

## Texts as agents of religious change

Although the study of texts may not command the same esteem it once did in the study of religion, it is still a central practice in the field; and it must, apparently, remain so, since texts absorb and cultivate important strands of religious ideology. At least one aspect of textual life is that texts are at the receiving end of processes of religious innovation and creativity, so they reflect rich historical processes of development.

Although it is obvious to scholars that texts, including foundational ones, grow and change, the image harbored in relation to them within religious traditions tends toward one of a stable, monumental truth that is deemed eternal and static. Yet although scholars are critical of this vision, they perhaps conform to it beyond what is apparent on the surface. All too often, texts are considered flat repositories of historical and doctrinal information, while their creative dimensions – and certainly their agency - are disregarded; texts, we are told, don't do anything in the world, they are not subjects; it is only people that interpret them and imbue them with meaning. Although many scholars have acknowledged that texts have a life to them, they are considered dead agents.

This session is conceived as an attempt to revitalize the study of texts in religious studies, through a consideration of the idea of agency in religious texts. For one thing, texts are anything but static, not only in the sense that they change over time, but by being the products of continuous creative activity, they evolve and transform. Whether resulting from flexible oral tradition or through interpretive genius regarding written texts, perhaps in face of challenging or changing historical conditions, texts absorb some of the deep, reflective moments of religious life and vitality. Once they do, we may suggest that they can be considered as the receptacles for a vibrant religious consciousness – or better, consciousnesses – that continues to influence society as a whole through the specific people that engage with them. Texts are not finite sets of ideas or doctrines, but rich complexes of processes that cross from the doctrinal and philosophical, through the poetic, aesthetic and inspirational, to the social and institutional. When people engage with texts, something happens not only because people have rich imaginative capacities, but also because the texts give home to lively vectors of thinking. Although such a formulation stretches the boundaries of our epistemological comfort zone, the great conscious effort that is invested in the formation or study of a text – of which we are well aware as scholars - may allow us to conceive of texts as agents, or at least to pause before we continue to view them as nothing more than paper and ink.

This session is designed as an assessment of the creative power of texts in generating process of religious change, which will allow for a preliminary consideration of the notion of texts as agents.

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