

# ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’\*

The pleasures and perils of intercultural hermeneutics

*Eric J. Sharpe*

In that most vivid of all Hellenistic historical narratives, *Praxeis Apostolon*, there is an episode in which a certain Philippos encounters an African diplomat (whose name the sources do not divulge), who he finds reading to himself—aloud, as the custom was—a passage from a Hebrew prophet, naturally enough in Greek translation. Philippos asks a simple question: ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Puns in other people’s languages are infuriating things. So in this case. ‘Do you understand (*ginoskeis*) what you are reading (*anaginoskeis*)?’ can be rendered into Latin, *intelligis quae legis*? I cannot think of a way of englishing it—not that that matters. The African diplomat’s answer is what matters: ‘How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?’

I trust that you will have recognised this episode from *The Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 8, which I have taken as a way into my subject. An Ethiopian reader had been overtaken reading a passage from a Jewish scripture (Isaiah) in Greek translation, and needed someone to provide him with a commentary and an explanation. Or if you prefer, an interpretation.

The extent to which we are all, at times, at the mercy of interpreters is a theme on which I do not propose to elaborate in general; except to say that ‘ordinary’ language aside, the linguistic pattern of the modern world resembles a peak-hour commuter train packed with jostling specialist languages (or at least terminologies), and that without the frequent services of an interpreter, the world would be fairly uninhabitable.

The word ‘hermeneutics’ in my original title (carefully removed in order not to frighten away the audience from this first session) is a case in point: a specialist term meaning the theory of understanding and interpretation of texts—which clearly goes some way beyond translation, though translation is a part of it. I believe that it was first

\* Paper given to the Inaugural Colloquium of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics, Oct. 4-5, 1990.

used in connection with the study of the Bible (though I cannot swear to that), and aimed at clarifying why a given text should be understood in one way and not another, and under what conditions. Obviously, though, there is no reason why the Bible should be a special case. The questions that hermeneutics asks can equally well be asked of any form of literature (or for that matter any symbol-system): how is it to be grasped? What does it mean? What impression does it convey? This of course is part of the bread and butter of the study of literature, and I do not propose to trespass on the preserves of others farther than is absolutely necessary. There are, though, two branches of the enterprise which, when stated in question form, provide the justification for this exercise. The first has to do with so-called 'sacred' texts as such, the other with the place of such texts within religions and culture.

First, then, what is sacred scripture actually *for*? And secondly, does its matrix prevent its being fully understood, 'on the open market', so to speak?

Questions like this do not permit of simple or straightforward answers. Nor can they be neatly enclosed within a dictionary definition of 'aesthetics' as having to do with 'principles of good taste and appreciation of beauty'. For the very good reason that in matters involving the use of such categories as 'sacred' or 'holy', we are not dealing only with individual feelings, perceptions and intimations (the *sensus numinis*, and the like), but also, and perhaps more significantly, with communities of faith and order who have more important things to think about than the state of people's feelings. In terms of twentieth century scholarship, Rudolf Otto stands for the individual, Emile Durkheim for the sociological approach, in classics written at about the time of the first world war.

Now although their respective theories appear at first sight to stand in diametrical opposition to each other—'the sacred' in Durkheim's terms is a social value, in Otto's a direct personal perception of a *mysterium tremendum*—the two do not rule each other out. They are rather opposite sides of the same coin.

Where *intercultural* hermeneutics is concerned, however, the point of view one initially takes on this question is bound to shape almost all one's answers.

Forgive the truism, but not even sacred scripture can emerge in a historical or cultural vacuum. Nor can it become sacred unless it fulfils the needs of a community of believers and performers, no matter how small. To the members of that community it serves as the source of a transcendent value-system, an account of the world's

history and the community's place in it, a source of inspiration and comfort and a central plank in a cultural platform. Often it will either *be* the community's law, or the foundation in which a more elaborate law is carefully laid. That we speak in this way of *scripture* is because of the importance of writing in our cultures. Where there is no writing, *custom* serves the same purpose. Either way, the community's history, standards and expectations are there to be taught and learned. They are hedged about by conditions and limitations and initiations: 'Let not the highest mystery (of Vedanta) be taught to an unquiet man, or to one who is neither son nor pupil...'

Scripture, then, can serve as an important, indeed, a central source of cultural or community identity. This is a matter of which the leaders of the community are well aware. This, though, is by no means to say that each and every member of the community in question knows each and every page of its sacred scripture. This is where what we might call *internal* hermeneutics comes in: that process whereby a leadership interprets the content of scripture to *its own* people. Inevitably this involves a process of selection: there is 'sacred'; there is also 'top sacred'. (Or at least there used to be: today's criteria tend to be opaque.) Always there is a narrowing down and a reduction. Where modern Christianity in the West is concerned, there is also the matter of translation.

I must be cautious here: the translation question could so easily swallow up the whole of my remaining time. Let me however at least mention two aspects, again insider and outsider perspectives.

Western Christianity is in a peculiarly defenceless position where its own sacred scriptures are concerned, in that it cannot (except by what the average student regards as an almost superhuman effort) cope with the languages in which those scriptures were originally written. In the English-speaking world, since the 1950s there have in addition been so many 'new' translations that in comparison, the Authorised Version of 1611 has come to seem 'original'. Some of these new translations are in reality little more than not particularly skilful paraphrases, and yet each one as it appears is enthusiastically embraced as an infinite improvement upon all its predecessors. Others are able to manipulate the text in the interests of a sectarian view of it (a characteristic of commentaries through the ages, but fairly novel where the text itself is concerned).

Contrast this commercial opportunism (worthy of Messrs Dodgy and Quickbucks, Publishers to the Fleet of Foot, at their most enterprising) with the solidity of those traditions that hold to the *traditore, traduttore* principle. When the intriguingly named

*The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics*

Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall published his Qur'an translation, he began with a disclaimer: 'The Qur'an cannot be translated. That is the belief of traditional Sheykhs and the view of the present writer ... [A translated Qur'an] ... is not the Glorious Qur'an, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy ... It can never take the place of the Qur'an in Arabic, nor is it meant to do so.' No doubt. I was reminded all the same of those curious photographs of Gandhi, taken during his student days in London in the 1880s, and showing him dressed in a dark European suit and with a high stiff collar and cravat—decent and respectable and ... utterly wrong. *That* Gandhi would have claimed no allegiance, either in Britain or in India.

Considering the Crusades, the Muslim pincer movement on Europe (Iberia one way, Austria the other) and the later history of the Ottoman Empire, it was not altogether surprising that Islam should have had not the best of reputations in early 19th-century Christendom.

There is an 18th-century Methodist hymn verse (I believe written by Charles Wesley) that sums up the popular view of Islam and Muhammad:

The smoke of the infernal cave,  
Which half the Christian world o'erspread,  
Disperse, thou heavenly Light, and save  
The souls by that Impostor led,  
That Arab-thief, as Satan bold,  
Who quite destroy'd thy Asian fold.

It is however one thing to shape for oneself an image of another country, people, culture, religion. It is quite another to go to that source to find out what it has to say for itself, especially when one's images have contained a sizeable component of fear. In this regard the Western (chiefly Christian) intercultural hermeneutics of Islam on the one hand and Hinduism (and Buddhism) on the other have been quite strikingly different. For one fairly simple reason: that Hinduism and Buddhism were never the slightest physical, political or economic threat to the West. Islam was, having taken control of so many Jewish and Christian sacred sites, and having practically eliminated Christianity from North Africa and Asia Minor.

A perceived threat may inspire more than one form of resistance—using a military analogy, infantry (mission), artillery (propaganda) and intelligence (scholarship). Undoubtedly it was the 'intelligence' aspect which first brought the Qur'an to the attention of the West. The

first translation of the Qur'an into Latin dates as far back as the 12th century (Robert of Retina and Hermann of Dalmatia, 1143), though not actually published until 1543. There was an Italian translation by 1547, a French one in 1647, and an English one in 1648–88—followed by other English versions in 1734 (by G. Sale), J. M. Rodwell in 1861, E. H. Palmer in the 1880s, and many more. Today one may buy the Qur'an in *Penguin Classics* .

But bearing in mind what I was saying earlier about the function of a scripture like the Qur'an in a community of faith, what measure of *understanding* might the reading of a scripture detached from its cultural matrix be expected to provide?

A considerable stir was caused in May 1840 when Thomas Carlyle delivered in London the second of his series of lectures 'On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History'. Its subject was Muhammad and Islam. Its tone was utterly different from anything that most of his audience would have been accustomed to hearing. No epileptic robber-chieftain here: 'Our current hypothesis about Mahomet', said Carlyle, 'that he was a scheming Impostor, a Falsehood incarnate, that his religion is a mere mass of quackery and fatuity, begins really to be now untenable to any one. The lies, which well-meaning zeal has heaped round this man, are disgraceful to ourselves only.' A false man, he argued, could not even build a brick house, much less found a religion. Muhammad, then, had by no means been an impostor. Rather he had been one of a noble company of prophets: 'A messenger ... sent from the Infinite Unknown with tidings to us.'

A messenger: but what had been his message? Carlyle, one feels, hardly knew. He had tried to read the Qur'an, though without very much success. It was, he said, 'as toilsome reading as I ever undertook,' adding that 'Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran.' Still, it revealed a human soul struggling to express itself; and that in the last resort was all that mattered.

Another image produced (though probably not intended) by Carlyle was the affinity between Islam and the Arabian desert: 'Consider that wide waste horizon of sand, empty, silent, like a sand-sea, dividing habitable place from habitable. You are all alone there, left alone with the Universe; by day a fierce sun blazing down with intolerable radiance; by night the great deep Heaven with its stars...'

With which we may perhaps compare these words of the celebrated 'Lawrence of Arabia', written almost eighty years later: '... the Arab appealed to my imagination. It is the old, old civilisation, which

has refined itself clear of household gods, and half the trappings which ours hastens to assume.'

Edward Said, whose important study *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) is a comprehensive settling of accounts with the various ways in which the modern West has produced convenient images of the Orient in general, and Islam in particular, never quite comes to grips with the *reasons* for the generation of these images. But you form, as a rule, lasting images only of that which you are badly placed to observe at first hand. That which you can see developing (or at least changing) you know to be always up for revision, reinterpretation, reformation or even revolution. That which you cannot see in motion, tends, like any still photograph, to be frozen at the unforgiving moment of exposure.

Holy Scripture is one of three things. It is either divine revelation, in which case its deepest meaning lies outside the boundaries of historical analysis altogether; or it is a historical record locked firmly into a cultural matrix, and significant only as a record of the conditions that produced it; or it is a living and ongoing religious and cultural tradition that has been artificially stopped at a canonical point, *whereas the tradition has in actual fact not stopped at all*. 'Holy' scripture is, in a manner of speaking, a fly in amber. Its holiness (or its sacredness) consists in very large measure in its apparent suspension in time.

I say *apparent* suspension, since just as it has a prehistory and a context, it also has a hermeneutical, an interpretative history, the tracing of which can be a fascinating exercise. Most of this is worked out along the various branches of the parent tradition. But once a sacred scripture, whatever its origin, has been printed in large numbers and sold cheaply to people capable of reading it, no power in the world can prevent it being examined as other than the divine revelation the devotee believes it to be.

This, however, is a very modern process. From a Western perspective, despite what I was saying just now about very early translations of the Qur'an, the comprehensive communication of Scripture across confessional frontiers did not begin seriously until about a century and a quarter ago. Where the English language is concerned, the towering landmark was the 50-volume series of *Sacred Books of the East*, edited by that remarkable scholar Friedrich Max Müller, German by birth but working from Oxford.

Advertising his series in 1876, he emphasized that the only possible reason one would want to read any of these sacred books was historical. 'It cannot be too strongly stated, that the chief, and in

many cases the only interest of the Sacred Books of the East is historical... and that no one but the historian will be able to understand the important lessons which they teach.' Writing to Ernest Renan a few years later, with the enterprise well under way, he confided that '... they are the very saddest books to read. But they must be read, they must be meditated on, if we want to know what kind of creature *homo sapiens* is.'

What kind of creature *homo sapiens* is—or what kind of creature *homo sapiens* was? For Max Müller, only the first of these questions was really valid. But it was a mistaken attitude for all that.

If I might digress for a moment, the years during which the *Sacred Books of the East* enterprise was taking shape, marked the high point of European imperial expansion in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War on the one hand; and (apparently unconnected though very much part of the same scenario) a determined drive for religious reform on the other. The argument was that improved communications were making the world dramatically smaller, and that Tennyson's 'Federation of the world' seemed both possible and desirable. But who or what was to rule it, and who or what was it to worship?

The reformers, of whom Max Müller was one, believed the answer to lie in a federation of religions, to which each separate tradition would bring its treasures; and within which all would agree to eliminate the purely local and the merely historically conditioned, stressing instead that on which all could agree—chiefly God's fatherhood, human brother-and-sisterhood, and the universality of the moral law.

However, no one would be in a position to know how to clear out the religious lumber-room without first knowing what it contained. Hence, among other things, the need to edit and translate and publish the whole of the world's scriptural heritage—and, incidentally, to announce one's support for parallel reform movements taking shape elsewhere in the world (other, that is, than among Orientalists in Oxford and Transcendentalists in and around Boston, Massachusetts). There were, let it be said, pitifully few of these. There was, though, one in Calcutta. Dating in its first form from the late 1820s, it went by the name of the Brahmo Samaj; and when its leader Keshab Chandra Sen visited London in 1870, he was given a quite remarkable red-carpet treatment by the whole of the liberal religious establishment.

Twenty years later, the flood tide had passed. The high ground was no longer occupied by the reformers and their allies, but

increasingly by what in later parlance we might want to call fundamentalists (though the term was not actually coined before the 1920s)—that is, ultra-conservative religionists claiming to live their lives in unquestioned obedience to what they believe their Holy Scripture to contain.

The onset of 'fundamentalism' was in Christian terms mainly a somewhat fearful conservative response to the impact of critical and especially evolutionary science and its application to the text of the Bible. In the geographical East, the parallel phenomenon among Hindus and Muslims had a different focus of opposition, which (let it be said) it has retained ever since, namely opposition to the political, economic, military and religious pressure of the West. Certainly there has been a tendency among Hindus and (especially) Muslims to dismiss critical historical scholarship much as the conservative Christian does: but to do so largely because it is yet another intrusion into their sacred territory on the part of the domineering West.

Let me illustrate from India and the *Bhagavadgita*. The Gita is neither the oldest nor the most authoritative of Hindu scriptures. But it is one of the shortest, being a mere 700 verses in length. And it was the first to be translated and published in Europe, in 1785. For a century, it intrigued European and American scholars, was translated and retranslated many times, fed transcendental speculation, sparked a few scholarly feuds (about dating and the like), and even became the libretto of a French opera (which I regret that I have never heard). But beginning in the 1880s, a curious change took place. From being a historical monument, which even Europeans could read 'for the entertainment of the curious' (the words of the Gita's first European translator), the Gita became the New Testament and manifesto of the Hindu wing of the Indian national movement. More than one Hindu 'freedom fighter' of the pre-1914 period went to the gallows (or at least to gaol) brandishing his Gita as radical young China, half a century or so later, was to brandish 'The thoughts of Chairman Mao'. Only at a few points in the Gita did the religious and the political message actually overlap. But what was important was the Gita's symbolical role as a focus of Hindu identity, distinct from the Christian identity, or the theistic identity, or the secular socialist identity that the West (in various combinations and permutations) had been hoping would emerge as the crown and consummation of India's religious quest. In the period of intensifying Indian national consciousness, the Gita's role could not be overestimated.

It has been said, with reference to another important item of Hindu identity, reverence for the cow, that 'The Hindu does not



revere the cow we see, but the cow he sees'. Might one be permitted to extend this paradox? The Qur'an the Muslim reads is not the Qur'an the Christian reads. 'Muslims do not read the Qur'an and conclude that it is divine; rather, they believe that it is divine, and then they read it.' Or why not, 'The Ayers Rock the American tourist sees is not the Uluru the Aborigine sees.' (This at least ought to be obvious enough.)

The business of hermeneutics is by no means limited to discussions about the real or imagined meaning of this or that cluster of words on a printed page. It goes to the heart of that most intractable of human problems: how to comprehend what another human being is trying to communicate in and through the symbols (only a very few of which are verbal) he or she uses in the desire to be understood. We have become accustomed to use the word 'culture' to label a coming together of values and styles and gestures, and we assume that within each culture, people will be sufficiently in tune with one another to be able to understand one another. But cross the cultural frontiers, call in question another's scale of values, tread upon another's holy ground, and (unless we are very careful) we can inflict untold injury. Nor are we going to enhance our own reputations very much along the way.

It may be an unfortunate thing to say at the start of a colloquium devoted to literature and aesthetics, but both these categories have their limitations—chiefly that both are notably lacking in horsepower when it comes to crossing the cultural divide. I fancy, too, that there is in addition a fairly high degree of subjectivity lurking in the programme. Not that I have very much against that. But hermeneutical principles are not exclusively individual. I would venture to say that they are not even as individual as we suppose them to be. The cultural imperative is (with apologies to John Masefield) 'a loud call, a clear call, that may not be denied'—no less influential for being unacknowledged. With a few rare exceptions, in the unlikely event of our being put in a position where we can read someone else's literature (whether sacred or not), we tend to respond to it more or less as we have been programmed to respond.

To the question, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' there is therefore only the original answer, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'

That 'someone' may be a preacher, a teacher, a prophet, a guru or an imam: all of whom can provide a running (or written) commentary on the text, not for the entertainment of the curious, but for the edification of the faithful. Only at a much later stage does there emerge the Professor of Religious Studies, to insist that though the

text is one, interpretations are endless; and that the explanations contained in whichever interpretation you are disposed to accept may have little enough to do with what the original writer of the text might have intended.

Hermeneutics may of course address itself to either end of the chain of interpretation (or, to borrow Wilfred Cantwell Smith's term, the 'cumulative tradition'). You may wish to address yourself to the first link of the chain, to the interplay of authority and discipleship that brought the Scripture into being in the first place, and the community within which it emerged. You may equally well concentrate on some fixed point along the way. Or you may simply look about you, betake yourself to synagogue, church, mosque or temple, and remember what you see and hear.

But are not practically all these situations in one or another sense 'intercultural'? And do we not have almost as much difficulty in approaching, say, the religious and social values of Victorian England with a measure of sympathetic understanding as we have in tackling Tibetan Buddhism? Successive phases of one culture may in other words be as elusive, where interpretation is concerned, as cultures which are remote from one another in a more obvious sense. Added to which, it is hard to be alienated from someone else's religious or cultural tradition. Understanding is perhaps never more elusive than in those cases in which we begin by being emotionally inclined to believe that we have it, and therefore have no further need to work upon it.

There remains, however, a still larger enterprise to which hermeneutics sometimes addresses itself: namely, the tracing of the interpretative process itself. Perhaps 'process' is too orderly a term to fit the somewhat haphazard nature of such an enterprise. In which case, we may substitute 'sequence'. Here, instead of snapshots, we aim for the video (plus commentary). And here, too, there are insider and outsider perspectives. Time will not allow me to illustrate in detail. Nevertheless, I may make a couple of points.

The first has to do with the Bible, first as interpreted by Christians and secondly as interpreted by Hindus. The word 'bible' comes from *biblia*, literally 'the little books'; a library, not a treatise, put together over a very long period of time. Now in practice, those who read it do not read it all, not do they read in in any kind of historical sequence. What they do instead is to elevate one or a few of the *biblia* over the others, and read the many (if need be) in the light of the few. That choice of priorities will then serve as a mark of identity, over against the choices the others make. For instance:

Daniel and Revelation—a strong taste for apocalyptic and very likely a Seventh Day Adventist or Jehovah's Witness. Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians—a legal mind with a puritan streak, traditional Protestant and either Irish or Sydney Anglican. The synoptic Gospels—no nonsense here, well behaved middle-of-the-road religion, not given to enthusiasms. The Gospel of John—social and ecumenical, with a tinge of mysticism.

Although flippantly stated, all this is most seriously meant. It is one of the tasks of hermeneutics to explain *why* this should be so, and the stages by which it has come to be so.

What then about the Hindus? Where Christians in the West have read Hindu Scriptures (which they have been doing, on and off, for two centuries), as a rule they have been looking for historical evidence, in the style of a Max Müller; or for a key wherewith to unlock the innermost mystery of the oneness of all things, in the style of practically everyone else. A century ago it was fondly supposed that if you were to put the Bible into Hindu hands, the Hindu would immediately zero in on the Gospel of John, the 'mystical' Gospel, and tell the rest of the world what it *really* meant. What actually happened was far different. Hindus reading the Bible showed no interest to speak of in its mystical streak. Instead, beginning with Rammohun Roy in the 1820s and following all the way through to Gandhi and Radhakrishnan more than a century later, the Hindu consensus was that the only aspect of the Bible worth taking seriously was and is its ethical content, especially as summed up in the Sermon on the Mount. They went further. They scolded Western Christians for failing to live up to this ethical standard.

The Muslim attitude was not greatly different where the moral content of the teachings of Jesus was concerned. Islam has after all always regarded Jesus as one in the long line of prophets preceding Muhammad, while insisting that Muhammad is the final and definitive Prophet. Jesus, however, could not have been Son of God; nor could he have risen from the dead. One curious consequence of this was the legend, generated in the 1890s, that Jesus had not died on the cross, much less been raised from the dead. He had survived and wandered off in a generally easterly direction, finally settling and in the fullness of time dying in Kashmir—where his tomb can still be seen to this day.

Intercultural interpretation (or the lack of it), whatever we might in the end decree to be the conditions in which it operates, is an imperative necessity in the kind of world in which we live and have to survive. Let no one therefore ask what in the last resort might be the

*The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics*

object of the exercise. What we do not interpret, we usually misinterpret. What we do not understand, we misunderstand. The mere absence of interest in and understanding of the deep springs of human motivation and passion that lies within the sanctuary, is not something of which to be proud. Max Müller was, you know, absolutely correct when he said that the sacred scriptures of the world had to be read and meditated upon, 'if we want to know what kind of creature *homo sapiens* is.'

That is part of it. The other part consists in cultivating some degree of sympathetic understanding (I dare not go higher than that) of the ways in which individuals and communities are motivated, enthused, maddened even, by Holy Writ and its interpreters.

If this passes some way beyond aesthetics, I crave pardon. But set ideas loose in the world, and you may find that more is at stake than feeling-states—ours or anyone else's.

*Eric J. Sharpe, M.A. (Manc.), Teol.D. (Uppsala), F.A.H.A.* is Professor of Religious Studies, University of Sydney. His works include *Comparative Religion, A History* (sec. ed. 1986), *The Universal Gita* (1988) and *Nathan Söderblom and the Study of Religion* (1990).

## The Confessions of a Con-Artist

I celebrate the untold  
touch the unseen, smite pigs in the eye  
& so the world spurns my collaborators  
& hangs the eyeless unseen  
history is but a narrow aperture  
you may journey on your gloomy  
passions with the tact of a tack but  
pins point no needles or argument to baseless maps  
I celebrate your slanders, your loathing  
& deprive prison of knots, unravel  
your hair & stoke our mutual oaths  
no heat nor any ache unspent

*Leith Morton*