# Views about Scripture: a key to a well-used book?[1]

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## Introduction

How does a person's view of holy writ influence his or her understanding and use of translated sacred writings?

In the 1930s Eunice Pike entered Mexico to conduct linguistic fieldwork among the Mazatec. She also endeavored to translate the Christian Scriptures into the Mazatec language. What Eunice found out, however, is that the people's former beliefs about holy writ influenced their ability to use the book she had produced (Pike 1960). You see, the Scripture was considered *holy* (she later realized more accurately should be translated as "powerful") and as such, only those who were *pure* were worthy to read it. And, in the tradition of the day, being pure meant avoiding sexual intercourse. Needless to say, this put a damper upon the use of Scripture, especially by married couples.

This is not just a phenomenon of past times, nor is it limited geographically to the Americas. In a letter written in April 1995, an Australian couple expressed their concern that the people of Papua New Guinea with whom they work seemed to retain their traditional religious values. They viewed the translated Scriptures as something magical, mystical, and beyond understanding. Their traditional view of holy writ affected the acceptance and use of the translated Scriptures.

Likewise, Harbsmeir (1988) in his treatise on translation of the Chinese Bible, asserts that preexistent ideas about religious concepts have shaped people's understanding (or misunderstanding) of holy writ. He says that while translation of the Bible has had a profound effect upon the very form of literature in various European societies, there "was never a chance for the Bible to define literacy" (i.e., have a formative influence on the receptor language itself) in societies with a long literary history, such as Chinese and Sanskrit. For example, he suggests that the Chinese word *sheng-*. chosen to represent holy, carries with it various preexistent connotations (i.e., semantic domains) that differ quite radically from those of the English word *holy*—in part defined by and brought into the English language by the Bible itself. In other

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words, Europeans initiated, or developed, their understanding (semantic domain) of these theological concepts, based on the meanings associated with them in the Bible. Other cultures with long literary traditions have had different understandings of these same concepts, based on the terms chosen to represent their theological concepts. Their understanding of these translated terms, therefore, often radically differs from that of the translators. The second part of the Chinese word for Holy Bible, *jing*, also carries with it meanings based on a preexisting Chinese literary tradition that have influenced the understanding of what the Bible is. The word translated as Bible, jing, is the term that is used for the Chinese (Confucian and Buddhist) classics. These classics are literally chiseled in stone and are, therefore, understood as unchangeable. The connotations associated with jing have subsequently interfered with the acceptance by Chinese Christians of many less literal and more accurate translations of the Bible (Zetzsche 1997).

These three cases are not unique. It seems universal that a people's belief concerning what is holy influences their view of anything that is presented as holy writ. There is a tendency for others to apply to Christian holy writ the same principles they apply to their own forms of holy writ. Given this phenomenon, it would seem important for us in South Asia to understand the views of holy writ of the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim people with whom we are working. In the first section of this article, my goal is to explain what I have discovered to be the major elements of belief about holy writ among these major world religions and to compare these with the Christian view of holy writ. In the second section I want to present a kind of case study about how the religious views of the Newar people of Nepal might affect their view of the Scriptures of another religion.

It is my hope that this article will inspire wider discussion and lead us to further investigate what factors may influence the view of holy writ among specific groups around the world. As an anthropologist, I would caution against overgeneralization, which has led to misinterpretation of cultural phenomena in the past, on the part of both anthropologists and missionaries. Although a people's view of holy writ may be influenced by their stated religion, we must remember that many practice their own unique form of these world religions, which may, in turn, lead to slightly different belief systems, or cultural practices based on those belief systems. Sanneh (1989:211) has stated, for example, that Islam takes a quite different form from continent to continent. I would suggest that Buddhism and Hinduism also follow this pattern. Further, I would suggest that the world religions of South Asia may take slightly different forms from people group to people group, and possibly even village to village, and that these different forms may influence the people's view of holy writ in slightly different ways. Each one of us may face a challenge like Eunice Pike, the Australian couple, or the translators of more recent versions of the Chinese Bible, either now, or in the future. For this reason it is up to us to discover what factors influence the peoples with whom we work and how these beliefs may affect the use or disuse of translated Scriptures.

## Views of holy writ

### *What is holy writ?*

It would probably be best to begin by defining what is meant by "holy writ." Webster's dictionary (1975:547) defines holy writ as "a writing or utterance having unquestionable authority." Webster uses the Bible as an example of holy writ, suggesting that the authority being referred to is the Christian God. However, all major religions have holy writ, so I would suggest that the authority referred to in these cases is god or gods, by whatever name you choose to call him, her, or them.

When discussing holy writ, the term *holy* must also be defined. Webster's (1975:546) provides several definitions as found below:

1. set apart for the service of God or gods: sacred; <the priesthood>

2. a. characterized by perfection and transcendence: commanding absolute adoration and reverence; <the Trinity>

   b. spiritually pure; <a man>

3. a. evoking or meriting veneration or awe; <the cross>

   b. being awesome, frightening, or beyond belief; <a terror>

4. filled with superhuman and potentially fatal power.

I find that none of these seems to fully capture what is meant by holy according to the indigenous religions of South Asia. For these religions, holy seems to translate as the unknown, mystical, or unknowable. This view of holy influences what people believe about the purpose, use, and understandability of that which is presented to them in the form of holy writ.

### *The Muslim view of holy writ*

Although Islam changes from place to place, Sanneh (1989:211) has stated that Islam's "universal adherence to a non-translatable Arabic Qur'an remains its characteristic feature." The result of this phenomenon is that form (the Arabic Qur'an only) takes precedence over meaning. Therefore, Muslims of South Asia, even though they neither speak nor understand Arabic, venerate the Qur'an and Arabic (considered the heavenly language) as holy. How does this influence what presuppositions Muslims in South Asia hold concerning other sacred writings? Perhaps it is likely to lead to the belief that holy writ is something magical and mystical, or beyond the understanding of mere mortals and, therefore, restricted only to the religious specialist.

### *The Hindu view of holy writ*

When talking about Hinduism, one must begin with a disclaimer: Hinduism is many things to many people. This is part of its defining characteristic. Renou (1961:16) has cautioned that in

attempting to define Hinduism one risks overgeneralizing to the point that "we fail to grasp the infinite diversity of forms which constitute Hinduism." This must be kept in mind when discussing the Hindu view of sacred writings.

The Hindu worldview generally places much more emphasis on the religious experience of the sages and gurus than it does upon the form of holy writ. This is not to say that the form is not important—the energy committed to the learning of Sanskrit in the education process would prove the contrary. But the many translations of the Vedic texts into various languages (Renou 1961:26) would indicate less rigidity toward form than that of the Muslims. More emphasis is placed upon meaning but, due to a high degree of illiteracy among the Hindu laity, this meaning is generally available only to religious specialists.

In Hinduism the experience of worship is apparently more important than the meaning of holy writ. In summarizing the elements of beliefs and practices among Hindus, Renou (1961:30–44) suggests that ceremonial ritual ablutions and food restrictions are the primary focus of the Hindu's personal worship. Of secondary importance is the recitation of various mantras, many of which have no meaning yet are considered pure in form. Renou notes that in these prayers "we find a tribute to the word as form, for many of the syllables (notably in the religious practices of Tantrism) have no meaning while others consist of a simple mention of the divine name such as *'Riim(a)! Riim(a)!'*" (p. 32). The study of scripture seems to take low priority for the average Hindu. Renou (1961:33) puts it at the bottom of the list of the elements of personal worship and does not include it among the obligatory personal practices as defined by Hindus.

Central to Hinduism is the theme of liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth (Renou 1961:42–43). Liberation can be obtained through various means. Such means include external practices, which are deciphered for the layman by the religious experts, who seem to place more reliance upon personal religious experience (mysticism) than on the sacred texts. Renou (p. 56) states that "Hinduism is a spiritual experience: it invites one less to thinking than to cultivating a presence." Further, he writes "religious facts tend to be translated into a world of symbols, those 'secondary' forms which are often more interesting than our direct transcriptions of reality." Truth is hidden in the text, waiting for each religious practitioner to discover what it means for himself or for his client.

So, what conclusions can we draw from the literature on Hinduism in respect to the view of the average Hindu toward sacred writings? (1) There is reliance of the layman upon the religious practitioner, and (2) the religious practitioner relies upon his mystical experiences as well as the mystical nature of the holy writ he interprets.

## *The Buddhist view of holy writ*

Given the "extraordinary diversity of languages utilized for the expression of Buddhism" (Renou 1961:26) throughout Asia, one would be tempted to assume that meaning might take precedence over form in the importance of holy writ in Buddhism. Although this may be true for some forms of Buddhism, it certainly is not for Tibetan Buddhism, the variety in South Asia with which we are most familiar. In his definitive work on Tibetan Buddhism, Waddell (1958:156) suggests that the Tibetan Buddhist sacred books are "held materially sacred, placed in high places and worshipped" by the lamas, the religious specialists of Tibetan Buddhism. Likewise, Tsering (1988:118) reports that the recent religious texts, although they were created by monks,

are regarded “as materially holy, and the texts themselves are treated with reverence.” This mystical or magical view of holy writ seems to be perpetuated by Buddhist laymen, who may keep small pocket editions of the mystical Sutras, which Waddell (p. 163) suggests are filled with mystical formulas that are mostly unintelligible, repeated as incantations to ward off misfortune.

As further reinforcement of the mystical nature of holy writ, the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures are kept, for the most part, in the hands of the lamas and hidden away from the Buddhist laity (Waddell 1958:165–166). Tsering (1988:110) suggests that the importance of religious specialists in Tibetan Buddhism is a remnant of the shamanism that preceded it throughout most of South Asia. He concludes that the laymen, for various reasons, are kept from learning meditation or reading the sacred texts and are relegated to a life of “making merit and avoiding trouble from evil spirits.” This practice places much reliance of the laity upon the religious specialist. Waddell (1958:168) also describes the ritualistic ordered steps of wrapping and unwrapping the books—how they are held on the lap in only a certain fashion—and the prescribed prayers associated with the reading of holy writ. Surely, this emphasis on the ritualistic handling of scripture also adds to the perception of the importance of the form of holy writ over its meaning.

The frequent repetition of mystical rosaries is also central to the worship of the lamas. These prayers are often a recital of mystical words and sentences (and their essential syllable) that may lack semantic meaning but are thought to lead to nirvana by their mere utterance (Waddell 1958: 148–149). Waddell suggests that this mystic emphasis upon sound has also had its impact upon holy writ. He states that one volume of the twenty-one-volume set called *Transcendental Wisdom* magically condenses the power of the critical revision of the first twelve volumes into a few letters, and finally to the single letter A, which is believed to be “the mother of all wisdom” since it is contained in the initial position of all syllables, words, and discourses (p. 161).

Another view of holy writ among Buddhists has been posited recently by Corless (1993). He has suggested that Buddhism relies more heavily upon the truth as it is revealed by the Buddha to each individual, while Christianity relies more heavily upon the truth as revealed in Scripture. According to Corless, Buddhism regards the inherent clarity or bodhi-mind as that which is manifested in Buddha, whereas in Christianity God is reflected in the soul and this distinction leads to a more authoritative role for the Bible as God’s Word in Christianity than for the sacred texts in Buddhism. In Buddhism the text is secondary to the inherent clarity of each person, but in Christianity cultivation of the image of God in the individual soul must always be checked against the primary authority of the text.

## *The Christian view of holy writ*

Perhaps the most succinct view of the Christian toward holy writ (the Bible) is that it is “the word of God in the words of human beings” (Dupuis 1991:170). This view, in turn, leads to the conclusion that its meaning is, therefore, to be understood. Thus, it is more important that the message is understood than that the form is preserved. As proof that meaning is to take precedence over form, Christians often cite the translation of the New Testament originally into Koine Greek—the common language of that day, understood and spoken by the common class.

They also refer to the struggles of Martin Luther and John Wycliffe in their endeavors to translate the Bible into the common language of their homelands. Sanneh (1989:211) considers this attitude toward the translatability of holy writ to be a major distinction between Christianity and Islam.

It is important not to overlook the fact that in the past, and even today, some Christians have not held the view described above. Centuries ago men and women were burned at the stake—often at the injunction of the religious leaders of the church—for attempting to translate the Bible into the common vernacular. And today, although they may not be burning people at the stake, many churches (and even major denominations in the past) regard the form of the Bible as holy and untranslatable. Their members scorn any translations except the authorized King James Version, criticizing or censuring versions of the Bible understood by the masses.

## The Hindu-Buddhist interface

One of the most interesting observations I made while researching literature on this topic is what I would like to call the Hindu-Buddhist interface. Recently I came upon the term "Hindu-Buddhists" (Shah 1993:2) used to describe many of the Tibeto-Burman peoples of Nepal. The author was distinguishing these people as different from Hindus, yet he did not elucidate on the differences. Although Hinduism and Buddhism have historically been presented as distinct religions, I found the number of similarities between the two (at least as they are represented in South Asia) to be astonishing. Two such examples that I have already noted are (1) the central theme of liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth and (2) the emphasis placed upon the role of the religious practitioner, rather than the individual, in the interpretation of the scriptures.

The similarity seen between the two religions should not be a surprise, given their common heritage in Vedism. But, it seems today that, as Shah's (1993:2) article would suggest, there is little need to define many people as either exclusively Hindu or Buddhist. Today, in much of the folk Hinduism and folk Buddhism, as practiced by many in South Asia, there is very little difference. As I read Waddell's famous work on Tibetan Buddhism and Renou's treatise on Hinduism, I often felt as if I were reading about the beliefs of the same group of people. Tsering (1988:35) has suggested that the Vedic roots of both religions have led both to a very similar worldview, and that throughout South Asia "a swarm of metaphysical Buddhas appeared, many of them as thinly disguised Hindu gods" (Tsering 1988:46). Perhaps the terms Buddhist and Hindu have been rendered useless in some parts of the world, and the term Hindu-Buddhist would be a more accurate portrayal of the folk religion practiced by many of the peoples of South Asia.

If we can accept the term Hindu-Buddhist, then we can define the characteristics of this religion basically as

- heritage in Vedism
- importance of appeasement of evil spirits
- dependence on religious specialists (including the shamans)
- dependence on mysticism or magic, and

- more emphasis by the religious practitioner on personal revelation (experience) than on the revealed truth of holy writ.

To the Hindu-Buddhists, their holy writ is authoritative in a magical and mystical sense that is only revealed to the religious specialist, to whom they must go for interpretation.

## Views of holy writ: The Newar example

I began this article by using two cases that illustrate how the view of holy writ has influenced the use of the Scriptures in Mexico and Papua New Guinea, and a third that illustrates how a preexisting worldview has cast a formative influence on how Christians have come to understand holy writ in China. I now want to present a more in-depth case study in order to show how a South Asian group's beliefs about holy writ may perhaps influence their use of other sacred texts.

Bedhert and Hartmann's (1988) work about the Newar Buddhists of Nepal discusses many of the religious beliefs and practices of Newars. I want to focus on how the Newars' emphasis upon the mystical may interface with their use of and beliefs about any holy writ. In traditional Newar Buddhism there are many institutions that promote secrecy, or mysticism, concerning things religious. Initiation into the Vajracaryas (the higher of the two sects of Newar Buddhists) is strictly on the basis of caste—one must be born into that community. That is the only possible way to be introduced to the secrets of the Vajrayana ritual (Bedhert and Hartmann 1988:3). Some of the shrines (such as Agamachen) may be entered only by Newars who have undergone certain Tantric initiation rites. Readings of sacred texts are in Sanskrit and classical Newari (p. 3). Apparently the secretiveness promoted by the structure of this form of Buddhism, along with the limited understandability of the sacred texts (due to language barriers), helps foster an attitude of scripture as something that (1) cannot be understood by common folk and is, therefore, mystical and (2) needs a specialized person to carry out its prescribed rituals. Bedhert and Hartmann (1988:4) point out that even though these religious specialists carry out complicated ceremonies and have memorized the texts for them, most of them lack the ability to explain the meanings of these rituals and thus add to the mystical (or non-understandable) view of sacred writings, even among the priests. To the Buddhist the word *holy* is probably best translated in English as "unknown" (Paut 1993:47) or maybe even "unknowable." This is sure to affect their view of any holy writ.

Further, Buddhism in Nepal, for the most part, has become the domain of the Tibetans. The Tibetan language and culture have exerted their influences on the religion and culture of all the non-Tibetan Buddhists. The Tibetans are looked to as the experts in the field, and according to the authors, they have "systematically translated Buddhist terminology into Tibetan" (Bedhert and Hartmann 1988:5). As an example, an article in Himal carried the following quip:

> A Tibetan Scholar saw no reason for the station [Radio Nepal] to promote Tibeto-Burman languages [by broadcasting programs in these languages]. Earthly affairs can be conducted in Nepali, he said, and spiritual ones in Tibetan. (Shrestha 1994:32)

Such views about the proper form for holy writ may indeed influence Buddhist people's beliefs and the use or disuse of any product presented to them as a form of holy writ.

Although the literature would seem to suggest that *mystical*, *secret*, and *unknown* are all suitable synonyms for the word holy among Buddhists of South Asia who follow Tibetan Buddhism, I would be remiss if I neglected to report the changes that seem to be occurring among these same peoples. According to Bedhert and Hartmann's (1988:15) article on Newari Buddhism, "modem Buddhism" is making the canonical texts available to lay persons through the translations into various modern languages. The texts were originally in Pali and, therefore, understandable and accessible only to educated monks. So far only a small portion of these canonical texts are available in Nepali and Newari, but, in the future, exposure to such writings might change people's views about the understandability of scripture.

## Conclusion

In cases where literature that might be considered to be holy writ is being produced, what impact will people's existing beliefs about the form and nature of holy writ have upon their acceptance and use of this material? From the literature we can deduce that the South Asian Muslim view of holy writ might possibly limit their acceptance of anything except Arabic, and that this belief may inhibit their understanding of the meaning of the text, since few in the region understand that language.

I have demonstrated that although holy writ is considered translatable to the Hindu-Buddhists throughout South Asia, minor emphasis is placed on its use in the individual's life. I have also argued that the Hindu-Buddhists view holy writ as something mystical (non-understandable) and limited to use and interpretation by only the religious specialists. All of these factors may affect people's use of what they consider to be holy writ.

I have also used a specific case study from South Asia (Newar) as an example to illustrate the type of factors that may influence the acceptance or general use of anything presented in the form of holy writ. Language developers will have to understand these factors in order to work effectively.

Marku Tsering (1988:29) said that rather than merely translating a text into someone else's language, "we need to know how our listeners think, and present our message in ways that make sense to them. This means taking their culture, their language, and their worldview seriously."

To this I would simply add that we need to understand not only how our listeners think, but also how they are likely to receive the meaning of the text *because* of the way they think. It is important to take the time to understand the cultural framework through which they view life. Any new holy writ will be filtered through the cultural presuppositions placed upon it by their existing beliefs.

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