

BOOKS AS RELICS

in Dialogue with D. Max Moerman

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Max Moerman's essay, along with the others in *The Death of Sacred Texts*, contributes to an emerging interdisciplinary discussion about the cultural significance of the material forms and visual depictions of texts. This discussion has roots in scholarship from the 1970s and 80s that pointed out the cultural importance attached to the ritual uses and symbolic appearance of particular books and texts. Gregory Schopen emphasized the significance of book veneration to the development of Mahayana Buddhism.¹ Martin Marty described the Bible as an icon in the conceptual "carapace" of Americans.² William Graham detailed the crucial role of oral and ritual performance to the religious impact of scriptures world-wide.³

Now, in the new millennium, several teams of scholars are collaborating on comparative projects to map the cultural use and significance of texts. One, led by Vincent Wimbush at the [Institute for Signifying Scriptures](#), emphasizes the social power dynamics of scripture interpretation and ritual use in specific religious and ethnic communities.⁴ Like some recent anthropological studies of "biblicism" among Christians and of book rituals in other religious communities, it brings ethnographic methods into the comparative study of scripture interpretation and use.⁵ Another, the [Iconic Books Project](#) directed by Dorina Miller Parmenter and myself, draws attention to the power ascribed to books and texts as material and ritual objects. Its symposia and publications foster cross-cultural and trans-historical study of the phenomenon.⁶ The need to communicate about ongoing

¹ Gregory Schopen, "The Phrase 'sa prthivipradesas caityabhūto bhavet' in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975), 147-181.

² Martin Marty, "America's Iconic Book," in *Humanizing America's Iconic Book* (ed. Gene M. Tucker and Douglas A. Knight; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 1-23.

³ William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

⁴ Vincent L. Wimbush, "TEXTureS, Gestures, Power: Orientation to Radical Excavation," in *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (ed. V. L. Wimbush; Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 1-20.

⁵ For "biblicism," see Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004); James S. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: an Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); James S. Bielo (ed.), *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Biblicism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009). Several essays in *The Death of Sacred Texts* also employ ethnography to study rituals of scripture disposal: see especially Kristina Myrvold, "Making the Scripture a Person: Reinventing Death Rituals of Guru Granth Sahib in Sikhism," 125-46, and Mans Broo, "Rites of Burial and Immersion: Hindu Ritual Practices of Disposing of Sacred Texts in Vrindavan," 91-106.

⁶ Dorina Miller Parmenter, "The Iconic Book: The Image of the Bible in Early Christian Rituals," *Postscripts* 2 (2006), 160-89; idem, "The Bible as Icon: Myths of the Divine Origins of Scripture," in

research on these topics by scholars in disparate disciplines led to the creation of a new academic society in 2010, the [Society for Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts](#) (SCRIPT).

Religious texts have naturally drawn the greatest attention in these efforts. Of all texts, they tend to take the most expensive forms and receive the most elaborate ritual treatment. At the same time, many religious traditions distribute inexpensive copies of them widely, even freely. However, the ritual and material treatment of scriptures and other sacred texts has analogues with other cultural practices involving texts. Publishers produce “collector’s editions” of various works in leather bindings with gilt edges (like bibles), libraries and museums display old or rare texts like art objects (or like relics), and some nations guard old copies of their constitutions or other founding documents as national treasures.

There are even secular analogies to the medieval Japanese sutra burials that Moerman describes.⁷ The medieval Japanese practice of reproducing elaborate sutras only to bury them may strike twenty-first century readers as bizarre, immersed as we are in a culture obsessed with the distribution and use of information. But his observation that “the value of their production and use lay in their media as much as in their message: what mattered most were the time, place, and materiality of their deployment” (p. 87) applies to the use of other texts in many time periods and various cultures, including our own.

Parallels include, of course, the practice of burying time capsules to preserve pieces of cultural ephemera for people fifty or one hundred years hence. But they extend to more deep-seated anxieties about preserving culture in textual form. The rationale for copyright libraries that collect every book published in a particular nation is to preserve information which might someday be needed, even if no one is currently interested in it. The status of “someday” in that rationalization is more than vaguely eschatological, as one commentator realized when he described the British Library’s new warehouse as a “tomb of tomes” ([Guardian 2007](#)). Positively apocalyptic is the [Long Now Foundation](#)’s efforts to preserve a record of 1,500 human languages etched microscopically on a nickel disk designed to last 50,000 years. Just like medieval Japanese Buddhists, contemporary cultures fear the loss of their languages and knowledge and are making expensive and time-consuming efforts to preserve it in more or less inaccessible forms.

Moerman’s conclusion, that “the practice of sutra burial reveals ... the range of concerns that are contained within this discourse. ... (it) is able to embrace a variety

Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon (ed. C. A. Evans and H. D. Zacharias; London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 298-310. James W. Watts, “The Three Dimensions of Scriptures,” *Postscripts* 2 (2006), 135-59; idem (ed.), *Iconic Books and Texts* (London: Equinox, forthcoming).

⁷ See further Watts, “Disposing of Non-Disposable Texts,” in Myrvold, *Death of Sacred Texts* (2010), 147-60.

of religious desires while at the same time charging them with a heightened sense of historical urgency” (p. 86), should therefore be extended to the manipulation of texts in many other cultures as well. Book and text rituals, which include their public performance and interpretation as well as their physical display and manipulation, serve to focus the attention of communities on enduring values. They cherish texts that contain those values as material representations of them, as relics of their faith. Anxiety about the future fuels efforts to reproduce and preserve those texts, so that they become material guarantors of cultural and religious persistence and, in Moerman’s words, “a rhetorical center around which other personal, familial, and political anxieties converge” (p. 86).