

Dwelling on the Borders: Self, Text and World¹

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Abstract

In spite of secularist predictions, religion on a global scale has not gone away and shows little sign of diminishing. Within the context of the renewal of interest in religion and the assertion of religion in the public realm, I seek in this article to explore the ways in which the self has been (and continues to be) formed in religious traditions. Drawing on substantive examples from my work on textual traditions in India and Europe, the article argues that 'religious reading' is central to the formation of religious traditions and the formation of the religious person, and that this has an impact upon discourse in the public realm. The process of religious reading itself occurs in a borderland between text and world and between self and world. Through 'religious reading', or more precisely textual reception, we can understand the ways in which forms of inwardness are constructed in tradition-specific ways and such inwardness too has an impact on public discourse. I therefore attempt to examine three traditional borderlands – between inwardness and externality, between text and world, and between private religion and public governance – in the light of religious reading.

Keywords: *religious reading, subjectivity, indexicality, text*

In spite of secularist predictions, religion on a global scale has not gone away and shows little sign of diminishing. Indeed, there has been a resurgence of religion in public discourse: particularly in debates about religious and civil law, debates about science and religion, and in the need for legislation that touches upon the ethical dilemmas arising from developments in medical and bio-technology. In this paper I intend not so much to cross over but to dwell on a number of borders through focussing on what is a central act of religion, namely a particular kind of reading. Religious reading is central to the formation of traditions and the formation of the religious person or subjectivity; furthermore, this impacts upon discourse in the public realm. Religious reading is not a purely private activity but is at the heart of religions, and has sometimes extreme consequences in the public sphere in

¹ While the articulation in this article is my own, the thinking behind it has been formulated in dialogue and in conjunction with Oliver Davies. We hope to develop the thesis of religion as reading in future publications.

terms of pragmatic politics. The process of religious reading itself occurs in a borderland between text and world and between self and world. Through 'religious reading', or more precisely a particular kind of textual reception, we can understand the ways in which forms of inwardness are constructed in tradition-specific ways, and the impact of such inwardness upon the public realm. I therefore intend to examine three borderlands or kinds of mediation, which we might name text, self and world, and to show how religious reading affects these three realms. These three borderlands wherein religious reading operates are kinds of mediation: text mediates between reading and world; the self mediates between inwardness and externality; and the world mediates between private religion and public governance. As Robert Frost once wrote, '[s]omething there is that doesn't love a wall', ironically putting into his neighbour's mouth the words 'good fences make good neighbours' (Frost 1979, 33). This inquiry might lend support, un-ironically, to the neighbour's claim, while feeling the force of the suspicion of walls. Finally, this inquiry raises questions relevant to other borders. I shall end with a contrast between the religious subjectivity formed through religious reading in the way I shall describe and a contemporary subjectivity formed through art. This raises interesting questions about both religion and art seen as revelation, and about the religious and the aesthetic subject.

Background

I am very interested in the idea and possibility of comparative religion, which has come under such criticism in recent years particularly because of its colonial inheritance (Chidester 1996). But because there have been mistakes in the past and comparative religion has been undertaken with a certain naivety, we cannot be completely sceptical about the enterprise. Some comparisons are of course absurd, and for any comparative enterprise there needs to be an initial recognition or pre-understanding of overlap and that different things share certain properties within the same category; to borrow a term from biology, they have to be congeneric. Thus we have comparative law, comparative literature, comparative linguistics (such as Indo-European Studies), comparative history of science, and indeed comparative religion. What all of these subject areas share is that they each have a common object: literature, language, law, history and science, and religion. The boundaries of these objects are not fixed and are always shifting; one person's fiction is another's history, and we can argue about the boundaries, but that prototypical examples of each can found in human cultures and histories arguably bears witness to their value. I know that in

the case of comparative religion this is highly contested, and I shall make a few remarks about that contestation presently.

Recent debate has focussed upon the nature of religion: whether it is a universal category, whether it can be explained in terms of cognition, and whether it has application outside of a particular time-frame in the west. Scholars such as McCutcheon (1997), Fitzgerald (2000), Asad (1993), and Staal (1993), have problematised the category, some claiming that it is a term empty of signification, and have thereby questioned the viability of 'Religious Studies' as a discipline. Others have shown how 'religion' is a category that arose during the Enlightenment in conjunction with the rise of a discourse about it (Harrison 2002). On the other hand there has been increasing recognition of the legitimacy of communities' rights to religious claims and religious self-representations, and the legitimacy of scholars pursuing religiously meaningful questions in a disciplinary environment. Within Christian Theology there has been rigorous discussion of the formation of a post-foundationalist Theology and what form this should take (Milbank 1998). Part of this background is also scholarship about religious reading (Griffiths 1999) and the internalisation of texts in medieval religious practice (Carruthers 2000), and I see this current project as a contribution to some of those debates.

Although there are shining examples to the contrary, the academic study of religion as a field of inquiry has in recent years broadly failed to understand the fundamental importance of sacred text in the formation of religious lives and the production of religious narratives. This has partly been due to a (justified) rejection of claims such as Max Muller's at the end of the nineteenth century, that sacred text should be central focus of scholarly enquiry at the cost of religious practice. While the shift from text to practice corrected a distortion in the study of scriptural traditions, this shift has now resulted in neglecting the importance of texts in practice. This neglect of the importance of sacred text, with some notable exceptions such as Paul Griffiths' groundbreaking work, has led to a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of religion, expressed in the academy by forms of explanation that seek to give an account of religion in terms of naturalist or eliminative reductionism on the one hand and cultural reductionism on the other. In some sense both might be regarded as 'eliminative reductionism', but it is useful to keep the two forms of reduction distinct. To summarise briefly what I have written elsewhere (Flood 2006): eliminative reductionism refers to theories of cognition and evolutionary psychology, together with their philosophical justification. Cultural reductionism refers to accounts that see

religion only in terms of politics of representation and structures of power. According to this account religion serves the interests of the rich and powerful, to the disadvantage of the disempowered. Eliminative reductionism stresses cognition and belief, while cultural reductionism stresses the body, ritual and action. Both kinds of reductionism share an incredulity towards religious truth claims and both offer externalist explanation and critique with materialist ontological and ethical pre-commitments.

While my own study is undoubtedly influenced by much of this work, particularly the emphasis on language in cultural practice among philosophers and the emphasis on pragmatics among linguistic anthropologists, to my mind these explanations do not (and cannot) provide an adequate account of interiority or subjectivity shaped by religion and specifically by religious reading. Neither eliminative nor cultural reductionism can offer a description adequate to a tradition-determined existential way of being in the world or to tradition-internal concerns that must be accounted for. We need a different sense of explanation, one that is not the location of a cause but rather an account of meaning: to explain religion is not to seek a causal account or to specify the necessary constraints but to show how something is connected to a broader sphere or context. Such an account is both descriptive and interpretive: descriptive in the sense of representing what religion shows us, and interpretive in drawing out the implications of description in theory-informed ways. In the social sciences, cultural anthropology – particularly that of Geertz – clearly offers this kind of account, in its emphasis on thick description alongside anthropological recontextualisation; and some forms of phenomenology of religion have attempted to offer an account of religion of this kind, although I would be critical of the starting point of phenomenology of religion in a philosophy of consciousness rather than in a philosophy of the sign. But I do think the account of religious reading I am about to present has descriptive power in relation to scriptural traditions; I would locate it within a hermeneutical phenomenology, which is unlike phenomenology in so far as it is interpretative and thus primarily concerned with signs, yet like phenomenology in so far as it has descriptive power.

Because of this descriptive power, this account of religion as reading locates religion in the cultural sphere and presents a positive response to certain problems in the academic study of religion. It offers, I think, a better account of scriptural traditions than either cultural or eliminative reductionism in recognising the positive power of religion in many peoples' lives and in demonstrating the processes involved in cultural transmission. The

cultural reductionist can draw no positive conclusions about religion and the eliminative reductionist can make few claims about subjective meaning and macro-cultural processes. Both cognitive and cultural reductionisms misrepresent and misunderstand religion as scriptural tradition in fundamental ways, particularly in giving no adequate account of religious subjectivity or of religious reading, and in ignoring tradition-internal concerns. The thesis I would wish to present here, by contrast, provides an account recognisable by practitioners of tradition in its description but is also recognisable as external explanation in the sense of the location of meaning. Such an account can negotiate the complex emphases of belief and action in religious behaviour and can recognise the importance of subjectivity, while at the same time maintaining the importance of understanding tradition in history and within the cut and thrust of cultural politics. On this account religion is not *sui generis* but is part of the flow of history, yet nor can it be adequately explained in terms of the two reductionisms. If this is theology then it is a cultural theology, although I would prefer the designation 'hermeneutical phenomenology'.

Religion as Reading

The act of reading is at the heart of religion. This somewhat bold assertion forms the basis of a thesis about the nature of scriptural religion (and therefore of all major 'world religions') which I am developing with Oliver Davies and which has broad ramifications for the study of religions. Indeed, our claim that the act of reading is at the heart of religious life, and that religious communities are formed by the reading of their sacred texts in defining ways, brings into question recent views that seek to explain religion without text. To miss this fundamental point about the act of reading is to significantly misunderstand the nature of religions. Furthermore this thesis shows how religious subjectivity or interiority interfaces with the political and social world. Religious reading is corporate, guarded by tradition, embodied and mimetic, distinct from other kinds of reading, and pervasive of doctrine. Above all, it is ritual. The phenomenology of religious reading is also a theory of religion. Religious reading (the realisation of the text) forms subjectivity (the internalisation of the text) and forms the political dimension of religion (the externalisation of the text). I have formulated the thesis in conjunction with Oliver Davies in the following terms:

Religion is the construction of a ritual sphere within which a text received from the past is realised within the present, within what we might call a

'present orality'. The text from the past is brought to life by a community only in the present act of reading and this bringing to life of the text is also the text's own participation in the authority of revelation that it lays claim to. 'Reading' in this ritual sphere is the realisation of the text in the present in such a way that the pastness of the text is not negated. This entails, accordingly, a reconfiguring of time within ritual which entails an understanding of the text and the very act of reading itself, in cosmological terms. The text is brought to life only in the here and now and in this way becomes a sign of its origin, a sign of a future, and, most importantly, a sign of its present, cosmological importance. Through religious reading, that is the realisation of the text, the community of reading lays claims to revelation through the text in a way that is governed by the text. That is, we might say the text itself lays claims to its own mode of appropriation. The act of reading is therefore the way in which the text meets the world, an act which has broad ramifications in other spheres of law, values, and art. The realisation of the text in the present is the opening of the text for a speech community which is, as it were, a re-awakening of the past voice of the text (which we might describe as a return to orality). This realisation has the consequence that the text will then be internalized through appropriation outside the time-frame of the ritual-liturgical phenomenology of text-realisation. Thus through the realisation of the text in the present ritual act – which is the text's temporal, simultaneous dislocation and relocation – body and life are reconfigured or transformed. This transformation is the internalisation of the text in the lives of those for whom the text is realized in the ritual act. We might say that religion is primarily an encounter with the text in a distinctively intense act of reading whereby the text is realised within present space and time. The text thus makes claims upon its liturgical or ritual readers such that the appropriation of the text entails its internalisation. A shared interiority is formed through reading, tradition and liturgy. This realisation is accompanied by a further stage which is the externalisation of the text. The realisation of the text impacts upon life outside of the ritual sphere, particularly law, values and art. It determines patterns of living and social interaction, nourishing human worlds in a way that resists explanation purely in terms of social formation or in terms of an evolutionary, boundary protection. (Flood & Davies 2006, unpublished.)

This somewhat dense formulation can perhaps be captured in the image of Moses receiving the words of God on the mountain and then communicating them to the human community who keep those words alive in continuous,

present acts of reading. Or in the image of Vasugupta who, tradition claims, had a dream in which Shiva revealed to him the presence of the Shiva Sutras inscribed upon a stone at the top of Mahadeva Mountain in Kashmir. Upon retrieving the text he communicated it to the community, which thereafter kept the text alive.

There are then, three dimensions to this thesis that need to be systematically expounded: (1) the realisation of the text, (2) the internalisation of the text, and (3) the externalisation of the text.

Borderlands 1 – Text: The Realisation of the Text

To reiterate the first part of the thesis: Religion is the construction of a ritual sphere within which a text received from the past is realised *as text* within a present orality. The reception of the text from the past takes place through the act of reading; by this we mean not simply following words on a page by the literate, but also aural and ritual reception. Such reading is always corporate (even when done alone; indeed, there can be no private religious reading). This reading is the coming into the presence of the text, and is the key point from which the others flow; the realisation of the text is an enlivening of the voice of the text, a voice from the past being inserted into the present field of meaning for a particular community of readers, but manifesting from within the text, and not displacing it.

The text forms its community of readers for whom it comes alive in the present. There can of course be other kinds of reading of sacred texts – as literature, as myth, as a subject of text criticism – but the distinctive nature of religious reading is in hearing a voice from the past which is brought to presence in the here and now and thereby gives access to the world. The world is understood by the community of readers through repeated acts of religious reading. Indeed, the proper meaning of the text exists only in the present and for the reader or community of readers.

This realisation of the text in the ritual act is determined not only by the community of reception but by the very nature of the text itself. The text set aside as ‘sacred’ is so not merely by virtue of being marked by a community in this way, but by the nature of the text itself, as having qualities of openness and semantic density that allow the text to be re-read and received afresh at each reception. While this quality of the sacred text may be shared by other kinds of texts, such as great poetry, the important difference lies in the realisation of the text: namely, that the sacred text has a liturgical mode of reception. In theory any text could become sacred over time, but in practice we see that only certain texts, ones with adequate semantic density, achieve

this status. While it might not be possible to specify other than vaguely the nature of semantic density shared by sacred texts, the point is that the nature of a text's sacredness lies in the mode of reception which distinguishes for example the Bible as literature from the Bible as liturgical act. This reception is embodied and mimetic. Intrinsic to the liturgical mode of reception is the conviction that the text lays claim to the act of reading itself, where a reading is taken to be 'true' or 'inspired'; such readings arise out of the privileged access of initiates to the text in its authenticity (cf. Christian accounts of interpreting the Bible 'in the Holy Spirit'). There is a unique intentionality to texts regarded as 'revealed', which makes injunctive claims on its readers or receivers who enact and interpret those injunctions through the generations. By thus laying claim to the space between reader and text in this way, such texts are also implicitly or explicitly laying claim to the temporal and spatial structures of the world within which every individual act of reading takes place. This introduces a *cosmological* dimension to 'religious reading'. The realization of the text thus has consequences beyond the present act of liturgical reading, as the text flows into the world through law, through values, and through art.

There are three aspects to the realisation of the text that need to be emphasised: firstly a distinct temporality, secondly a distinct understanding of agency, and thirdly its embodied and mimetic nature.

(a) Temporality in the Realisation of the Text

The realisation of the text entails a particular configuration of temporality. Time is collapsed into the present act of reading and the text is realised as sacred only in ritual time. The voice of the text coming from the distant past is realised only in the present, in the here and now, for a community of reception. There is a temporal collapse in the bringing into presence of the past in a way that stands outside historical time; in fact, it brings historical time into its sphere. From the perspective of ritual time, the perspective of the realisation of the text, historical time is subsumed into it. The realisation of the text in which the past is conflated with the present is an instance of cosmological time as distinct from historical time. Indeed, historical time itself is an instance of cosmological time when seen from within the ritual sphere.

Religious reading in our sense of the realisation of the text, while continuing in modernity, is essentially pre-modern. In some ways we might say that religious reading is a survival into modernity of a cosmological mode of being in the world. The sacred texts of the scriptural traditions of Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam were all generated in the

distant past and by communities of reception formed long before the advent of modernity. Yet the realisation of the text in acts of ritual, reading, and prayer continues in the modern world among significant populations.

The reading of any text entails the retrieval of a semantic entity from the past into a present field of meaning (which is akin to Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons'). The more alien the text, the greater the dislocation between what Ricoeur calls 'the world of the text' and the reader's own world. The reading of any text, but especially an ancient text, 'stretches' temporality by drawing into alignment 'voices' from the past with speech agents of the present; thus the text manifests itself in the present as a distinct voice: the 'voice of the text'. It is thus possible to say that the text 'speaks', and that this speaking entails the realisation of the text as text by a community.

Under certain circumstances, some ancient texts can exercise a powerful influence upon the present (as evidenced for instance in the appropriation of the philosophical, political and literary texts of antiquity). But through the process of removing ancient texts from their original context and re-contextualising them in new, present contexts, religious reading is set apart from non-religious reading on account of the former being communal or tradition-centred and on account of its articulation in the ritual sphere. Religious reading takes place within communities that have themselves been shaped by prior acts of reading the same text or cluster of texts. In Gadamerian terms, the 'fusion of horizons' that occurs as the community reads its own core texts is already governed by the historical life of the community grounded in successive – and often corrective or innovative – readings of the same text/s. To read a 'sacred' text 'religiously' is to allow it to come to life in ritual, liturgically in the present, which is to read it from within a hermeneutic community which has already been formed in its own history by the successive and formative appropriations of that same text. The preservation of the historical text means that its realization as 'voice' constitutes a temporal 'stretch' or 'collapse'. From one perspective, time is as it were stretched to the past in the realization of the text, from another the past is collapsed into the present.

This stretching or collapse of temporality is implicit in any act of reading, but especially so in the reading of ancient texts; and it becomes critical in the case of religious reading. This happens in two ways. In the first place, sacred texts offer answers to questions of ultimate meaning and questions about life and death. This is an *eschatological* claim by virtue of content. But an eschatological claim is also made in these texts by virtue of the way in which their reading is enacted or performed. While the voices from the

past which are embedded in ancient texts mostly sound but distantly to the modern reader, the religious reader presupposes that the voice/s in their sacred texts have full and immediate present force. God, the prophet/s, the sages, and the saviour speak immediately to the community in and through the ancient text as it is received by its religious readers in the ritual sphere. There is a radical closure of temporal distance which entails a collapsing of the past-present relation. For Christians, Jesus, who lived two thousand years ago, still speaks today in scripture and liturgy; for Hindus, mantras from the Veda have present, ritual force. This speaking from within the text is the realization of the text in the present.

The immediacy of divine speaking, or divinely inspired speaking, from the past in the present, which we have called the realization of the text, contracts time into an eschatological now. If modernity is characterised, as Nowotony argues, by a sense of an 'extended present' (Nowotony 1994, 52–3), then tradition, articulated as text in the present, encloses both past (account of origins, sacred history) and future (the end of time, the end of suffering) in the unfolding of a new time as realised eschaton. This in some ways echoes Eliade, but without the ahistorical essentialism entailed in his work.

(b) Agency in the Realisation of the Text.

This collapsing of temporality, of the past into the present, has implications for agency. The realisation of the text in liturgical acts of reading is the handing over of agency to the text or tradition. The self who reads in modernity is autonomous, a free agent able to choose to read or not to read, to lay a book aside, whereas the realisation of the religious text entails an act of reading in which the agency of the participants in the ritual act is temporally relinquished. My voice becomes the voice of the text, my life is made to conform to the life of the text, a consequence of which is that the narrative of the tradition is made to flow through the narrative of my extra-textual life. The voluntary relinquishing of agency in the liturgical act might be seen as a kind of asceticism, in which the will is given up to the text. The collapse of temporality, the liturgical, communal reading and realisation, serve to displace individual agency and a modernist, Kantian autonomy, in favour of a voluntarily accepted heteronomy of the ritual act. This giving up of agency in the realisation of the text facilitates the internalisation of the text, which carries on beyond the ritual sphere of religious reading itself. In this way the individual or community inhabits the tradition and the tradition flows through the community into future generations.

(c) Body and Mimesis in the Realisation of the Text

The realisation of the text in liturgy entails the body and entails mimesis in the sense of the imitation of ritual action. Indeed, we might even say that the text becomes inscribed on the body through the liturgical act. There are degrees of such inscription, from overt forms of empowering the body with the text of tradition through for example touching parts of the body accompanied by the recitation of text, to a more subtle inscription in for example the procession of the holy gifts in Orthodox liturgy. The body is fundamental to the ritual act and to the realisation of the text. Furthermore, the reception of the sacred text entails a mimetic structure in which the body reflects and recapitulates other bodies in the chain of transmission. Such mimesis is both an imitation of other bodies, which are themselves imitations of others, and an imitation of the text: the body performs the injunctions of text and acts out the narrative of the text in liturgical action.

Borderlands 2 – Self: The Internalisation of the Text

A function of the realisation of the text is its internalisation. The text is realised in ritual space and time, resulting in the internalisation of the text by practitioners. The phenomenological encounter with the text in a distinctively intense act of reading, whereby the text is realised within present space and time, makes claims upon its ritual readers such that the appropriation of the text entails its interiorisation. Subjective interiority or shared interiority is formed through reading and liturgy. We might say that the intentionality of the text itself, which we can call the 'narrator' and which Bakhtin calls the 'author' (Bakhtin 1990, 12), interfaces with the intentionality of the 'reader' or 'receiver' who internalises and reconstructs the text. The indexicality of the text interfaces with that of the reader. This process has been demonstrated by Urban, who shows how the indexical-I of the reader identifies with the 'I of discourse' in the text (Urban 1989; Davies 2004; Flood 1999, 185–91), just as the reader also positions herself with regard to the notional reader implied by the text. This reconstruction of the text is the way in which the text is made 'one's own' and is fundamental to the processes of textual transmission and religious identity formation. This process is what Silverstein and Urban have called 'entextualization' and 'contextualization' (Silverstein & Urban 1996, 1–3): the simultaneous extracting of the text from one context and re-establishing it in the new. 'Entextualisation' takes place when the living discourse of speech agents distils as autonomous textual discourse, while 'contextualisation' occurs when textual discourse is retrieved back

into the dynamic matrix of living culture through meaningful acts of reading. This process of internalization, whereby the extra-textual, indexical-I becomes identified with the intra-textual or anaphoric-I (the 'I' of the text), is closely linked with narrative.

The appropriation of the text through entextualisation and contextualization is a way of describing how the narrative identity of the subject recapitulates the greater narrative of the tradition. This inhabiting or dwelling within the tradition through the realization of the text in the ritual sphere is linked to the subjective construction of coherence (cf. Griffiths' religion as comprehensiveness, unsurpassability, and centrality, 1999, 1–2). Narrative is the formation of subjective coherence through the linking of the indexicality of the subject with that of the text. In this way a subject operates within or inhabits several narratives. But what is distinctive about religious narratives, what ensures the narrative coherence of text-formed tradition through time, is the realization of the text in the ritual sphere. Forms of interiority which continue outside of the ritual sphere are formed through the realization of the text (as described above).

Subjective coherence through narrative is central to any understanding of religion. This coherence of subjectivity through narrative entails the structure articulated by Ricœur: that identity through time (*idem*-identity) is only articulated as particular narrative (*ipse*-identity) (Ricœur 1990, 2–3, 16, 18). In the case of religious identity this is formed fundamentally through the realization of the text, which as a consequence forms a certain kind of inwardness. This subjective appropriation of religious narrative that flows from the realization of the text is fundamental to religion as macro-history, social cohesion, and the articulation of power relations. While of course there are macro-forces working through history, the practices of religious reading that we have identified here are central to the religious formation of communities. This internalization of religious narrative has been understood externally in terms of 'ideology' or 'false consciousness', as well as internally in terms of 'truth', but the structure of religion that we identify is prior to these contestations. This is to present both an existential understanding of religion and to offer a phenomenology of reading. It is also to identify a primary structure, that of reading, which – although it bears a recognizable relation to non-religious forms – is nevertheless distinctive to religion and determinative of it.

The realization of the text and its concomitant internalization has consequences beyond the ritual sphere and the individual life. Religious reading flows out into the world, as it were, and has consequences for a community in terms of law, ethics, politics, art and social formation.

Borderlands 3 – World: The Externalisation of the Text

The process of religious reading brings a community into the world. Both text and world are enlivened through religious reading in the sense that the text gives access to a world. Indeed, a characteristic of sacred texts is that they claim to give such access and offer modes of understanding that are not only epistemologically coherent but which are transformative of communities and persons within them (that is, they claim to be soteriological). The sacred text's claims on the world through the realization of the text are therefore cosmological and ethical. The externalization of the text is therefore the text laying claim to the world, which is the establishing of the world under the control of the text. According to our thesis, therefore, the world is not absorbed into text but established by the text through the community. The text lays claim to the world not through the absorption or reduction of world to text but through the control of the world. Religious texts and their reading are ruthlessly realistic.

Religious reading, the realization of the text, shows a community something about the nature of the world and so has consequences beyond the ritual sphere. Religious reading in the sense described here is a pre-modern activity that lays claims on a community; in particular that a community must see itself within a cosmos and that the world is fundamentally ordered in such a way that the sacred text becomes an articulation of that order. There are degrees of cosmological sensitivity in different traditions and forms of reading. Where religious narrative is cosmologically ornate, the construction of subjective narrative will be mythically and liturgically rich (e.g., Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, Catholicism). Conversely, where religious narrative is cosmologically poor, there is a reduction of mythic and liturgical depth (e.g., Protestantism, modernist Islam). This shift from cosmological richness to cosmological paucity is historically linked in the West with the rise of science.

The realization of religious texts impacts upon the world not only in cosmological claims, but also in ethical and legal claims and in art. The texts place deontological demands on their communities and the acting out of these injunctions is an extra-textual consequence that spills over into the world. The performance of ethical injunction does not directly affect the realization of the text, but the realization of the text affects ethical performance in the extra-textual world. Furthermore ethical injunction becomes encoded in law. Religious law, i.e. the set of prohibitions and injunctions so fundamental to religion, may be seen as a consequence of the realization of the text through a community of reception. Thus while narrative might

be important for identity formation within the liturgical act of reading, prohibitions and injunctions expressed through law are fundamental to extra-textual ways of being in the world for the reading community. Even secular law in the West has its foundations in religious law, itself a consequence of the realization of the text in our sense. Interesting dilemmas arise when the ethical and legal codes that flow from the liturgical realization of the text come into conflict with secular law.

Religious reading, as the fundamental act of religion, forms the ritual sphere; it forms kinds of inwardness; and it forms the ways in which a community behaves in the world or at least offers injunctions, prohibitions and norms of behaviour that traditions claim flow from the realization of the text. Religious reading brings a community into 'the world' and links a tradition-specific subjectivity with forms of social and political institution and action.

The Nature of Sacred Text

To substantiate the claim about religion as reading, we need to locate what is distinctive about sacred texts as opposed to any other cultural production that could be classified under the sign of 'text'. What is the force of the adjective 'sacred'? To locate the notion of a sacred text within the development of theories of the text, particularly in literary studies, would be a task beyond this article, but we nevertheless do need to identify the processes at work within sacred texts, which cannot be understood in isolation from the community of readers or the tradition for whom the text is sacred.

A text is sacred – as has often been suggested – first of all by virtue of being set aside by a community as having special status. This might be because it is believed to have a transcendent source or to be revealed, in the Qur'anic verses received by Mohammad or in the Veda received ('heard') by ancient sages; because it is believed to be inspired by a transcendent source or by supernatural events, as in the case of the New Testament; or because it narrates the life and teachings of a person who is revered for having a deep understanding of the nature of the world or of an otherworldly goal, as in the case of the Pāli canon of Theravāda Buddhism. In different traditions there will be different emphases on the nature of the text set aside and transmitted in ways particular to tradition, usually in liturgical modes. From a text-critical perspective, all of these texts set aside in particular ways by traditions have been formed and gathered over a usually long period of time, so that there is variable unity to the voice they contain.

All sacred texts might be said to contain a 'voice', which is usually complex in its formation, being the sum totality of the authorial voices that

have composed it. This voice from the past is only enlivened by the present communities who set the text aside. The voices of many sacred texts are now silent because their communities are no more, while other voices are heard in very different ways: secular readings of the Bible as 'literature' are quite different from its liturgical reception. But two characteristics of voice within sacred texts can be identified: the voice of injunction and the voice of narrative.

René Girard has emphasised the injunctive nature of religions. Their primary characteristic, he argues, is injunction: they command people to act or not to act: 'thou shalt' or 'thou shalt not' (Girard 1987, 10–11). This is clearly important in the Hebrew Bible and in the Veda, for example, where one community of interpretation, the Mimamsa, regarded injunction (*vidhi*) as its most important feature. But an equally important dimension of the voice in sacred text is narrative. The voices of texts tell stories that express values in time, that provide readers with models of how to live and how not, and that describe the nature of the world and the world's relation to a transcendent source or telos. The narrative of the text imitates life and human time, as Paul Ricœur has so eloquently mapped out. It is Ricœur to whom we can turn to draw out a deeper understanding of the nature of sacred text.

For Ricœur, narrative is mimetic of human action; furthermore, we understand our lives through interpreting them as if they were narratives. Narrative can refigure past and future in the human imagination, and we understand ourselves through the stories we tell and hear. Ricœur analyses the mimesis characteristic of narrative into three components: mimesis 1, 2, and 3. Mimesis 1 is prefiguration, i.e. 'a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources and its temporal character' (Ricœur 1984, 55). It is our ability to recognise what human action consists of, such as the terms 'agent, goal, means, circumstance, help, hostility, cooperation, conflict, success, failure, etc.' (Ricœur 1984, 55) that enables us to recognise a plot. We have, therefore, a semantic understanding (such as 'X did A in such and such circumstances, taking into account that fact Y does B in identical or different circumstances'); a symbolic understanding or recognition that human action can be narrated because it is 'always already articulated by signs, rules and norms'; and a temporal understanding that recognises that in action there are 'temporal structures that call for narration' (Ricœur 1984, 59). The next level of mimesis 2 is emplotment or the organisation of events. This is the representation of action in texts and the formation of actions into an intelligible whole, which 'opens out

the kingdom of *as if* (Ricœur 1984, 64), the kingdom of fiction. This allows us as readers to look back over a story and to have 'a sense of an ending' (Ricœur 1984, 76, citing Frank Kermode). Thus mimesis 2, emplotment, is the work of both text and reader, in that the reader's expectations are governed by paradigms that allow her to recognise genre, formal rules or type of narration, while the act of reading actualises the capacity of the text to be followed: 'To follow a story is to actualize it by reading it' (Ricœur 1984, 76). Finally, mimesis 3 is a refiguration, i.e. the application of the world of the text to the real world, the place where the world of the text meets the world of the reader. This gives narrative its full meaning, by restoring it 'to the time of action and of suffering' (Ricœur 1984, 70). The relationship between these three levels of mimesis is one of circularity, in that narrative is based on life and we learn about life through narrative. The act of reading connects emplotment (mimesis 2) with the extra-textual world and is 'the final indicator of the refiguring of the world of action under the sign of the plot' (Ricœur 1984, 77).

Ricœur's analysis is clearly germane to the reception of sacred texts. Sacred texts assume a pre-understanding of action and of the causal nexus of actions in the world. The vedic scriptures, for example, enjoin their followers to sacrifice assuming an understanding of causality between action and its effect on the part of practitioners; the New Testament assumes an understanding of the political and symbolic nature of action in Jesus riding into Jerusalem on an ass. Sacred texts are brought to life in their reception in mimesis 3, and like narratives are characterised by the emplotment of mimesis 2. But it is with Ricœur's mimesis 2, the opening out of the kingdom of *as if*, that difficulties begin to arise.

For Ricœur there are two types of narrative: fiction and history. Both assume a narrative competence on the part of the reader and both assume a human truth rather than a referential understanding of truth. Now sacred texts resemble both fiction and history. Like history they do not consist merely of lists of events (as would be a simple chronology or historical annals), but draw causal connections between events; occurrences within sacred texts are generally regarded as events by their communities of reception. Religious texts not only relate events but narrate them, that is, they explain them in a causal sequence. Thus the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* not only gives an account of the last journey of the Buddha, his final hours, and his death, but plots this story in terms of a cosmic drama, in which the death of the Buddha is his passing into the final transcendence of complete *nibbāna*, an event accompanied by earthquakes and supernatural occurrences (Ling 1981,

139–213). But unlike history, sacred texts do not problematise explanation or set up a critical distance between the narration of events and the giving of an account of them. In this sense sacred texts are more like fiction, in that the performance of recounting a narrative is also its explanation. The events of fiction are created by the author or authors, whereas the events of history are not so created but are ordered and explained by the historian. In this sense sacred texts are more like fiction than history; yet this variability depends upon different communities of reception. For a text-critical, scholarly community of reception it may be possible to write the occurrences of a sacred text as history, to separate events from non-events or fictions, whereas for a community of faith it may not be possible to do so and the sacred text is taken as closer to history than fiction. This is true of many literalist readings of sacred texts. Different readings by the critical historian have only been possible for a couple of centuries. For the critical historian, sacred texts are more *mythos* than *logos*.

We might say, then, that sacred text occupies a variable place between history and fiction. Like both, sacred text entails emplotment or the narrative ordering of events; unlike fiction, however, communities of reception treat events within the text as history, while unlike history the texts do not offer a critical distance between explanation and narration. While sacred texts themselves are widely divergent and tradition-specific, we can nevertheless argue that we are dealing with a genre distinct both from fiction in Ricoeur's sense (which for him embraces the genres of 'folktale, epic, tragedy, comedy and the novel') and from history. Sacred texts are not straightforward narratives, and in many of them the narrative dimension is subordinated to laudatory hymns, ritual prescriptions, and ethical injunctions, but these are often set within a narrative account of cosmology, and such narrative accounts are often contained within individual accounts. Thus the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible contain an implicit cosmological understanding, as do the hymns of the *Rg-veda*.

In response to the question 'what is different about sacred texts compared to other kinds of texts?': we can say, first of all, that sacred texts are distinct from other genres in occupying a contested ground between fiction and history. But secondly, and more importantly, we can say that for their communities of reception sacred texts embody a voice from the past that has present force. Sacred texts are distinct from other genres because of the ways in which people inhabit them and the kinds of textually mediated subjectivity they generate. Sacred texts make demands upon their readers to act and think in certain ways that are generally not true of either fiction

or history. Sacred texts lay great claims on their communities of reception because the kinds of claims and demands they make have life-changing consequences for their practitioners and are the source for particular ways of living for whole communities. While in all narratives time becomes human through the act of narration, as Ricœur suggests, in sacred texts cosmic time is related to human time and to the particularity of human life. Through the mediation of the voice of the text, the individual life path is integrated into the life of tradition and into the community. The story of the tradition becomes part of my own story; the prefiguration of action in mimesis 1 is translated in the text into the emplotment of mimesis 2, and the emplotment of mimesis 2 becomes integrated into life in the refiguration of mimesis 3.

Let us illustrate this with a brief example. A text regarded as revelation by a community of worshippers of Vishnu, the Pancaratra, called the *Jayakhya Samhita*, may be recited as part of the Pancaratrin's daily practice, and its liturgical prescriptions, detailed over several chapters, may be enacted. This text, composed between the fifth and tenth centuries CE, is a substantial work comprising thirty three chapters and four thousand five hundred verses. The text is a mixture of injunctions to perform rituals, set within a loose narrative structure. That narrative structure is a search for knowledge of emancipation from the world of suffering. The sage Samvarta approaches his father Aurva and asks him to tell him about the means of salvation. Aurva tells how he and other sages also searched for this, and how their search came to nothing until they found the sage Sandilya at Mount Gandhamadana. Sandilya placed his hand on the sages' heads, symbolising a formal teacher-disciple relationship, and told them what he himself had learned from the sage Narada at a hermitage. This teaching Nārada had received directly from the Lord. Sandilya imparts his knowledge to the sages, and the book records the dialogue between Narada and the Lord (as reported by Sandilya).

At one level the text is a description of the manifestation of the universe, a cosmogony, at another level an account of what a person needs to do to ensure salvation at death, mostly a ritual prescription in which the cosmology described in the text is inscribed upon the body. Above all, the text seems to insist on the necessity of worship of the Lord who is the source of all. The text presents an account of the universe created in cosmic time, which is then re-enacted in the reading and performance of the practitioner. The temporal process described in the text is performed within the limited temporality of ordinary life. The narration of the text is complex, the bulk of the work being a dialogue between the Lord and the sage Narada; the

latter imparts the dialogue to Sandilya, who in turn imparts it to other sages. But the unity of the text is performed in the reader-practitioner's imagination. Indeed, this text illustrates the difference between sacred text and mere literature; namely the complexity of a text with possibly multiple authorship over a long period and the special reception of the text. It is not read and put away, but is repeatedly recited and performed. The verses in the text are constantly re-configured in the imagination of the reader within his horizon of expectations. In Ricœur's terms, the text assumes the pre-figuring of action in its description, weaves these descriptions into a loose narrative emplotment, and lays claims upon the reader internalising this emplotment in his own, extra-textual life. The voice from the past, the voice of the Lord, is mediated through a number of intermediaries to the present reader, where it has present force.

Conclusion – Reading Art and Receiving Revelation

To conclude: I have argued that religious reading is not simply a cognitive act but a bodily one, sharing in our gestures, postures, and expressions within a community of reception. What we have arrived at, then, is the simple claim that religion, which I take to be prototypically a matter of scriptural traditions, is best understood as a kind of reading. But not just any kind of reading; rather, one in which a voice, privileged by some community as transcendent, divine, or divinely inspired, has present force for some community who receive it through the text. This reception is 'reading' the text, which means literally reading it for those who can, hearing it, and – perhaps most importantly – enacting it in repeated liturgical acts. Indeed, the majority of practitioners of these traditions throughout their histories were probably illiterate; thus reading as performance is key in understanding the process of textual enactment and transmission. The performance of the text is simultaneously its internalization and a kind of inwardness or subjectivity peculiar to religion.

In some ways this is a conservative view of the religious self, a view that is hesitant about the possibility of forms of spirituality that exceed the confines of tradition, yet an understanding that nevertheless places an existential truth of human subjectivity at the heart of religion. But I would like to end with a consideration of a parallel process in new configurations of traditions in late modernity, with its emphasis on what is vaguely called 'spirituality'. In this context I would like for a moment to consider the work of the video artist Bill Viola. Viola is an American artist who is concerned with themes of birth, death and resurrection, with the borderland between

life and death, wakefulness and sleep, and with the possibility and experience of transcendence. All this is undoubtedly inspired by his experience as a six-year-old of almost drowning. These themes he expresses through the use of elemental forces of nature (water and fire), desert landscapes, and the slow rhythms of animals. Like many of his generation he draws from an eclectic range of religious traditions and himself practices Zen Buddhism.

In the sequences *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), *The Passing* (1991), *The Crossing* (1996), *The Messenger* (1996), *Five Angels* (2001), and *Fire Woman* (2005) we see the themes of death and resurrection and the distortion of time so characteristic of Viola's art. In many ways, then, this work is a kind of revelation or of showing. The comparison of this kind of work serves both to bring into relief what is distinctive about religious reading and to show what is similar between art and revelation. There are, it seems to me, striking parallels between some kinds of art, such as Viola's, and textual revelation: both have a semantic density, both are concerned with the possibility of human transformation, and both are concerned with the reworking of time. In Viola's work we have temporal distortion and the collapse of temporality into an extended present; in religious reading we have a collapse of time into the present, accompanied by themes of birth, death and resurrection.

If we extend the category of text to include visual or plastic art, there are clear parallels in the aesthetic reception of art and religious reading in the sense described here. Both have a strong impact upon human receptivity. Indeed, this is why religion more closely resembles art than science. But while the artist might be like a shaman in bringing wisdom back from some other world, a major difference lies in the mode of reception. In the case of religious reading the community of reception has liturgically received the text through the generations, in a way that does not or has not occurred with artwork. This merely serves to illustrate the distinctive nature of religious reading and of the reception of traditions that continue to resist erosion as we move into the twenty-first century.

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