

INTRODUCTION

Simone Sinn

Historically, the emergence of a discrete body of texts as “sacred scripture” has been closely associated with the formation of a distinct religious community. These sacred scriptures are of vital importance to the respective religious communities. For instance, as the Christian community recognized the biblical canon as authoritative scripture, the church and the Bible took shape. Equally, in Islam the recognition of the Qur’an as the authoritative scripture was crucial for the formation of the *umma*. These interrelated processes fundamentally connect the community to the text and vice versa.

These processes did not only occur when the communities came into being but continue to take place throughout the ages. Whenever Christians gather to listen to the gospel message, this constitutes the Christian community as church. Wherever Muslims gather to listen to the message of the Qur’an, there the Muslim community is alive.

Beyond this close relationship between a community and its sacred scripture, there have always been well distinct connections to other texts and other readings of the same texts and traditions. There is clearly a historical as well as theological interrelatedness between the Tanach, which Judaism refers to as sacred scripture, the Bible, which Christians regard as authoritative, and the Qur’an, which Muslims regard as the Word of God. These sacred scriptures did not emerge in isolation nor are they generally read in isolation. The reading of sacred texts can be used to distinguish and demarcate one’s own community or to build bridges and establish a connection to other communities.

The interpretation of sacred scriptures is a contested field. Clearly the power of a sacred text can only unfold in its reading since the text needs a person and a community for whom the message becomes meaningful and relevant. Critical questions that many contemporary religious com-

munities struggle with include the following: Who has the legitimate right authoritatively to interpret sacred scriptures? What are appropriate approaches? What are suitable methods of interpretation? How is the notion of “sacredness” to be understood in the process of interpretation? Neither Christianity, nor Islam has one central authority that decides on these questions. Globally and locally interpretation is a polycentric endeavor—polycentric in terms of geographical diversity, various positions of influence and different approaches.

The essays in this volume contribute to debates on scriptural exegesis by proposing readings that take into account insights from the discourse on hermeneutics and interreligious dialogue processes. Christian and Muslim scholars from different contexts explore theoretical assumptions and interpret relevant texts from sacred scriptures, focusing specifically on “transformative readings.” This implies that reading and interpreting sacred texts is not simply a matter of intellectually reconstructing the content of a text nor an act of immersing oneself into a preexistent tradition, but a reading that effects change by opening up new possibilities of knowing God and oneself and of being in the world.

This publication is divided into three sections. The first explores interpretative possibilities emerging when insights from other religious communities and other religious texts are taken into account. The various contributions look at the interaction and dialogue between texts, communities and scholars.

With reference to concrete examples of how interpretations shift over time, Oddbjørn Leirvik outlines how the concept of hell was reinterpreted in Christian circles, and how contemporary Muslim scholars deal with Qur’anic verses that condone violence. He identifies the “humanization of theological ethics” as a hermeneutical strategy that can offer transformative perspectives in contemporary Christian and Muslim interpretations.

Anne Hege Grung demonstrates that the humanization of theological ethics developed among scholars of Islam and Christianity can similarly be observed among the faithful in the communities. She analyses empirical data of a process where Muslim and Christian women together read difficult texts in the Qur’an and the Bible. The women in this interpretative community agreed that some texts from their respective traditions have the dangerous potential to be used in destructive ways. Hege Grung discusses the need for and possibilities of establishing forms of transformative hermeneutics through co-readings.

Analyzing historical developments, Stefan Schreiner explores the interwoven reception history between the Qur’an and the Bible. His starting point is the observation that many Qur’anic passages recollect texts and stories known from biblical and post-biblical Jewish and Christian sources

and he goes on to examine how scholars have interpreted the succession of revealed books and prophets. Schreiner's analysis clearly demonstrates that there is not only a historical correlation but a mutuality that is also theologically relevant for today's interpretation of the Qur'an and the Bible.

Nicholas Adams reflects on the unusual and remarkable practice of scriptural reasoning, which requires that scholars suspend their expertise and reason together on the basis of the text alone. This is frequently experienced as a provocative requirement, perhaps because it puts into question the status of the scholar. Adams draws attention to this aspect of scriptural reasoning, argues that it sheds light on important features of the practice, and suggest that it accounts for certain successes and failures among particular groups of participants.

The report from a dialogical experiment with a multi-religious and interdisciplinary team of scholars in Hamburg concludes this section. Katja Drechsler and Thorsten Knauth outline the methodological approach and results of this empirical endeavor and suggest that at the heart of the dialogical hermeneutics is a balancing act of four fields of tension: one related to knowledge, another one to context, the third one emerging from the distinction between sacred and profane and the fourth to the opposing dynamics of trust and suspicion.

The second section focuses on transformative readings of the Qur'an. Safet Bektovic summarizes recent developments in Islamic theology in Europe. He discusses the legitimacy of the concept of a European Islam and European Islamic theology and explores contemporary dimensions and perspectives of Islamic theological thinking in Europe. He concludes by describing their relevance in relation to the everyday lives of Muslims and the training of imams in Europe and clearly shows how structures and spaces for education and research need to be created that allow for transformative readings.

Mouhanad Khorchide speaks out of such a space. Khorchide is convinced that the Qur'an is not a monologue and, consequently, explores the Qur'an as an "act of communication." He underlines that the Qur'an is at the same time thoroughly divine and thoroughly human. In order to deal with the hermeneutical challenges, Khorchide finds helpful insights in Paul Ricoeur's reflections on hermeneutics. As a Muslim theologian, Khorchide highlights God's mercy as the hermeneutical key to understanding the Qur'anic message.

Since constructive interreligious relations are often restrained by exclusivist religious truth claims, Sahiron Syamsuddin critically addresses such claims. He reinterprets Q 2:111–113, which is often used to legitimize an exclusivist perspective. Syamsuddin interprets the text by employing a classic twofold approach—first by establishing the original meaning of

the text and second by articulating its significance for the contemporary situation. He shows how these verses can be interpreted in inclusive, even pluralist ways.

In light of renewed reflection on gender relations, the creation stories in sacred scriptures are again the focus of attention. Dina El Omari describes insights of contemporary feminist exegesis of the Qur'an. Looking at key Qur'anic passages, she points out that God created men and women at the same time from the same substance and highlights that from this perspective men and women are equal partners. El Omari discusses theological debates related to the concept of the Fall and argues that this concept is not part of the original Qur'anic message.

Asmaa El Maaroufi reinterprets Qur'anic passages referring to animals in order to develop fundamental guidelines for animal ethics from an Islamic perspective. She identifies similarities and differences between human beings and animals, and outlines the relationship that both have with the Creator. El Maaroufi explores the Qur'anic terminology used for the relationship between animals and human beings and critically addresses a reductionist anthropology. She pleads for repositioning humanity within the cosmos, and to develop more sensitivity to the close relationship between human beings and their fellow creatures.

Naveed Baig's contribution on Islamic spiritual care concludes this section. He explains how Qur'anic verses may help people in pain and suffering to find coping mechanisms and outlines how tradition and orthopraxy are present in the way religious Muslim patients cope during times of crisis. There are also signs that traditional Muslim coping ideals are expressed in ways peculiar to the individual's personal situation during times of suffering and need and a "talking with God" that defines new ways of perceiving God and the images of God.

The essays in the third section focus on transformative readings of the Bible. Clare Amos takes the reader on a journey through the book of Genesis and demonstrates the shifting presentations of God. Traveling through the story of creation, the story of the flood, the stories of Abraham, of Jacob and of Joseph and his brothers, Amos argues that God's voice in and through the biblical text is dialogical. Furthermore, she points out that the different names of God reflect various aspects of God's relationship to humanity. Amos encourages an approach to the Bible that takes this sacred scripture as a dialogue partner.

Kenneth Mtata highlights that the power of sacred texts lies in their ability to offer a language for alternative reality. He underlines that in the biblical tradition God's communication is an invitation of love. Mtata interprets 1 Samuel 1-7 and shows how in these chapters nation building transitions from a theocratic to a monarchical model. These passages pri-

marily depict the catastrophic nature of divine silence but also point to its reversal. Mtata explores what led to the decline and how the nation was restored through God's agency and God's messengers. The new alternative reality is shalom, which is fully God's, yet through God's grace humans participate in the realization of shalom.

Marianne Bjelland Kartzow observes that people relate to the Bible not only as sacred scripture, but also as a cultural, poetic, scholarly and political text. She argues that the theories of intersectionality and othering provide relevant insights for biblical interpretation today. She identifies hermeneutical and epistemological models in the New Testament which, due to their destabilizing potential, offer a space for transformation.

According to Martin Kopp, climate change is one contemporary ethical challenge that leads the interpreter of the Bible to approach the texts with questions its authors ignored. Kopp poses the question how science, exegesis and theology can collaborate to generate meaning and discern God's will. He advocates for a renewed interpretation of the scriptures in the face of the ecological crisis, and points out that a renewed theology will lead to a transformed understanding of what it means to be a Christian in today's world.

The contributions in this publication address the issue of transformative readings at the epistemological as well as the methodological level. While addressing different aspects of transformation--the structural, communal and individual--all of them affirm the communicative and dialogical nature of sacred texts. Thereby the cliché that sacred texts are sacred because they stand "apart" from mundane reality is questioned. Rather, sacred texts are here presented as invitations to dialogue and engagement because they are a living, communicative source for human knowledge of God's agency in this world.

It is obvious that sacred texts unfold their transformative power when they speak to people's hearts and minds. In order to prevent harmful readings and foster live-giving interpretations ethical and theological discernment is called for. Both, scholarly expertise and the communities of faithful are needed for such discernment. On many contemporary issues such as gender justice, animal ethics, climate justice, exclusion and violence joint Christian and Muslim scriptural interpretation provides an important space for transformative readings. These shared interpretative spaces open new possibilities of understanding and mutually reinforce engagement.