Other Peoples' Scriptures: Mythical Texts of Imagined Communities

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Scriptures were once central to the orientalist project of discovering other religions, for obvious practical reasons: once discovered or reconstituted, they were definite, stable, unchanging objects of analysis, readily accessible to scholars yet presumed to represent and even define vast communities of religious others. The essays in this issue of *Numen* illustrate just how elusive scriptures actually are, and how illusory the others they represent; but in so doing they also demonstrate that "Other Peoples' Scriptures" remain a particularly generative focal point for the academic study of religions.

The Power of an Absent Text

Texts are many-headed beasts. Once, they were mined by scholars for doctrinal and historical content. Later, they were excavated for the hidden meanings behind their mythical narratives. Today, the academic study of religious texts looks beyond words and meanings to examine the material, graphic, and performative dimensions of scriptures, the processes by which they are canonized, and the practices of reading and study to which they are subjected. Accordingly, the essays that follow deal not so much with content as with language, sound, script, literary contexts, symbolic vocabularies, interpretive frameworks, and conceptions of textual authority.

Indeed, in all three of the historical cases studied in these essays, a writer manages to evoke someone else's scripture without reproducing its verbal content at all. The first essay describes a medieval Aragonese Christian, the Dominican Ramon Martí (d. after 1284), who borrowed only the language and script of his Jewish opponents' sacred text. He was citing not a Hebrew scripture but

the New Testament, which he quoted in Latin and then translated into fully vocalized Hebrew, complete with Masoretic punctuation and cantillation marks. Why did he go to the trouble of translating New Testament passages into Hebrew for Christian readers? Ryan Szpiech shows that his object was not to convey the meaning of Gospel passages to either Christians or Jews, but rather to endow his New Testament quotations with a certain aura of authenticity. Rather than using the content of Jewish scripture, he employed its linguistic and formal features to make the New Testament appear more authoritative in the eyes of an imagined Jewish interlocutor.

In the second essay, by Nathan Hofer, it is not the content of the Qur'an but the interpretive discourse surrounding it that is borrowed across religious lines. The Jewish Pietist David ben Joshua Maimonides (d. ca. 1415) appropriated passages from Muslim Sufi writings, using everything except their qur'anic quotations, which he replaced with verses from the Bible. He thus affirmed that there is truth among religious others, but by conspicuously reinserting the biblical passages from which he believed that truth was originally derived, David affirmed that the Qur'an was merely an echo of his own scripture. His argument was advanced precisely by not quoting the Qur'an at just those points where his educated audience would have known to expect it. The Qur'an was made to speak by its absence.

In the third essay, by Garry Sparks, another Dominican friar, Domingo de Vico (d. 1555), uses Mayan mythical figures, symbols, concepts, and stylistic devices to express a Christian "theology for the Indians." Some New World missionaries regarded such cultural translation as a corruption and betrayal of true doctrine, but Vico could countenance it because his Thomistic theory of language treated words as neutral signs that could be employed without prejudice to the message being conveyed. He therefore distinguished between the theological content of Mayan sacred narratives and their symbolic vocabulary, which was a theologically empty vehicle that could be employed for communicating Catholic ideas. In his *Theologia Indorum* the other's scripture was present in form but absent in content — or so he hoped.

In these essays, scriptures are not stable objects of focused analysis but unseen presences hovering around the periphery of our vision. The Hebrew Bible is not a sequence of words to be quoted and interpreted, but an imagined paradigm of authenticity and authority. The Qur'an is not a repository of spiritual ideals, but a symbol of Islam whose very absence can serve to indicate the derivative nature of Islamic Sufism. The sacred stories of the Maya are not embodiments of theological claims that missionaries must affirm or refute, but a symbolic vocabulary, a system of language, a theologically neutral vehicle of communication that missionaries can employ to express Christian teachings. As strings of words, canonical texts are fixed, in principle if not always in practice; but as imagined symbols, they are exceptionally malleable and can be

manipulated as a means of negotiating one's relationship with the other. Texts are mythical beasts, evanescent as rainbows and elusive as unicorns, conceived in one community's imagination as a symbol of another — rather like the many-horned beasts that stand for other communities in apocalyptic literature.

The Other as Imagined Foil

The religious others who are evoked by these allusions to absent scriptures turn out to be equally mythical: they are hermeneutical Jews, rhetorical Muslims, and eminently assimilable Maya.

Ramon Martí's polemic against the Jews is in fact addressed to Christians. He employs an imagined Jewish conception of authority to bolster the polemical power of his fellow Christians' own scripture in their own eyes. He gives the New Testament the shape and sound of otherness so that it conforms to what he thinks his Christian audience will imagine to be what his imaginary Jewish opponent would regard as an authentic scripture. It is a delightful hall of mirrors, but, of course, the other remains a pure fiction. Even in borrowing the language and script of the other's scripture, Ramon Martí is not engaging Jews at all but only fabricating a phantom Jew who serves to assure his audience that Christians are superior not only politically but also religiously.

David ben Joshua Maimonides likewise addresses an internal audience, and a small one at that, disguising his main point from all but his fellow "Jewish Sufis." The image of Muslim Sufis that he paints for them is recognizable only because they already know so much about the thought and literature of their Muslim rulers and because they have in fact appropriated a great deal of the Muslims' mystical thought and practice. But the picture David paints serves to invert that situation of subservience and dependence; it presents Muslim Sufis as dependent upon the mystical tradition of the Jews, and it projects a vision of Jewish political supremacy. David conceals the names of his Muslim Sufi sources but hints at their identity, thus converting them and their absent scripture into witnesses to the truth and superiority of Jewish pietism.

The case of Domingo de Vico differs in that his intended audience appears to have been primarily literate Maya and only secondarily his fellow Catholic priests, whom he hoped to persuade to start incorporating Mayan religious vocabulary into their Christian preaching. He was not just imagining a useful other; he knew Mayan languages and literature remarkably well and was revered for that by some of the Maya themselves. From the viewpoint of his fellow priests, the concern was not whether he was distorting Mayan religion but whether he was distorting the teaching of the Church. Vico was aware of this possibility, and although he did not adopt Mayan beliefs uncritically, he recognized that Mayan language and symbolism constrained and shaped

his communication of Christian doctrine. For example, he shed the Church's masculine language about God in favor of more gender balanced Mayan terminology. At the same time, however, Vico was reshaping Mayan religious discourse, redefining the very words and images he used by either correlating them or contrasting them with biblical figures and concepts. The sacred narratives that he employed in his writing were therefore not exactly those of Mayan scripture, but of a reimagined Mayan mythology mapped onto Catholic teaching. This was not a purely fictitious image of the other: imagination does not imply fiction, and in this case Garry Sparks emphasizes the mutual and reciprocal nature of the interaction that took place. But the very act of reaching across religious boundaries to make use of someone else's scripture, or of its language and literary form, entails a new way of framing and imagining that scripture for one's own purposes.

Studying the Mythical Texts of Imagined Communities

These three rich and provocative articles end up deconstructing the category they are supposed to explore. Other peoples' scriptures, they suggest, are not really the scriptures those others read, nor are those others the people who actually read them. The religious line that is crossed in the act of reading, quoting, evoking, or otherwise making use of another community's sacred text turns out to be more difficult to cross than it appears. This particular form of religious interaction turns out to be partly illusory, a kind of shadow fighting with imaginary weapons against opponents who are not quite there. But that is all the more reason to focus the study of religions on such points of imagined encounter, on the mythical texts of imagined others. For that is what the historical study of religions is: the study of human imagination — not only of how humans imagine the supernatural, but, more importantly, how they imagine themselves and one another, and how they continually reconstruct the fixed and canonical strings of words that they hold sacred.

The study of how scriptures cross (and fail to cross) religious lines is but one instance of a broader shift in the academic study of religions that has been taking place over many decades but that has not yet sufficiently refocused the discipline. The study of centers and essences is slowly yielding to the study of margins, convergences, and points of interaction. These three essays demonstrate the promise, for both research and teaching, of deliberately focusing on points of interaction between religious communities. Such study forces to the surface the imaginative processes by which human beings construct themselves and others and turns attention to the non-informative dimensions of texts. It compels attention to other crucial issues as well: the ethical and political dimensions of human interactions; the imagined boundaries that divide human beings from each other; and the shared discourses that belie those boundaries and make interaction possible.

The comparative study of scriptures is not dead. Rather, both comparison and scripture are being reimagined. Comparison is no longer the attempt to define a static relationship between two supposedly stable entities; it has become a dynamic process of interaction between studies of particular historical moments. When those historical moments themselves lie at the boundaries of religious traditions, they are particularly generative, as these essays illustrate. Scriptures, likewise, are not what they used to be. They are no longer regarded as stable repositories of words and ideas but as multifaceted artifacts whose many aspects can be redeployed and manipulated for all kinds of purposes. They may be hard to pin down, and they may not actually tell us much about the people who regard them as sacred, but they remain provocative sites for studying the human religious imagination.