though I do not mean to collapse the very diverse experiences that different peoples and cultures have with texts and media that are not literary or print based. Given my conviction that knowledge and familiarity with New Testament contents are still important for cultural change and transformation, are there ways or strategies to teach the New Testament as one form of “scriptures” that involve levels of reading or seeing beyond the level of literal and literary reading? Are their pedagogically innovative ways to teach New Testament texts with art and/or artifacts, for example? Would doing so not also open up a space for us to learn and talk about how persons and peoples make use of “book scriptures” without necessarily reading or reading from a book?

Bibliography

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998. 

Nikky-Guninder Singh, Colby College



Nikky-Guninder Singh is the Crawford Family Professor of Religious Studies at Colby College. She teaches courses on Asian Religions, with a focus on poetics and feminist issues. Her publications include *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (2001) and *Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs in America*, coauthored with Paul Numrich and Raymond B. Williams (2001).

SINCE I TEACH Asian religions at a liberal arts college, I have the opportunity to teach a wide spectrum of scriptures from the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese worlds, along with the Guru Granth, which is my narrow area of expertise. I have, over the years, followed three basic approaches. I will consider them in relation to the issues raised by the four foci described by Wimbush.

1) For courses at the introductory level, I give my students just a “taste” for scriptures. Scripture, especially another’s scripture, may be “too reverential,” too daunting to enter into. So I introduce Asian texts through Western fiction and poetry. We read novels like Forster’s *Passage to India*, Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge*, Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, and Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. Through flesh and blood protagon-

nists these novels open up the Quran, the Upanishads, the Four Noble Truths, and Verses of the Sikh Gurus respectively; they bridge the gulf between the sacred and the everyday, between the foreign and the self.

For example, an interesting exercise is a reading of *The Razor’s Edge* as a modern, fictional exegesis of the Katha Upanishad, the important Hindu scripture recited at death rituals. Maugham’s title and overture are a direct citation from the Katha Upanishad, but the theme of the novel bears striking parallels with the Upanishad too. Larry, the lad in Maugham’s novel from Marvin, Illinois, and Naciketasa, the Brahmin boy in the Upanishadic narrative, make identical journeys: both are instructed by “death”; both give up the life of luxury, love, and money for a realization of their true self; and both go on to experience the co-presence of immanence and transcendence. Works of fiction create a sense of familiarity as Western readers can identify with the protagonists and therefore begin to feel more comfortable about entering the “sacred” texts of people from other faiths.

Furthermore, such an approach creates an aesthetic delight. There is a stylistic play in interpreting the ancient story by means of another story, making the readings and rereadings very provocative. Devoid of any dull x=y equations, works of fiction provide tantalizing glimpses into scriptures; without narrowing any possibilities, they stimulate the reader’s imagination to discover the tacit connections between sacred Asian texts and modern Western novels.

Similarly, Western poets like T. S. Eliot also promote a “taste” for Asian scriptures. Eliot’s musing in *Four Quartets*, “I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant,” entices the reader to grab a copy of the Bhagavad Gita. Indeed, religion and literature are two closely interrelated aspects

of the human imagination, and the approach through Western writers fosters a deep sensitivity to both these capacities.

2) At the intermediate level we do read selections from the Vedas, Upanishads, and Buddhist texts. But again, I regard scriptures as works of literature. It is not that I undermine them in any which way; to the contrary, I view sacred texts as extraordinary aesthetic and literary works, which must be recognized and analyzed and savored with our own individual senses, mind, and consciousness. It is exciting to see students contextualize the temporally and spatially distant texts in their own and different voices. Vedic hymns to Agni and Usha, the *Tao Te Ching*, and the *Shobogenzo* come out beautifully alive in their analyses and interpretations. I love when my students bring their own world into these sacred works and can take back answers and questions from them for our contemporary issues on race, gender, and class. Together we have attempted to understand symbols as constructions arising from our deep and holistic creativity as humans, which help to shatter narrow and rigid categories of exclusivism. My goal is to make Asian scriptures relevant to our lives here and now and thus introduce my Western students to different ethical models, different ways of articulating Truth and Reality — all extremely important resources for our global society.

3) At the advanced level I offer a seminar on Sikh Scripture. Here we discuss the compilation of the *Guru Granth* by Guru Arjan in 1604. Although the historical relationships amongst different communities in his milieu were acrimonious, the Sikh Guru did not get stuck on external differences of accents, intonations, grammar, structure, or vocabulary. Through his profoundly personal sensibility, he heard the “distinctive convergence” of languages expressed by

Hindus and Muslims alike: *koi bolai ram ram koi khudai* — some utter Ram; some Khuda (Arjan, 885). Whatever resonated with the voice of the founder Guru Nanak — *bhakhia bhau apar* (language of infinite love) — Guru Arjan included it in the sacred volume for his community. Written out in the Gurmukhi script, the *Guru Granth* contains the poetic verses of the Sikh Gurus along with that of Hindu Bhaktas and Muslim Sufis. My overall objective is:

- To disclose the universality of the Sikh holy book;
- To underscore the book as the body of the Gurus (daily it is “dressed in” silks and brocades);
- To zoom in on the feminist themes and images that are neglected in male-stream exegesis; and
- To make my students sensitive to the importance of the translation process.

In the case of Sikh scripture, English has imposed *his* master’s voice onto the voice of the Sikh Gurus — distorting their vision of the transcendent One into a male God, reducing their multiple concepts of the Divine to merely a single concept of a Lord, and dichotomizing the fullness of their experience into Body and Soul. Such impositions, reductions, and dualizations debilitate any genuine relationship between languages. As Walter Benjamin wrote in “The Task of the Translator,” “Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, *a priori* and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express.” I share with my students the urgency to explore new ways to translate the Sikh sacred text, and thus recover the true affinity between Punjabi and English — and our common humanity. PSN

CONVERSATIONS

Liew: It seems to me that Yan helps to push us again to confront the question of defining “scriptures,” but at the same time complexifying that question. First of all, I think Yan’s example of how commentaries of *jing* became “scriptures” — or how in Confucianism, commentaries and “scriptures” are not neatly separated or separable — illustrates in some way my earlier suggestion that in some traditions, one may have “scriptures” without the idea of canon.

Second, if “scriptures” are understood differently across cultures (here, mainly through Yan’s example of the word *jing*), is it desirable and/or feasible to push for some tentative parameters to understand what is and is not “scripture” (as I suggested before)? Perhaps those parameters and/or definitions have to be culturally specific rather than cross-cultural (in the sense of a set of parameters or definitions that can be applied across cultures)?

Of course, one gets to another sticky question here: how does one define “culture”? Again, Yan’s point about the literati class making *jing* equivalent to civilization or culture shows that what one means by “culture” — like what one means by “scripture” — is itself a site of interpretive and sociopolitical struggles. There is no one shared Chinese

understanding, because of, say, educational and socioeconomic differences. Or, to go back to Gundaker’s contribution, if and when one attempts to come up with certain culturally specific parameters or definitions of “scriptures,” one really cannot talk about a so-called Western understanding (again, because of different communities, including diasporic ones, within the so-called West).

My point here is not to get us into “a paralysis of analysis,” but to underscore the importance of specificity in “teaching scriptures,” or what one means by “scriptures.”

I find Yan’s comments about the importance that commentaries have over the *jing* a challenging one for me as one who teaches scriptures. As I said earlier, I found this to be true of most of my students: they often read what the textbooks have to say about the New Testament without reading the New Testament itself. I find that a disturbing problem. After reading Yan, I am wondering if the problem has more to do with me than my students. Is it possible that my discomfort with this phenomenon has to do with my own assumptions about “scriptures,” and how they may differ from the assumptions that my students have about “scriptures”?

I would venture to say that, generally speaking, my students’ and my assumptions *about* the New Testament are indeed not the same. If we spell out our different assumptions, I would, however, also imagine that my students actually tend to have a much higher and more rigid view of the New Testament than I do. So we end up with this odd scenario: a teacher who does not actually have a high view of the New Testament finds it disturbing that people read *about* the New Testament rather than read the New Testament itself, while students who have a higher view of the New Testament are happy reading about the New Testament without reading the New Testament itself. Does “teaching scriptures” in my case — if I were to do so effectively — necessitate some attempts to make sense of and sort through all the factors and dynamics that are involved in this scenario, not the least of which would be the assumptions that students bring to the class about “scriptures”?

In this vein, I find Aymer’s identification of her institutional context as well as her students’ communities rather helpful and significant. Her reference to how spirituals and a song by Kanye West are used “as scripture” also touched on both of the issues that I am struggling with above. The ambiguous “as scripture” may refer to: 1) The phenomenon

of reading something else rather than “scripture” itself; and/or 2) The idea that “scripture” may have a broader meaning and reference. The significant question for me, then, is this: when students refer to the spirituals or West’s song “as scripture,” are they operating with the first, the second, or both of the meanings identified above? As readers, we may focus on textual effects separate from authorial intentions; as teachers, however, would we consider it important — to the extent that we could — to try to differentiate what we are dealing with here?

Finally, I actually find Aymer’s teaching not as far from the ISS’s foci as she said. After all, she does seem to teach her students how to read not only the New Testament, but also how nonacademic readers are reading the New Testament. In my own teaching of the New Testament “as scriptures,” I have often tried to impress on my students that the New Testament is not the only resource that one may use to wrestle with the “big questions.” I have used, for example, contemporary novels in my New Testament classes. In using them, my point is less about how the novels may allude to the New Testament and more about suggesting that “scriptures” have

(continued on page vii)

(from page vi)

no monopoly on making meanings, much like — if I may refer back to Yan at this point — *jing* cannot be equated with civilization or culture. Whatever “scripture” is, one thing seems to come across strongly from this conversation: “scriptures” and the interpretation of “scriptures” are infused with power. If so, it seems important to me to teach my students to attend also to other voices without implying that these other voices are undercover “scriptures.” Perhaps I am now back to Gundaker’s contribution: may one understand Lusane’s memorial as meaning-full without categorizing it as a form of “scripture” in disguise or in the process of emerging as “scripture”? Or does one have to equate meaning-full texts (again, literary or otherwise) as “scriptures”? And, what is the difference and implications between those two teaching positions?

Aymer: I would like to second Liew’s proposition of the importance of cultural context — not only internationally but also within the context of the United States. Part of the reason I was so specific in my description of my context for teaching is that it is contextually very different from “American culture” as I had previously understood it; and through teaching Bible at ITC, I have underscored the places of discontinuity between “Bible” and “scripture” — whether “texts” (written or performative or both) are so defined consciously or not.

Further, as I noted earlier, there is another level of world-interpretative “texts:” “texts” through which even the Bible is interpreted — texts that govern how the Bible is read and what it must say. I take as an example of this Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks.” My students report that this text . . . and texts like it . . . are used to understand Bible (rather than the reverse) by the youth in their churches. I am struck by the report on this song, that it is used in church to dismiss the youth to “Youth Church” and that the youth sing it on the way out of church; apparently, these youth (of an upper-middle-class African Methodist Episcopal church) thought “Jesus Walks” was in the Bible.

Of course, this further complicates the question of culture by adding the layer of generation — which is palpable where I teach. I have, after all, students in my classroom who remember segregation sitting next to students for whom the death of Tupac Shakur is far more important than the death of Martin Luther King Jr. Thus not only do they scripturalize Bible differently, their “midrashic” or Talmudic (to borrow a term from the ancient world) lenses are very different one from the other.

How do we understand these texts through which world they are read — including Bible? Is the Protestant canon still “scripture”? Are we dealing with a midrashic level that further pushes the question of what “scripture” is? Parallels can, I’m sure, be found in Yan’s and Gundaker’s work; and of course the ancient parallel is that of Talmud. So, then, are “Talmudic”-type “texts” “scripture”? And in being scripture, do they displace the importance of what we have come to think of as “scripture”?

This, I think, gets back to Liew’s question: may one understand Lusane’s memorial as meaning-full without categorizing it as a form of “scripture” in disguise or in the process of emerging as “scripture”? Or does one have to equate meaning-full texts (again, literary or otherwise) as “scriptures”? And, what is the difference and implications between those

two teaching positions? And what, then, is the implication for how/what we do/ought to teach?

Liew: I really like the way Gundaker outlined the issues. All the issues she has identified are important, especially the ones about being contextually specific in terms of our “teaching” of scriptures and our understanding of “scriptures.” In our teaching in particular, it seems important that we identify not only our institutional context but also the assumptions regarding “scriptures” that students as well as we (as teachers) bring to the classroom (I think Aymer has helped make that clear).

Issues that may be raised and/or refined in light of this last round of conversation include:

- 1) What are the relations between “official scripture” and “personal scripture” (this I gleaned from Aymer’s point about the discontinuities between the Bible and “scripture” among her students), as well as between “scriptures” and canon (since the former may exist without the latter)?
- 2) Can we identify different ways in which people (including our students) use other texts (literary or otherwise) to make sense or make use of “scriptures”? Are these texts (whether commentaries or a song by Kanye West) used to avoid, resist, expand, and/or illuminate “scriptures”? And are these texts used to determine or dictate what “scriptures” may mean (Aymer’s example of her students) or to provoke conversations and dialogues (Singh’s example with her introductory course)? Which of these ways of reading reinforce the power of “scriptures”? Which of them may displace that power?
- 3) Should we, in “teaching scriptures,” need further work in tracing the common ancestral roots of “scriptural” and literary studies? This issue results from Singh’s introductory course (not only her use of novels to introduce Asian “scriptures,” but also her remark that “religion and literature are two closely interrelated aspects of the human imagination”). These shared ancestral roots are, I think, particularly true in the case of the Bible and European/American literary studies, though the dynamics seem to involve both using literature to promote and replace biblical literature. I wonder if and how these dynamics play out in other traditions.
- 4) How may we better investigate and teach “scriptures” as a result of interreligious mixings and dialogues (as opposed to using “scriptures” to begin interreligious dialogue)? Again, what Singh said about Guru Arjan’s inclusion of Hindu and Muslim materials in the *Granth* led me to think about how the Hebrew Bible, for example, also contains all kinds of materials from other traditions (from Canaanite to Zoroastrian). However, such work is seldom pursued in depth and rarely taught. But doing so will also be an important resource for “our global society” (Singh’s words). It is important to look at how different peoples or cultures look at the same “scriptures,” but it is equally important to look at how “scriptures” themselves are always already a mixture of different traditions.
- 5) How do we use novels to “teach scriptures”? I mentioned that I use novels quite a bit in my New Testament courses, and Singh does as well with her courses on Asian religions. Her use of Western novels (and poetry) to teach Asian “scriptures”

raises two questions in my mind. Can I find and use novels — to borrow the title of Kwok Pui-lan’s well-known book — from “the nonbiblical world” that refer to the Bible in my classes? I also wonder how the dynamics of power differential play out between using “Western fiction” to teach Asian “scriptures” and using, say, Asian novels to teach the Bible.

- 6) Finally, I really like Singh’s point about bringing “our own world” (particularly issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.) into one’s engagement with “scriptures” in her intermediate-level courses. What I would love to hear would be some pedagogical strategies that we can use to encourage that, and do it in a way that students are less concerned about what “scriptures” say about race or gender but rather how we can better think about such relations with and through “scriptures” (in other words, how “scriptures” may become something we “think with,” in contrast to resorting to “scriptures” to think for us). How can we promote this effectively as teachers?

Wimbush: So many important issues, problems, considerations! I cannot and do not want to try to list them here; I want simply to jump in with some of the issues that haunt and provoke me. These are some of the issues that inspired ISS.

First, I wonder if we have any sort of consensus regarding the concept of “scriptures” — in this case, whether it is possible, wise, feasible, to have discussion about such a phenomenon across cultures and societies. It seems to me that concern about “teaching” “scriptures” is also concern, heightened sensitivity — as you all have indicated — about context and the politics and types and levels of consciousness and different practices and orientations that define different contexts.

Teaching what? To whom? For what? Might not the focus on teaching force us to come to terms with the reality that what is being taught is less texts themselves — this is the issue for so many engaging theological/religious studies discourses in the “world religions”/major civilizational contexts. And to take into account any other material objects, as with the individuals and subcultures Gundaker is so creatively tuned in to. Or are we confronted with the nationalist “classics” or “icons” as may be the categorization elsewhere? And the reactions to such?

Are we teaching (something about, the contents of, the shape of) some “thing”? Or is not that “scriptures” are something like a catchphrase for (and a veiling of) some other concern or problem? And what might that be? And why do we not name it, address it? Or is it necessarily beyond speech/language/scripts, so we are forced to play games with speech/language/scripts?

And what might heightened consciousness about the reality of multiplicity of other such things — “scriptures”/“classics” — bring to bear upon our thinking? And that of students? Are we not confronted with an ethical situation here? Can the study of any “scripture” tradition go on without the challenge that there are others? And that there are differences as well as similarities aplenty?

Where should we place the challenge to students — all students — about the scandal of multiplicity of scriptures/classics/icons? How should we challenge ourselves? What might it mean to teach “scriptures” (as the teaching of some other thing/problem, etc.) in one key (one tradition) or representation (only in terms of traditional scripts, as with

Gundaker)? What might it mean to do that, but with consciousness of other traditions, types of scripts, practices, engagements, categorizations?

To be sure, there are risks involved in thinking this way, orienting one’s teacherly self this way. There are those who would question the validity of (the very notion of) comparative scriptures. And there are those who would raise questions about the wisdom of the rather expansive and tensive understanding of “scriptures” so that it includes nontraditional “scripts” and no scripts at all. But I think we are at a point where we see too clearly what is being protected by such conservative positions.

The challenge must be multidirectional: boomeranging back to ourselves, as teachers; toward students who think they want/need only the basics; toward the conservators/authorities of scriptures; and toward those who cannot see yet what is at stake in reading society and culture and power dynamics through problematizing these matters.

Liew: Just a couple of quick responses. First, I think it is absolutely our ethical responsibility as teachers to “relativize” the scriptures we teach, particularly as one who teaches Christian scriptures in a seminary in the United States (that is to say, the need to “relativize” is itself relative in light of power differentials). I am, however, less sure that the best or only way to do so is to point to the existence of “other scriptures” as “scriptures.” When I, for instance, use Martel’s *Life of Pi* for my course on the Gospels or Morrison’s *Paradise* for apocalyptic texts like Revelation, I am trying to help my students see that books of the New Testament do not have a monopoly on those concerns that the New Testament texts deal with. I use these texts instead of, say, a selection from another known scriptural tradition because I do think ethically we also need to “relativize” this whole category known as “scriptures.” I said this in some way in light of what Jacob Neusner said years ago about E. P. Sanders’s attempt to present Judaism in terms of Sanders’s covenantal nomism. He mentions the problem of seeing Judaism as valuable only when it is presented in Christian terms. I want to be sure that human attempts to deal with various questions are not considered to be important by, in my case, Christian seminarians, only because they are categorized as “scriptures.” Perhaps one way to deal with this is to incorporate recognized “scriptures” from other traditions as well as other texts — whether it is Lusane’s memorial that Gundaker points to or a novel that Singh uses — into our courses on “scriptures” (from whatever traditions or however defined).

Second, while I absolutely agree that the category of “scriptures” needs to be explored and exploded (to include nontraditional scripts and nonliterary texts), I do not think that this exploration/explosion and teaching what may be called the “basics” of one’s scriptural traditions are mutually exclusive. Just as it would be wrong, in my view, to spend one class session on a Hindu or Confucian text and think that one knows the scriptures of Hinduism and Confucianism, it will be equally wrong for me, as a teacher of the New Testament, not to confront my students with what is and what is not actually in the New Testament. It is one thing if students make a decision consciously or even half-consciously to subvert or displace the New Testament by inventing or improvising on the texts (I have no problem

(continued on page viii)

(from page vii)

with that at all); the greater problem — at least in many Protestant seminary contexts — is that students think they know the New Testament texts when they actually seldom or never read them. My insistence on confronting students with the New Testament texts is therefore not out of a conservative position, but out of a desire for students to really think about and think through what they need to do with the “scriptures” of their traditions, and they cannot do this responsibly without knowing what is there and not there in those scriptures.

So in “teaching scriptures,” there are two types of courses that I would now like to develop in my context. Again, these two are not mutually exclusive; they leak into one another (both will involve in various degrees the recognition of other scriptural traditions and other contributions to human imagination and struggles) but they do have distinguishable focus. One will focus on exploring and exploding what one means by “scriptures,” the other will focus on engaging particular scriptures with “one’s own world” (particularly on issues of race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and so on). In my own case, I think I have done better on the latter than the former. The mission and work of ISS has helpfully pointed to the need — or my need — to develop a specific course that focuses on problematizing and investigating the category of “scriptures,” so that students as well as I will have more to say about this category of “scriptures” than a vague and evasive “however defined.”

Gundaker: My interdisciplinary teaching takes place through three faculties — American studies, anthropology, and black studies. Two of my research interests especially overlap the interests of the ISS: 1) The history and politics of written, graphic, and material sign complexes; and 2) A network of theories and practices for which “vernacular African Diaspora knowledge systems” probably offers the most workable rubric.

Rather than being the specific field for which I was “trained” in the academy, the latter coalesced recursively from the people, practices, and material/visual forms that reshaped my orientation to research and teaching during fieldwork, and gained strength over and against an academic climate during my graduate school days that marginalized — and continues to marginalize — vernacular epistemologies through “explanations” (that explain them away) in terms of “big T” theories of meaning, politics, and economy. Although I had no good (academic) vocabulary at the time for articulating the mismatch between most of these grand Theories and life as lived, practices as practiced on the ground, I came away from three years of field discussions with diverse African Americans on their home ground with the simple conviction that they were smarter (critically aware of the workings of the world and how to deal with them), wiser (better equipped to follow through on the implications of values and consequences), and more generous (tolerant of human failing, willing to share expertise) than most of the academics to whom my work was answerable as a graduate student.

Herve Varenne recently defined “education” as “conscious processes of deliberate change.” Though rarely spoken aloud as such, the shared aim of my foundational teachers was, and remains, to make a better, more just world, and to show others what such a world could look like, from the uniquely informed perspective of African descendants distant no more than two to three generations from enslavement, and distant not at all from personal experience with segregation, violence, and marginalization. How,

then, does a generous, wise, and smart person “educate” an outsider like me? With what aims? And with what “instructional materials”? Therein should be some clues about what I should also teach.

Partly because of self-selection — I was not, after all doing research in schools — the experts I met preferred indirection and open-ended approaches. Many “instructed” through writing and visual/material signs on their property. Some also used proverbs, biblical quotations, and body movements — like cutting the eyes with a sharp, up-tilt of the chin. When spoken, the terms of expression, the means, and the verbal summations/translations of visual/material signs were in terms of scripture, specifically Protestant and Catholic. But to focus narrowly only on deployment of biblical passages and related proverbs would be as distorting as reducing all to Marxian political economy or any other “big T” theory (from this perspective the term “scripture” seems to carry forward as much baggage as any other Big Meta frame — generative of *a priori* explanations over and against localized, grounded ones).

In any case, “Diaspora knowledge systems” or “vernacular epistemologies,” became cover terms for the foundations of smartness and wisdom. And these foundations became the most worthwhile things my many educational opportunities yielded to teach about. In order to be respectful of the diverse historical and cultural currents that shape these foundations in the present day, it is important to recognize and turn students’ attentions to what Toni Morrison called “discredited knowledges” as well as institutionally sanctioned ones. The Christian Bible and schooled Roman alphabetic (as well as at times Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek) literacies fall into the second category. The former includes but is not limited to numerous cosmologies and practices that captives and immigrants brought with them to the Americas from West and Central Africa: vernacular and esoteric Islam, Yoruba Orisha traditions, Kongo cosmology, perspectives on the interactions of matter and spirit from Guinea Coast, and Bight of Biafra groups, and much more — limited only it seems by my ignorance. All of these, in turn, have generated representational/communicative repertoires that could/should figure within a broad definition of “scripture,” but at the same time are emblematic of precisely that “backwardness” by which, in the terminology of Michel de Certeau, the “Western scriptural economy” defines itself. However, as my colleague Michael Blakey has graciously reminded me when we have taught together in graduate seminars, it is very misleading to rest with this distinction because, while it reveals knowledge that have been “othered” and excluded, it also erases the contributions of people of color within, and to the schooled, the sanctioned, the “Western,” etc.

Given where I am positioned in the academy, it is tempting to argue that all students need courses that pose these challenges and that all faculty need to lead the charge, not to this specific Diasporic content, but to whatever kind of “coloring outside the lines” helps to illuminate critically the institutional structures of which we are parts and the forms of knowledge that these structures systematically obscure. But that’s not only arrogant: it ignores some important “messages” built into the priority my teachers placed on indirection.

1) Circle in gently to find out where the student is at. In “big T” educational theory terms, Lev Vygotsky said the same thing: locate a “zone of proximal development (ZPD),” a meeting point between teacher and student on which to build a “scaffolding” for new ideas.

- 2) Don’t throw pearls before swine. You can lead a horse to water but . . . don’t expect the blind to see (or as Lusane’s tree “tells” us, somewhat like Foucault’s use of Magritte’s painting *This Is Not a Pipe*, the reader needs to see past the print to the irreducible difference of the visible/visual).
- 3) Baldly explicit statements are by definition as self-explanatory as possible. They are little ultimatums: You get it or you don’t. There’s no spillover, no writhesome tentacle escaping like tendrils of ivy to pull down the edifice of prior assumptions. Surely it is no accident that water is a central substance in so many cosmologies, so many metaphors for change.
- 4) If they knew what you really think they’d kill you. You knew it was a snake when you picked it up. Knowledge worth having is powerful and threatening to powers that be. Don’t blame powers that be for being what they are; be able to handle them if you mess with them.

The list could go on but I’ll stop here. What has all this to do with teaching scriptures? A few closing thoughts. Yes, the term “scripture” is problematic. It can mask; it can reveal. For myself, it’s sufficient to take the ISS’s name as a ZPD with all the contradictions that “scripture” opens up, and all the potentials for indirection that go with the vernacular practice “signifying.” Its complex ramifications let it shape-shift, like water, meeting learners with all sorts of assumptions where they’re at, but with lots of leaks and tendrils to work on “deliberate change.” For me, at the start of these discussions, the word “scripture” was still too closely tied for comfort to the canonical texts of religions of the book inscribed in “major” writing systems. But these discussions have helped to undermine that too-hasty judgment. My colleagues have reminded me that these scriptures are both doctrinal and generative, both the bounded word of God and repositories of the means to make their own closure permeable and their situatedness apparent. The “how” of getting that across necessarily varies among us, but we do all seem to share the will to do so.

Aymer: These are some brief further musings on my part, in response largely to Liew but also to Gundaker. To Liew’s first point, I, too, find that my students know the New Testament texts only nominally well. However, from where I sit I am quite certain that my students understand that “the books of the NT do not have a monopoly on those concerns that the NT texts deal with” (I, too, have used novels — Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Moore’s *Lamb*, Kushner’s *Angels in America*, and Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower* to name a few; as well as spirituals, gospels, hip hop, etc.). The younger cohort (under 40) is particularly clear about this as hip hop enters into these sorts of conversations to greater and lesser degrees (and citing a multiplicity of texts and/as “scriptures”); but I have even had an older student of his own volition compare Bilhah, the concubine of Jacob/Israel, to Celie in *The Color Purple*.

That these texts are addressing some unique set of concerns is not the essence of their scriptural for my students, as far as I can discern. For my students, at least, these texts — often within a very particular translation, mark you — are incantational (this, perhaps, to Gundaker’s colleague’s comment that in fact African Americans have also acted upon, and made meaning upon, the schooled Roman signs). They — in their cadences and phrases — invoke into being (an)other world. Indeed, certain cadences have become so powerful as to require very little more than the correct

intonation, physical posture, movement, and so on (which of course is practiced in the halls and at the evening services on campus) to invoke that “other world.” When I, like Liew, point out what is — and what is not — in these texts, I find that I become to some extent complicit in aiding these contemporary conjurers; for in so doing, I am helping them refine their incantations, gain secret power and/or knowledge with which to confront the world. And the texts are so varied and multivocal that there are not enough hours in an MDiv curriculum to attempt to demystify them; and given their ultimate use, I’m not sure demystification is even entirely possible or desirable (any more than it would be for Yoruban-based “scriptures”).

What I found worked — perhaps for the very first time this semester — was to point to the magic itself, the conjuration (thus Thee Smith) of which Christian texts are but one tool, the de/re/formulative (Wimbush) impulses not at all subtly behind the use of these texts in particular contexts. In my advanced class, the question of “what is being conjured here” or “for what reason are these texts being invoked” did more to bring to consciousness the “scriptural” of these texts (and by extension of other “texts” [Kanye West, Alvin Ailey]) than anything I have ever done in intro or in exegesis. But of course, they already have intro and exegesis; I’m not sure that first-semester students would be even open to the question.

Also to Gundaker’s points is the matter of the limits of a seminary education. For, in fact, seminary education is finally the preparation of students to be conjurers, to conjure with (and sometimes against) “scriptures” — written, spoken, and unspoken. My advanced class — as it looked seriously at why and how others conjure — took on the feel of a cabal, co-conspirators undermining the power of those “in charge” and how they use “scripture” while playing with our own dangerous gnosis; not surprisingly, much of the class was in the younger cohort. With all of that gnosis, I’m not sure any of them is changed in how they consider “scripture” or (for that matter) in how they conjure. And yet, many asserted that such a class should be a requirement at seminary.

Wimbush: Always informative, at times disturbing and challenging, this conversation needs to go on. Across societies and cultures. Across traditions. Across fields and disciplines. Across the lines of academic-professional organizations. But I am convinced that the most important point — that the study and teaching of scriptures should be carried out as transgressive excavation, that is, not in terms of unacknowledged apologetics for the texted tradition in which one is located, but in terms of social texture and formation and power across traditional academic and social-cultural-political divides and practices — has been made with conviction and eloquence. At a time in which tensions around the world are now routinely religiously inflected, more specifically and poignantly, legitimized by reflexive recourse to scriptures (always only one’s own!), a lot is clearly at stake. Far beyond the vapid but insidiously apolitical stance of “letting the text speak for itself.” The extent to which the ISS — and this conversation as an extension of it — models and argues the challenges of beginning the thinking about scriptures and all that pertains to it, including all that the term itself masks, in social-critical and political terms, it is transgressive and compelling. And this work has only begun. I should like to end by expressing appreciation to all of the colleagues who have been part of this installment of the conversation. I also invite and challenge readers to “cross over,” and join us. RSN