Hermeneutics is a topic that demands serious attention in the discussion of interreligious relationships, particularly in the Christian quest for a credible theology of religions. At the moment, we have a largely fruitless debate between those who believe in the “inerrancy” of the Bible and those who make use of historical criticism in interpreting the texts. A community of discourse is hardly possible because there is no meeting ground between them. The fact that neighbours of other faiths also have their own scriptures and their own hermeneutics, has hardly entered into the discussion. Is it possible to shift this debate from intra-Christian to inter-religious, from a mono-scriptural to a multi-scriptural context, in order to develop what may be described as a relational hermeneutics?

I

Hermeneutics is generally understood as the disciplined study and interpretation of texts in a given cultural, religious, linguistic and socio-political context. Although the focus of this essay is on religious texts, hermeneutics, as a discipline, is concerned not just with “sacred” scriptures but also with secular texts, literary and scientific. The plurality of religions and the plurality of languages are closely related.

Hermeneutics has to do not just with texts, but also with the perceptions of truth behind the texts. The recovery of the “original” text and the current exegesis of a particular text are indeed important, but in themselves do not lead to “truth.” However, in so far as scriptures are “testimonies” to the original experience of the community, there is indeed a connection between texts, truth and the experience of the community. Religion, language and reality are therefore intimately connected in the collective consciousness and ongoing experience of the believing community. The kind of relational hermeneutics suggested here would be impossible unless the
plurality of religions and the multiplicity of languages were accepted not just as phenomenological facts but as matters of theological significance to human life and destiny.

In recent history, the study of religions and the study of languages supported each other. Sometimes the study of religions required a study of the original languages. Sometimes, the study of languages led to the study of religions. J. Waardenburg points out that a hundred years of the study of religions in the west, from Max Müller to Gaston Berger, helped the west to break through its feelings of "self-absolutization" and has been conducive to its "self-relativization." From 1879 onwards, Max Müller published from Oxford, the fifty volume series entitled *The Sacred Books of the East*. This led to a hermeneutical shift from the notion of "scripture" in the singular, that is, the notion that the Bible was the only scripture, to "scriptures" in the plural.

This shift from the mono-religious to the multi-religious, from the mono-scriptural to the multi-scriptural, was brought about not just by the academic study of other religions, but also by the encounter with peoples, cultures and civilisations, to whom these were not just books for study but faiths to live by. This combination of the study of other scriptures and the encounter with people of other faiths could not but disturb the consciousness of the west, Wardenburg writes:

> It would indeed be impossible to separate the rise of the study of religions from deeper cultural and religious turbulence within the West at the time of its birth, of which it was a reasonable outcome. The fact that a powerful civilization which identifies itself with a world religion starts to be interested in other religions is too striking than that (sic) the rise and course of its interest should not demand attention.2

In an age dominated by science and technology, there is a tendency to underestimate the role of "sacred scriptures" in the life of people. The powerful influence of scriptures on history has been well stated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith:

> Scripture has played in human history—not only in individual and corporate piety and moral sensibility and intellectual version, but also in law, family relations, literature, art, economic patterns, social and political organisations,

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2 Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches*, p. 75.