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## Holy For Me. Sacred Texts in an Individualized Culture

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### *§ 1 Introduction*

A decade ago, it would not have awakened any major interest to organize a conference on the theme of sacred texts and their meaning for contemporary identity formation, except perhaps for some specialist theologians. Any suggestion of holiness, canonicity, and authority was suspicious. Modern human beings did not want to live under the guidance of sacred texts. They wanted to realize a life of their own, not supported or prescribed by any tradition or authority. Nowadays the scene has changed, and the force of religion, sacred texts and identity formation are again a living issue. This cultural change is largely due to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and especially terrorism, as it has found a culmination in the events of September 11, 2001. However, the use of sacred texts that leads to religious fundamentalism is only one side of the picture. It leads our attention to what is called 'strong religion', referring to militant movements, and 'highly focused antagonists of secularisation' which 'often include the extreme option of violence and death.'<sup>1</sup> This attention for 'strong religion' makes us forget the existence of 'weak religion' as a cultural force, a non-organized form of religion, or a scarcely organized form of religion, without strong or violent claims.

It is this weak religion that I want to bring forward in my paper. As a matter of fact, I think that the use of sacred texts in fundamentalist contexts is not very interesting in a hermeneutical perspective. Its literal use of eclectic texts to support a presupposed ideological identity is something that comes to the surface rather easily. It is far more interesting to turn to the use of sacred texts in weak forms of religion, forms of religion that do not make strong claims. As a matter of fact, can a sense of holiness be maintained when no strong claims are made? Is not holiness so much related to authority and monopolist claims, that we should dispose of the notion of holiness in viewing weak religion? It is my conviction that a sense of holiness can be maintained in weak religion, though we should be willing to adapt our notion of holiness. However, before turning to a specimen of sacred texts in weak religion, as I have encountered it in the Netherlands, I will first be dealing with the question: what does holy or sacred mean (§ 2)? The subsequent question is: What is characteristic of sacred texts (§ 3)? After having dealt with these questions, I turn to the description of a recent project around sacred texts on the internet (§ 4), and I elaborate the consequence for our conception of the holy, concerning the transcendent and its social function (§ 5).

### *§ 2 Views of the sacred*

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion. The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 2.

The tradition of religious studies in the twentieth century provides us with two different tracks of dealing with phenomena of holiness. One track is given by the German theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto, with his magisterial book on *The Idea of the Holy* (German: *Das Heilige*, 1917).<sup>2</sup> Otto stands in an essentialist tradition of viewing religion, as started by F. Schleiermacher. In his view, religion has an essence of its own and cannot be reduced to another category or field of explanation. For Otto, the essence of religion is given in its conception of the holy. Its attitude towards the holy is specific for religion, and makes religion different from ethics (against I. Kant). In order to preserve the uniqueness of the holy, Otto goes as far as to create a new word: the numinous, a neologism derived from *numen*, the Latin word for divine majesty. The numinous is a mysterious term, and it cannot be otherwise than that. We will search in vain for any clear definition of the holy or the numinous in Otto's book. The numinous can simply not be caught in rational terms or categories, for it is exactly Otto's intention to express everything that exceeds the rational in this notion (cf. the subtitle of his book). Following this intention, Otto can only offer descriptions and elaborations of the notion of the holy. The numinous is, for example, something that creates a feeling of dependency (connecting to Schleiermacher). It is a tremendous mystery that leads to awe and fear. It leads to reverential hymns, to fascination, it makes uncanny (*befremdend*), and it leads to a sense of elevation. In short, the holy is wholly different (*ganz anders*) from our reality, and the perception of the holy may strike us, negatively and positively. The holy is a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

I see the line of Otto continued in the approach of Mircea Eliade, in his *The Sacred and the Profane* (orig. 1957).<sup>3</sup> This might surprise us, for Eliade starts the introduction to his book with a statement in which respects he differs from Otto. Eliade views Otto as someone who used the notion of the holy for expressing the non-rational aspect of religion, while he intends to offer a total view of the *homo religiosus*. However, he does so in the line of Otto, in making a sharp difference between sacred and profane, as two different existential attitudes of standing in life. The profane is an instrumental way of dealing with life, the sacred is an expression of standing in communion with something that exceeds the immanent and the profane. This sense of sacredness is expressed in time and space, and it is the task of Eliade's book to show how time and space govern the phenomenology of the sacred.

Recent study of religion has left the Otto-Eliade line of thinking, though we may observe its tenets in many philosophical and theological approaches. Otto's designation of the holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* has become common, and Eliade's analysis of the sacred as a phenomenon in time and space is still useful. Still, religious studies have taken another track, leaving the notion of the holy as something transcendent to philosophy and theology.<sup>4</sup>

This alternative track has also roots in the early twentieth century, leading back to Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Fr. orig. 1912). Durkheim distinguishes the sacred and the profane as well, but for him both are social functions. 'Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which

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<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (1917; München: Beck, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, 1959) (Originally 1957).

<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Emmanuel Levinas may be seen as a fairly recent expression of the transcendent interpretation of the holy: the real sanctity comes from the Other, and exceeds our manipulation.

these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first.’<sup>5</sup> A social group has a set of rules and interdictions. The notion of sanctity is used to establish and to maintain that set, and to define everything that deviates from it as profane. Such a conception makes sanctity a fundamental religious function, which applies to any religion. After Durkheim, this claim has been pursued in many forms of contemporary religious studies. It is only recently that I discover some criticism about it.<sup>6</sup>

Such recent criticism on the social function of holiness does not bring us back to the transcendent approach. A large cautiousness in using essentialist notions transposes the transcendent approach to another field of consideration. I see no ways to bring the two tracks together within religious studies.

### § 3 Sacred texts

However, this conclusion should not stop us from using the two tracks as two possibilities to keep an open mind to the phenomenon of sacred texts. What could be said about sacred texts from these two perspectives on sacredness?

The transcendent approach will refer to sacred texts as holy scriptures in which a sense of the numinous comes to the fore. A wide range of religious, canonical texts appears then. In his book, Otto widely quotes from various religious traditions. He himself made a translation of the Bhagavat Gita and was well known with the Hindu tradition. But Otto also has the freedom to quote from the work of mystics, and literary authors. Thus, in an appendix to the book, we may find together a quotation from the Bhagavat Gita, an angelic choir from the Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century tragedy writer Joost van den Vondel, and a part from a Jewish liturgy, all expressing a sense of the holy as *tremendum et fascinans*. There is no external criterion for such texts. But it may also be clear that not the whole of a literary text or religious scripture *per se* is a holy text. The text must arise a sense of the numinous. And that experience is bound to some textual parts, and, moreover, to individual insights and sensitivity. In the perspective of Otto, we cannot make up a canon of sacred texts.

The situation is different if we view sacred texts from the perspective of their social function. In this view, sacred texts are texts that establish or maintain the border between sacred and divine in a society or culture. Religious study has for a long time studied ‘primitive’ or non-scriptural cultures. But with more recent studies we may extend the social function of the sacred to sacred texts.<sup>7</sup> I mention a few points.

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<sup>55</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: Allen, 1915, <sup>2</sup>1976) 40-41.

<sup>6</sup> For example in Stewart Guthrie, ‘The Sacred: A Sceptical View,’ in: Thomas A. Idinopulos, Edward A. Yonan, *The Sacred and Its Scholars. Comparative Methodologies for the Study of Primary Religious Data* (Studies in the History of Religions, Numen Book series, vol. 73; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 124-138, who views the holy as a concept that is overburdened for religious studies.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gregory Bateson, Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear. Towards an epistemology of the sacred* (New York: MacMillan, 1987); Jon Davies and Isabel Wollaston (eds.), *The Sociology of Sacred Texts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

First of all, sacred texts have the function to delimit, but they are delimited themselves, as well. Sacred texts are part of a canon, a fixed list of holy scriptures, or at least: a list that suggests that it is fixed.<sup>8</sup>

Second, sacred texts have a depersonalised status. It does not matter who the material author of the text is. The authorship of a text only has to stress its divine or authoritative character. Thus, it does not matter for us whether a New Testament letter is written by Paul or by Peter, or perhaps by one of their followers. What matters is the apostolic stamp that they bear and that gives them a place in the New Testament canon. There are questions of authorship, but these merely function in establishing the sacred status of the text, not in establishing more sanctity for the author.

A third aspect is given in a monopoly of interpretation that is attached to the sacred texts. It is a paradox of the Reformation, that it has brought the Bible to everybody, in everybody's language, but has maintained the privilege of ministers to preach and to proclaim the divine Word. We may say that every religious group has these traits of monopoly.

This monopoly is stressed in attaching the characteristic of holiness to the language of a holy scripture. We highlight a language as holy, and such a language is not accessible to everyone. Thus, in Christianity, we deal with Hebrew and Greek, or with the liturgical languages of Latin and Old Church Slavonic. And even when we use our own language, we have a preference of using a special idiom, or a centuries old translation of the Bible like the King James Version.

We may raise the material status of sacred texts to a high level in the Christian tradition. Some people may break into a eulogy of Hebrew, the beauty of its characters, and the structure of its texts. Others may do so for Church Latin. Another sense of material sanctity is given in the form of holy books, their aesthetic design, the devotion the actual books receive (e.g. kissing and elevation in liturgy).

All these aspects make sacred texts a special sort of texts, raised above the normal use of language.

#### *§ 4 The Zinweb project: Holy for me*

Now, may these aspects of sacred texts be maintained in the present cultural condition of Western Europe? The Western culture may be defined as a secularizing culture, and a culture that is directed towards individuality. These are notions upon which I will not expand at this place. I will not simply maintain that Western culture is secularized, neither. I only notice a tendency that leads people away from traditionally organized religious groups into other patterns of religion and meaningfulness. Common to this variety of patterns are the inherent individual movements. A pattern of meaning is not accepted as part of a tradition; it must be made acquired personally and internalized individually. This also applies to sacred texts. It would be interesting to see how this individuality works out in the reception of a new Bible translation, as we had in the Netherlands in 2004, or in the conception of a unified Protestant Church in the Netherlands, as we experienced in the same year. However, I would rather turn

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<sup>8</sup> On canonicity cf. Theo L. Hettema, 'The Canon: Authority and Fascination', in: A. van der Kooij, K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Canonization and Decanonization* (Studies in the History of Religions Numen Book Series Vol. 82; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 391-398.

to another phenomenon: the creation of alternative sacred texts in this culture of individuality and internalization.

With this interest I turn to a recent project, which was elaborated on a website that has been launched by a bunch of liberal Protestant organisations in the Netherlands: Zinweb.<sup>9</sup> The website presents activities of liberal religious organizations, it offers a view of journals and books, and presents texts and multimedia projects. In 2004, Willem van der Meiden, an editor of this website, elaborated the idea of collecting a 'holy source book' of inspirational texts, to be gathered by the visitors of the website. In January 2005 this project started with the name of 'Holy for me'. The editors had high targets: they aimed at a 'democratic form of spirituality', and stated: 'What makes a text sacred is a matter of one's own.'<sup>10</sup> Criteria for selection were: one should propose existing texts, not larger than 200 words, not blasphemous, racist or discriminating. The editors aimed at collection 343 texts and quotations, playing with the numbers 7x7x7. An enthusiastic response came up, with many texts, poems, and quotations, often combined into one contribution, so that I finally have counted 379 texts.<sup>11</sup> Some contributors even offered some twenty texts.

The texts vary from beloved Bible texts, to poems, quotations from novels, and songs. We encounter texts from the Christian tradition (Bonhoeffer, St. Francis of Assisi), but also three Koran quotations and some texts from the Islamic mystical tradition. We come upon names that were popular in an older tradition of twentieth century spirituality: Rabindranath Tagore, Khalil Gibran, R.M. Rilke, and we meet the newest spiritual authors like Helen Schucman (*A Course in Miracles*), Neale Donald Walsch (*Conversations with God*) and the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. As for the Bible texts, 1 Corinthians 13, in various forms, is absolutely favourite. As an interesting phenomenon I notice the contributions in the field of light verse and Dutch cabaret. We come upon many Dutch poets, but also international authors, like W. Szyborska, and T.S. Eliot. We even meet Charles Darwin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Levinas, and our Rudolf Otto, all with one quotation.

Some contributors have added an explanation to their choice. These explanations testify of a personal use of the texts for special occasions in life: the birth of a child, marriage, the death of beloved. Sometimes we come upon exclamations around the term 'sacred', which notion is experienced as far too dogmatic, in the sense of narrow and authoritative. For a text like Bertrand Russell's 'Why I am not a Christian' the epithet 'sacred' seems a bit out of order. But all contributors agree on the meaning of the term as something elucidating and special for themselves.

I do not think of the project as an intended counter-canon to the Bible. Perhaps the original intention of the editors was to collect alternative sacred texts, but we see that many Bible texts have found their way into the collection. (I counted 27 quotations = 8 percent). What matters is the criterion of selection: does this text have a special meaning for me? Within this perspective, Bible texts side with cabaret songs and spiritual insights of Osho (Bhagwan). Anything is possible when holiness is meant as 'holy for me'. As such, the collection is characteristic for an individual culture. The collection is open, and might easily be extended with thousands of other texts. The patterns of meaningfulness in an individuality-oriented society are infinite. Only reasons of time and space delimit the project, which has come to a close at the end of 2005.

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<sup>9</sup> <[www.zinweb.nl](http://www.zinweb.nl)>

<sup>10</sup> Statement in the initial invitation, Jan. 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Some contributions overlap, so that we may count with an average of 350 texts.

### § 5 *The Zinweb project as holy scripture*

This description leads us to a comparison with the characteristics that we had attached to sacred texts. Are these aspects sustained, altered, or even denied?

I notice a natural affiliation of the Zinweb-project with the Otto-approach of the numinous. Otto intended to highlight the sensitivity for the mystery of the numinous. It is exactly this sense that is expressed in the contributions to 'Holy for me'. Many texts and explanations testify of a sense for the numinous, openness to life as a mysterious force, the miracle of birth and dying, an attitude of receptivity, etc. I do, however, scarcely find any sense of the *mysterium as tremendum*. The contributors' view of the transcendent and God is rather one of love than one of shiver and tremor. That is an alteration to the model of the holy as *tremendum et fascinans*, such as Otto presents it.

Or should we rather say: it is a correction to our interpretation of this model? For we have to remind that Otto attaches six 'moments' to the numinous: receptivity, tremor, hymnical praise, fascination, uncanniness, and elevation (*augustum*). Our reception of Otto only stresses the *tremendum et fascinans*, but there is more to the numinous to be said. We should not press Otto's notion into a bipolar model. This is an effect of a structuralist tradition in the study of religion that narrows our focus. In this respect, I think that the Zinweb-collection turns our attention more to the hymnical facet and the aspect of elevation. This turn is a useful correction of our perception of the holy.

There is also something to say on the social functions of the Zinweb project. First of all, we mentioned the sacred text as canon, as a fixed list. It may be clear that this does not apply to the Zinweb-collection. There are only practical reasons to delimit the amount of contributions. While the collection does not pretend a claim of canonicity, it will not gain authority either. But this authority is not intended by the participants. If I notice how many texts have been put forward by some persons (sometimes up to twenty contributions), it is clear that even for one person involved, there is no single sacred text. The contributions are not put forward with the intention to convince others of the sacred status of a text.

Second, we noticed the depersonalised status of sacred texts. Once a sacred text, the author does not matter anymore, or the author becomes a mystification. This aspect may be recognized in the collection, as well. The identity of the contributors does not matter very much. There are some well-known Dutch among the contributors, but also anonymous contributions. Moreover, the identity of the authors tends to fall away. Of many poems and quotations the author is not given. The editorial staff has been generous, so that we encounter the same texts in several shapes. A nice example is a text that goes as follows:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate  
 Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
 It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.  
 We ask ourselves: who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
 Actually, who are you not to be?  
 You are a child of God.  
 Your playing small doesn't serve the world.  
 There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that

other people won't feel insecure around you.  
 We are all meant to shine as children do.  
 We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.  
 It's not just in some of us; it is in everyone!  
 And as we let our light shine, we  
 unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.  
 As we are liberated from our own fear,  
 our presence automatically liberates others!

This text is attributed to Nelson Mandela, who is said to have used it in his inaugural address. Others say that Mandela quotes this text from a book of Marianne Williamson, *A return to love*, while the fact is, that Mandela did not use the text at all in none of his inaugural addresses. As a matter of fact, the text comes from M. Williamson, an author inspired by the *Course in miracles*. The text appears three times in the collection, but only once with a reference to the right source. Clearly this does not matter to the contributors.

A third aspect is the monopoly of interpretation. This does not fit the Zinweb-collection, with its connotation of openness. However, there are underlying selective forces that we should take into account. We should not forget that the editorial staff has had large possibilities of directing. They have made some contributions themselves, they have invited some to do, and they have created a jury out of the first group of contributors, who has reviewed the contributions offered. So there is a deal of manipulation that does not show at the surface of the presentation. There is one hard fact of monopoly of interpretation that the project had to face, that is the sacred status of copyright.<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of the project the editors intended to publish the collection, once completed. However, three publishing houses that were interested initially rejected publication, because the copyright fees would become too large.<sup>13</sup> If there is monopolist power in contemporary sacred texts, it is in the publishing houses.

The fourth aspect is the material devotion of sacred texts. There are some fine examples of texts carried through time, for example a poem written in a Japanese internment camp in Indonesia in the second World War, and saved over sixty years. However, in general I do not see this aspect stressed very much.

### § 6 Conclusion: the double helix

I conclude. In working on the subject matter of sacred texts, I came upon an article of the scholar Guy Stroumsa, writing on the origin of a canon of secular literature in early Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Stroumsa notices 'the parallel establishment of two series of texts as the double backbone of the emerging culture: the new Scriptures (Old and New testaments) on the one

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. the book on American copyright law by David Nimmer, *Copyright: Sacred text, technology, and the DMCA* (The Hague: Kluwer, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> The same problem made an end to a similar initiative of the Dutch publisher Kees Korenhof (Meinema Publishing House) on collecting a 'third testament' of contemporary sacred texts.

<sup>14</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, 'The Christian Hermeneutical Revolution and Its Double Helix,' in: L.V. Rutgers e.a. (eds.), *The Use of Sacred Books in the Ancient World* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology vol. 22; Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 9-28.

hand, and what could be salvaged of Greek and Latin culture on the other hand.’<sup>15</sup> What interests Stroumsa is the intricate network of relations between the two canons, which makes him speak of a ‘double helix’.

I like this image in speaking of sacred texts, which presents a fresh model of dealing with sacred texts. In the present situation of our individualized culture, it is tempting to state that the phenomenon of sacred texts has disappeared, or remains as a remnant in traditional settings. An alternative is to speak of at least a longing towards holiness in cultural expressions and thinking, as the remnant of what was once a culture of Holy scripture.<sup>16</sup> However, such models testify to many presuppositions about a presumed obsolescence of religion, which makes them not suitable for explaining the enduring attractiveness and vitality of religious expressions. Therefore, I prefer the image of a double helix, which establishes narrow interconnections between two bodies of texts, without suggesting any subordination or inferiority of a body of texts.

There is one important consequence if we favour this model of a double helix: the canon of the Zinweb project is not unique for a 21<sup>st</sup> century individualized culture. For Stroumsa, the emergence of a double helix is a sign of an emerging culture. The formation of a double helix seems to express the vitality and adaptability of a culture. Could, similarly, the Zinweb project be an expression of the vitality of Western culture, as laid down in its weak forms of religion? The answer will be given by the future.

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<sup>15</sup> Stroumsa, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Hendrik Johan Adriaanse, ‘Die Sehnsucht nach den Gestalten des Heiligen im Denken,’ in: Klaus Kienzler e.a. (Hrsg.), *Das Heilige im Denken. Ansätze und Konturen einer Philosophie der Religion*, FS Bernhard Casper (München: Lit, 2006) 81-98.