Introduction: Sacred Texts and Digital Culture

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In this time of a global pandemic that required almost every industry, including academia, to rapidly pivot online and exploit digital capacities for all their worth, the topic of this special edition of *Postscripts* —“Sacred Texts and Digital Culture”—seems even more felicitous than might have been originally anticipated. This fine collection of articles originates out of a Call for Papers for an international conference due to be held in Dublin over the days of 26–27 May, 2020—a time in which most countries were experiencing their first major lockdown and coming to terms with the immense implications of a pandemic in the twenty-first century. The conference, slated to be hosted by the Dublin City University’s School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music, in collaboration with the Society for Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts (SCRIPT), unfortunately had to be cancelled.

The planned conference, and now in turn these articles, set out to uncover the many far-reaching implications of the “digital turn” for the use of sacred texts—from individuals to religious communities to academia—as people increasingly engage with scriptures in digital formats. For many, this shift from print to digital culture is understood primarily in terms of content: texts are seen as moving from one receptacle (printed books) to another (electronic formats). There are, however, other important aspects of this transition to consider, including issues of materiality, iconicity, and performance. Texts do not become immaterial when

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moved to digital formats, but instead are encountered in new material forms. What is gained or lost when a text is used in digital formats, as compared to print culture? How is personal, ritual, or scholarly engagement with sacred texts impacted by the digital turn? Important questions related to the material, performative, and iconic dimensions of sacred texts continue to emerge, even in the digital world.

This collection of papers attests to the evolving dynamism of the sphere of digital sacred texts and the necessity for scholarship investigating and elucidating the many aspects of enquiry it opens up. We are therefore deeply grateful to all the scholars included here for their contributions to this volume despite the many challenges that the past eighteen months have posed for all. This work, gathered together in this special issue, demonstrates the need for focused concentrations on this emerging vista of development in the way sacred texts are produced, read, used, and consumed in this emerging digital era.

Brad Anderson and Amanda Dillon open this issue by “mapping” the various ways in which the Bible is used in digital culture. The essay begins with an overview of the development of digital Bibles since the first commercial iteration over four decades ago in 1980, showing how these have morphed, alongside parallel developments in hand-held devices, for example, into the many different possibilities available to readers and users today. The essay also examines the implications this shift has had in the context of liturgy and worship, including how different approaches to digital texts prevail in different communities as use of digital texts increases. Finally, the essay looks at the ways in which scholars are engaging with sacred texts, from the digitization of manuscripts to engagement with paratexts, provoking new research questions whilst potentially “dethroning ... the critical editions as the sole arbiters of textual ‘truth.’”

Taking us further afield, Bhakti Mamtara presents us with an insightful ethnographic overview of the user practices of adherents engaging with apps designed for Hindu devotees, notably BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, a prominent denomination of the Swaminarayan Sampraday. The *Vachanamrut Study App* (*Vachanamrut Study*) and *Swamini Vato Study App* (*Swamini Vato Study*), are two of the more prominent digital sacred text applications that have become available on iOS and Android during the last decade. Mamtara examines the development and design of these digital tools and how they are shaping reading practices. As pedagogical aids, the paratextual features of these smartphone applications reinforce a slow, careful, and intentional study of sacred texts that support the spiritual lives of the users.

Dorina Parmenter's article examines the issue of iconicity and its relationship with materiality in the Christian missionary effort to place a copy of the Bible in the hands of every person on earth, fulfilling the perceived biblical mandate of the Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20), and ensuring the gospel will "be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations" (Matt 24:14, KJV). She examines the practices of some publishers seeking to subvert the political and/or cultural prohibition against Bible ownership in certain areas of the world with digital possibilities, while simultaneously exploiting the iconicity of the printed Bible as a witness to faith in their own marketing and messaging.

In another ethnographically oriented paper showing how the digital use of scriptures and online ritualization of texts may become an integral part of a community's strategy, Anna Bochkovskaya introduces us to the *Avtar Bani* and the Sant Nirankari Mission. This essay brings to light a further demonstration of the subversive use of digital texts within religious communities, as she explores the Sant Nirankaris' use of digital technologies in promoting their ideology through the *Avtar Bani*, an "alternative" text to the revered *Guru Granth*—the sacred scripture of Sikhism—compiled and used by the Mission in its attempts to recruit new adherents, while simultaneously navigating a complex relationship with mainstream Sikhism.

Mina Monier opens another vista, that of the use of digital sacred texts in academic research, offering a fascinating demonstration of how technology provides a tool for textual criticism through exploration into one of the oldest conundrums of New Testament textual criticism: the ending of Mark's Gospel. He walks the reader through a close analysis of manuscript paratexts, revealing new insights previously unconsidered within the established categories on the reception history of this text, and potentially disrupting centuries of previously held certainties about authenticity, patristic influence, canonicity, and much more. Monier argues that the transition to a new generation of digitized texts prompts a fundamental reexamination of our understanding of their transmission.

The disruptive potential of new media technologies, especially in the challenge to interpretive authority, is again a theme in the article from James Watts as he traces similar impulses in Christian history where technological developments provide "examples of populist movements causing schisms based on differences in biblical interpretation." What happens to the role of expert mediation in the seemingly unlimited democratization of texts through new technologies? Ultimately, he maintains, these tensions between mass literacy and appropriation of scriptures and

the enduring tradition of scholarly expertise and authority are misplaced. Indeed, the interpretive diversity of mass literacy may actually generate more demand for expert interpretation.

Subjectivity in relation to these emerging forms of sacred texts is the focus of Mark George's article, which explores the affordances of digital texts in relation to print counterparts. He calls attention to the multimodal design of these apps, seemingly designed to anticipate the shorter and more fluid concentration spans of contemporary users. Examining both the positive and negative potentialities of the hypertextual and multimodal affordances of digital apps, he questions the lack of awareness (or critique) of agendas that may inform the algorithms that facilitate the functioning of such apps, driving certain texts to the user and potentially determining user behaviour in many instances. This is a call for scholarly engagement with this still emerging aspect of digital sacred texts.

In a reflexive essay in search of authenticity, J. Sage Elwell ambitiously and creatively "hijacks" actor-network theory to think about the development of digital sacred texts, juxtaposing this with anecdotes from his own history. His performative assemblage draws together some of the voices already heard in this issue, as well as other theorists, including Law and Latour, as he proceeds to unpack some of the complex interconnecting influences between human and nonhuman actors in the networked process of transitioning a text from analog to digital formats.

Digital sacred texts herald a vista of new hermeneutical and investigative horizons. As is evidenced in this collection of essays, all three dimensions of what we might consider textual exploration—the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text—are dynamically opened up to new possibilities of discovery and interpretation by digital innovations. This is not a disinterested arena, as these essays make clear; multiple agendas including missionary expansion as well as subversion are at work and all need to be critically examined. Our hope is that these essays will contribute to the growing body of work that is grappling with these important questions.