

## Introduction

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Starting from the assumption that reading is a situated activity—historically contingent, ideologically grounded, and culturally organized—this special issue offers an analysis of practices of reading sacred texts in different religious communities and moments in time. More specifically, this collection of papers considers the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions and for each tradition provides one article focused on contemporary settings and another on past historical epochs.

The papers embrace a multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach. Different dimensions—usually separate domains of inquiry, investigated by different research traditions—define the matrix of their investigation:

1. *Texts, deciphered in their form and content.* While going beyond textual exegeses, the articles pay close attention to text structures and themes, from deictic and intertextual references to semantic constituents and genres. These elements are important resources for understanding not only the scope of the reading activity but also the contexts and modes of text apprehension.

Linguistic and pragmatic analysis of focal texts is particularly precious for investigations of reading practices of which we have no direct documentation, such as those related to historical periods far from the contemporary. This analysis offers insights on how religious texts often shaped and mediated the forms through which people approached and experienced the Divine.

For instance, central to Vincent Barletta's study of the scribal and lectorial activities of crypto-Muslim communities within sixteenth-century Aragon (Spain) is the analysis of the forms of deictic reference encoded in traditional Islamic texts (translated into Ibero-Romance). These texts were secretly copied and read by Aragonese Muslims forcibly converted to Christianity, as a way to continue to practice Islam. Barletta highlights that deictic references in extant manuscripts often point to performative

and multiparty textual events, such as collaboratively performed prayers and rituals. We can thus speculate that even when carried out clandestinely, under hostile and strict ruling, religious literacy practices in Aragonese crypto-Muslim communities continued to involve communal gatherings and verbal performances.

Through a semantic analysis of the biblical term for reading, paired with an examination of narrative scenes of reading in the Bible, Daniel Boyarin (1992) has convincingly argued for the need to historicize the notion of reading, showing that in the culture in which the Bible was produced, and which is reflected in the biblical text itself, reading is a speech act, an act that is oral, collective, and public. In the article included in this special issue, Boyarin further develops his argument on the importance of situating historically and culturally practices of text apprehension, with an analysis of the generic matrix of the Talmud. Boyarin suggests thinking of the Talmud as an instance of the late-ancient genre of the *spoudogeloion*, also referred to as Menippean satire, a genre characterized by the irreverent mixing of other genres, high and low, such as philosophy and humor. Boyarin's genre and textual analysis brings to light new aspects of dialogism in the Talmud, and the profound influence of Greek literary context on Rabbinic culture.

The analysis of text form and content takes a semiotic orientation in Sterponi's study of medieval reading of the book of hours. Books of hours were highly decorated manuscripts, and the images therein contained did not solely have an ornamental function. Close examination of these illuminations reveals that they usually indexed other texts and external sources, linked in different ways to the excerpts of biblical texts and the prayers in the manuscript. The juxtaposition of words and images thus created a layered semiotic landscape, which prompted and scaffolded the reader's exercise of memorizing and remembering. Moreover, it mobilized an interpretive procedure that was concurrently literal and metaphorical, projecting the devout reader into meditation and embodiment of virtuous life (Huot 1996).

## 2. *Community's meaning and scope of the practice of reading sacred texts.*

Reading as a cultural practice is intimately interrelated with local customs and dispositions pertaining to people's relationship with knowledge and tradition, the role of texts in the conservation and transmission of such cultural heritage, and in the specific cases considered in this special issue, the role of texts in the communication between human beings and the Divine. In different historical epochs and religious communities, reading praxis assumes different meanings and scopes. It is thus crucial to investigate reading ideologies and their manifestation and reproduction

through norms and conventions defining the legitimate uses of texts and the procedures of interpretation for each community of readers.

Ayala Fader offers a particularly insightful approach to the analysis of literacy ideologies and the ways they inform the shaping of religious subjectivities and a community's engagement with sacred texts. Drawing on Webb Keane's (2007) notion of *semiotic ideologies*, Fader attends to cultural/religious beliefs about signs and to the interplay between different signifying practices as they shape multilingual literacy socialization activities in a contemporary Hasidic community in Boro Park, New York. Fader shows how an overarching ideology that holds signs as not arbitrary and claims the existence of one truth given by God, shapes the ways Hasidic girls are taught to approach and interpret texts, both secular and religious. Besides providing an intriguing case study of literacy socialization practices in a nonliberal religious community, Fader's analysis offers critical insights on commonly assumed dichotomies, such as tradition and modernity, the religious and the secular, orality and literacy.

Another illuminating illustration of how reading praxis assumes different meanings in different religious communities is offered by Leslie C. Moore. Moore examines the apprenticeship of Fulbe (Maroua, Cameroon) children into Qur'anic reading and writing practices. In the Fulbe community, like in much of the non-Arabophone Islamic world, Muslims read or listen to the reading of the Qur'an without understanding the lexico-semantic content of the text. Accurate decoding and memorization of suras (and eventually of the whole Qur'an) are the goals of Qur'anic instruction. Teachers do not address issues of text comprehension and apprentices do not ask instructors or more advanced practitioners about text meaning. Yet engagement with the sacred text is highly valued as an act of piety, discipline, and moral growth, and as such it features centrally in the everyday practice of Islam.

Oral decoding of text, without requiring or necessitating text comprehension, is also characteristic of ritualistic reading of the Zohar in contemporary Southern Moroccan Jewish communities (Bonfil 1995; Goldberg 1990). Reading as a practice of devotion and a means of spiritual growth is not primarily an intellectual exercise; rather, it prioritizes an involvement deeply rooted in the intertwining of the emotional and sensorimotor experiencing of the text.

3. *Participation roles and reading modes.* In accounting for the *situatedness* of reading practices, notably for the circumstances of engagement with sacred texts, the contributors to this special issue examine the configurations of participation, the reading modes, as well as the other semiotic resources being employed in the focal literacy/religious events.

Moore, for instance, has highlighted that within the context of a Qur'anic lesson, which often gathered a large number of children, teachers privileged personalized, one-to-one relationships with apprentices as a way to respond to each child's unique learning trajectory. In addition, through a thorough multimodal analysis, Moore has revealed how competent rendering of Qur'anic texts implies clearly defined bodily demeanor, orientation to reading artifacts, and sequences of coordinated nonverbal actions, all considered as fundamental gestures signifying proper engagement with God's Word.

Patricia Baquedano-López's study of the practice of reading prayers, in particular the Act of Contrition, in contemporary Spanish-based religious education classes (*doctrina*) offers a nuanced analysis of how sacred texts, and the instructional practices that mediate their apprehension, shape students' subjectivities and their relationship with God and the religious institution of the Church. Baquedano-López points out that prayer is not a bounded genre and often incorporates other generic forms, such as lament, divination, or poetry. Moreover, prayers and the functions they perform may set up different participation frameworks, such as an intimate one that engages the individual devout in dialogue with God, or a more collective one in which the believer's voice is part of the choral voice of the community. The Act of Contrition presents elements of individuality and collectivity as it is a scripted apology addressed to God in the first personal pronoun that the believer recites within the confession ritual, which involves the presence of a third party, the priest. In her analysis of the activity of learning the Act of Contrition in *doctrina* instruction, Baquedano-López observes that the participation framework indexed by the text and established by the ritual of confession is further complicated by the mediation of the teachers: In monitoring and supporting the learning process, teachers punctuate students' reading, memorization, and recitation of the prayer with commentaries that often position the apprentice in a broader social horizon, as member of a community with shared intents and dispositions toward texts and conducts.

In his innovative approach to reading as active production, French historian and cultural theorist Michel de Certeau (1984) underlines that, as situated practice, reading is ephemeral and dynamic; it is not entirely inscribed in the text and leaves poor traces behind. This conception constitutes the foundation as well as the challenge assumed by the contributors to this special issue. Through original approaches and multidimensional analyses, the papers here contained offer original insights into practices of reading sacred texts. In so doing, they show that the 'spirit' of reading is not ethereal but rather intricately structured by historically rooted social conventions and semiotic ideologies. In this sense, reading positions

one in a web of culturally stipulated relations between bodies, minds, and texts as artifacts and symbols.

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