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

Guest Editor: Vincent L. Wimbush

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.

His phrase “signifying (on) scripture” presses for a fresh mentalité, the thematic 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.

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.

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.

From the Editor’s Desk

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.

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

Guest Editor: Vincent Wimbush, Claremont Graduate University

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 scrabbling 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 texts, 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(es) 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 begins new and ongoing critical orientation and excavation — within and across academic categorizations and sociocultural traditions. 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 bodies 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 “scriptures” as historical and perduring cross-cultural dynamics and phenomena can be discussed, debated, and taught in the twenty-first century.

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.

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 regimes/disciplines, and corresponding power structures, dynamics, differentiation, and relationships involved in the engagements of “scriptures.”

It should be clear that the aim is to pursue central questions — the historical, social psychology, anthropology, and power dynamics/poitics — 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.
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, ethnographic, 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.

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.

Mr. Lusane’s statement, one is also on the path to applying such sight to other situations.

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 Ejagham 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.

Bibliography


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/SpotlightTeaching/indexmain.asp.
I rarely get students from Asia, or of Asian descent, with one of the above backgrounds, and the majority intend to do ministry work in hospitals, and prisons. The southeast United States is due to students who come from the African continent, in the southeastern part of the United States. White-controlled) seminaries. I teach current "scriptures" here in the conventionally narrow sense 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 of "scriptures" without developing some parameters would render the term meaningless, for "scriptures" is too narrow or rigid, can we agree on an understanding of "scriptures" may have become too broad, vague, or undefined?

Gundaker’s interesting and multi-leveled reading of Luke’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 the Bible in Asian America. They are not always in line with their presumed ethics and/or theological of the biblical texts. That is, one could not always assume a "liberationist" use of the biblical texts within the black community, 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 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. For instance, two responses emerged: one of the unorthodox Interpreter’s use of scriptures 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.

The assignment for these students was to identify a reader of a biblical text as scripture. Half of them chose a pastor or church congregation as reader; of the rest, one chose a specifically Christian medium (Christian rap), one chose a political speech, and five chose "social." The further from God you are, the gayer you are. 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 are, the further from God you are.

"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 refrain in the African American community... Even when the song is biblical inspired or uses the biblical text, often a pastor is 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.

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 "esxegical" 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 a text (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 aforementioned 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 how are they used? To what "scriptures" (cf. Wimbush) are they responding; indeed, what are they naming and/or creating as "darkness" and how do the biblical texts function "scripturally" in response to these darkness, 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-reflexive questions of what they themselves conjure when they step behind a pulpit to use the texts of the Protestant Bible as "scripture."
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**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 Lu Sinian, jing originally means the classics used in the ancient education system, which are seen as the origins 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, "I am not more than my disciples in that I can express my thoughts through concrete things than to convey it in empty words." In other words, Confucius used "scriptures" as mo dao (vehicle) instead of authentically "putting forth" the " WAY truth." What Confucius spoke to his disciples (ji, i.e., "records") and the commentaries by Confucius and his disciples (zhuang 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 "scriptures" 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 "temple experiences" and the "oracle text" itself became "scriptures" collectively. So in the Confucian tradition commentaries and "scriptures" are more often than not indistinguishable. As Confucius himself did not actually make the commentaries, although Confucius, his colleagues, and his disciples not only read but also composed the commentaries. The commentaries are 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 sages (immortals). In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the most influential was the Analects by Confucian scholar simulated Confucius, Huining, an illustrious monk in the Tang dynasty, were titled "scripture" along with 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 literate elites and accordingly the establishment of the "scriptures" learning, in addition to the worship of written scriptures, 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 classics — there 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 that the West was more advanced than China in wealth, power, science, and technology. The reason is that in the Confucian society, the "scriptures" were equivalent to the "knowledge" (wen), which is epitomized in the Confucian scriptures (jing). Nevertheless, the ancient Chinese sage kings were not gods or demigods nor, as Confucius said, they were able to 'firstly to discover what is common in our minds." So the learned scholar-officials were not able to have a complete monopoly of the "scriptures," especially among the literati. The rise of Neo-Confucianism is the Song dynasty a new approach emerged, which focused on getting the way by, in, and for oneself (zidai) 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 "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. Zizong, Confucius' disciple, once said, "Our Master's views on culture can be gathered, but it is not possible to have his views on the nature of things and on the Way of Heaven." Among the Five Classics, the Six 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 Revelation (Taitang ganyin 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 being bring their arrivals." In this perspective the idea of "three types of knowledge" (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. Confucianism as well as Taoism. For instance, the Dudie 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 is considered, as well as on a number of Taoist commentaries. In summary, different groups of people have quite different ways in their engagement of the "scriptures": this dynamism runs throughout Chinese history. It is still the case today, as can be seen from the fact that people with different sociopolitical interests engage in the Confucian "scriptures" totally differently, for democracy, authoritarianism, or "new left" ideas.

**UNION, from piv**

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 not only the significance of IS's current project on the ethnologies of scriptural reading among communities of color that embrace scriptural literacy and/or activism, 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 Garside (1992) emphasizes that "scriptures" 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 the "scriptures" of our contemporary scriptural studies. People need the ability to understand 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 Lu'san's memorial may not also become a way to teach the text of the New Testament as scriptures in other textual ways. This desire so pay attention to a particular point of view, related to the question "How should scriptures as cross-cultural phenomena be taught in the classrooms of the twenty-first century?" Again, I am not so much on the New Testament on the question of "teaching" that of "scriptures." That is, how do I, as a New Testament teacher, teach the New Testament cross-culturally, especially in the "context" of the "scriptures" that involve levels of reading or seeing beyond the level of literal and literary reading? Are their pedagogically innovative ways to reach New Testament together 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 in ways that are not necessarily reading or reading from a book?

**Bibliography**

In my New Testament classes, in fact, I use works of fiction to wrestle with the "big questions" in 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. Spirituals, for example, are not by definition spirituals, but they do contain elements that use the language of the New Testament, and thus may be read as such. Indeed, given Aymer’s emphasis on the fluidity and complexity of what constitutes scripture, it is possible to read these religious texts as part of a larger, more comprehensive religious tradition. In this way, the distinction between scripture and non-scripture becomes blurred, and the boundaries of what constitutes religious knowledge become more fluid.

Finally, I actually find Aymer’s teaching not so 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 non-academic 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, for example, contempo-

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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 of analysis, “but to underscore the book as the body of the Gurus (daily it is “dressed in” silks and brocades);”

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IT seems to me that Yan helps to push us again against the confront of defining “scriptures,” but at the same time complicating that question. First of all, i think Yan’s example of how commentaries of jing became “scriptures” — or how in Confucianism, commentaries and “scriptures” 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), it is 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-culturally (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 literary 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 we use works of fiction, one does not come 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 diocesan ones, within the so-called West). My point here is not to get us into a “paraly-

sis of analysis,” but to underscore the import-

ance of some means of interpretation. “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 scripture courses. As i stated 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 trans-
no monopoly on making meanings, much like — if I may refer back to Van at this point — jing cannot be equated with civilization or culture. Whatever "scripture" is, one thing seems clear, and that is, especially given the context of conversation: "scriptures" and the interpretation of "scriptures" are infused with power. If so, it important to me to teach my students to amplify their voice, to other voices, and to implication that these other voices are undercover "scriptures." Perhaps I am now back to Gundaker's contribution: may one understand the new as memorial as means of writing, 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 the course I teach is that it is contextually very different from "American culture" as I had previously understood it; and through teaching Bible at ITG, I have underscored the places of discontinuity between "the Bible" and "the world" — 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 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 reported that Kanye West's text — 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 American Mainstream church) thought "Jesus Walks" was in the Bible.

Of course, this further complicates the question of culture by adding the layer of generational and/or interpretative "texts" — texts(literary or otherwise) to make sense or use of "scriptures"? Are these texts (whether commentaries or a song like Kanye West's) used to "read" or to 

3) We can identify different ways in which people (including our students) use other texts (literary or otherwise) to make sense or use of "scriptures"? Are these texts (whether commentaries or a song like Kanye West's) used to "read" or to understand the culture by adding the layer of generational and/or interpretative "texts:" "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 reported that Kanye West's text — 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 American Mainstream church) thought "Jesus Walks" was in the Bible.

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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 take the door and the key and make sure 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 the texts.

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 the study of one or more of other scriptural traditions and other contributions to human imagination and struggles) but they do have distinguishable focus. One will focus on exploring and exploiting 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, and violence on and 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 definition.

**Gundaker:** My interdisciplinary teaching takes place through three faculties — American studies, anthropology, and black studies. Two of my research interests especially overlap with the concerns 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 the world and how to deal with them. It developed out of a variety of fieldwork, and gained strength over and against an academic climate during my graduate school days that marginalized — and continuously marginalized through the late 1970s, 1980s — my readings and readings in African ethnographies through "explanations" (that explain away) these discussions, the word "scripture" was still too closely tied for comfort to the canonical texts of religions in this book included in "majors" writing systems. But these discussions had to be undertaken with a different understanding of the text.

My colleagues have reminded me that these scriptures are both doctrinal and generative, both the bounded word of God and repositories of the meanings to make their own closure permeable and their situatedness apparent. The "how" of getting that across necessarily varies among us, but we all seem to share the work to do so.

**Aymer:** These are some brief further musings on response letter and discussion, but also to Gundaker. To Lieves first point, I, too, find that my students know the New Testament texts only nominally well. However, I think it's important that I sit with them in our seminars, it's very misleading to rest with this distinction because, while it reveals knowledge that has been "othered" and excluded, it also erases the contributions of people of color. 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 some point.

**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 academia and the academic professions. But I am convinced that the most important point — that the study and teaching of scriptures should be carried out as transgressive or transformative — that is, in terms of unacknowledged apologetics for that told tradition in which one is located, but in terms of new articulations and power across traditional academic and social-cultural-political divides. My colleagues have spoken with conviction and eloquence. At a time in which tensions around the world are now routinely and otherworldly, more specifically and poignantly, legitimated by reflex to scriptures (always only one's own), a lot is clearly at stake. Far beyond the rapid and insistently apologetical stance of "lettin' the text speak for its- -" The examples of the ISS — and this conversation as an extension of it — models and argues the challenges of beginning the thinking about scriptures and all the possibilities that a text term itself makes, in social 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.


1) Circle in gently to find out where the student is at. In "big I" 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 "fold ing" for new ideas.

2) Don't throw pebbles before swine. You can lead a horse to water but ... don't expect the blind to see (or as Lusane's tree "tells us, the wise name of no spillover, no withesnse tentacle escap ing like tendrills of joy to pull down the edi fi ce of prior assumptions. Surely it is not accurate to characterize both as a problem in any of the many more metaphors for change.

4) If they knew what you really think they'll kill you. You knew it was a snake when you picked them up. Knowledge 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 metaphor and to use or invoke that metaphor as a kind of "coloring outsidethelines" helping to open up, and all the potentials for indi rect observation that go with the vernacular practice "signifying." Its complex ramifications let it shift, like water, meeting learners with all sorts of assumptions where they're at, but with full 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 in this book included in "majors" writing systems. But these discussions had to be undertaken with a different understanding of the text.

My colleagues have reminded me that these scriptures are both doctrinal and generative, both the bounded word of God and repositories of the meanings to make their own closure permeable and their situatedness apparent. The "how" of getting that across necessarily varies among us, but we all seem to share the work to do so.

Also to Gundaker's points is the matter of the limits of a specific educational program. In fact, secondary education is finally the preparation of students to be conjurers, to conjure with (and sometimes against) "scriptures" — writen, spoken and unspoken languages — across classes — 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 some point.