CHAPTER 22

Power Women: The Retelling of Sacred Narratives in an Interreligious Context

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22.1 Introduction

In what ways and under what conditions can interreligious reading of sacred texts create new meanings in the understanding of oneself, the other, and the world?

Intertextual reading is different from interreligious reading.\(^1\) The first focuses on texts and their intertexts, the second on the joint reading process of people from different religious backgrounds who try to interpret texts from their own and the other religious tradition.\(^2\) Both intertextual and interreligious readings assume that there is a possibility to compare divergent texts, i.e. that there is no incommensurability between these texts. On the other hand, the process of interreligious reading often starts from the assumption that participants identify with different religious traditions and therefore read different sacred texts using different hermeneutics.

In this article, I present a case study of a particular meeting centered around interreligious reading. In the Netherlands, an association of Muslim women, al-Nisa’, has organized a yearly weekend since 1986 (with a temporary break during the years 2007–2013), in which Muslim and Christian women read texts from Holy Scripture (the Bible, the Qur’an, Hadith, Qisas al-Anbiya’, and legends of the saints) together.\(^3\) The participants in this group come together

\(^1\) Anne Hege Grung, Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christian and Muslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the Hadith (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015), 25.

\(^2\) Martha Frederiks compares the process of interreligious encounter with the encounter with a strange religious text. In both cases, the process requires a hermeneutics as a theory of encounter with the stranger. Martha Frederiks, “Hermeneutics from an Interreligious Perspective,” Exchange 34, no. 2 (2005).

\(^3\) The term “sacred texts” in this article is coterminous with “Scripture” the way it is used by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his book What Is Scripture: as a term denoting a human activity, a relationship between a text and a human community endowing that text with religious
under the label of interreligious dialogue, as “Muslim and Christian women.” They therefore primarily identify according to their religious background. This does not mean that there are not also ethnic and cultural differences. The association al-Nisa’ consists of Dutch converts to Islam as well as younger immigrant women of Moroccan, Turkish, and Surinamese backgrounds. The Christian participants are mostly native Dutch, with some immigrants mostly from Suriname.

In the 2014 meeting, the group engaged in the joint reading of the stories of Abigail (1 Samuel 25), Asya, Pharaoh’s wife (Qurʾan 28:9) and Balqis, the queen of Sheba (Qurʾan 27:20–44). Below, I will elaborate on the choice of topics. By following the planning of the organizing group, the outcome of the debates, and the evaluation of the participants, I will touch upon a number of questions and dilemmas regarding interreligious hermeneutics.

I was part of the weekend and in the position of a participant observer. I will not try to give a critical analysis of what happened there but simply present the way this group worked with the narratives, from time to time reflecting on background questions.

I will start with a brief analysis of the different types of appropriation of religious texts, reader positions, and the choice of genre in interreligious reading. My aim is to identify instances where the process of interreligious reading leads to a transformation of the understanding of such sacred texts.

Where and when can one see moments of interpretation of the texts of their own tradition by the women participating that go beyond the authoritative use? Are there moments of interpretation of the texts of the religious other? If so, where and when? Does the process lead to a reading of texts of both the self-tradition and the other-tradition in a new and transformative way? What causes such transformative understandings?

22.2 Transformative Understanding

Interreligious reading is a layered process. One can distinguish between three different processes of conversation going on at the same time. Readers involved in it are in conversation with their “own” text and the way it has been appropriated in their religious tradition. This in itself is a complicated process, as any religious tradition is always contested, and there is no single interpretation. Especially with larger traditions like “Islam” and “Christianity,” we have