Gender and Sacred Text(ure)s: Extending the Field of Sacred Text Studies

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This special issue of Postscripts focuses on the interaction of gender and sacred texts. Within the critical, comparative, and historical study of sacred texts, many excellent studies have been undertaken that offer close readings of sacred texts to retrieve information about their models of and for gender. In religiously engaged ways, religious specialists have produced highly systematic, literary, or creative rereadings of their foundational texts in order to reposition the gender norms of their tradition. What critical and religiously engaged scholarship still needs to ask is if or how the handling, use, and embodied enactments of sacred texts regulate, entangle, occlude, tolerate, or even subvert religious and gendered identities.

A primary motivation for juxtaposing gender and sacred texts in a journal already dedicated to interdisciplin ary studies of diverse engagements with sacred texts, also as material objects, is to problematize some limitations that come with the concept of text in the term “sacred text”. Most studies of sacred texts, whether as texts or material objects, focus on elite men’s uses within official religion. This bias is explainable because men in patriarchal religions have held offices and privileges that would grant them direct contact with sacred texts in formal studies or liturgical use and because it is of their religiosity that most primary sources have kept records. Yet, as this special issue will argue, laymen and women in general have also associated their religiosity with sacred texts, even if their engagements were not direct and/or liturgical. To be able to understand lay religiosity dependent upon sacred texts, this special issue pursues a methodological focus on engagements with sacred texts in direct, yet non-liturgical as well as indirect ways. This focus brings to light activities
such as production, ornamentation, aural reception, recitation, and in particular embodied enactments of sacred texts. To bolster this pursuit, this special issue introduces the analytical concept of “sacred texture”.

My idea to introduce the concept of “sacred texture” was inspired by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (1976), where he distinguishes between speaking and writing. He argues that “all references in oral language rely on monstrations, which depend on the situation perceived as common by the members of the dialogue” (Ricoeur 1976, 35), whereas discourse, once it is fixed in writing, is freed from the limits of authorial intentions and of situational references. Instead, he speaks about the “semantic autonomy of the text” (Ricoeur 1976, 35), where internal references between the different parts enable a reader’s reconstruction of a self-contained whole. Of relevance here is that Ricoeur mentions an exception to this dichotomy between oral and written communication: The concept of text

combines the condition of inscription with the texture proper to the productive rules of literary composition. Text means discourse both as inscribed and wrought.

[... Accordingly,] even oral expressions of poetic or narrative compositions rely on processes equivalent to writing. The memorization of epic poems, lyrical songs, parables and proverbs, and their ritual recitation tend to fix and even to freeze the form of the work in such a way that memory appears as the support of an inscription similar to that provided by external marks. (Ricoeur 1976, 33)

A text does not have to be inscribed. Its texture consists of letters, words, and sentences wrought and woven together as textile in a specific way that makes it recognizable as a particular text. According to Ricoeur, ritualized oral performances of a poetic or narrative kind qualify as texture, which makes both recitation, which repeats already produced texts, and the oral production of poems textural. Ricoeur’s conception of text also as texture opens up the possibility of thinking about poetic and narrative performances in oral cultures as activities that may qualify as sacred texture. In Miriam Levering’s pioneering anthology *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (1989), she worried that an “emphasis on looking at religious achievements through texts privileges the literate over the oral, and the elite strands of a tradition over the folk or popular strands” (Levering 1989, 4), and that this would lead scholars to neglect the overall comparative insight that sacred texts as phenomena also have symbolic and mythic power providing knowledge about human religiousness. Accordingly, many of the contributors to Levering’s
book focused on the aural aspects in scriptural use, but primarily with a focus on the praxis of recitation from a written copy. With the concept of texture, I hope that it will be possible to speak not only about orality in literate culture, but also about textuality in oral cultures.

The concept of texture has another potential. The items within a texture are cohesive, and their recognizability depends on a distinctive wreaking/weaving/sequencing of its items. Yet, if an oral repetition of a text, for example the shema (Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Num 15:37–41) opens with “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God,” but then continues with fragments in the proper sequence, like “Take to heart these instructions … Recite them … when you lie down and when you get up … scribe them on your doorposts” (Deut 6:4–9), the sequenced fragments will suffice to make them recognizable as belonging to the texture of the shema. In cultures where only specialists have access to and are able to study physical copies of sacred texts – that is, the semantic whole – lay people will most likely know only fragments, to which contact is nevertheless important to establish and demonstrate their religiosity. In other words, monstration of fragmentary, yet sacred texture should also be included in sacred text studies as a practice that pertains to people’s religious agency. Monstration is, according to Ricoeur, a characteristic of oral communication. However, in the hybrid phenomenon of sacred texture, monstration proves itself to be a resource, not only of oral communication, but fundamentally of mimetic communication that enables religious people to point to what a word signifies, or to illustrate parts of a text with his or her bodily movements, or with art for that matter. Since a bodily or artful monstration, like an oral recitation, can omit parts, yet still fragmentarily manifest a sacred text by rendering parts of its texture, activities of many religious people will be recognizable as matters of sacred text use. I shall even argue that especially embodied enactment would serve as a means for a religious person to make an otherwise inaccessible sacred text accessible in the body. Terminologically, I suggest that “sacred text” refers to an inscribed text of a sacred status, directly accessible for hermeneutical and artefactual use, whereas “sacred texture” refers to its

2. On cohesion and texture in a linguistic perspective, see Halliday and Hasan 1976, 2-8.
3. For more on mimetic communication and its function in history of cultures, see Donald 2001.
4. I define hermeneutical use as a matter of deciphering a semantic whole, whereas artefactual use transforms a sacred text as a manipulable symbol that triggers
indirect manifestation, often as fragments or sequences in bodily enactments. Sometimes a use will imply both direct and indirect access and in such cases I suggest the graphic rendering “sacred text(ure)”. Going to these lengths to include oral production and fragmentary recitation and embodied enactment of sacred texture in sacred text studies pertains to representativity in our selection of source material to ensure that scholars of religion can document diverse forms of religious agency. The religious identity of many elite men has been indisputable because of their direct contact with something sacred, for example a sacred text. It is my hope that the concept of “sacred texture” will generate a methodological focus on hitherto overlooked ways for laymen and women in general to make their religious identities intelligible.

A couple of theories on identity formation inform this special issue. In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), philosopher Judith Butler presented her theory of performativity to explain the phenomenon of gender. Instead of perceiving any kind of identity as an essence, as something stable, Butler asserts that someone’s identity is attained, but also becomes intelligible to others, through his or her participation in rule-generated practices within a culture (Butler 1990, 34, 185–6). Yet, not all people have equal agency, concretely understood as access to participating in cultural, rule-generated practices (Butler 1990, 198). This understanding offers itself to studies of religion as an emphasis on the importance of rituals or ritual-like acts for the intelligibility of religious identities, just as it invites the question of who has access to what rituals and ritual-like acts. The question of access has inspired the distinction in this special issue between direct and indirect access to sacred texts. If scholarship only focuses on people’s direct access to sacred texts, it will mostly produce insights into elite male religious identity. If, however, access is qualified in a broad sense to include indirect and/or direct, non-liturgical engagements with sacred texts, it would also grant scholars insights into the formation of religious identities among laymen and women in general.

Another element in Butler’s theory of performativity is her concept of “subversion” that offers a model for understanding what is required for a culture to accept significant variations in identities. When people have to engage in rule-generated practices to become intelligible, such engagements entail repetition. Yet, no repetition of a practice can be absolutely

all the senses and establishes transitivity between the individual and collective users, their associations and cultural representations and the immediate context; cf. Schleicher 2017.
identical to the previous one, and incidental or deliberate variations will always occur. If outsiders try to affect identificatory norms, culture will tend to be hostile, just as antinomian insiders will be met with some kind of violent/defensive regulation. However, if one participates in a culture’s rule-regulated practices, even with some degree of variation, the culture will tend to interpret the participation as a matter of loyalty to culture and accordingly be tolerant and even acknowledge the varied element and thereby bestow on it intelligibility (Butler 1990, 191, 199). I mention this part of Butler’s theory because it emphasizes how practices involving sacred texts will constantly transform or produce new religious identities and that culture will not necessarily be hostile to variation in practices as long as the impression of loyalty prevails.

One weakness in Butler’s theory of performativity is that its underlying cultural constructionism fails to explain when physical matter comes to matter. For this reason, the special issue has taken inspiration from physicist and gender theoretician Karen Barad who adjusts Butler’s theory of performativity to take account of the effects of materiality. One among many insights taken from quantum physics is that identities are constantly produced in processes of becoming when different phenomena meet and entangle. Identity is therefore not only the result of a person’s participation in a rule-generated practice. Every material object involved in the practice will intra-act with things or people involved and be a co-producer of their identity (Barad 2007, 170–2). In a special issue that wants to take account of sacred texts not just as written discourse waiting to be interpreted, but also as material objects that intra-act with and contribute to people’s religious identities, Barad’s refinement of Butler’s theory of performativity is important.

These theories of texture and performativity inspired the call for articles sent out in July 2021. Half a year later, we held a three-day workshop, generously funded by the School of Society and Culture, Aarhus University, Denmark. People came from different fields with different specializations. Some knew about sacred texts and religion, others knew about gender and religion. The purpose of the workshop was not for participants to adopt specific theories, like those mentioned above, but to ensure that everyone was conscious of his or her understanding of gender, sacred, text, and sacred text. Accordingly, I gave a brief overview of existing research on these topics, leading to discussions where participants could position themselves and apply the favoured perspectives to their empirical material in a round of concluding presentations. The
outcome was exhilarating and initiated the writing process leading to this special issue.

The special issue opens with the article “Old Norse Women’s Use of Sacred Textures in Crisis Situations” by Emma Cecilie Sørlie Jørgensen, trained in the comparative study of religion. Jørgensen sheds light on women producing sacred texture of an oral kind according to the imaginings of Icelandic saga literature in its portrayal of Old Norse religion. With Émile Durkheim’s understanding of the sacred as numinous, protected, and set apart from the profane, with Ricoeur’s abovementioned understanding of poetic or narrative texts as texture in oral culture, and various processual understandings of gendered identity, she brings her own translations and analyses of excerpts from Njáls saga, Vólsa þátttr, Völuspá, and Eiríks saga rauða. Jørgensen documents how literary female characters produced sacred textures in times of crisis with significant effect on their intelligibility as religious agents in Old Norse culture and with effects on their gender since their production of sacred texture implied an entrance into the domain of cultural defence otherwise associated with men’s activities.

The second article, “Drinkable Ink or Womb-Destroying Words? A Solution for Suspected Adultery in Numbers 5:11–31,” is written by Rosanne Liebermann, scholar of Old Testament Studies. Liebermann analyses the Book of Numbers on the so-called sotah ritual that was intended to determine the guilt or innocence of a woman suspected of adultery. Following James Watts’s call to look beyond the semantic dimension of scripture and also reflect on the ritualization of scripture’s iconic and performative dimensions, Liebermann focuses on the biblical description and prescription of how a text containing divine words is aurally performed, and how its iconic dimensions are transformed from the scroll format to a watery solution before the performance of the ritual requires the suspected woman to embody it through ingestion. Drawing upon R. W. Connell’s theory of masculinities, she illustrates how the material object of a sacred text in this described and prescribed ritual sanctions and bolsters the hegemonic and complicit masculinities of the priest and the presumably cuckolded husband, when a woman does not handle, but is handled with a sacred text.

The third article “Jewish Women and Sacred Text(ure)s: Making Women’s Religious Agency in Jewish Book Culture Intelligible” is written by myself. I trained in the comparative study of religion with specialization in Jewish Studies. Inspired by the abovementioned theories on texture and identity formation I ask who has access when and where
to which ritual or ritual-like activities that involve sacred texts or fragmentary parts of textures. In my search for source material, I begin in the Hebrew Bible and proceed to early Judaism, early rabbinic literature, and Ashkenazic Judaism in the Middle Ages, asking when texts were conceived as sacred in the first place, when and how access to them became regulated, and what effect this has on the intelligibility of religious identities, especially that of Jewish women. Drawing on my earlier distinction between hermeneutical and artefactual uses of sacred texts, I illustrate that in ascetic and/or pietistic contexts some elite women had direct access to sacred texts in the form of hermeneutical use and in the production of sacred and religious books as artefacts. For most other women, however, access to sacred texts was indirect, either through facilitating men’s Torah studies or by bodily enacting textural fragments invoking commandments incumbent upon women or sequences from the lives of biblical or Talmudic heroes. A crucial finding is that women’s embodied enactments of sacred textures, despite their lack of direct access to the sacred texts as objects, were as meritorious as elite men’s direct access was, and the embodied enactments had great effect on the intelligibility of women’s religious identity.

The fourth article, “The Gender of Purple Manuscripts and the Makeup of Sacred Scriptures,” by art historian Thomas Rainer, analyses letters sent by the church father Jerome (fourth–fifth century) to Roman aristocratic women whom he warns against scriptural codices with purple-coloured parchment, gilt lettering, and precious covers. Simultaneously, Jerome encourages these Christian women to renounce any kind of bodily adornment, be it makeup or luxurious clothing. Rainer argues that the correspondence between Jerome’s ideals for the materiality of Christian scriptures and for Christian women’s education and appearance reflect a dualistic worldview that elevates the “naked” scriptural texts and Christian bodies in distanciation from this-worldly, distracting luxury and sensuality. Following James Watts’s concept of scripture’s iconic dimension, Rainer illustrates how asceticism necessitates not only an austere approach to the materiality of scripture to focus on the text itself, but also women’s doffing of the sensuality that pre-Christian Roman culture associated with female identity. Instead, ascetic women had to approximate Jerome’s ideals for male Christian scholars.

The fifth article, “‘Then Queen Esther Daughter of Abihail Wrote’: Gendered Agency and Ritualized Writing in Jewish Scriptural Practice,” is written by Jonathan Homrighausen, a researcher in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish religion. He contextualizes and analyses the ritualized writings
performed by four female ritual scribes in contemporary American Judaism: Nava Levine-Coren, Avielah Barclay, Jen Taylor Friedman, and Rachel Jackson. Based on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, Homrighausen illustrates how these women engage in the iterative act of copying the scroll of Esther within the halakhic framework, thus demonstrating loyalty to Jewish tradition and making themselves intelligible as Jewish ritual scribes. The religious agency that comes with ritual scripting has not been immediately available to Jewish women in pre-modern Judaism. However, Homrighausen illustrates how these scribes, with their iterative engagement in scripting, by adhering to the halakhic rules, and by bodily enacting the writing that the biblical figure of Esther engaged in herself, have subverted the normative expectations in modern American Judaism of a scribe’s gendered identity.

The sixth article, “‘I Left My Bible at Home…’: Evangelical Women’s Bodies as Biblical Text in the Workplace during the 1980s,” is written by historian Rachel E. C. Beckley, who has specialized in Christianity in America. She makes the methodological choice of focusing on affiliated periodicals and not institutionally produced books and magazines to be able to access American Evangelical women’s own writings in the 1980s. In an analysis of Shirley Schreiner Taylor’s parable, “God Protects His Sheep among the Wolves,” Beckley analyses the agency of an Evangelical woman upon entry into the workforce where her physical Bible had to be left at home. Beckley points to how the Bible, now inaccessible, became indirectly accessible by being ensconced in the Evangelical woman’s body. Inspired by Judith Butler and Karen Barad’s theories of performativity, Beckley argues that Evangelical women engaged in embodied mirrorings of biblical heroes’ defence of their religiosity in hostile environments. Evangelical women like Taylor thereby replaced their material copies of the Bible with embodied enactments of biblical motifs and narratives as markers of their religious identity and as a means to continue the evangelization so seminal to Evangelical identity.

The seventh and last article, “Doing Piety through Care: Embodied Enactments of the Qur’an and Gender Perceptions in Muslim families in Contemporary Denmark,” is written by Abir Mohamad Ismail who has specialized in Arab and Islamic Studies from an anthropological perspective. After introducing central passages in the Qur’an and the Hadiths that deal with *birr-al- wālidayn* (filial piety) and *‘awra* (the intimate body parts that must be covered) and *‘ayb* (shame/shamefulness), Ismail analyses two ethnographic cases from her fieldwork where she studied practices of elderly care in multigenerational Arab Muslim families living in
Denmark. She documents how Um Ali, a 61-year-old woman, and Salim, a 57-year-old man, provide filial care for their parents as a matter of pious, bodily enactments as prescribed in Muslim sacred texts. It is, however, with inspiration from Judith Butler’s theory of performativity that Ismail highlights that gendered expectations of who does what kind of care to whom complicates filial care due to clashes with scriptural commandments concerning the naked body. Here, men and women have different access to embodied enactments of sacred texts to such an extent that the entanglement of filial piety, nudity, and shame becomes a conflicted space where skilful navigation will decide whose Muslim and gendered identity will benefit the most.

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References


