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Sacred Texts in a Digital Age: Materiality, Digital Culture, and the Functional Dimensions of Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

From scroll to codex, and from manuscript to moveable print, sacred texts have long been influenced by technological developments related to the production and transmission of texts.[1] As with all of these material predecessors, it seems as though the shift to digital culture is another such revolution, altering the textual landscape and the way in which people interact with and use sacred texts across religious traditions.[2] What are the implications of these developments in terms of how people engage with and use scriptures?[3] There has been some reflection on these issues in recent years: a good deal of attention, for example, has been devoted to the academic study of sacred texts in light of digital culture and electronic resources, whether in the digitization of ancient texts, or the use of digital tools for studying various aspects of these texts and their content.[4] There has been more limited engagement with questions of how people are using such texts in digital contexts outside of academia; while studies have begun to appear on these themes in recent years,[5] more common has been anxious reflection emerging

1 For a stimulating exploration of these issues from the perspective of the Jewish tradition, see David Stern, *The Jewish Bible: A Material History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

2 For a penetrating study on the shift to digital culture more broadly, see Jerome McGann, *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

3 I use the nomenclature of "sacred texts" and "scriptures" interchangeably throughout the essay, and engage primarily with the texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Further, I focus here on the actual reproduction of the text in a new literary format, though there is room for further reflection on these matters in relation to other formats to which sacred texts are translated, such as audio or visual.

4 Claire Clivaz, Paul Dilley, and David Hamidović, eds., *Ancient Worlds in Digital Culture*, DBS 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2016); David Parker, "Through a Screen Darkly: Digital Texts and the New Testament," *JSNT* 25 (2003): 395–411. See also the essays from Fedeli and Allen in this volume.

5 See, e.g., Tim Hutchings, "E-Reading and the Christian Bible," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 44 (2015): 423–40; Tim Hutchings, "Design and the Digital Bible: Persuasive Technology and Religious Reading," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32 (2017): 205–19; Kathy Brittain Richardson and Carol J. Pardun, "The New Scroll Digital Devices, Bible Study and Worship,"

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from confessional contexts about what the implications of this shift might be for religious (often biblical) literacy.[6]

In this essay I explore the use of sacred texts in digital culture in terms of the functional dimensions of scriptures, with a special focus on questions of materiality. My contention is that while we are seeing dramatic changes in some elements of how sacred texts are used, related primarily to the content of these collections, other functional dimensions are closely tied to questions of material forms, and so the shift to digital contexts have been slower to take hold. I begin, however, with some reflections on the diverse ways in which scriptures are used and employed.

1 The Functional Dimensions of Scriptures

Recent decades have witnessed a nascent interest in theoretical reflection on scriptures and their use.[7] One such theory has been put forward by James Watts.[8] Watts has proffered a heuristic three dimensional model for understanding the use of scriptures, and here Watts has in mind the notion of scriptures across religious traditions. He notes that such a "functional model of scripture ... might help us better understand those religious traditions that are self-consciously 'scriptural' and to evaluate their claims about the role of scripture within their own tradition against historical and comparative evidence both within that tradition and outside it."[9]

Journal of Media and Religion 14 (2015): 16–28. See also the essays from Mann and Suit in the present volume.

6 For example, see Sarah K. Patrick, "The Digital Age and Bible Literacy," *Seeds Family Worship*, available online: https://www.seedsfamilyworship.com/the-digital-age-and-bible-literacy/; "Is Technology Making Us Bible Illiterate?," *Beliefnet*, available online: http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/articles/is-technology-making-us-bible-illiterate.aspx.

7 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (London: SCM, 1993); Miriam Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989); William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004); Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*, Signifying (On) Scriptures (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion and Bible," *JBL* 128 (2009): 5–27; James S. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*, Qualitative Studies in Religion (New York: New York University Press, 2009); James S. Bielo, ed., *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Biblicism*, Signifying (On) Scriptures (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

8 James W. Watts, "The Three Dimensions of Scriptures," *Postscripts* 2 (2006): 135–59.

9 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 139–40.

Watts notes that scholars involved in the academic study of scriptures and religious texts "have devoted the vast majority of their time and publications to explaining the origins and meaning of scriptural texts."[10] Taking biblical studies as an example, he notes that "modern research has focused on describing the process by which the Bible was composed and the original meaning intended by its authors. Biblical scholars have also given considerable attention to the process by which the Bible became scripture. Such studies of canonization, however, still concentrate on the Bible's semantic form and contents, that is, on questions of when particular books became part of the Jewish and Christian scriptures and under what circumstances."[11] What has too often been missing, Watts suggests, has been robust discussion on the functional dimensions of such texts: how and why they have been used, in various contexts through the centuries.

What emerges is a tripartite system, whereby the ritualized use of scriptures can be heuristically classified in terms of a semantic dimension, a performative dimension, and an iconic dimension.[12] The semantic dimension, according to Watts, has to do with the content and meaning of what is written, and engagement with the written word. This "includes all aspects of interpretation and commentary as well as appeals to the text's contents in preaching and other forms of persuasive rhetoric."[13] Further, "most religious communities with written scriptures encourage many of their devotees to gain expertise in their interpretation, not only for personal devotion but also as a means for directing community behavior and for adjudicating conflict."[14] The semantic dimension, then, focuses on engagement with the *content* of sacred texts.

Meanwhile, the performative dimension of scriptures, Watts suggests, is the performance of what is written, be it the performance of the words or the contents of scriptures. This can take the form of ritualized public readings, recitation of texts, musical performance or singing of scriptures, dramatic presentation, and artistic illustration.[15] Watts points out that these modes of performance "often work in tandem to expose devotees to their tradition's scriptures. They hear the text read and sung, and also see it enacted in drama and art."[16]

10 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 136.
11 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 136.
12 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 140.
13 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 141.
14 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 141.
15 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 141–42.
16 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 141.

Beyond the semantic and performative levels, Watts notes that scriptures function as icons, pointing to something beyond themselves.[17] Because of this, the physical forms of these texts are treated differently from other books. "They are often displayed prominently on podiums or tables, hung on walls, or else hidden within special cases that call attention to them."[18] Such texts are also "carried in religious processions, displayed to congregations, and venerated through bowing and kissing. … They are also manipulated in political ceremonies – displayed or touched as part of oath ceremonies and waved in political rallies and protests."[19] This iconicity often leads to another factor, which is that scriptures frequently come to be identified with the tradition as a whole, and so also with the legitimization of particular traditions.[20] Giving the example of some contemporary forms of evangelicalism, Watts notes that they take pride in carrying their Bibles, in both sacred and secular contexts. "In their hands, Bibles function as badges of Christian identity."[21]

The issues of scriptural iconicity and legitimacy lead to another issue, which is the potential desecration of scriptures.[22] Watts notes that "the iconic dimension of scriptures … can be manipulated by anyone who gains access to a copy of the book. … Ease of access also means that the iconic dimension is most easily attacked by deliberately mishandling the scripture. Such ritual abuse is called 'desecration.'"[23] This helps make sense of "the explosive social power of desecrating scriptures. Insofar as the scripture has become identified with the religion to the point that the tradition's legitimacy is conveyed by … the material book, its ritual abuse can feel like an attempt to delegitimize the whole religious tradition."[24]

Watts's model draws heavily on ritual theory, including the work of Catherine Bell and Jonathan Z. Smith, amongst others, making the claim that the religious

17 Other works exploring these issues of iconicity include Martin Marty, "America's Iconic Book," in *Humanizing America's Iconic Book*, ed. Gene M. Tucker and Douglas A. Knight (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982): 1–23; Dorina Miller Parmenter, "The Iconic Book: The Image of the Bible in Early Christian Rituals," *Postscripts* 2 (2006): 160–89. See also the collection of essays in James W. Watts, ed., *Iconic Books and Texts* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013).

18 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 142.

19 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 142.

20 This can be seen quite clearly in visual art: "The artistic association of a deity with scripture legitimizes the scripture as authentic, and the association of a human with recognized scripture legitimizes the person's spiritual status" (Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 142).

21 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 148.

22 James W. Watts, "Desecrating Scriptures," *A Case Study for the Luce Project in Media, Religion, and International Relations* (2009); available online: http://surface.syr.edu/rel/3/.

23 Watts, "Desecrating Scriptures," § 1.

24 Watts, "Desecrating Scriptures," § 1.

use of scriptures is in fact a form of ritual.[25] "By describing the dimensions in terms of *ritualization,* the model explains the similarities and differences between scriptures and other books and writings. ... All books and writings exhibit semantic, performative, and iconic dimensions at least to an incipient degree. Some secular texts (such as national constitutions and theatrical scripts) are also typically ritualized along one or two of their dimensions. What distinguishes scriptures, however, is that their religious communities ritualize all three dimensions."[26] Drawing on Smith's work on ritual, Watts comments that "The otherwise trivial practices involved in reading a book are, in the case of scriptures, given sustained attention. Semantic interpretation is ritualized by commentary and preaching. Reading and dramatization both become ritual performances. The book's physical form is decorated, manipulated in public and private rituals, and highlighted in artistic representations. In each case, special attention is given to otherwise routine acts of reading. Thus religious traditions maintain the status of their scriptures by ritualizing normal features of books and other writings."[27] As he goes on to note, "The *more* a book or text is ritualized in *all three* dimensions... the more likely it is to be regarded as a scripture. Thus the functional identification of scriptures depends not on a difference in kind from other books and writings, but on the *degree* to which a particular book or writing is ritualized as text *and* as performance *and* as icon."[28]

2 The Functional Dimensions of Scriptures in the Digital Age

As noted above, the rise of digital media has undoubtedly altered the textual landscape and the way in which people interact with sacred texts. What happens, though, when we think about these technological changes in light of Watts's theoretical reflections on the varied use of scriptures? What I want to do here, for the sake of space, is to focus in particular on the semantic and iconic dimensions. How has the digital turn impacted these aspects of scriptural use?

25 Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice (*New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

26 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 140–41.

27 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 144–45.

28 Watts, "The Three Dimensions," 146.

2.1 Semantic Dimension

As Watts notes, the semantic dimension includes elements such as reading, interpretation, commentary, and preaching. This dimension, I would suggest, is where shifts in digital usage are most obvious. Such developments have spawned countless new endeavours to rethink the use of the Bible and other sacred texts, from pious devotional reading to digital evangelization. A few examples are worth noting.

2.1.1 Reading and Devotion

One area where this shift can be seen is in the rise of digital texts of scriptures aimed at reading and devotion. There are now countless websites that have the full text of the Jewish Tanakh, the Christian Bible, and the Qur'ān. There are also a growing number of apps for portable devices that have this same function.

One such example was documented by the *New York Times*, and picked up by dozens of other news outlets: in 2013, a digital Bible app for mobile devices known as the YouVersion passed 100 million downloads.[29] Their website now, several years later, puts the number at over 352 million downloads.[30] Along with the biblical text in hundreds of languages and translations, the group responsible for the app also provides reading plans and challenges for the faithful, YouVersion for Kids, and even YouVersion events for churches that can sync with peoples' phones and tablets. This is summed up by the tagline on their website, "The Bible is Everywhere."

The use of electronic resources is not always a matter of convenience – digital texts have also been used as a way to make the Bible available in places where it might otherwise be difficult to obtain, or in languages where physical translations are uncommon. Thus, Catholic officials in the Indian Archdiocese of Goa recently launched an app containing the entire Bible translated into Konkani, intended for local laity as well as those in the diaspora.[31]

Such resources are not limited to the Christian Bible. The Jewish publisher Artscroll Mesorah has developed a popular app of the Babylonian Talmud to

29 Amy O'Leary, "In the Beginning was the Word; Now the Word is on An App," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2013. See also the chapter from Mann in the present volume.

30 Number as of 13 December 2018. See https://www.youversion.com/the-bible-app/.

31 "Now, a Konkani Bible on Your Cellphone," *The Times of India*, May 1, 2018; available online: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/goa/now-a-konkani-bible-on-your-cellphone/articleshow/63979490.cms.

encourage reading and study. The MyQuran app, meanwhile, has been extremely popular as well, and advertises the opportunities of reading, study, and memorization. How much these apps and programs are being used, and to what ends, is a matter of debate. Nevertheless, there is evidence that opportunities exist for such engagement in reading and devotional use.

2.1.2 Commentary, Interpretation, and Study

The arenas of commentary, interpretation, and study have also been affected in significant ways by the digital turn. There are a number of tools that are very popular among both clergy and academics that offer the chance to study scriptures, while also accessing research and lexical tools, commentaries, and other secondary materials right within the programme. BibleWorks, Accordance, and Logos are some of the major players in the world of biblical studies, and the resources and capabilities of these programmes continue to expand exponentially.

Further, in 2016, a new online, digitized repository of the entire Babylonian Talmud was launched, called Hachi Garsinan, which includes all textual variants. The creator's comments are telling: "Our project is totally comprehensive and will help everyone who studies the Talmud ...What we have here is no less a revolution than the printing of the Talmud in 1523 in Venice. It is a unique project and will change the way Talmud is learnt within a few years because it has created the ultimate system for Talmud study."[32]

2.1.3 Preaching

Finally, we see the use of digital forms making their way into preaching and other forms of exhortation. Preachers are increasingly making use of digital tools such as tablets in their homilies, sermons, and other presentations, as well as using resources such as iPads for scriptural readings during services. This type of use is considered progressive in some circles, where technological innovation is lauded.[33]

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32 Jeremy Sharon, "Digitized Talmud and Mobile App to be Launched," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 29, 2016; available online: https://www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Tech/Digitized-Talmud-and-mobile-app-to-be-launched-455357.

33 By way of example: this past year I attended a church service in the United States where the preacher asked congregants to open their Bibles or swipe open their phones to their Bible apps.

It remains the case, as Timothy Beal has noted, that physical Bibles, Tanakhs, and Qur'āns continue to be sold and to proliferate, and there are implications of this trend that need to be considered.[34] Nevertheless, it is also clear that the digital turn is having a significant effect on scriptural use in the semantic dimension. Personal reading, study, interpretation, preaching: all of these bear witness to substantial developments in recent years that are directly related to technological change and how people are engaging with these scriptures in the emerging digital landscape.

2.2 Iconic Dimension

Let's turn to Watts's iconic dimension. This dimension focuses on how scriptures point to something beyond themselves, are treated with special reverence, and often come to symbolically represent the larger traditions of which they are a part.

2.2.1 Digital Usage

In this domain we find far less evidence of the impact of the digital turn than was seen in the semantic dimension outlined above, though examples can be found. To begin, there have been several headline-grabbing cases over the past few years related to the use of digital texts as part of oath swearing ceremonies. For example, New Jersey firefighters were sworn in on an iPad in 2013,[35] while a New York county executive was sworn in using a digital version of the Bible in 2014.[36] The rise in digital formats has also led to discussions regarding the proper disposal of digital texts. In many traditions, for instance, there are guidelines for the proper disposal of scriptures. But what about digital sacred text? How should these be disposed of? There are numerous online discussion forums where these types of issues are raised. One particular Jewish forum had an interesting

34 Timothy Beal, "The End of the Word as We Know It: The Cultural Iconicity of the Bible in the Twilight of Print Culture," in *Iconic Books and Texts*, ed. James W. Watts (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013): 207–24.

35 Doug Drinkwater, "New Jersey Firefighters Sworn Into Office With iPad," *Mashable*, 11 February 2013; available online: https://mashable.com/2013/02/11/new-jersey-firefighters-ipad/#mTNZPQIbsPq1.

36 Salvador Rodriguez, "Elected Official Takes Oath of Office on an iPad," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 January 2014; available online: http://www.latimes.com/business/technology/la-fi-tn-politician-sworn-in-ipad-bible-20140103-story.html.

discussion regarding what to do with an email that contains scriptures including the name of God. A rabbi notes in response to a query that "This issue was discussed in the 1950s regarding audio cassettes. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein ruled that he saw no reason to forbid erasing a tape with Torah content, but still advised 'perhaps not to erase since it appears like erasing G-d's name.' He – and others – therefore advised that it would be ideal to do the erasing in an indirect manner, such as asking a child to do it."[37] The instruction here is based on the fact that an email, like an audio cassette, is an impermanent, erasable format. Consequently, an email containing scripture can be deleted (but better if someone does this for you, to be safe!). One can find, then, instances of the iconic dimension of scriptures being engaged in relation digital formats, though these remain exceptional: swearing of oaths on iPads and the proper disposal of electronic sacred texts are two examples.

2.2.2 Continued Physical and Material Use

These few examples notwithstanding, it is also worth noting a series of incidents from recent years which highlight the continued importance of physical, material scriptures as icons in the contemporary world. I offer a selection of scenes and snapshots drawn from the headlines that demonstrate just how prevalent and diverse such material usage continues to be. I have organized these into examples of desecration, oath swearing, public and symbolic usage, talismanic usage, and cases from religious contexts.

2.2.1.1 Desecration

(1) In 2010, Terry Jones, the pastor of a small church from Florida, threatened to burn a Qur'ān on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 in protest of what he decried as the text's violent tendencies. There was much publicity, and even President Obama weighed in, citing the possible destructive implications of such an event for international relations. Finally, Jones relented, and did not go through with the burning. On the 20th of March 2011, however, Jones and his family did burn the Qur'ān after holding a court trial in their own church and

37 Menachem Posner, "Proper Disposal of Holy Objects," *Chabad*, 30 July 2015; available online: https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/475304/jewish/Proper-Disposal-of-Holy-Objects.htm. For more on matters of ritual disposal of sacred texts, see the essays in Kristina Myrvold, ed., *The Death of Sacred Texts: Ritual Disposal and Renovation of Texts in World Religions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

finding the Qur'ān guilty of encouraging violence. As feared, Jones's actions did lead to further violence, as twelve people ended up dying when people took to the streets in Afghanistan to protest this desecration.[38]

(2) In February 2012, several days of protests led to the deaths of thirty Afghans and four American soldiers after it became known that American soldiers had burned Qur'āns at the Bagram Air Base.[39]

(3) In early 2012, Bishop Eddie Long, the pastor of New Birth Baptist Church in DeKalb County, Georgia, was wrapped in an actual Torah scroll by the charismatic messianic rabbi Ralph Messer, who claimed the ritual was an ancient one symbolizing enthronement and new birth. This event led to both publicity and controversy; the story was highlighted on CNN, and after renunciation from a number of sectors, Bishop Long issued an apology to the Jewish community for the mishandling of the sacred text in this way.[40]

(4) Several states in Central Asia came under scrutiny in 2012 and 2013 for state sanctioned destruction of religious texts. In Russia, Islamic theological texts were ordered to be destroyed, while Bibles and other Christian literature were ordered to be destroyed in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, after which several human and religious rights watch organizations called for international actions against these countries.[41]

(5) In March of 2016, footage surfaced of what appeared to be ISIS destroying Christian Bibles and books in a bonfire in Mosul. This was seen as deliberate desecration of Christian texts and part of a larger pattern of hostile persecution of Christians in the region.[42]

(6) Police were called to investigate a series of anti-Muslim incidents in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, including a woman tearing pages from the Qur'ān and placing them on cars in public places. Elsewhere, the woman was seen

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38 Enayat Najafizada and Rod Nordland, "Afghans Avenge Florida Koran Burning, Killing 12," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2011.

39 Alissa J. Rubin and Graham Bowley, "Koran Burning in Afghanistan Prompts 3 Parallel Inquiries," *The New York Times*, February 29, 2012.

40 Marcy Oster, "Bishop Eddie Long Apologizes for Torah Scroll Ceremony," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 6 February 2012; available online: https://www.jta.org/2012/02/06/news-opinion/united-states/bishop-eddie-long-apologizes-for-torah-scroll-ceremony.

41 Felix Corley, "Russia: 'I've never encountered the practice of destroying religious literature before,'" *Forum 18*, 21 March 2012; available online: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1682; Mushfig Bayram, "Uzbekistan: Raids, criminal charges and Christmas Bible destruction," *Forum 18*, 31 January 2013; available online: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1797; Felix Corley, "Kazakhstan: Court-ordered religious book burning a first?," *Forum 18*, 14 March 2013; available online: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1813.

42 Footage is available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=np3OszSEmiw.

burning pages from the Qur'ān on video. She noted that these actions were part of a larger attempt to have the Qur'ān listed as hate literature.[43]

2.2.2.2 Oath Swearing

(1) For his second inauguration, President Obama used three Bibles while taking his oath of office: a Bible from the Robinson family (his wife's family), Abraham Lincoln's Bible, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s travelling Bible.[44] These choices received a good deal of attention and critique, including a robust response from Cornel West, who criticized Obama for appropriating King.[45] Meanwhile, in January 2017, Donald Trump used two Bibles while taking his oath of office: his own personal Bible, and Abraham Lincoln's Bible, choices which again drew comment and critique.[46]

(2) London's mayor, Sadiq Khan, took office as the city's first Muslim mayor in May 2016. At the time of the election, an anecdote from Khan's previous 2009 appointment to the Privy Council was making the rounds. "The next day Buckingham Palace rang about his appointment to the Privy Council: 'You're going to be sworn in before the Queen, what sort of bible would you like?' I said: 'I swear on the Koran, I'm a Muslim'. They said: 'We haven't got a Koran, can you bring your own?' So I went to Buckingham Palace with my Koran and afterwards they returned it and I said: 'No, can I leave it here for the next person.'"[47]

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43 Stewart Bell, "Pages ripped from Qur'an put on car windshields again, police investigating," *Global News*, 10 April 2018; online edition: https://globalnews.ca/news/4133148/pages-from-koran-car-windshields-mississauga/.

44 Gabrielle Levy, "Obama's Inauguration: Everything You Wanted to Know About the 57th Inauguration and the 56 Before It," *United Press International*, 21 January 2013; available online: http://www.upi.com/blog/2013/01/21/Obamas-inauguration-Everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-the-57th-inauguration-and-the-56-before-it/8011358757175/. For the public inauguration Obama used just two, stacked on top of one another: The Lincoln and King Bibles.

45 Kirsten West Savali, "Cornel West: President Obama Doesn't Deserve To Be Sworn In With MLK's Bible," *News One*. 20 January 2013; available online: https://newsone.com/2153928/cornel-west-obama-mlk/.

46 Erin McCann, "The Two Bibles Donald Trump Used at the Inauguration," *The New York Times*, 18 January 2017; available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/us/politics/lincoln-bible-trump-oath.html.

47 Sarah Sands, "Full interview: As he launches his bid for City Hall, Sadiq Khan says 'I won't be a Zone One Mayor,'" *The Evening Standard*, 13 May 2015; available online: https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/full-interview-as-he-launches-his-bid-for-city-hall-sadiq-khan-says-i-wont-be-a-zone-one-mayor-10247056.html.

2.2.2.3 Public and Symbolic Usage

(1) In 2014, Trinity College, Dublin, underwent a rebranding initiative. Part of this included removing the Bible from the college crest, which had been there since the sixteenth century. It was replaced with a generic open book signifying scholarship open to all. This received considerable pushback from a diverse and surprisingly large constituency within and outside of the college who felt that the iconic Bible should remain.[48]

(2) In 2014, the Satanic Temple submitted a Satanic colouring book for distribution in public schools in Orange County, Florida. This was in response to a group (World Changers of Florida) that was distributing Bibles in schools. The distribution of religious materials, and the Bible in particular, has remained a contested issue in the United States – now groups such as the Satanic Temple along with atheist organisations are pushing back by asking for inclusion and distribution of their own materials.[49]

(3) In April 2016, Tennessee's state senate approved a bill making the Bible the official state book, even though the state's attorney general said it would be unconstitutional. Here the Bible was being used as an iconic tool in identity politics in the southern United States, under the guise of historical and cultural appreciation, which is how the lawmakers described their bill.[50] The governor vetoed the bill later in the month, agreeing with opponents who said it would trivialize the Bible.[51]

(4) After the US retailer Target announced a new policy regarding use of bathrooms, including a transgender policy, Target faced extreme backlash to this decision. One prominent example showed up on YouTube, as a mom paraded through a Target store, her kids in tow, warning shoppers of the new policy. Interestingly, the entire time, the woman is holding high above her a Bible.

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48 Joe Humphreys, "Is nothing sacred? Trinity College scraps Bible from its crest," *The Irish Times*, 29 March 2014; available online: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/is-nothing-sacred-trinity-college-scraps-bible-from-its-crest-1.1742490.

49 Lauren Roth, "Satanic Temple submits coloring book, fact sheets for Orange school distribution," *Orlando Sentinel*, 30 October 2014; available online: http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/school-zone/os-satanic-temple-coloring-book-20141030-post.html.

50 Joel Ebert, "Bill to make Bible Tennessee's official book heads to governor," *The Tennessean*, 5 April 2016; available online https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2016/04/04/bill-make-bible-official-state-book-heads-haslam/82625250/.

51 Matt Pearce, "Tennessee's governor vetoes Bible as state book," *The Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 2016; available online: http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-tennessee-bible-20160417-story.html. On the larger phenomenon of Bibles as representative books, see Melissa Chan, "Tennessee Wasn't First State to Attempt to Make the Bible the Official State Book," *Time*, 20 April 2016; available online: http://time.com/4301131/bible-state-book-bill-fail/.

As Brent Plate notes, "there's really nothing 'biblical' in her soliloquy ... What she does do is firmly hold high a bible. ... It stands as a visible beacon that guides them ... But the bible is never mentioned, never quoted from, never used for anything other than a visual display of some, unknown, power."[52]

(5) In 2016 Irish solicitors were told to always carry with them both Bibles and Qur'āns in case they have to administer an oath for a sworn affidavit, as instructed by the High Court. An exemption can be made if someone chooses to object on religious grounds.[53]

(6) In March 2017, police in Fort Collins, Colorado, arrested a 35-year-old man, suspected of throwing rocks and a Bible at a mosque. Surveillance video captured a person overturning benches, breaking windows and hurling objects into the prayer area of the Islamic Center of Fort Collins, police said.[54]

2.2.2.4 Talismanic Properties

(1) In 2016, a story made the headlines in the United States when a man was pulled from his burning car following an accident – along with an unscathed Bible. Here we see the ancient trope of scriptures functioning as a talisman, protecting people and bringing good luck because of their association with the divine. There have been no such stories, to my knowledge, about the survival of iPads with Bible apps installed.[55]

(2) "When a tornado battered southern Mississippi in January 2017, it yanked trees out the ground and tore through buildings at William Carey University. When staffers combed the campus, sifting through the damage, they said they happened upon a stunning scene: An open Bible on the pulpit of the campus church, undisturbed by the surrounding debris."[56]

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52 S. Brent Rodriguez Plate, "Waving Bibles, Protesting Bathrooms," *Iconic Books Blog*, 15 May 2016; available online: http://iconicbooks.blogspot.ie/2016/05/waving-bibles-protesting-bathrooms.html.

53 Mark O'Regan, "Solicitors Told to Carry Bible and Koran," *Irish Independent*, 24 April 2016; available online: https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/courts/solicitors-told-to-carry-bible-and-koran-34654171.html.

54 Jason Le Miere, "Colorado Mosque Attack: Bible and Rocks Used to Smash Prayer-Room Windows." *Newsweek*, 27 March 2017; available online: http://www.newsweek.com/mosque-attack-bible-colorado-muslim-prayer-574767.

55 Henry Hanks, "Bible, Driver Survive After Car Bursts Into Flames," *CNN*, 22 February 2016; available online: http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/22/us/car-in-flames-bible/index.html.

56 Madeline Holcombe, "Amid the Tornado Wreckage in Mississippi, a Bible is Left Untouched," *CNN*, 25 January 2017; available online: https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/25/us/bible-survives-tornado-trnd/index.html.

2.2.2.5 Religious Contexts

(1) Numerous reports have been made in recent years of sacred texts stolen from religious communities and their houses of worship, some of these gaining a very high profile. These include ancient Torah texts taken from the Samaritan community in Palestine,[57] as well as significant scrolls and Bibles in communities from New York to Hawaii.[58]
(2) On the other side of this equation, stories of reclaimed scriptures have also been noted, including the special role these material texts continue to play in contemporary religious communities. In Kingston, New York, for example, a local Jewish community celebrated their synagogue's new scroll in 2018, a restored scroll that was rescued from Prague after World War II.[59]

Burning and desecration, talismans, oath swearing, protests, official books, stolen and reclaimed sacred texts: in each case, we find a focus on the material and physical dimensions of these scriptures, and the iconic role that they continue to play in the world today. Thus, in spite of the rapid increase in the availability of scriptures in digital formats, it is important to note that the iconic role of scriptures has seen less drastic change, and that physical sacred texts continue to have a significant place in social and religious discourse.

2 Sacred Texts in a Liminal Age

When read in light of Watts's reflections on the functional dimensions of scriptures, the examples highlighted above suggest that the rise of digital culture is impacting in diverse ways the use of sacred texts in different domains: engagement

57 Daniel Estrin, "Who Stole the Torahs? An Ancient Sect, A Brazen Theft And The Hunt To Bring The Manuscripts Home," *National Public Radio*, 29 April 2018; available online: https://www.npr.org/2018/04/29/602836507/who-stole-the-torahs.

58 Rick Daysog, "Sacred Torah scrolls stolen from Oahu synagogue," *Hawaii News Now*, 24 January 2018; available online: http://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/story/37333800/sacred-torah-scrolls-stolen-from-oahu-synagogue; Nicole Hensley, "Thief steals century-old bible, gold staff and challis from historic Harlem church," *New York Daily News*, 1 May 2018, available online: http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/manhattan/thief-steals-century-old-bible-gold-staff-harlem-church-article-1.3964989.

59 "Rescued Torah scroll at Kingston temple stands as reminder of Holocaust," *Daily Freeman News*, 11 April 2018; available online: http://www.dailyfreeman.com/article/df/20180411/news/180419922.

with digital culture is much more evident in the semantic domain than it is in the iconic dimension. Is there a way to account for this?

To begin, it might be helpful to situate the present era in light of the work of van Gennep and Turner and their respective theories of liminality, the stage of disorientation or ambiguity that emerges in the life cycle of rituals.[60] Working in anthropology and ritual, van Gennep and Turner highlighted that rites of passage and rituals pass through three stages: separation, margin, and aggregation. As Turner notes,

> During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject ... are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more. ... Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.[61]

Without pushing the issue too far, this is an apt description of the ritualistic use of scriptures in the contemporary world. We are in many ways experiencing a liminal phase between the old and the new: while new digital forms of the text are beginning to take root, a new ordered and stable reality has yet to emerge, and the older, physical forms of sacred texts continue to manifest themselves in very real ways, particularly with regard to the iconic dimension of scriptures.

But pressing beyond this notion of liminality, how might we account for the ongoing employment of material forms in relation to the iconic domain? Continuing with the theme of ritual, Watts has suggested that work comparing scriptures with what we think of as disposable texts such as phone books might be enlightening.[62] He notes,

> To the degree that a book simply serves as an information source, it can be replaced by computer searches without readers feeling any loss. Online phone directories have become readily available and will likely replace material phone books entirely within a generation. Sacred texts have also been adapted for the new media but with very different prospects for the material books. ... the difference between phone books and Bibles lies not in the degree to which they have been transformed and accepted in electronic form, but rather in the fact that the disappearance of physical Bibles is unimaginable because of their ritual uses. It is

60 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell, [1961] 1977).

61 Turner, *The Ritual Process,* 95.

62 James W. Watts, "Disposing of Non-Disposable Texts," in *The Death of Sacred Texts: Ritual Disposal and Renovation of Texts in the World Religions*, ed. Kristina Myrvold (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010): 147–59.

> impossible that e-readers will ever replace traditional codices in liturgical processions and other ritual uses along the iconic dimension, because computers and other kinds of e-readers do not represent particular texts but are generic containers for any content. … To the degree that people ritualize books and other texts along the iconic dimension – that is, to the degree that they pay conscious attention to how they look and feel, how they carry them and their own posture as they read them – such iconic books will remain features of human culture. The iconic status of various kinds of material books preserves and even enhances their appeal in an age of digital information.[63]

Watts thus suggests that the continued importance of physical scriptures is related to their ritual use, and this seems to be corroborated by several of the examples noted above, particularly those that highlight the continued importance of these texts in for explicitly religious uses. But what about the other, less overtly religious examples noted above?

Here the work of Jonathan Westin is suggestive.[64] Westin, whose expertise is in the field of critical heritage studies and conservation, has drawn on the sociology of translation to develop what he calls the vocabulary of limitations. Westin makes two important observations for our purposes.[65] To begin with, all formats embody cultural values. As digital books have become increasingly common, "questions arise regarding how those cultural values which are negotiated around a physicality translate to a digital sphere. … few would argue that nothing has been lost in translation when a phenomenon is moved from an analogue to a digital format. Expressed through digital means, the content is detached from the 'culture' to which it was bound by the context of its traditional physicality."[66] This is not some unspecified culture; rather, networks in societies "champion the positive connotations and authenticity of their format, rather than the content itself, by invoking cultural values in a context tied to time and space. This ensures the longevity of the format and consequentially their investment in it, while the content is deemed lessened in other contexts. As a consequence, the cultural values of a format stand in proportion to the cultural values put into that format by the stakeholders."[67]

Second, these cultural values related to particular formats include limitations, and translation to a new format is a negotiation of cultural values, includ-

63 Watts, "Disposing of Non-Disposable Texts," 149–50.

64 Jonathan Westin, "Loss of Culture: New Media Forms and the Translation from Analogue to Digital Books," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 19/2 (2012): 129–40.

65 The sociology of translation draws on the work of Bruno Latour and others who have given a more prominent role to objects in the forming of social and cultural networks.

66 Westin, "Loss of Culture," 130.

67 Westin, "Loss of Culture," 135.

ing these limitations. "When the limits of a format's ability to communicate a content is reached, ... there is a detour to another format."[68] Here we come to an interesting point: limitations are often seen as a reason for translating to a new format. This is clearly seen in the history of sacred texts, as the shift to new formats (e.g., from scroll to codex, or codex to digital form) is often to make the text more accessible. However, these limitations embody numerous cultural values, and consequently "these cultural values enter the negotiation as actants, to be enrolled or ignored."[69] Westin suggests that we pay attention to such limitations, and the way in which these aspects shape the cultural use of these objects: what is often seen as a limitation when translating to a new format is in actuality a socio-cultural signifier, and so the new format must eventually negotiate with this to communicate such a limitation. "In the negotiation process, a new format can either follow the absolute limitations of the new format or partially emulate the limitations of the previous format."[70] Accordingly, "While content can be moved from one format to another, the 'culture' present in the combination of format and content must be translated and in that act branches are created that take the content in new directions."[71]

Thus, according to Westin, the process of translating to a digital format is a negotiation that includes cultural values (including limitations) of physical forms. The examples I have noted above suggest that users are indeed attempting to negotiate these cultural values in digital formats – swearing oaths on iPads, for example – but that many of such values are retained in the physicality of printed scriptures. Can a digital text function as a talisman? Can it be invoked in a protest? Can it be revered and processed in a religious ceremony? These are values that have been assigned to particular material texts (scrolls, manuscripts, and print), and translating these elements to digital formats will be a complex task. In this sense Westin's proposal seems to complement Watts's contention that the iconic, ritualized use of scriptures is an important dimension of why physical Bibles continue to play an important role in a changing world: there are cultural traits that have not yet been – and perhaps cannot be – translated to the digital form.

68 Westin, "Loss of Culture," 135.

69 Westin, "Loss of Culture," 135. Here Westin draws on Latour's notion of actants. See Bruno Latour, "On Technical Mediation," *Common Knowledge* 3/2 (1994): 29–64; and Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

70 Westin, "Loss of Culture," 137.

71 Westin, "Loss of Culture," 138.

3 Conclusions

As digital culture increasingly becomes the dominant frame of reference for how people engage with texts, further analysis of how sacred texts function in a digital age will become ever more important. I close with a few concluding reflections that such work might consider:

The work of Watts and others is a reminder that we need to think carefully about how and why scriptures are actually used, and in doing so, to reflect more critically on these diverse practices. Further, giving attention to the diverse uses of scriptures suggests that while we are seeing a rapid change in the semantic dimension of how sacred texts are used in the emerging age of digital texts, we are also seeing how manuscript and print texts continue to play an important role in a variety of different contexts. Westin's theoretical reflections are helpful, I think, in that they highlight how translating to the digital domain is not a simple task, but is in fact a complex process, and one which must account for the materiality of the texts in question and attendant social and cultural dimensions.

Indeed, just as digital texts must attempt to account for the social and culture values inherent in physical books, so the digital texts themselves are also acquiring social and cultural values. These, too, will become important elements of these digital texts; the social and cultural values that digital texts acquire will also need to be negotiated when translated to yet another (perhaps still unknown) format – and so the complex process of translation will continue.

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