Anne Hege Grung


Scripture is for many believers, at least for most Jews, Christians and Muslims, part of their everyday practice of rituals. Scripture gives guidelines for proper behavior, and narrates about human experience of the Sacred. Yet, in interreligious encounters between Jews, Christians and Muslims, Scripture is hardly ever the main topic. This may be so because most encounters stress the need for the so-called ‘dialogue of life’. Despite the caricature that is sometimes made of it, most organized dialogue initiatives do not focus on religious ideas, but put societal issues on the agenda. This is the more so if the encounter is not planned but spontaneous. There are some exceptions, like the initiative of Jewish, Muslim and Christian scholars to set up groups of ‘Scriptural Reasoning’, discussing important topics by joint studies of scriptural texts. Scripture, however, could be a very fruitful focus for soul-to-soul encounter.

Anne Hege Grung has studied the process of this type of encounter between women of a Christian and Muslim background in Norway. Women reading Scripture in an interreligious context have to meet different types of hermeneutical challenge. In the first place, they have to contend with a secular society that offers stereotyped images of ‘suppressed’ Muslim and Christian women. But they are also engaged in struggles within their own communities, where women have been (and sometimes are) seen as lacking in authority to explain Scripture. This double struggle might be described as a search for gender justice, the term used in the title of the book. ‘Gender justice’ suggests, in addition to ‘gender equality’, that there is a subjective side to what participants themselves experience as right and just, and that there are no fixed, objective criteria for the aims of women’s emancipation. Women from the Muslim and Christian tradition have to contend with the challenge to read Scripture texts about gender roles in a new way if they want to make sense of them for their own lives. Another type of hermeneutical challenge is posed by the interreligious setting. If they engage with women of other religious backgrounds, women have to make meaning of well-known texts in a new interreligious context. In this book, Grung engages in a qualitative analysis of the communication process of a small group of female readers.

In her second chapter, she discusses the different levels of intertextuality that occur:
First is the Koran and Bible in their original contexts, where both relate to other texts and to their historical contexts. Second, there is the intertextual relation between the Koran and the Bible as incorporating parts of other texts, including mutual exchange, shared themes, and ideas, or one text relating to the other both in historical and contemporary perspective. (....). Third, there are the texts (the Koran and the Bible) and their present contexts as represented through participants in a social process emerging as a discourse. The fourth level is to establish a space that is transcontextual (....). this happens through a shared space of the intertextual.

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For Grung, the difference between the term ‘intercultural’ and ‘transcultural’ lies in the movability of cultures. The term ‘intercultural’ suggests that cultures are stable entities that engage with each other. If an encounter is transcultural, people from those different cultures experience a shifting, a change within their respective cultures. The meeting itself influences the substance of their cultures (p. 28). The same can be said about ‘transtextual’ and ‘transreligious’ encounters. These encounter in themselves create a ‘third space’ from where transformations of texts or religious traditions are being made possible.

Grung is interested in the process of exchange by participants in the encounter. She chose a group of ten participants (five Christians, five Muslims) from different cultural backgrounds and denominations. A requirement was however that all the women could express themselves well in the Norwegian language. With this group, she had several meetings, studying a narrative text and a prescriptive text from both the Qur’an and the Bible. She made extensive transcriptions from the discussions between the women and she analyzed these.

In her rendering of the process, it becomes clear for the readers what is meant by ‘transtextual readings’. Grung analyzes that the biblical and Koranic stories of Hagar and Ismaël evoked and activated stories taken from the life-experience of the participating women. Some of their own narratives acted as a counter-narrative to the story from Scripture, some gave new meaning and depth to the texts that they share. In the end, their understanding of the story from their own tradition was transformed by their shared experience as readers from different traditions. They were engaged in a new, shared, meaning-making process of the well-known narrative.

This process was different when women read two prescriptive texts from the Bible and the Qur’an. Here, they discovered the real and enduring difference in the Christian (at least, the contemporary Norwegian Christian) way to