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# Transformative Readings of Sacred Scriptures

Christians and Muslims in Dialogue





TRANSFORMATIVE READINGS OF  
SACRED SCRIPTURES: CHRISTIANS  
AND MUSLIMS IN DIALOGUE

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AND MUSLIMS IN DIALOGUE

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# PREFACE

*Martin Junge*

For us Christians the interpretation of the Bible is crucial since the stories, prayers and theological reflections in the Bible profoundly nurture our faith and our life in this world. One key dimension of the Reformation movement was the renewed focus on the Bible and its life-giving message. Martin Luther was a Bible scholar by training, and he stressed the importance of translating the Bible into the vernacular. He underlined that God's Word is a living word that aims at touching people's hearts so that they experience God's grace. Most renewal movements in the history of the church, be it pietism, popular Bible readings in base communities, or resistance movements in situations of oppression, find motivation and orientation in biblical texts.

Among Muslim scholars and within the Muslim community today, there is a vibrant conversation about the interpretation of the Qur'an. For Muslims, the Qur'an provides guidance for their relationship to God and to the world. Muslims recite Qur'anic verses when they pray and these support the Muslim community in daily life and at special moments. To learn verses of the Qur'an by heart is a key practice in Muslim spirituality, and Muslim ethics draw conclusions from the Qur'anic texts.

Christians and Muslims know full well that each text emerged in a specific context, and that each reading of the text takes place in a specific context. People of faith turn to their sacred scriptures in times of trouble and weakness as well as in times of joy and gratitude. People look at the texts when they seek guidance, and refer to them when they have to make major decisions.

The way in which we understand the texts is naturally informed by what is happening around us. As a Latin American, having grown up during times of oppression and massive violations of human rights, I remember

what it meant to read sacred texts against this specific sociopolitical context, and how that context informed the ways in which I approached, understood and read sacred texts.

The relationship between text and the diverse contexts is therefore one of the main topics in scriptural interpretation. In today's world, communication breakdowns seem to be the order of the day and communities that used to live together peacefully no longer manage to do so. Polarization, hate speech and extremism haunt our communities; violence or the threat thereof is frightening.

In the midst of this reality, the articles in this book, written by Christian and Muslim scholars, attest to the fact that dialogue is possible—dialogue within and between our communities about meaningful and responsible scriptural interpretation today. How do religious communities deal with those passages in their own sacred scriptures that condone, or even justify violence? How do we deal with “texts of terror” in our own scriptures? It is vital that together we try to discern, explain and learn to be accountable in more explicit ways to those key principles that inform our reading of sacred texts and help us to live in a shared world.

Important topics that currently trigger vibrant debates in our religious communities with regard to scriptural interpretation are the empowerment of women and the ecological crisis. If justice is not at the very center of how men and women interact with one another the world will never find justice and peace. Equally, justice needs to be at the center in how we relate to all of creation and the planet as a whole. Important interfaith activities have taken place in climate advocacy and we need to join hands in dealing with the significant challenges facing the human family.

The essays in this book were first presented at an international Christian-Muslim conference in 2016, which was organized by The Lutheran World Federation in collaboration with the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo, Norway and the Center for Islamic Theology, University of Münster, Germany. I would like to commend this publication to you; it is a clear sign that yes, dialogue is possible, yes, the world deserves strong contributions from religious communities and, yes, our focus is on transforming violence, oppression and injustice and live out the message of God's love, grace and mercy.

# INTRODUCTION

*Simone Sinn*

Historically, the emergence of a discrete body of texts as “sacred scripture” has been closely associated with the formation of a distinct religious community. These sacred scriptures are of vital importance to the respective religious communities. For instance, as the Christian community recognized the biblical canon as authoritative scripture, the church and the Bible took shape. Equally, in Islam the recognition of the Qur’an as the authoritative scripture was crucial for the formation of the *umma*. These interrelated processes fundamentally connect the community to the text and vice versa.

These processes did not only occur when the communities came into being but continue to take place throughout the ages. Whenever Christians gather to listen to the gospel message, this constitutes the Christian community as church. Wherever Muslims gather to listen to the message of the Qur’an, there the Muslim community is alive.

Beyond this close relationship between a community and its sacred scripture, there have always been well distinct connections to other texts and other readings of the same texts and traditions. There is clearly a historical as well as theological interrelatedness between the Tanach, which Judaism refers to as sacred scripture, the Bible, which Christians regard as authoritative, and the Qur’an, which Muslims regard as the Word of God. These sacred scriptures did not emerge in isolation nor are they generally read in isolation. The reading of sacred texts can be used to distinguish and demarcate one’s own community or to build bridges and establish a connection to other communities.

The interpretation of sacred scriptures is a contested field. Clearly the power of a sacred text can only unfold in its reading since the text needs a person and a community for whom the message becomes meaningful and relevant. Critical questions that many contemporary religious com-

munities struggle with include the following: Who has the legitimate right authoritatively to interpret sacred scriptures? What are appropriate approaches? What are suitable methods of interpretation? How is the notion of “sacredness” to be understood in the process of interpretation? Neither Christianity, nor Islam has one central authority that decides on these questions. Globally and locally interpretation is a polycentric endeavor—polycentric in terms of geographical diversity, various positions of influence and different approaches.

The essays in this volume contribute to debates on scriptural exegesis by proposing readings that take into account insights from the discourse on hermeneutics and interreligious dialogue processes. Christian and Muslim scholars from different contexts explore theoretical assumptions and interpret relevant texts from sacred scriptures, focusing specifically on “transformative readings.” This implies that reading and interpreting sacred texts is not simply a matter of intellectually reconstructing the content of a text nor an act of immersing oneself into a preexistent tradition, but a reading that effects change by opening up new possibilities of knowing God and oneself and of being in the world.

This publication is divided into three sections. The first explores interpretative possibilities emerging when insights from other religious communities and other religious texts are taken into account. The various contributions look at the interaction and dialogue between texts, communities and scholars.

With reference to concrete examples of how interpretations shift over time, Oddbjørn Leirvik outlines how the concept of hell was reinterpreted in Christian circles, and how contemporary Muslim scholars deal with Qur’anic verses that condone violence. He identifies the “humanization of theological ethics” as a hermeneutical strategy that can offer transformative perspectives in contemporary Christian and Muslim interpretations.

Anne Hege Grung demonstrates that the humanization of theological ethics developed among scholars of Islam and Christianity can similarly be observed among the faithful in the communities. She analyses empirical data of a process where Muslim and Christian women together read difficult texts in the Qur’an and the Bible. The women in this interpretative community agreed that some texts from their respective traditions have the dangerous potential to be used in destructive ways. Hege Grung discusses the need for and possibilities of establishing forms of transformative hermeneutics through co-readings.

Analyzing historical developments, Stefan Schreiner explores the interwoven reception history between the Qur’an and the Bible. His starting point is the observation that many Qur’anic passages recollect texts and stories known from biblical and post-biblical Jewish and Christian sources

and he goes on to examine how scholars have interpreted the succession of revealed books and prophets. Schreiner's analysis clearly demonstrates that there is not only a historical correlation but a mutuality that is also theologically relevant for today's interpretation of the Qur'an and the Bible.

Nicholas Adams reflects on the unusual and remarkable practice of scriptural reasoning, which requires that scholars suspend their expertise and reason together on the basis of the text alone. This is frequently experienced as a provocative requirement, perhaps because it puts into question the status of the scholar. Adams draws attention to this aspect of scriptural reasoning, argues that it sheds light on important features of the practice, and suggest that it accounts for certain successes and failures among particular groups of participants.

The report from a dialogical experiment with a multi-religious and interdisciplinary team of scholars in Hamburg concludes this section. Katja Drechsler and Thorsten Knauth outline the methodological approach and results of this empirical endeavor and suggest that at the heart of the dialogical hermeneutics is a balancing act of four fields of tension: one related to knowledge, another one to context, the third one emerging from the distinction between sacred and profane and the fourth to the opposing dynamics of trust and suspicion.

The second section focuses on transformative readings of the Qur'an. Safet Bektovic summarizes recent developments in Islamic theology in Europe. He discusses the legitimacy of the concept of a European Islam and European Islamic theology and explores contemporary dimensions and perspectives of Islamic theological thinking in Europe. He concludes by describing their relevance in relation to the everyday lives of Muslims and the training of imams in Europe and clearly shows how structures and spaces for education and research need to be created that allow for transformative readings.

Mouhanad Khorchide speaks out of such a space. Khorchide is convinced that the Qur'an is not a monologue and, consequently, explores the Qur'an as an "act of communication." He underlines that the Qur'an is at the same time thoroughly divine and thoroughly human. In order to deal with the hermeneutical challenges, Khorchide finds helpful insights in Paul Ricoeur's reflections on hermeneutics. As a Muslim theologian, Khorchide highlights God's mercy as the hermeneutical key to understanding the Qur'anic message.

Since constructive interreligious relations are often restrained by exclusivist religious truth claims, Sahiron Syamsuddin critically addresses such claims. He reinterprets Q 2:111–113, which is often used to legitimize an exclusivist perspective. Syamsuddin interprets the text by employing a classic twofold approach—first by establishing the original meaning of

the text and second by articulating its significance for the contemporary situation. He shows how these verses can be interpreted in inclusive, even pluralist ways.

In light of renewed reflection on gender relations, the creation stories in sacred scriptures are again the focus of attention. Dina El Omari describes insights of contemporary feminist exegesis of the Qur'an. Looking at key Qur'anic passages, she points out that God created men and women at the same time from the same substance and highlights that from this perspective men and women are equal partners. El Omari discusses theological debates related to the concept of the Fall and argues that this concept is not part of the original Qur'anic message.

Asmaa El Maaroufi reinterprets Qur'anic passages referring to animals in order to develop fundamental guidelines for animal ethics from an Islamic perspective. She identifies similarities and differences between human beings and animals, and outlines the relationship that both have with the Creator. El Maaroufi explores the Qur'anic terminology used for the relationship between animals and human beings and critically addresses a reductionist anthropology. She pleads for repositioning humanity within the cosmos, and to develop more sensitivity to the close relationship between human beings and their fellow creatures.

Naveed Baig's contribution on Islamic spiritual care concludes this section. He explains how Qur'anic verses may help people in pain and suffering to find coping mechanisms and outlines how tradition and orthopraxy are present in the way religious Muslim patients cope during times of crisis. There are also signs that traditional Muslim coping ideals are expressed in ways peculiar to the individual's personal situation during times of suffering and need and a "talking with God" that defines new ways of perceiving God and the images of God.

The essays in the third section focus on transformative readings of the Bible. Clare Amos takes the reader on a journey through the book of Genesis and demonstrates the shifting presentations of God. Traveling through the story of creation, the story of the flood, the stories of Abraham, of Jacob and of Joseph and his brothers, Amos argues that God's voice in and through the biblical text is dialogical. Furthermore, she points out that the different names of God reflect various aspects of God's relationship to humanity. Amos encourages an approach to the Bible that takes this sacred scripture as a dialogue partner.

Kenneth Mtata highlights that the power of sacred texts lies in their ability to offer a language for alternative reality. He underlines that in the biblical tradition God's communication is an invitation of love. Mtata interprets 1 Samuel 1-7 and shows how in these chapters nation building transitions from a theocratic to a monarchical model. These passages pri-

marily depict the catastrophic nature of divine silence but also point to its reversal. Mtata explores what led to the decline and how the nation was restored through God's agency and God's messengers. The new alternative reality is shalom, which is fully God's, yet through God's grace humans participate in the realization of shalom.

Marianne Bjelland Kartzow observes that people relate to the Bible not only as sacred scripture, but also as a cultural, poetic, scholarly and political text. She argues that the theories of intersectionality and othering provide relevant insights for biblical interpretation today. She identifies hermeneutical and epistemological models in the New Testament which, due to their destabilizing potential, offer a space for transformation.

According to Martin Kopp, climate change is one contemporary ethical challenge that leads the interpreter of the Bible to approach the texts with questions its authors ignored. Kopp poses the question how science, exegesis and theology can collaborate to generate meaning and discern God's will. He advocates for a renewed interpretation of the scriptures in the face of the ecological crisis, and points out that a renewed theology will lead to a transformed understanding of what it means to be a Christian in today's world.

The contributions in this publication address the issue of transformative readings at the epistemological as well as the methodological level. While addressing different aspects of transformation--the structural, communal and individual--all of them affirm the communicative and dialogical nature of sacred texts. Thereby the cliché that sacred texts are sacred because they stand "apart" from mundane reality is questioned. Rather, sacred texts are here presented as invitations to dialogue and engagement because they are a living, communicative source for human knowledge of God's agency in this world.

It is obvious that sacred texts unfold their transformative power when they speak to people's hearts and minds. In order to prevent harmful readings and foster live-giving interpretations ethical and theological discernment is called for. Both, scholarly expertise and the communities of faithful are needed for such discernment. On many contemporary issues such as gender justice, animal ethics, climate justice, exclusion and violence joint Christian and Muslim scriptural interpretation provides an important space for transformative readings. These shared interpretative spaces open new possibilities of understanding and mutually reinforce engagement.





# READING SACRED SCRIPTURES IN DIALOGUE



# HANDLING PROBLEMATIC TEXTS: ETHICAL CRITIQUE AND MORAL ENRICHMENT

*Oddbjørn Leirvik*

In the following, I will address the issue of “problematic texts” in the Bible and the Qur’an. I will try to identify some hermeneutical strategies aimed at tackling such texts—strategies applied by ordinary believers as well as by theologians. I will relate my discussion to the concept of hell in the Christian tradition and the way in which Sura 5:32 is dealt with in popular Muslim discourses about religion and violence. As for professional hermeneutical strategies, I will discuss the concepts of ethical critique and moral enrichment of sacred scriptures.

Which themes are put on the agenda in interfaith dialogue is a matter of discursive power in a given context. In her analysis of the work of a long-standing interfaith dialogue group in the Swedish city of Malmö, Anne Sofie Roald notes that some of the Muslim participants felt that the agenda was heavily influenced by liberal Christians—reflecting their social-ethical commitment to human rights, gender equality, social justice and ecological balance. Ethical issues outside the liberal agenda, such as alcohol consumption, were seemingly simply not taken into consideration for discussion. Furthermore, difficult theological issues—such as the question of heaven and hell—were completely ignored in a dialogue that was entirely “down to earth” in its orientation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Sofie Roald, “Religionsdialogiska perspektiv: En fallstudie av en dialoggrupp i södra Sverige,” in Mikael Stenmark and David Westerlund (eds), *Polemik eller dialog? Nutida religionsteologiska perspektiv bland kristna och muslimer* (Nora: Nya Doxa, 2002), 83–97.

## THE DOCTRINE OF HELL AS A HERMENEUTICAL CHALLENGE

In contemporary Christian theology, at least in the West, the images of heaven and hell have seemingly been abolished altogether, along with a rejection of the idea that non-believers and adherents of other faiths face eternal perdition. The Swedish theologian Kajsa Ahlstrand has suggested that interfaith dialogue has in fact contributed to this development, as part of a general “softening in inter-faith discourse.”<sup>2</sup>

Along with the ethical turn in modern theology, the doctrine of eternal damnation—with its traditional images of hellfire—tends to be seen as entirely incompatible with an ethically responsible theology. For many, it is seen as a real stumbling block for the humanization of theological ethics.

But how can those who strive for a humanization of Christian theology sidestep the image of a tyrannical deity who throws unbelievers into a hell of eternal torture? Are not these conceptions a pivotal part of the Lutheran confessions (The Augsburg Confession, Article 17)<sup>3</sup> as well as of the New Testament message? And what hermeneutical strategy can be applied to defend the abolition of hell and related conceptions?

Back in 1953, the issue of hell was the topic of a heated public debate in Norway in connection with a radio broadcast in which the famous Inner Mission chief Ole Hallesby said:

I’m sure I speak to many this evening who know they have not turned to God. You know very well that if you fell dead on the floor at this moment, you would fall directly into hell ... So how can you, who have not turned to God, confidently go to bed and sleep at night when you don’t know if you’ll wake up tomorrow in your bed or in hell?<sup>4</sup>

The speech was transmitted by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, which at that time had a monopoly. The speech was heavily attacked by the general public and also by some church leaders. Hallesby hit back by

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<sup>2</sup> Kajsa Ahlstrand, “Softening in Inter-faith Discourse,” (2003), at [http://www.emmausnett.no/ressurser/ahlstrand\\_softening.shtml](http://www.emmausnett.no/ressurser/ahlstrand_softening.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> “They also teach that at the consummation of the world Christ will appear for judgment and will bring to life all the dead. He will give eternal life and endless joy to the righteous and elect, but he will condemn the ungodly and the devils to endless torment.” “The Augsburg Confession—Latin Text—Article XVII: Concerning the Return of Christ for Judgment,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 51.

<sup>4</sup> Ole Hallesby, “Omvend deg – nå! (Helvetestalen),” Virksomme ord, n.d., at <http://virksommeord.uib.no/taler?id=3982>, author’s own translation.

stating that “in the Gospel of Matthew alone, Jesus spoke eighteen times about eternal perdition. And in nine of these instances, he vividly depicted the torment in various ways.” To quote but one of Hallesby’s examples from the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13:40–43:<sup>5</sup>

As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Or in Matthew 10:28: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Hallesby’s chief opponent, the liberal Bishop Kristian Schjelderup, declared that for him, the doctrine of eternal punishment in hell was not compatible with what he called “the gospel of love”:

Undoubtedly, divine love and mercy are greater than what is expressed through the doctrine of eternal torment in hell. The Gospel of Christ is the gospel of love ... For me, the doctrine of eternal punishment in hell does not belong to the religion of love.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the Bishop did not deny that in the gospels Jesus does speak of salvation and perdition. But Schjelderup could not imagine that perdition would mean eternal torment—which in his understanding would be “in contradiction with the very spirit of the divine revelation we have received through Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

Oddly enough, the question was eventually dealt with by the Ministry of Church Affairs (this was in the state church era), which concluded that Bishop Schjelderup’s position was not contrary to Lutheran doctrine, thus abolishing hellfire by political decree.<sup>8</sup>

Bishop Schjelderup’s approach has been the main hermeneutical strategy of liberal theologians with a “humanizing” program: to take the sting out of problematic passages in the Bible by subordinating them to a superior message of love, which is postulated as the very core of the gospel. Reading the scriptures in light of a postulated center—the crucified Christ—is also

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the New International Version.

<sup>6</sup> Kristian Schjelderup, *De evige helvetesstraffer og bekjennelsen* (Oslo: Forlaget Land og Kirke, 1954), 15, author’s own translation.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*