

designated a self-evident and simple religious phenomenon readily identifiable anywhere in the world, namely the idea of a “sacred book.” However, as a concept adequate to encompass the functional roles of the great sacred texts of history, *scripture* is a term of considerable ambiguity and complexity.

In the first instance, the specific form and content of scriptural books vary sharply from tradition and even within a single scriptural corpus. Ritual books, legal maxims and codes, myths and legends, historical accounts, divine revelations, apocalyptic visions, ecstatic poetry, words of teachers and prophets, and hymns or prayers to a deity can all be found in scriptural texts. The love lyrics of the *Song of Songs* in the Hebrew Bible, the talismanic prayers against evil in the last two surahs of the Qurʾān, Kṛṣṇa’s self-revelation in chapter 11 of the *Bhagavadgītā*, and the Buddha’s parable of the burning house in chapter 3 of the *Lotus Sutra* have had significant roles as scripture, yet they have little or nothing in common in their style, form, subject matter, or intent. Such disparity makes any reasonably comprehensive yet still simple definition of *scripture* as a literary genre impossible.

Second, a major obstacle to delimiting the phenomenon of scripture definitionally is its very medium of expression. The term *scripture* is usually reserved for religious texts that have been committed to the written or printed page, as the word itself and its common equivalents (e.g., “holy writ”) suggest. Yet in most religious traditions, sacred texts were transmitted orally in the first place and written down only relatively late. Nor do written sacred books exhaust the full range of texts that function clearly as scripture. The Hindu tradition, for example, presents a major problem for defining “scripture” in terms of the written word. Its holiest texts, the Vedas, have been orally transmitted for three millennia or more—for most of that time in explicit preference to (and even firm rejection of) writing them down. Despite their great length, they were not committed to writing but instead preserved in memory and verbatim recitation until comparatively recent centuries. It may also be argued that nonliterate communities have oral texts that function in similar ways to written sacred texts in literate societies, insofar as these cultures use traditional recitations in cultic practice or hold certain myths or other oral texts sufficiently sacred to be worthy of transmission over generations. For these reasons, a descriptive distinction between oral and written scriptures (or oral and written uses of the same scripture) may on occasion be necessary, even though etymologically “oral scripture” is a contradiction in terms and “written scripture” a redundancy.

**SCRIPTURE** is the generic concept used in the modern West and, increasingly, worldwide, to designate texts that are revered as especially sacred and authoritative in all of the largest and many smaller religious traditions.

**AS A GENERAL CONCEPT.** In popular and even in scholarly use today, the term *scripture* is commonly used as though it

A further ambiguity of “scripture” as a conceptual category lies in the wide variety of texts that might be classified as “scriptural.” A key problem in this regard involves those “classic” texts in literate cultures that have many cultural, social, and often even religious functions usually associated with more overtly “religious” texts. Examples would be the

*Iliad* of Homer in later antiquity; the five (or six, nine, twelve, or thirteen) “classics” (*jing*) and the four “books” (*shu*) in traditional Chinese culture; the great Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*, in India; and the *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan) and *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) in Shintō tradition. Such texts do have “scriptural” qualities, such as the veneration they inspire and the authority they command, and thus might be treated as “scripture” in certain contexts.

Another problem in delimiting and defining “scripture” is distinguishing the primary sacred text(s) of a religious tradition from others that are also sacred but secondarily so. Such distinction between a community’s preeminent scripture(s) and the rest of its sacred texts is helpful in understanding many religious traditions, but others not at all: in some cases, the panoply of texts revered is so great and the relative distinctions of authority and sacrality among them so unclear or unimportant that all have some legitimate claim to the title of scripture. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition as a whole, the number of texts treated as sacred is so vast that it is not possible to single out some as more deserving of the title *scripture* than others, save in particular segments of the tradition where one *sūtra* is given extraordinary status (e.g., Nichiren Buddhist veneration of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Japan). Even in a community with a scriptural book or canon that is clearly more sacred than other revered texts, the decision to reserve the status of “scripture” only for the former can be a debatable one. For example, the Purāṇas function scripturally across a wide spectrum of Indian society even though they are not *śruti*; in rabbinic Jewish tradition, the Mishnah is held to be the oral Torah, also revealed at Sinai; the *ḥadīth* serve in Islam not only to clarify and to explain but to supplement the Qur’ān as a religious authority, especially in matters of practice; and in Therāvada Buddhist traditions, texts such as Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* are greatly revered even though they do not report the “word of the Buddha” (*buddhavacana*) in the strict sense.

**AS A RELATIONAL CONCEPT.** As these considerations indicate, neither form nor content can serve to identify or to distinguish scripture as a general phenomenon. It is true that the form, content, or other specific attributes of a text may be perceived by the faithful as the guarantee of the extraordinary character of their major scripture (note, for example, Muslim faith in the literary “matchlessness” [*i’jāz*] of the Qur’anic style). Nevertheless, from the historian’s perspective, the sacrality or holiness of a book is not an *a priori* attribute but one that is realized historically in the life of communities who respond to it as something sacred or holy. A text becomes “scripture” in living, subjective relationship to persons and to historical tradition. No text, written, oral, or both, is sacred or authoritative in isolation from a community. A text is only “scripture” insofar as a group of persons perceives it to be sacred or holy, powerful and meaningful, possessed of an exalted authority, and in some fashion transcendent of, and hence distinct from, other speech and writing. That which is scripture for one group may be a

meaningless, nonsensical, or even perversely false text for another.

This relational, or contextual, quality is of paramount importance for the study of “scriptural” texts in the history of religion. The “scriptural” characteristics of a text belong not to the text itself but to its role in a community. “Scripture” is not a literary genre but a religio-historical one.

**ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT.** Whatever the subtleties and difficulties of defining it, scripture is a major phenomenon in the history of religion and thus an important concept in the study of religion. Whence it came and how it has come to serve as a general as well as a culture-specific concept are questions basic to understanding and using it intelligently and adequately as a descriptive term.

**The idea of a heavenly book.** The development of the concept of a scriptural book is often linked to the notion of a heavenly book. The idea of a heavenly book containing divine knowledge or decrees is an ancient and persistent one found primarily in the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds and in subsequent Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. As Leo Koep points out in *Das himmlische Buch in Antike und Christentum* (Bonn, 1952), it can take one of several forms, typically that of a book of wisdom, book of destinies, book of works, or book of life. References to a celestial book or tablet of divine wisdom appear in ancient Babylonia and ancient Egypt and recur in almost all subsequent Near Eastern traditions, apparently as an expression of divine omniscience. Geo Widengren argues (*The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book*, Uppsala, 1950; *Muhammad, the Apostle of God, and His Ascension*, Uppsala, 1955, esp. pp. 115–139) that such a book was coupled in the ancient Near East, in Judaism, and finally in Islam to a messenger figure to whom the book is given in a personal encounter with God or validated through such an encounter (e.g., Moses at Sinai, Muḥammad on his ascension). The idea of a book of destinies or fates, in which the allotted days and assigned end of human lives are written down, was known, as art and textual evidence show, in ancient Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and especially late antiquity. Israel also knew this motif (see *Ps.* 139:16–17), and the sealed book mentioned in *Revelation* 5:1ff. may well be a Christian instance of it. The similar notion of a book of works, in which a heavenly record of human deeds is kept, was also widely known of old. References to the writing down of good and bad deeds, often in connection with a last judgment, are found among the ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, and Hebrews, as well as Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian writers of later antiquity. However, it is in the biblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity (cf. *Ex.* 32:32, *Phil.* 4:3) that the notion of a book of life, in which the names of God’s elect are inscribed, finds a special place.

While the precise relationship of these ideas to that of a revealed scriptural book remains to be clarified, elements of all of them do appear in the developed concepts of Jewish and Christian scripture and the Qur’ān, and all of them do

reflect the antiquity and strength of the idea of a written book as the repository of divine knowledge or divine decrees.

**The idea of a sacred book.** The quintessential "book religions" are those that trace their lineage in some fashion to the Hebrews, the prototypical "people of the book." It is not yet fully understood how Judaic ideas of the sacred or heavenly book joined historically with influences from other sectors of the ancient Near Eastern world and the growing status of the book in later antiquity to set in motion the "book religion" that plays so large a role in Christianity, Manichaeism, and, most spectacularly and pronouncedly, in Islam. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has, however, pointed to the gathering strength in the period after Alexander the Great, and especially from the second century CE, of the idea of a sacred book or "classic," a text that carries ultimate authority. Christianity's increasing emphasis on authoritative writings, the point of departure for which was Jewish reverence for the Torah, was especially decisive in this development. Mani's self-conscious effort to produce books of scriptural authority reflects the degree to which by his time (third century CE) a religious movement had to have its own scripture or scriptures to be legitimate. The fourth century in particular seems to have been a time when scriptures, notably the Christian and Manichaean, were coming into their own. But it was the Qur'an's insistence upon the centrality of the divine book, given now in final form as a recitation of divine speech, that carried the development of book religion to its apogee in the early seventh century. Later developments such as Sikhism's veneration of its "book" (*Granth*) have to be seen as but new variations on a theme already fully articulated in Islam, the book religion *par excellence* (Smith, 1993, ch. 3, pp. 45–64).

**Semantic background.** The most basic meaning of *scripture*, as of its Indo-European cognates (Ger., *Schrift*; Ital., *scrittura*; Fr., *écriture*; etc.), is "a writing, something written." It is derived from the Latin *scriptura*, "a writing" (pl., *scripturae*). The Latin word translated the Greek *graphē* (pl., *graphai*), which corresponded in Classical and Hellenistic usage to the postexilic Hebrew use of *ketav* (pl., *ketuvim* *kitvei*) as a term for a writing: a letter, inscription, written decree, or a holy writing. These terms could even refer to the written law (Plato, *Laws* 11.934)—in the Septuagint, specifically to the Mosaic law, or Torah (*1 Chr.* 15:15). In the Mediterranean world of later antiquity, pagan, Jewish, and Christian writers used these words (or their plurals) to refer to various kinds of written texts in the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Septuagint, and the Old Testament books of the Latin Vulgate (e.g., *Ex.* 32:16, *Tob.* 8:24, *Ps.* 86:6). By the time of the Christian New Testament writers, however, the terms had gradually come to be used especially for sacred books, above all the three divisions of the Hebrew scriptures, the Pentateuch (Torah), Prophets (Nevi'im), and (other) Writings (Ketuvim). In early Christian usage, they were extended also to the Gospels, Pauline epistles, and other texts that eventually formed the New Testament.

In Jewish and Christian usage, the singular forms were applied primarily to a particular passage or particular writing,

and the plurals were used in a collective sense for the whole. For example, *Daniel* 10:21 employs *bi-khetav emet* (Septuagint, *en graphē alētheias*; Vulgate, *in scriptura veritatis*), "in a true writing/scripture"; *Luke* 4:21 employs *hē graphē autē* (Vulgate, *haec scriptura*), "this [passage of] scripture" (referring to *Is.* 61:1f.), and *Matthew* 21:42, *Acts of the Apostles* 17:11, and other passages employ *hai graphai* (Vulgate: *scripturae*), "the [Old Testament] scriptures." The Christian fathers used both singular and plural forms collectively to refer to the Old and New Testament books (e.g., *Epistle of Barnabas* 4.7, 5.4; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.24.3, 2.27.1). Although in the New Testament these terms in singular or plural refer uniformly to scriptural as opposed to other kinds of writings, there is some dispute as to whether the singular *graphē* (*scriptura*) ever refers collectively to the whole of the scriptures or only to one or a part of one of them (as in *Jn.* 10:35 or *Rom.* 11:2).

Other terms, usually also associated with writing or books, were used in like fashion to refer to sacred, authoritative writings. In Greek, *grammata* (sg., *gramma*, "what is written; writing"; Lat., *littera*), used generally for literature or documents (as in the Septuagint, where it usually translates the Hebrew *sefarim/sifrei*, plural of *sefer*, "writing, book"), came in Hellenistic times, in pagan as well as Jewish and Christian contexts, to refer especially to any sacred text (e.g., *2 Tm.* 3:15, *ta hiera grammata*; Vulgate, *sacras litteras*). Scriptural citations in the New Testament and early Christian works are commonly introduced by the formula used in the Septuagint: "(As) it is written," (*Kathōs gegraptoi* (*Mt.* 4:4, 4:6, 21:13; *Rom.* 1:17, 2:24; *1 Cor.* 2:9, etc.). The Greek *biblos* ("book"), or, more commonly in the Septuagint and New Testament, its diminutive form, *bibliōn* (pl., *biblia*), referred originally to any type of written document—scroll, codex, book, or letter. In the Septuagint and subsequent Jewish and Christian Greek sources (for example, the Greek preface to *Ben Sira*, 1 and 2 *Maccabees*, 1 *Clement*, and the writings of Philo Judaeus, Josephus Flavius, and Origen), although not in New Testament writings, terms like *hiera biblos*, "sacred book," and (*hierai*) *bibliōi*, "(sacred) books," were used for the Pentateuch or the entire Hebrew scriptures. From the earliest days of the Christian church, in which "the books" (Heb., *ha-sefarim*; Gk., *ta biblia*) of Hebrew scripture were "the bible of the church" (Hans von Campenhausen, *Aus der Frühzeit des Christentums*, Tübingen, 1963, pp. 152–196), the Greek neuter plural *biblia* or the Latin *biblia* (a neuter plural formed from the Greek) was used in Christian contexts to refer specifically to the Hebrew scriptures. It appears that by the end of the second century, or at least by the end of the fourth, the generally recognized writings of the emerging New Testament were also included in "the books" (Harnack, 1928). In the Middle Ages (certainly from the twelfth century and probably earlier), *biblia* came to be treated commonly as a feminine singular, whence such modern singular forms arose as *the Bible*, *die Bibel*, and *la Bibbia*.

In the New Testament (e.g., *Rom.* 1:2, *2 Tm.* 3:15) and in the works of the Christian fathers, and as well as in Philo and Josephus, various adjectives were added to the words for “scripture(s)” and “book(s)” to emphasize their special, holy character: for example, *hieros*, *hagios*, *sanctus* (“holy”); *theios*, *divinus* (“divine”); *theopneustos* (“divinely inspired”); *kuriakos* (“of the Lord”). Such usage had much earlier precedents, such as the use in Ptolemaic times of *ta hiera gram-mata*, “the holy writings,” to refer to the sacred Egyptian hieroglyphic literature in contrast to the demotic writings, or the use of the Hebrew equivalents, *kitvei ha-qodesh* (“the Holy Scriptures”) in rabbinic writings, or *sifrei ha-qodesh* (“the sacred books”) in later, medieval writings, for the sacred scriptures.

**Generalization of the concept.** In these ways, the Jewish and Christian worlds gradually appropriated the use of such terms as *scripture*, *holy scripture(s)*, *books*, *sacred books*, and so forth, primarily as proper-noun designations for their own holy texts. In particular, as Christian culture and religion triumphed in the Mediterranean, especially in southern Europe, (*sacred*) *scripture* came to mean specifically the Christian Bible. Such limitation of the idea of scripture to a proper noun referring only to the Old and New Testaments continues even today in many Christian circles. Apparently the use of *scriptura(e)* and *scriptura(e) sancta(e)* (or their European-language equivalents) to designate sacred texts in general was until recently, chiefly in the past century or two, unusual at best. *Scriptura* could, of course, always be used as a neutral term for any writing, and it is not a giant step from such usage to a generalized concept of religious writings in other cultures. For example, such a concept may be present when Peter the Venerable (d. 1156) contrasts “*sacra scriptura*,” or Christian scripture, with Muhammad’s “*nefaria scriptura*,” the Qur’an (*Summa totius haeresis saracenorum*, cited in James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, Princeton, 1964, p. 206). A clearer example of the notion of “scripture” as something appearing in many cultures can be found as early as the mid-thirteenth century. In 1254, at the Mongol capital in Inner Asia, the Franciscan traveler William of Rubrouck warned a group of Nestorian Christians about tactics in their coming debate on religion with Buddhists and Muslims before the Great Khan: “They do not have faith in [our] Scriptures; if you recite one [scripture], they will recite another” (in Anastasius van den Wyngaert, *Sinica Franciscana*, Florence, 1929, vol. 1, p. 294).

Such Western generalization of the concept of scripture was, to be sure, hardly novel. In the Muslim world, the concept of sacred “scripture” (*kitāb*) had already been generalized in the Qur’an, where especially Jews and Christians are spoken of as “people of scripture” (*ahl al-kitāb*). The term designates those communities that have previously received “books” or “scriptures” (*kutub*) sent by God, which were then eclipsed in the perfection of his final “sending” of the Scripture [*al-kitāb*], the Qur’an, through Muhammad. *Ahl al-kitāb* status was early extended to Zoroastrians and Man-

daeans, and later even in some cases to Hindus because of the Veda. There seems, however, to be no evidence of direct influence of the Muslim use of *kutub* on modern Western generic usage. It appears rather that it was the growing Western awareness in the eighteenth century of the Indian Veda in particular, and the Chinese “classics” to some degree, that led to wider acceptance of the idea that there were other scriptures and books of wisdom beyond the Bible that could claim great antiquity as well as importance in their own cultures in much that way the Bible has in the West.

In English, clearly generic use of *scripture* can be found at least as early as the eighteenth century. George Sale wrote in the introduction to his Qur’an translation of 1734 that the Qur’an shares things with “other books of scripture” (pace the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which can cite no use of *scripture* to refer to non-Christian religious texts before 1764). By the nineteenth century, the generic use of the term or of approximate equivalents like *sacred writings* was much more common. The ambitious series of translations of the great scriptures of the world that was inaugurated in 1879 by Max Müller under the title “The Sacred Books of the East” reflects a clear recognition by this time in the modern West of the worldwide existence of texts that function “scripturally” in ways analogous to those of the Hebrew or Christian Bible.

The extended use of the term *scripture* (or its linguistic equivalent in languages other than English) for any particularly sacred text is now common in modern Western usage and widely current internationally. Even the word *Bible* has been used, albeit less often, in a similarly general sense to refer to any sacred scripture (e.g., Franklin Edgerton’s reference to the *Bhagavadgītā* as “India’s favorite Bible” in *The Bhagavad Gītā, or Song of the Blessed One*, Chicago, 1925). However, *scripture* is the term that today is most commonly and properly used as the generic term for particularly sacred texts.

**CHARACTERISTIC ROLES.** Scriptural texts function in a variety of ways in a religious tradition. Some of their major functions can be categorized as follows.

**Scripture as Holy Writ.** The significance of the written word of scripture is difficult to exaggerate. If the etymology of *scripture* and its common association with the written or printed word have strengthened the tendency in Judeo-Christian culture (and even more in modern, print-dominated society) for Westerners, especially scholars, to treat sacred books primarily or even exclusively as written documents, there is good historical cause for this practice. With the important exception of the Hindu world, the writing down of the major religious text(s) of a community has been typically an epochal event in its history, one often linked to the crystallization of religious organization and systematic theological speculation, as well as to the achievement of a high level of culture. The written scriptural text symbolizes or embodies religious authority in many traditions (often replacing the living authority of a religious founder such as

Muhammad or the Buddha). Such authority is well expressed in the aforementioned formula, "(As) it is written," which typically prefaces a biblical citation (whereas in the more orally-oriented Islamic and Buddhist worlds, respectively, "God says" introduces a Qur'anic citation, and "Thus I have heard" is the traditional introduction to a *sūtra*).

Although the fixity and authority of the physical text have been felt particularly strongly in the last two thousand years in the West, the idea of an authoritative sacred writing is not limited to one global region. The "book religion" that Siegfried Morenz contrasted with "cult religion" has flourished notably in the Mediterranean (Morenz, 1950) and, later, the wider Western and Islamic worlds, yet veneration for the sacred word as book has also been important, if not always central, in most of the Buddhist world of Southeast and East Asia. It has been suggested, for example, that there was an early Mahāyāna cult of the book (*sūtra*) that vied with the *stupa* relic cult (G. Schopen, in *Indo-Iranian Journal* 1[1975]: 147–81), and high esteem for the written *sūtras* has been generally prominent in Mahāyāna tradition. Furthermore, it was in India, not the West, that the veneration of the written text reached one of its historical heights in the Sikh movement (the Sikh focus on the sacred book reflects, to be sure, considerable Muslim influence, much as the emphasis of the Mormons on the book reflects Judeo-Christian attitudes to Holy Writ). It is also in Asia that some of the more recent book religions have appeared, as for example, Babism in Iran and Tenrikyō in Japan.

One of the overt ways in which the importance of the written text is evident is in the religious valuation of the act of copying and embellishing a sacred text. Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions boast especially strong calligraphic traditions for their scriptures. In the Islamic case, for example, where a considerable iconophobia has held sway in the public sphere, magnificent calligraphic renderings of the Qur'anic word have been not only the favorite expression of the art of the book but also the chief adornment of mosques and most other monuments. Mani (d. 277), the founder of Manichaeism, placed great importance on painting pictures to illustrate his own canon of sacred books, and Manichaean missionary concerns led to the production of beautifully embellished calligraphic texts as well as a picture volume on the teaching. Here holy book and holy image come together (Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy*, Leiden, 1982). Besides furthering fine calligraphy and manuscript illumination, Christians have extensively cultivated rich illustration of the Bible, notably in early medieval Byzantium and late medieval western Europe (Ernst von Dobschütz, *Die Bibel im Leben der Völker*, Witten, 1954, pp. 82f., 123f.). In Tibetan Buddhist monasticism, the zealously careful production of the Bka'-gur (Kanjur) and Bstan-gur (Tanjur), whether by hand copying or block printing, is yet another example of the great attention paid to the form of a sacred written text.

**Scripture as spoken word.** Whatever the central place of the written word, the oral roles of scripture in religious

life are equally striking. Morenz (1950) touched upon the oral dimension of every sacred text when he traced the creative genius of "book religion" to the Israelite capacity for "hearing," in contrast to the "seeing" that dominates "cult religion," such as that of ancient Greece. Scripture's importance rests ultimately on the perceived importance of the sacred word that the memorized or written text seeks to fix forever (Heiler, 1979, pp. 339ff.). However much the written text dominates in any form of book religion, its presence in a community is still primarily realized orally and aurally. Historically, all but a small minority of those who have "had" a scripture have been illiterate, and even in highly literate communities the scriptural text is regularly "heard" in worship, teaching, and preaching even more than it is "seen" in silent reading. It is only relatively recently that any kind of reading has become a silent rather than an oral activity (Balogh, 1926–1927; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, London, 1982).

Recitation or reading aloud of scripture is a common feature of piety, whether in Islamic, Sikh, Jewish, or other traditions. Many scriptures have primary or secondary schemes of division according to the needs of recitation or reading aloud in the community (e.g., the 154 divisions of the Torah for synagogal reading over a three-year span). Great esteem is given to the person who knows all of the sacred scripture "by heart"—in the Muslim case, such a person is honored with the special epithet, *ḥāfiẓ*, "keeper, protector, memorizer [of the Word]." In the early synagogue and in the early Christian church, the reading aloud of scripture in worship was fundamental to religious life (Ismar Elbogen, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst*, Leipzig, 1913, chap. 3; Paul Glaue, *Die Vorlesung heiliger Schriften im Gottesdienst*, Berlin, 1907; but cf. Walter Bauer, *Das Wortgottesdienst der ältesten Christen*, Tübingen, 1930), just as it was in pagan cults of the Hellenistic Mediterranean, such as that of Isis (Leipoldt and Morenz, 1953, p. 96). The Jews call both the reading of scripture and the passage read *miqra'* (*Neh.* 8:8), "what is recited, read aloud, a reading." In Talmudic usage, the term came to refer to the Torah (Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings that make up the Tanakh, or Hebrew scriptures. An ancient Greek synagogal inscription in Jerusalem reads, "The synagogue is for the reading aloud (*eis anagnosin*) of the Law" (*Theologischer Begrifflexikon zum Neuen Testament*, ed. L. Coenen et al., Wuppertal, 1967–1971, vol. 1, p. 153). The Greek *anagnosis* or *anagnosma* (Lat., *lectio*) was also used in the same sense in the early Christian context for public scripture reading on the Jewish model. The Arabic word *qur'ān*, which is not attested in pre-Qur'anic sources, probably derives from *qeryānā*, the Syriac equivalent of *miqra'*, and is likewise a verbal noun meaning "reciting, recitation" (Graham, 1984).

In other traditions, notably the Islamic and Buddhist, the recitation of the sacred word is even more central to religious practice, despite the frequently massive importance of veneration of the written text in the same traditions. In

Hindu practice, the oral, recited word completely eclipses the importance of any written form of it and presents the most vivid instance of the all but exclusively oral function of scripture. It appears that until the coming of Islam stimulated the writing down of the Avesta as a book, the most sacred Zoroastrian texts, those in Old Persian, were similarly transmitted and used only orally, in recitation, while the less sacred commentaries (*Zand*) and other religious books in Pahlavi had long been written (Geo Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans*, Stuttgart, 1968, pp. 245–259).

Oral use and even oral transmission of scripture should not be confused with folk oral tradition in which verbatim accuracy is not aspired to (i. e., in which “formulaic composition” predominates: see, for example, Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, Mass., 1960). The technical mnemonic methods of oral transmission have sometimes been so highly developed for sacred texts as to render the oral text more reliable than the manuscript tradition—notably in the Islamic and Hindu cases. In any event, few if any scriptural books have the verbatim uniformity popularly associated with the written and especially the printed word. Even the “fixation” of a sacred canon in writing has rarely meant that one definitive documentary text is universally recognized or that variant texts disappear.

**Scripture in public ritual.** Whether the written or the oral text of a scriptural book predominates, the most visible religious role of a scripture is in public worship. In some instances a scripture is explicitly a ritual text that orders and explains the rite itself, as in the case of the Brāhmaṇas in Vedic tradition. In other cases it is a sacred text either recited in ritual acts (e.g., the Qur’ān, the Zoroastrian *Gāthās*, the Vedic *mantras*, and the Shintō *norito*, or ritual prayers taken from the Engi-shiki) or read aloud from a written copy in communal worship, as in Jewish or Christian practice. Such recitation or reading is often a major, if not the central, element in worship. In some traditions, particularly initiatory sects, the sacred character of a text has led to its being kept secret from the masses and read or recited only by and for initiates. Leiboldt and Morenz (1953, pp. 88ff.) have treated this scriptural “secrecy” in the Mediterranean world in some detail.

Sometimes, perhaps most prominently in the case of the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs, a sacred exemplar of the holy scripture even plays a functionally iconic role in the liturgical setting. Ritual veneration of the physical sacred text is also seen in the Tibetan monastic practice of circumambulating the *sūtra* collection of the monastery, the solemn procession of a copy of the Qur’ān in some Muslim funerary rites (Edward W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 5th ed., London, 1860, p. 514), and Jewish ritual handling of Torah rolls in the synagogue.

Scripture also characteristically provides the fundamental elements of ritual language, the basic vocabulary as well as texts for hymnody (as in the Christian Psalter), sermon (e.g., the marketplace preaching, or “speaking about *sūtras*”

[*shuo-ching*], of Buddhist monks in Sung China; see Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion*, Cambridge, Mass., 1976, p. 179), and especially prayer (as in the Lord’s Prayer, the Psalms, the Shema, the Fātiḥah, or the Triratna). Its words frequently form the texts used for recitation in the major rites of passage and other important festival and ritual occasions of a tradition: for example, surah 36 (*Yā Sīn*) is recited especially on 15 Sha’bān (the Muslim “Night of Quittance”) and at Muslim funerals, as is the *Lotus Sutra* in mortuary and ancestral ritual in Nichiren Buddhist practice in Japan, or the Gāyātri *mantra* (*Rgveda* 3.62.10) at the Upanayana ritual of Hindu initiation.

Ritually important passages of a scriptural text are sometimes pulled together into special anthologies or collections that serve the liturgical needs of the community, as in the Christian breviary, psalter, lectionary, or evangeliarium; the Pāṭimokkha selection from the Vinaya that is recited as a regular part of Buddhist monastic life; or the *Blue Sutra*, an abridgement of the *Lotus Sutra* that is used in the ritual of the modern Reiyūkai Buddhist sect in Japan (Helen Hardacre, *Lay Buddhism in Contemporary Japan*, Princeton, 1984). Whether it is read or recited aloud, given physical prominence as a ritual object, or cited or paraphrased in prayers, homilies, hymns, or litanies, a scriptural text plays one of the most visible and important parts in worship in many traditions.

**Scripture in devotional and spiritual life.** Closely tied to public ritual, and equally or more important to religious life, is the role of scripture in personal devotion and in mystical, ascetic, and other traditions of spiritual discipline and realization. Aspects of the devotional role of scripture have been treated in the preceding sections, but some further points bear mention.

Recitation and reading aloud are not only central to formal worship (see above), but also to private devotion and the practice of diverse spiritual disciplines. *Meditatio* in the Christian tradition was from the start basically an oral activity of learning the text “by heart” through reciting with concentrated attention and reflection. In turn, as Jean Leclercq has eloquently articulated in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* ([1957] 1974), meditation formed the basis of the monastic *lectio divina*, the active, oral reading of and reflecting on scripture upon which the monk’s discipline was based in Pachomian, Benedictine, and other rules. Buddhist monastic discipline similarly focuses upon constant meditation upon scripture through reading and recitation, whether in monasteries of Sri Lanka Therāvada, Tibetan Vajrayāna, or Chinese Mahāyāna. Study of the Vedas which centers on recitation and memorization—is said in the *Laws of Manu* (2.166f.) to be the highest austerity, or ascetic discipline. In Islam, Qur’anic recitation (*qirā’ah*) is a public and private form of devotional practice that also demands mindfulness of and meditation on the meaning of the sacred text as well as recitative technique (cf. K. Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur’ān* [Austin, Tex., 1985]).

Closely related to meditative practices involving scriptural texts are the recitation of and meditation upon formulas derived from scripture. The chanting of Hindu and Buddhist *mantras* and of Buddhist *dhāraṇīs*, as well as the recitation of Šūfī *dhikr* litanies (many of which are Qur'anic) are major examples of formulaic use of scripture in devotional life.

Other uses of scripture in devotional and spiritual life abound. The setting of scriptural texts to music has been important in diverse traditions of piety. Chant and hymnody are prominent foci for scriptural use in both public and private worship in Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and other traditions. Similarly, reverence for the physical text of scripture and ritual copying or illumination of it have also been important parts of piety in many scriptural traditions. Nor is it by chance that most reform efforts in religious communities with a scripture mandate a "back to the book" piety that seeks (usually literal) authority in the pages of scripture. Where human beings may prove changeable, the sacred word stands secure for every generation as the unchanging guide to individual as well as group morality and action.

**Magical and superstitious use of scripture.** All of the previously discussed uses of scripture can tend at times toward bibliolatry—the treatment in an extreme fashion of scripture as an object of worship or a locus of supernatural power. Such treatment of scriptural texts results from the power associated with the written and spoken word. Bibliolatry can take many forms, from doctrinal emphasis on the infallibility of the literal text to overt bibliomancy, the superstitious or magical use of scripture. The answer to a problem or guidance for any occasion is often sought through scripture divination. Thus turning to sometimes random, sometimes specific pages of scripture in times of adversity, uncertainty, bereavement, or the like is a time-honored but little-documented use of scripture in Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and many other traditions. Similar examples of bibliomancy as a protective or empowering device are placing a Bible in the bed of a sick child as a curative, using a tiny Qur'ān or Bible as a protective charm or talisman, seeking omens in scriptural verses, or dissolving slips of paper with words of scripture on them in a drink to make a medicine (Rühle, 1941; Bertholet, 1949).

Quasi-magical notions of scripture can even be seen in "orthoprax" religious life. The proper chanting or reading aloud of scripture is commonly seen as efficacious in a variety of situations. In Theravāda Buddhist practice, collections of scriptural texts known as *parittas* are recited by the monks to ward off the actions of demons and to bring prosperity, health, and other blessings (Lynn de Silva, *Buddhism: Beliefs and Practices in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, 1974, pp. 81–90). In Vedic sacrifice, the efficacy of the rite depends upon the absolutely accurate recitation of the sacred text. Talmudic literature contains many statements about the proper biblical passage to be used for protective or other magical purposes (M. Grunwald and Kaufmann Kohler, "Bibliomancy," *The*

*Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1901–1906). In Nichiren Buddhism, the sacred formula of adoration of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Daimoku*, is said to encapsule the whole of truth in a single invocation. Protestant doctrines of the literal inspiration of every word of the Bible have been used to justify very diverse ideas and practices. Numerology and alphabet mysticism connected with a scriptural text are as prominent in such traditions as those of the qabbalists and the Šūfis and well known in virtually every religious tradition (cf. Bertholet, *op. cit.*, 1949, pp. 14–17, and Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, 1993).

**CHARACTERISTIC ATTRIBUTES OF SCRIPTURE.** The scriptures of any given religious tradition possess a number of characteristic attributes. Some of the most important are as follows.

**Power.** The major functional attributes of scripture are bound up with the power felt to be inherent in scriptural word. Both the written and the spoken word carry a seemingly innate power in human perception. At the most basic level, a word is an action: words do not signify so much as they perform. Hence to speak a name ritually is in some measure to control or to summon the one named. For the faithful, a sacred word is not merely a word, but an operative, salvific word. Its unique, transformative power often rests upon its being spoken (or written) by a god (as in Jewish, Christian, or Muslim tradition). In other cases, the sound itself is primordial and holy (as in India), or the message or teaching embodied in the scriptural word is considered to be salvific truth, with little or no reference to a divine origin (as in many Buddhist traditions).

The power inherent in the spoken word is vividly seen in the idea of a divine, creative word. Many traditions have cosmogonies in which a god creates the world or men or animals through speech: as, for example, the Memphite cosmogony of ancient Egypt (in which the god Ptah creates by thought and speech), *Genesis* 1:3 ("God said, 'Let there be light . . .'"), Qur'ān 40:68 ("[God] said, 'Be,' and it was"), or tribal mythologies, such as those of the African Dogon and South American Witoto peoples, in which the gods create with a spoken word (Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, London, 1965, pp. 16–40; Konrad T. Preuss, *Religion und Mythologie der Uitoto*, Göttingen, 1921–1923, pp. 633–634).

The power of the spoken word of scripture also appears in a variety of other religious contexts, most prominently in worship (see above; the most extreme case may be that of Veda recitation in Brahmanic ritual). Also noteworthy are the aforementioned practices of *mantra* recitation in Hindu and Tantric traditions, where the sound of the Vedic formula or hymn enables the worshiper or meditator to appropriate the power of a particular divinity (*devatā*); the *dhikr*, or "remembrance," practiced in Šūfī tradition in Islam, in which Qur'anic or other phrases or texts are chanted or sung as a means of focusing consciousness and being upon God; and Buddhist chanting and singing of *sūtras* (and *mantras*) as a meditative practice or act of worship.

The power of the written word has already been touched upon. The Jewish designation of holy books as "that which renders the hands unclean" expresses well the widespread sense of the power latent in every copy of scripture. In most scriptural traditions, such perceived power manifests itself within both "orthoprax" and "popular" spirituality in tendencies towards bibliolatry—the treatment of scripture as an object of worship or as a locus of supernatural power. Magical notions of the power that lies in a copy of a sacred scripture are an extreme extension of religious sensibility to the presence of divine wisdom or ultimate truth in a scriptural text. Even the laying of the hand upon a copy of the Bible in swearing a legal oath of truthfulness echoes such notions.

**Authority and sacrality.** The power of scripture is clearly expressed in its most common attributes as well as its most common uses. Of all those attributes, the most essential ones are the extraordinary authority and sacrality of scripture vis-à-vis other texts. In both theocratic and nontheocratic religious traditions, scriptural books possess a supramundane authority and degree of holiness for the faithful that no other texts can command.

The authoritative character of scripture is most vivid in those cases in which a sacred text provides the legal basis of communal order. This is especially evident in the Jewish tradition, where the written Torah is the pediment upon which the entire edifice of Jewish life is built, and in the Islamic tradition, where the minimal legal prescriptions and much larger body of moral injunctions found in the Qur'ān are viewed as the ultimate bases of the *shari'ah*. It is also evident in the role of the Vinaya ("discipline") section of the Tripiṭaka, the "law" of Buddhist monasticism.

The extraordinary sacrality of scripture is seen in almost every facet of its use in communal life. The way in which a scriptural text is handled, the formulas of respect that accompany its mention, citation, recitation, or reading, and the theological doctrines that are developed to set it apart ontologically from all other texts are common evidence of such sacrality. Among many examples that reflect this kind of holiness of scripture are the enshrinement of the ornate Torah scrolls in their special cabinet, the ark, in the synagogue; the tokens of homage paid to the *Ādi Granth* in Sikh worship; the "Little Entrance" procession in Eastern Orthodox churches (or, in Anglican divine service, standing) to honor the reading of the Gospel; the ritual purification required for recitation of the Qur'ān; the merit held to accompany recitation of Buddhist *sūtras*; the virtue attached to copying or memorizing sacred texts such as the Bible or the Qur'ān; the aforementioned folk traditions of the healing power of scripture; and the stress placed upon the eternal, transcendent nature of the Veda, the Torah, the Qur'ān, the Buddhist *sūtras*, and so on.

There is often more than one level or degree of sacred texts in a community. As already noted, it is possible in most traditions to distinguish among various sacred books one text or corpus of texts that is the scripture *par excellence* (e.g., the

Qur'ān, Hebrew Bible, Avesta, or Veda). Other texts or groups of texts (e.g., the ḥadīth, Mishnah, Pahlavi books, or Purāṇas) may, however, achieve a quasi-scriptural status as sacred books of nearly or effectively equal importance in the life of the tradition. While, strictly speaking, such texts may be denied fullest scriptural status, they often function in a community in remarkably similar ways to the major scripture of other traditions. Conversely, the supreme scripture in a tradition may play a functionally less important role or less visible role in piety than a theoretically second-order sacred text. India offers the best example of this in the major Vedic Saṃhitās, or collections, which are recognized as the supreme holy texts in all Hindu traditions yet functionally are virtually a *scriptura abscondita* for many Hindus, who make greater active use of non-Vedic or later Vedic texts. In Hindu tradition, an explicit distinction is made between *śruti* ("what is heard," the product of the *ṛṣi*'s revelatory experience) and *smṛti* ("what is remembered"), the former applied to the whole of the diverse corpus of Vedic texts, the latter to later sacred texts. Yet in many Hindu sectarian groups, especially those of a devotional (*bhakti*) bent, the most sacred scriptural texts in actual use are *smṛti* texts such as the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Such popularity of a *smṛti* text takes nothing away from the sacrality of the Veda; rather, it indicates the tendency to elevate ever more texts to the functional status of sacred scripture in everyday piety.

**Unicity.** A further quality of scripture is its perceived unicity of source, content, and authority in the community involved with it (see especially Leipolt and Morenz, 1953). No matter what the historical origins or textual development of its constituent parts, and no matter how diverse those parts, a scriptural corpus is commonly conceived of as a unified whole, both in its ontological origin as sacred word and its internal consistency and authoritativeness as sacred truth. The many originally separate texts that were collected into the Egyptian *Book of Going Forth by Day*, the diverse "holy scriptures" of the Hebrew or Christian Bible, the myriad *sūtras* of the Chinese Buddhist canon, or the various kinds of Vedic texts revered as *śruti*—these and other bodies of sacred texts are each conceived as an ontological and conceptual unity, whether that unity is one of God's holy word (as in ancient Egypt or Islam), the Buddha-word, or the "sound" (Skt., *śabda*; Chin., *sheng*) of ultimate truth or wisdom heard by the ancient Indian and ancient Chinese sages. If scriptural texts such as the Qur'ān or the *Book of Mormon* can boast a single-source origin with considerable historical justification, the greatest number of scriptures in the world represent collections of material put together not by one person or even one generation but by a gradual process of recognition of sacred texts usually referred to as "canon formation." Nevertheless, once the community has reached general agreement about which texts it accepts as sacred, it is common for it to affirm unity of origin as well as message in its scriptural corpus.

**Inspiration and eternity/antiquity.** The tendency to see one's own formal or informal canon of scriptures as a uni-



fied whole is closely linked to the characteristic development of a theory of inspiration, revelation, or some other kind of suprahuman and primordial origin for its words. All of the prophets and teachers whose words become part of scripture are held to have been inspired in their speech (as with the Hebrew prophets), to have been given God's direct revelation to their fellows (as with Muhammad and Mani), or to have had an experience in which they transcended the contingent world to grasp ultimate reality (as in the Buddha's enlightenment). Whether the sacred word is vouchsafed to them in a vision or an auditory experience, or given to them as heavenly tablets or books, the earthly bringers of the holy word have been chosen to be, or have become through their own special power, a bridge between the transcendent and the mundane.

The divine word is also commonly held to be eternal, as in the role of Vāc ("speech") as primordial being or goddess in Vedic thought, in the Hindu concept of the eternal Veda (cf. *Laus of Manu* 12.94, 12.99), in the Muslim doctrine of the uncreated, eternal Word of the Qur'an (which, as God's very Word, is an eternal divine attribute), in the Sikh concept of the *bani* ("word") that preexists and extends beyond the gurus and the *Ādi Granth* (W. Owen Cole and Piara S. Sambhi, *The Sikhs*, London, 1978, p. 44), and in Buddhist ideas of the eternal Dharma or the *buddhavacana* ("Buddha word") in Mahāyāna thought.

A scripture is virtually always conceived to be, if not eternal, at least of great antiquity. The Japanese *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, the Avesta, the Veda, and the Five Classics of China are all prime examples of sacred texts to which hoary antiquity is ascribed. The authority of a scripture is guaranteed both by its divine or otherwise supramundane origin and by its venerable character as an age-old, if not eternal, word that has been preserved by unbroken and faithful transmission through every generation. These characteristics hold whether the sacred text embodies revelation from a god, preserves the teaching of a master or the wisdom of ancient sages, reports the sacred myths or history of a community, or records the inspired utterances of seers and prophets.

**RELATED DEVELOPMENTS.** When a scripture emerges in (or helps to create) a religious community, its presence engenders a variety of new phenomena and its influence extends beyond the specifically cultic or confessional sphere into the wider culture as well. A development tied to the emergence of scripture in some traditions is the delineation of an authoritative "canon" of scripture to set it apart from other texts. Traditionally thought of as basic to scripture, the idea of a canon of sacred texts is historically a secondary development in which a community reaches some kind of consensus about the texts that have made it what it is and that loom most important in the tradition and life of that community.

Another development is the growth of traditions of scriptural interpretation by means of which scripture is appropriated as a continuing authority in new circumstances. New circumstances often raise the question of translating the

sacred word of scripture, which can pose a dilemma for theories of scripture in the community. Finally, the importance of scripture in religious life has important consequences for culture more broadly. Some of the most evident of these are in the spheres of language, literature, and the arts.

**Canon formation.** The perceived unicity of scripture leads often to a felt need for an authoritative "canon" (from the Greek *kanōn*, "rule, measure"), or "list," of texts that properly belong to sacred scripture—properly, that is, in the view of those who want to prescribe authoritative as opposed to less authoritative or nonauthoritative texts. Nowhere in the history of religion has the process of canon formation been a clear or unequivocal one, dependent as it usually has been upon the pressure of defining one "orthodoxy" against one or more competing interpretations of faith. In most cases, it is finally not the fiat of a council or individual religious authority seeking to forge a canon in order to delimit orthodoxy, but rather the usage of the majority that determines any canon of sacred and authoritative scripture. This has been especially true of the three traditions in which "canonical" lists of scriptural books have received the most attention: the Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist traditions.

In other cases, such as the Manichaeic, Islamic, and Sikh traditions, the early recognition of a single scriptural corpus has meant that the problem of diverse texts eligible for admission or exclusion from a "canon" has hardly arisen. In the Hindu case, the general reverence for the four major Vedic collections, which together with subsequent related texts like the Upaniṣads are given the status of *śruti*, has been complemented by the popular veneration and use of a variety of other texts that strictly rank only as *smṛti* (e.g., the Puraṇas; see Coburn 1984) but whose sacrality and centrality in Hindu religious life is indisputable. In general, the vast array and diversity of functionally sacred texts, as well as the tendency to be inclusive rather than exclusive in defining even *Veda* or *śruti*, have worked against the elaboration of any clear idea of a canon in the Hindu case.

The influence of ideas of a designated canon of scripture such as one finds in Christianity in later antiquity or in classical Therāvada Buddhist thought has been undeniably great. An excellent example is the Chinese Buddhist (as also Daoist) recognition of a *zang*, or "basket," of scriptural texts on the original model of the "Three Baskets" (Tripiṭaka) of Pali scripture. What modern scholarship often rather glibly calls a "canon" in traditions as diverse as the Jain or the classical Chinese (Confucian) would not be recognized uniformly in these traditions—or at least not until relatively recent times, and then often under the influence of Western scholarly conventions—as a body of scripture (or "classics") analogous to a biblical canon.

**Interpretation.** Every text that achieves scriptural status in a religious community elicits extensive popular and scholarly exegesis and study of its contents. The varied kinds of scriptural interpretation are fundamental elements in a community's relationship to its sacred book, for they provide a

bridge between the text and its application to life and between the era in which the text originally arose and all subsequent ages in which it must serve changing needs in new situations. Every application of a scriptural text, from superstitious, talismanic use to use in theological argument, is in some degree an act of interpretation and must be considered a part of scriptural *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, the history of the text as scripture. Even some scriptural books themselves are actually interpretation and elaboration of previous scripture: thus the Abhidhamma segment of the Pali Tipiṭaka is a philosophical expansion on the basic teaching of the Buddha in the Sutta Pitaka, much as the speculation of the Upaniṣads is built upon the earlier Vedic texts.

All scriptural communities boast impressive formal traditions of scholarly interpretation, many of which form the basis of all learning in their respective traditions. The imposing knowledge of a good Talmudic scholar, a learned Therāvada *bhikkhu*, or a first-rate Muslim *ʿalim* is focused upon knowledge of the interpretive tradition tied to the Torah, Tripiṭaka, or Qurʾān, respectively, and its vast oral traditions and written literature. Most esoteric and mystical traditions also rely heavily upon various forms of scriptural exegesis to buttress their ideas. Less formally, the preaching or teaching of a religious message normally relies heavily upon more or less sophisticated and overt forms of exegesis of a scriptural text, just as visual or musical artistic rendering of scriptural themes provide commentary on and interpretation of the meaning of scripture.

**Translation and resistance to translation.** A common phenomenon related to the role of scripture in changing circumstances is the development of the idea that a scripture cannot be translated from its original, sacred language: only the original form is felt to carry the inspired and exact meaning or sound. This idea is very old: Ancient Egyptian sacred texts were not translated, even when Nubians ruled Egypt in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE (Leipoldt and Morenz, 1953, pp. 66f.). Resistance to translation of the “Arabic Qurʾān” (surah 12:2, 41:3, et al.) has been especially strong in Islamic tradition. Even when translated by Muslims, the Arabic text is customarily still written or printed beside (or interlinearly with) the translated text of the Persian, Turkish, Swahili, Malay, or other language, since the Arabic text alone is the speech of God *ipsissima verba*. (It should, however, be noted that vernacular translations of the Qurʾān in many of the diverse lands where Muslims abound have long been circulated and used for the necessary business of comprehending the text; this has not diminished appreciably the reverence for the Arabic Qurʾān, but it has facilitated the transmission of the meanings of the text.) Translation of Vedic texts is unheard of in Hindu tradition, and Jews similarly have placed overwhelming importance upon retaining the original Hebrew text of the Bible in worship (with the major exception of the several centuries in later antiquity when the Septuagint translation was the text used by hellenized Jews).

It is, nevertheless, also the case that translations can come to be viewed as themselves inspired, and their texts as sacred. Salient examples can be found in later antiquity, where the Septuagint was considered an inspired text by hellenized Jews and later by Origen and the other Christian fathers. The Latin translation of Jerome (d. 419) that later developed into the “Vulgate” has been treated as an inspired text by the Roman Catholic church (and was used exclusively for mass until Vatican II), and the major Protestant vernacular translations have been widely held to carry the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (Resistance to the vernacular mass and resistance to acceptance of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible are recent evidence of just how effectively sacred a translation can be.) Another important example is the Buddhist case, in which the Chinese translations of Sanskrit *sūtras* became the holy texts still used in Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions as the scriptural canon.

Some traditions, however, have little or no objection to the translation of scripture into vernaculars accessible to diverse peoples. As one might expect, such an attitude is most often found in explicitly “missionary” and “universalistic” traditions such as the Christian, Buddhist, and Manichaean, and that of the Mormons. The Mormon case is doubly interesting in this regard, as Joseph Smith himself claimed to have translated the *Book of Mormon* from its original “reformed Egyptian” (*Mormon* 32) idiom into English. Here even the earthly “original” of the scriptural “prophet” is a translation of the original golden tablets of the angel.

**CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES.** The influence and importance of a scriptural text extends far beyond the specifically religious sphere in a culture. One of the most obvious ways that scripture leaves its imprint upon culture and society is through its effect upon language. A scriptural text, whether in its original language or a translation, may provide a major standard for the “classical” grammar and style of an entire language, as in the case of the Qurʾān for Arabic, the “Classics” for Chinese, the Authorized (“King James”) Version of the Bible for English, or the *Lutherbibel* for German. In any culture with an important scripture, the linguistic influence of scriptural vocabulary, metaphors, similes, linguistic conventions, and so forth, can be pervasive. Examples from English phrases and images from the Bible alone make this vivid: “hardening of the heart,” “a land of milk and honey,” “wise as Solomon,” “a good Samaritan,” “the patience of Job,” “the meek shall inherit the earth”, or “killing the fatted calf.”

Scripture also serves as one of the richest sources for later literature in a cultural tradition. Nowhere is this more evident than in Western Christendom, where one need only think of Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, or Goethe to recognize the generative influence of the Bible upon this tradition’s greatest authors. Scripture is, in the first instance, immensely influential as the ultimate proof text in most traditional cultures. This is especially vivid in Muslim writing and speaking, where the Qurʾān is the final word to be quoted as the seal

to any argument, large or small. Western Protestant traditions are also traditionally rife with this kind of use of the Bible. Scripture usually provides the great symbols and lasting images in a culture, whether it is the figure of Abraham in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim cultures (in each case with different emphasis and textual basis), Agni (Fire) in Hindu culture, or the Buddha's great "going forth" to seek enlightenment in Buddhist cultures.

Scripture also has considerable influence upon the arts in most cultures. The most obvious areas of influence are two: the elaborate calligraphy, referred to above, that is commonly developed for the scriptural text itself and manuscript illumination and illustrations that depict scriptural stories and ideas. The massive importance of the calligraphic art in Islam, the scriptural tradition *par excellence*, deserves particular stress. In Islamic culture, calligraphy and abstract (e.g., "arabesque") design associated with calligraphy extend far beyond the scriptural text to provide even the central forms of decoration in Islamic architecture. Prime among the calligraphic subjects used on Islamic buildings is the Qur'anic word.

In Western culture, traditions of Bible illustration expanded well beyond the biblical text itself to become major strands in all of the visual arts. The stained-glass masterpieces of western and eastern Europe and the Byzantine mosaics of Ravenna and Balkan Europe are major religious examples. The masters of Western art all employed scriptural themes and events in their works, whether explicitly in icons or the Sistine Chapel ceiling, or more subtly in the works of a Chagall or Rouault. In India, iconographic presentation of scriptural figures and stories has always been a vastly important part of the Hindu scene. In the Buddhist world, the most striking example of scriptural representation in the arts is probably the vast stupa of Borobudur, around whose facade stretch hundreds of stone reliefs telling in pictures myriad scriptural stories of the Buddha. The *mandala* in Tibetan and East Asian Buddhism often presents a pictorial condensation of a major event or teaching from the *sūtras*.

The scriptural books of a culture also often provide the themes and even the literal text for musical compositions of all kinds. This is very familiar in the great works of European music, but it is also evident in the music of Hindu, Islamic, and other cultures as well—especially since the line between "secular" and "sacred" music is if anything less clear in most other cultures than it is in the West. "Religious" chant and hymnody (largely drawn from or based on scripture) remain in many of these traditions the most popular forms of musical performance. The Hindu and Islamic worlds provide numerous examples of this.

The cultural consequences and influences of scripture go far beyond these few examples. Even these suggest, however, the immense importance of scripture in human affairs. In and of themselves, scriptures can be forces for good or evil—as Shakespeare noted, "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." What is ultimately significant about scripture

as a concept and a reality is its role in expressing, focusing, and symbolizing the faith of religious persons and their communities around the globe, both for the faithful themselves and for the outsider who seeks a glimpse into another world of faith and discourse.

**SEE ALSO** Biblical Exegesis; Biblical Literature; Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas; Buddhist Books and Texts, article on Exegesis and Hermeneutics; Calligraphy; Canon; Epics; Literature, article on Literature and Religion; Qur'ān; Śāstra Literature; Sūtra Literature; Upaniṣads; Vedas.

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The articles contributed to *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*, edited by Frederick F. Bruce and E. G. Rupp (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1968), vary in quality but provide useful information on particular traditions. Several solid articles can be found in *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Frederick Mathewson Denny and Rodney L. Taylor (Columbia, S. C., 1985), which contains survey-discussions of some major world scriptural traditions; and a series of more analytic studies are collected in *Rethinking Scripture*, edited by Miriam Levering (Albany, N. Y., 1989), that offer critical re-evaluations of scripture as a generic and specific category. A newer, comparative collection of essays is: Hendrik M. Vroom and Jerald D. Gort, eds., *Holy Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1997).

In addition to works cited in the foregoing article under the specific topics treated, several others deserve special mention, espe-

cially those that address the problem of the semantic background of the terms *scripture*, *book*, and so forth found in the West: "Schrift," in *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*, 2 vols. in 3, edited by Lothar Coenen et al. (Wuppertal, 1967–1971); "Bible [Canon]," by Bezalel Narkiss, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem, 1971); and "Écriture sainte [1. Le nom]," by Hildebrand Höpfl, in the *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1926).

Few studies have been devoted to the functional roles of scripture within the various traditions. For the Christian Bible, special note may be made of Ernst von Dobschütz's *Die Bibel im Leben der Völker* (Witten, West Germany, 1934) and his "Bible in the Church," in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1909); "Écriture sainte et vie spirituelle," by Jean Kirchmeyer et al., in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. 4 (Paris, 1960); Beryl Smalley's *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1952); Hans Rost's *Die Bibel im Mittelalter* (Augsburg, 1939); *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3 vols., edited by Peter R. Ackroyd, C. F. Evans, G. W. H. Lampe, and S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge, 1963–1970). See also the important statement on the problem by Wilfred Cantwell Smith: "The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (June 1971): 131–140. Also useful are Adolf von Harnack's "Über das Alter der Bezeichnung 'die Bücher' ('die Bibel') für die H. Schriften in der Kirche," *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen* 45 (1928): 337–342; Oskar Rühle's "Bibel," in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Berlin, 1927); and Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–154 (concerning Christian oral treatment of the Bible).

On the role of the Qur'ān in Muslim life, see Navid Kermani, *Gott ist schön: Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran* (Munich, 1999); W. A. Graham, "Qur'ān as Spoken Word," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, edited by Richard C. Martin (Tuscon, 1985); *idem*, "The Earliest Meaning of 'Qur'ān,'" *Welt des Islams* 23/24 (1984): 361–377; *idem*, *Beyond the Written Word*, pp. 79–116; Paul Nwyia's *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique* (Beirut, 1970); and Kristina Nelson's *The Art of Reciting the Qur'ān* (Austin, Tex., 1985). On the use of scripture in Indian life, see Frits Staal, *Nambudiri Veda Recitation* (The Hague, 1961); Thomas B. Coburn, "'Scripture' in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 (1984): 435–459; Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–78.

WILLIAM A. GRAHAM (1987 AND 2005)