The legend of the wizard's pupil tells us about the invention of extraordinary tools by an excellent first generation, but which with later generations changed into autonomous instruments, with activities and expressions of their own, no longer directed by their first designer. In the fascinating musical play by Paul Dukas, in 1897 composed after Goethe's Der Zauberlehrling (written in 1797), the apprentice of the sorcerer still remembers the magical commands to activate a broom, but he is not able to end its activities and to lay down his creation. — These images followed me, while reading three important new studies on the concepts of scripture and revelation, all three written in the borderland between comparative religion and theology. This article wants to present a review of these books by W.C. Smith, K. Ward and R. Fernhout, ending in some proposals for interactive reading of the Christian and Muslim scriptures.

In his most recent book, What is Scripture?, Wilfred Cantwell Smith follows the classical path of the science of religion, while focusing first on history and then criticizing the historical approach. For Smith scripture is a human activity (18), merging from a 'pre-scriptural' period at some time in human history. This slow process of scriptural consolidation went along two lines: the Indian and Iranian mode of oral/aural not written and less fixed texts versus the biblical tradition of a written book, culminating in the Qur'an as 'the true meaning of Scripture' (Chapter IV). The study of the origins and growth of the concept and content of scripture within the major religious traditions of the world (the Qur'an, the bible in Jewish life, Hindu and Buddhist writings, concluding with the Chinese and Western 'civil religions': ethical and philosophical systems, rather than strict God-focused religions) reminded me of the structure of the famous Meaning and End of Religion. The latter book, however, is more historical in drawing the general lines along which the developments of the idea took place. Only the last pages suggested a position for religion in our days. Speaking about terms 'as Christianity, Buddhism and the like', Smith was "bold enough to speculate whether these terms will not in fact have disappeared from serious writing and careful speech within twenty-five years." (Smith 1964:175) In his new book Smith much more concentrates on an analysis of the present religious situation, but he is not so bold to give firm predictions about developments in the near future.

According to Smith, something went wrong with religion and also with
scripture. As to scripture, there are even two opposite developments, which
are equal serious threats for the true understanding and use of scripture: the
historical critical and the fundamentalist reductions. On the top of Smith’s
blacklist are the side-effects of the historical critical academic approach. After
some generations of fear, verdicts, dismissal from university chairs and even
excommunications, major Christian churches now surrendered, accepted the
results of historical critical research. The overwhelming majority of Muslims
still do not like these approaches. In a sense this book can be understood as a
apology of this muslim position. “Muslims themselves have often sensed in
Western Islamic scholarship an hostility out to undermine their faith.. Our
suggestion—indeed our affirmation—is that the Qur’an has meant whatever is
has meant, to those who have used or heard it or appropriated it to themselves;
and specifically, that the Qur’an as Scripture has meant whatever it has meant
to those Muslims for whom it has been scripture” (82 and 88 combined). This
seems to be a perfect definition of the hermeneutical circle: Scripture creates
the belief-system, but only the active member of this belief-system is entitled
and able to understand and interpret this text. Or should we even look at it
from the other side: the believer has created a holy scripture (see above:
Scripture is a human Activity) and then has lost the initiative and becomes
controlled and inspired by his own ‘creation’, like the sorcerer’s apprentice?

Smith has a number of intelligent and sometimes even witty and amusing
remarks about the shortcomings of the historical critical approach. The least is
of course, that texts are often put in their ‘historical’ context, but taken away
from their proper meaning. He likes the paradox: “We read the Gita not in
order to understand the Gita. Rather, we read it, if we are Hindus, in order to
understand the world, and our life within it; and if we are historians, to
understand how the world has been seen by Hindus, to understand what the
Gita has been doing to people these two thousand years...” (34).

The oral/aural tradition of Hinduism and Buddhism did not immediately create
scripture. They created many texts, even in such an overwhelming quantity and
variety, that the faithful could choose out of an extremely rich heritage and
develop preference and selectivity without strict or dogmatic criteria. Smith,
however, does not easily give exclusive qualifications to certain groups. He
even noticed this practice of selecting one’s ‘personal scripture’ also with
Protestant Christians: “the most scripture-oriented group of Christians, have
felt no qualms in personally having their own explicitly ‘favourite’ verses, or
even book, from among the many that constitute the Bible. In fact, the less one
has had such, the less scripturally involved one might seem to be.” (158)

The great religious (and also academic) traditions have influenced each other.
“Max Müller published a printed edition of the Rg-Veda, thus turning it for
the first time into a book, both in fact and in theory. This has affected not only
Western conceptions of the work and attitudes to it, but also Hindu.” (139)