



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 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 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 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.”

