

## **“LOOSE CAN(N)ONS? READING AND TEACHING CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES IN A PLURALISTIC CONTEXT”**

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I spent my last sabbatical in Hong Kong, where I was born but had not lived for 25 years. Now I am not sure if this arrangement was really conducive to staying in one spot to read and write. Not that Hong Kong is a bad place for the kind of research and writing I had in mind before going on my sabbatical, it is just too good for a few other things. Don't have the time to tell you all of them, but one of the things Hong Kong is great for is the latest in digital technology. After they confiscated my stone and chisel at the airport, I found it necessary to avail myself of more modern modes of communication. So, not only do I know now that PDA may mean something other than “public display of affection,” I have also become the proud owner of a cell phone, a digital camera and a wireless laptop. If my accumulating of these technological toys in Hong Kong intimates, as many have argued, that globalization is making our world more homogeneous, my experience in Hong Kong last semester also suggests that globalization has simultaneously made each world more diverse. One of the biggest changes I noticed in Hong Kong is that racial/ethnic and religious diversity have become a lot more prominent. Not that Hong Kong was a monolithic society when I was growing up, but with the increasing influx of domestic workers, particularly from the Philippines and more recently from the predominantly Muslim country of Indonesia, one can now see on Hong Kong's streets not only a greater racial/ethnic diversity but a visible religious minority.

I

It has long been disturbing to me that discussions of pluralism have not necessarily involved religion. Too often discussions of pluralism in the broader academy and the even larger culture to include various groups and canons have ended up excluding considerations of religion and religious texts (Eck: 4-7; Spinner-Halev: 6, 128).<sup>1</sup> As Robert Fullinwider writes, “Although religion almost always appears on the list of ‘differences’ that multiculturalists address, it seldom received any substantial discussion” (15).<sup>2</sup> To talk about religious plurality, one must also talk about a pluralistic

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<sup>1</sup> I do not mean to imply here that sacred texts are necessarily “religious” in the conventional sense. Since sacred text is at least partly a relational concept (that is, it depends on people's reception), I am not going to venture into defining any further the characteristics of sacred text as if these characteristics are inherent. Brief examples of such “definitions,” however, can be found in Levering: 8-13; and Van Voorst: 5-10.

<sup>2</sup> To say that religion should not be underestimated in discussions of diversity and pluralism is not the same as overestimating the significance of religion in such discussions. I disagree with Richard John Neuhaus, whose tunnel vision on religion causes him to (dis)miss other (multi)cultural sites of mediation, thus resulting in his thesis that the absence of religion would inevitably lead to a “naked public square” that falls prey to the monopoly of the state.

understanding of canons or scriptures.<sup>3</sup> Not only are there multiple sacred texts of different contents and origins in Asia and Asian America, these texts also have multiple literary *and* non-literary forms. The crucial point here, in addition to the heterogeneity of Asia and Asian America, is that we cannot talk about one book, or even *just* the world of books when we talk about Asian/American sacred texts. For too long, the concept of sacred text has either been limited to the Bible, or dictated by the popular (mis)understanding of the Bible as a fixed book of reified and crystallized words on paper (Levering: 3-4, 9; W. Smith; Graham). If David L. Eng is correct—and I think he is—that canonization (a close cousin of sacred texts, conceptually speaking), identification and hence identity formation are all related processes, then pluralization and problematization of sacred canon(s) are imperative for Asian/American identities not to end up becoming uniform, identical, and one and the same.<sup>4</sup>

Having affirmed the significance of religion for pluralism and the pluralization of canons, as well as acknowledged the problematic dominance of the Christian Bible in many conceptualizations of scriptures, as well as acknowledged the problematic dominance of the Bible in many conceptualizations of sacred text, let me confess that my following remarks will nevertheless be focused on reading the Bible as *one* Asian/American sacred text in a pluralistic context, although I do plan to end with some more general comments about sacred text(s), pluralism, and context(s). I focus on the Bible for a reason that is at once historical and philosophical. I don't think I need to spend time addressing issues that have been discussed at length by others: the importance of "cultural capital" for transnational Asian/American/s (Ong); the "cultural capital" that the Bible represents in the geopolitical west in general, and the US in particular (Frye; T. Smith; Aichele); or the greater rigidity that tends to exist between Abrahamic religions and sacred texts (W. Smith; Graham; Van Voorst). I do want to, however, follow up on Neil T. Gotanda's insight on "Asiatic racialization" in the US to argue for the strategic importance of engaging the Bible in Asia or Asian America. According to Gotanda, in contrast to Africans who are mainly racialized in terms of "inferiority," Asians are racialized in the US as "foreign," "alien," and "pagan." If so, then (to keep up with Pierre Bourdieu's economically loaded terminology) "Asian Bible-brokers" present a simultaneously appealing and appalling image. They represent a potential tension, a possible disruption. Or, to use a more theoretical language, "Asian Bible-brokers" may break open a "hybridized" third space/moment (Bhabha), or bring about a "contact zone"

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<sup>3</sup> The irony of Spinner-Halev's book is that as he argues for the inclusion of religion in multicultural debates, he sees no problem in excluding so-called "non-Western religions" from his discussion by a mere hint that he lacks "certainty" or knowledge in this area (22). Is this narrowing of the topic a "moral economizing" move to facilitate discussion (Gutmann and Thompson: 85-91), or is it a "mortal economizing" claim of human finitude? I will return to this question in a latter part of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Eng's short but important piece relies on a psychoanalytic framework. For a longer and provocative work on the critical but unstable relations between identification and identity, see Diana Fuss. This issue of identification and identity is particularly pertinent to Asian/American/s, as the title of Fuss' book, *Identification Papers*, indicates. One should also keep in mind that Sigmund Freud constructs his theory of identification on a metaphoric logic. As Fuss reminds her readers, the Greek word for "metaphor" (μεταφορα) means also "transport" (5). Freud himself also describes the ego that seeks to stabilize identity as a "frontier-creature" (46). In that light, it may be somewhat ironic that only the last chapter of Fuss' book (141-65) deals specifically with racial/ethnic others.

(Pratt) where two supposedly binary and separable spaces or elements merge and mingle.<sup>5</sup>

## II

To illustrate how Asian/American/s who are committed to pluralism may (ab)use the Bible for disruptive and/or (de)constructive purposes, I will resort to a canonical—thus salient if not sacred—text within the “ethnic canon” of Asian America: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*.<sup>6</sup> In addition to its canonical status within Asian American literature, I am choosing *Dictee* because it is truly a pluralistic text in terms of both form and content. *Dictee* or dictation deals with the fluidity between what is spoken and what is written; as Eun Kyung Min suggests, dictation is a process in which “the audible turns visible and the visible becomes audible” (309). Within the pages of *Dictee*, one will also find drawings and photographs, as well as words in Chinese, English, and French. How does the Bible function in this *diaglossic* (Ferguson), *heteroglossic* (Bakhtin), or simply but by no means simple pluralistic (con)text?

First, Cha transports or translates what she finds in the Bible onto or into a new (con)text not for the sake of “application,” but in a spirit of interruption and opposition. In a “chapter” focusing on her mother as a “woman warrior” who fights for survival rather than glories in martyrdom, Cha cites from the Authorized Version (KJV) rather unexpectedly the entire episode of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by the devil (50-53). This citation of Matthew 4:1-11 is both framed and fragmented by Cha’s description of a dream or hallucination of heaven that her mother experiences while living under Japan’s colonial rule and falling ill in Manchuria. In contrast to the Matthean Jesus who secures angelic service by refusing to eat, to jump from the temple top or worship the devil on a mountaintop, Cha’s mother refuses three times the angelic service of heavenly food, and ends up being pushed from heaven back down to earth by an angel. Time won’t allow me to do a detailed interpretation of Cha’s use of this Matthean passage. I will simply suggest that Cha is here protesting or questioning the biblical rhetoric or logic that privileges hunger for “spiritual”/heavenly food over earthly food. For Cha, survival on earth may well be equally or even more meaningful than martyrdom for the reward of entering heaven. In other words, she circumscribes, disrupts, or re-contextualizes the dictates of a Gospel text. After all, unlike the Matthean Jesus who is articulate in his refusal of the devil as well as assured of his identity as the “Son of God,” Cha or Cha’s mother is a female transnational traveler whose speech is often denied, and identity in flux. In Cha’s pluralistic (con)text, even biblical citation does not dictate, but is displaced and transformed by means of a transporting, translocating, or translating act.

Second, Cha also dis-places the Bible by placing it as but one text in a vast “library” of texts (written or otherwise). To put it in a term made popular by Dipesh Chakrabarty, the Bible is “provincialized” in Cha’s pluralistic (con)text. In the last “chapter” of *Dictee*, Cha narrates a story that is simultaneously similar and dissimilar to the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 (167-70). It is

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<sup>5</sup> Psychoanalytically speaking, one can also think about the problem *and* the potential associated with “Asian Bible-brokers” in terms of the fluid boundaries between identification and disidentification. As Judith Butler suggests, a disidentification may well be “an identification that one fears to make only because one has already made it” (112).

<sup>6</sup> I have also read Cha’s *Dictee* for a different purpose in Liew 2005: 147-50.

dissimilar because this meeting at the well does not result in the Samaritan woman at the well going to evangelize her townsfolk upon meeting a Jewish man; instead, it ends with a woman at the well giving a girl some medicine to take back to the girl's neighboring village to cure the girl's ailing mother. It is dissimilar because Cha seems to be mixing the story of John 4 here with at least two other texts: (1) an ancient Korean shamanistic myth about a young princess who, by virtue of marriage and the birth of seven sons, receives healing water from her husband's well to make her mother well from a deadly illness; and (2) the ancient Greek myth about Demeter and her rest at an Eleusian well in her search of her daughter, Kore(a?), who has been abducted by Hades into the underworld because Kore(a?), unlike Cha's mother who refuses to eat other-earthly food, has eaten a few seeds in Hades. I am going to sidestep the interpretive issues surrounding this specific episode within *Dictee*. Rather, let me just state that this practice of interweaving texts (biblical, Greek, and Korean) points to competing texts and traditions not only alongside, but also inside any dictate. If the Korean myth on princess Pari Gongju is a competing tradition that is separable from the Bible, such a neat separation cannot be made between the Demeter/Kore myth and the Gospel texts. The Greek myth is, of course, associated with the ancient mystery religion of Eleusis, and thus in competition with the Gospels in the first four centuries of the Common Era. However, if one considers their common emphasis on trans-world travels and rebirth, and the fact that the Greek myth and the mystery both predated the Gospels but continued to be circulated and celebrated in the same geographical and cultural zones of the Gospels, one will be hard pressed to deny the influence that this and other ancient Greek myths might have on the Gospels. Instead of repeating the biblical dictate that "in the beginning was the Word" and "the Word was made flesh" (John 1:1, 14), Cha inscribes not only that her own "words [were] made flesh" (18), but further insinuates that there are multiple words or texts as well as multiple beginnings with her two introductory invocations of the muses: "Beginning *wherever* you wish, tell even us" (7, 11; emphasis mine).

### III

I think Cha's *Dictee* points to the need, in a pluralistic context, for not only a pluralistic understanding, but also a pluralistic "reading" of sacred texts. By that I do not mean the by-now rather popular notion of multiple interpretations; that is, different people from different contexts, or the same person at different times and contexts may interpret the same text in different ways. What I mean by pluralistic "reading" is, first of all, a single "reading" that highlights differences and even contradictions within one (sacred) text. I am driving at the re-cognition that within each sacred text, there is more than one single, definitive word or viewpoint. Instead, there are different, even contradictory positions. In contrast to the "gospel impulse" to simplify (Gates: 141), my imperative is to multiply and pluralize. While I generally do believe in the progressive potential of Derridean *différance*, my suggestion here has more to do with pluralism's affirmation of options and choice. If pluralism promotes room for more than one viewpoint in the world, then a pluralistic "reading" should do the same with the narrative world of a (sacred) text. I would further argue for such a "reading" by appealing to another word in my title: "context." Alan Sinfield, for example, has argued convincingly for the presence of multiple viewpoints and options (what he calls "faultlines") in any single text because (1) textual production does not happen in a vacuum but in context

(Macherey); and (2) context is inevitably contentious and complex (thus pluralistic?) rather than congruent, consisting of dominant, residual and emergent elements (Williams).<sup>7</sup> Finally, let me point to yet a third word that is implied in the words “canons” and “scriptures” of my title: “sacred.” If the word “sacred” implies, among other things, otherness, then one’s “reading” of *sacred* texts should involve a “reading” of what is other or different. If “sacred” texts are, among other things, supposed to bring one into the presence of glory (however defined), this supposition expressed in Greek would result in an understanding that *sacred* texts are by definition “paradoxical” ( $B\forall\Delta\zeta$ , “in the presence of”;  $*\cong>\forall$ , “glory”).<sup>8</sup> I would further argue that there is a close connection between this presence of plurality and the continual reception of certain texts as sacred by people in different times and/or places. Texts without multiple lives are texts that die out over time and/or space.

Since I am talking about Greek, I may as well go back to the Bible. I contend in this regard that it is no longer enough to say that the Bible is part of a “library” of texts or that the Bible is itself a library of texts. Each text within the biblical library turns out to be itself a “library.” If I may return to the episode of Jesus’ temptation in Matthew 4, we find there an incredible conflict that is intertextual and pluralistic. Jesus and the devil are both quoting from Hebrew scripture(s) to make claims and counterclaims in a war of holy words, or a dispute over sacred text(s). What we find there then is a great illustration that neither Matthew nor the Hebrew Bible is “a monolithic entity in which all of its statements point in one direction” (Snodgrass: 118). This re-cognition will, I hope, remove the fundamentalist excuse of “thus saith the Lord,” and enable people to discuss and argue for their different positions with better reason and greater honesty.

A pluralistic “reading” of sacred texts involves, however, more than just “reading” for options and contradictions within any single given sacred text. As pluralistic as a single given sacred text maybe, no one sacred text is pluralistic enough. Sacred text(s) within one’s tradition(s) cannot be completely adequate for self-examinations and/or universal aspirations. My suggestion for a pluralistic “reading” of sacred texts then requires also a “reading” with, or a “reading” through various sacred texts, Asian/American and otherwise. In a way modeled by Cha’s reading of John 4, this pluralistic “reading” should feature both the similarities and dissimilarities of different sacred texts, since my goal here is not building consensus but promoting understanding without understating differences. Such a “reading” may even promote a pluralism that allows people to draw on or from two or more (religious and/or cultural) traditions. In other words, a pluralistic society need not be one made up of different but definitely self-

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<sup>7</sup> One can in fact argue that contexts are always already pluralistic. That is certainly true for the Bible, which was written and collected in times of colonial conflicts that involved more than one culture and one religion. This is particularly obvious in another sense when one talks about the Christian Bible, since it also incorporates (some of) the sacred text(s) of Rabbinic Judaism. One should also realize that people may potentially have different interpretations of what makes up “the” context of any given (sacred) text, thus again making “pluralistic context” in a sense gratuitous. A better word for today’s panel, if I am correctly interpreting the desires and purposes of the organizers, may actually be “global.”

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted here to John Guillory’s reading of Bourdieu and Cleanth Brooks, despite the fact that Guillory is really using Bourdieu and Brooks to talk about a related but different topic; namely, the (historical) entanglements between literary sensibility, religious belief and scientific truth in modernity (136-75).

contained communities.<sup>9</sup> I am once again referring to a hybridized or impure model of pluralism that I alluded to when I talked about the simultaneously appealing and appalling image of “Asian Bible-brokers.”

#### IV

Guillory has recently warned that current debates about canons and pluralism often fail to acknowledge (1) institutional contexts and dynamics; and (2) the issue of cultural production in addition to that of cultural representation or reception. Guillory’s warning is most relevant to my suggestion above. If (religious and/or cultural) pluralism requires and facilitates knowledge and understanding of sacred texts beyond one’s own tradition(s), what does it mean for someone like myself who teaches the New Testament in a Christian seminary? Unlike university or college religious studies departments, seminaries (of whatever persuasions or traditions) tend not to have any course offerings on *other(s’)*—when it comes to Asian/American/s, I may well say some of “our” (*m*)*others’*—sacred texts.<sup>10</sup> Not only does this silence or silencing produce students who lack knowledge and understanding, it will reproduce or multiply this lack with compound interest. Why? Because if some sacred texts are not currently represented or received in a seminary curriculum, these same texts will not have currency in current and future cultural production.<sup>11</sup> Or, at the very least, their currency is and will be greatly short-circuited. This is well illustrated by Spinner-Halev, whose “uncertainty” or ignorance about other(s’) religions results in a book that affirms religion and pluralism without referring to any religion outside of Judeo-Christian traditions (22). I can also point to many “inter-faith” gatherings that I have attended in Chicago, where one is hard pressed to find any tradition outside the Abrahamic religions. Having Judaism and Islam alongside Christianities is great, don’t get me wrong, but it is not enough. If I may adapt Guillory’s language, dissemination of (other/Asian/American) sacred texts provides a cultural basis for the dispersion of (Asian/American) political power (100).

I know that not all Christian seminaries are ready to or even should consider this. For those that are committed to (religious and/or cultural) pluralism, however, I would like to end by posing them with this question: What does pluralism require of “us” in terms of other(s’), Asian/American or not, sacred texts?<sup>12</sup> I read recently that after

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<sup>9</sup> A good, though somewhat one-sided, illustration of this is the way the Christian Bible is made up of both the Jewish scripture (renamed the Old Testament) and the New Testament. A better example may be the way both Confucians and Taoists accept certain ancient Chinese classics like the *I Ching* as secondary sacred texts (Van Voorst: 8).

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to David Kyuman Kim for a paper that he delivered and a panel that he organized for the 2002 APARRI Conference. Kim’s paper and panel addressed the historically contentious relationship between theology and religious studies, a topic I thought at the time to be one of the historic past (at least for myself and a number of people who teach at progressive mainline seminaries) rather than one of contemporary relevance. Now, upon reflection and in preparation of this paper, I realize that I was mistaken. While the nature of that contention has changed, its legacies certainly live on.

<sup>11</sup> The dynamics of cultural production is of course what Eng is trying to get at when he interprets the process of canonization in terms of repetition (14).

<sup>12</sup> It is obvious that no curriculum can cover *all* sacred texts, Asian/American or otherwise. As Guillory correctly points out, the word “canon” (and we may say, “sacred texts”) really stands for an “*imaginary* totality of works” (30), since the inclusion or exclusion of such works is always contested and changing. This fact does not diminish, but in fact deepen my argument that seminaries committed to pluralism must begin to consider the issue regarding teaching and learning other(s’) sacred texts.

September 11, more students are taking religion courses in colleges and universities, and one professor commented that doing so is “good exercise for your brain” (Diamant). So I wonder today: will students in Christian seminaries today be able to take more courses on more religions and more canons of scriptures? What will that be good for, especially if seminary students think seminary education have already exercised their brains more than they would like? While I am not sure what my pluralistic “reading” of sacred texts would mean in the mission for and towards divinity, I do think that it—with its emphasis on internal or *immanent* critique,<sup>13</sup> as well as on interreligious and intercultural “literacy”—will, in the words of Martha C. Nussbaum, help “cultivate [a] humanity” that is both happy in and helpful to a pluralistic world (8).

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<sup>13</sup> The term “immanent critique” comes from traditions of Western Marxism; see Warnke: 35.

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The mega perspective on Scriptural authority is a foundationalist position which argues for biblical foundations in order to provide a secure truth base for confidence in the epistemological enterprise itself. Gordon Clarke is representative of this view. Mary Crumpacker notes that "While Clark concurs that science cannot be the standard for the Church, his solution of course would be to reject modern scientism altogether and adopt as the test for all truth the orthodox Protestant criterion"namely, the Bible." The three positive contemporary views on sola scriptura outlined above differ on