

Scripturalism: A theory

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Abstract and Keywords

As both scholars and laypeople have suspected, the various scriptures of the world—Bible, Veda, Qur’an, Gita, and others—do indeed share something in common, but what they share has less to do with the scriptures themselves than with the roles of the scripture texts in community-making. I suggest that scripturalism is a distinctive type of tradition, a complex of interdependent beliefs and practices by which communities are able to adapt their practices to changing social environments while maintaining a strong sense of community identity. Scripturalist communities attribute ultimate authority to a named text regarded and treated as highly distinctive among the community’s other literatures. Scripture-artifacts and scripture-performances alike tend to be distinguished formally from those of other texts. The explicit, normative attribution of ultimate authority to a scripture forms a core element in the community’s self-definition. It is precisely the principle of ultimate scriptural authority that allows the imaginative adaptation of the scripture’s “meaning” to individual, factional, and community ends—the practice of scriptural authority, often misunderstood as interpretation. Scripturalism is a highly successful form of culture because it provides both continuity of community identity and a means of community change.

Keywords: Biblicism, epidemiology of beliefs, hermeneutic, interpretation, scripture, text-artifact

Introduction

AMONG the oldest texts in continuous use are the sacred texts or scriptures—the Muslim Qur’an, the Hindu Vedas, the Jewish Torah, the Christian Bible, and others. Such scriptures influence people not only individually, as readers, but also socially, as a community orientation, a framework for discourse, and a ground of authority. Scripturalist communities enshrine a sacred text with fine materials, exquisite artwork, miraculous stories, formalized dogma, respectful handling, ritualized performance, and—most importantly—a continuous search to discover the text’s implications for their lives.

Scripturalism: A theory

These “scriptures of the world” invite comparison. People from various religious traditions, upon becoming aware of one another’s sacred texts, intuit that there is something comparable about them, as if they might somehow be more parallel to one another than to the other literature of their native communities. Scholars, too, sensing a distinctive phenomenon, have suggested that the various scriptures are members of some distinctive class—a literary genre or cultural type—that has developed independently in different parts of the world.

I propose that scripturalism is in fact a distinctive type of cultural tradition: a traditional means of establishing community, a complex of mutually supporting traditions, and a method of adaptation for both communities and individuals. The functional architecture of a scripturalist tradition is approached from the viewpoint of cultural reproduction, an epidemiology-of-beliefs perspective (Sperber, 1985, 1996). A tradition’s functional architecture is the set of processes, both social and psychological, that go into reproducing a scripturalist tradition in a community. The naturalistic perspective of the epidemiology of beliefs comports with embodied, performative, and dialogical (p. 168) approaches to culture in focusing on people’s practices—especially their interactions—because it is in and by these that cultural patterns are displayed, propagated, and disputed.

A scripturalist tradition includes a set of elements that interact to produce a distinctive form of community. A scripturalist community is one in which a scripture is normatively authoritative for community members, and community participation normatively involves distinctive rhetorical practices that, taken individually, appear to enact scriptural authority.

What makes scripturalism a *type* of tradition is that its beliefs and practices are partly defined by their formal properties. Formal properties are information-bearing distinctions—that is, *differentiae* that propagate, or, in the words of Gregory Bateson (1979), “differences that make a difference” (p. 228). For such properties, what is causally important is not the *differentiae* themselves but rather the information they communicate (Shannon & Weaver, 1948; cf. Floridi, 2011). All *differentiae* that communicate the same distinction are formally equivalent: they convey the same information and thus form a functional analogue between traditions. In scriptures’ origin stories, for instance, what often matters is not the narrative details—about which informants are seldom much concerned—but rather the implied contrast between scripture’s special origin and the normal origin of all other literature (about which informants are usually emphatic). The functional elements of scripturalist traditions must be understood, not semantically, in terms of their overt content, but rather in informational terms, in their implications for community members.

From an epidemiology-of-beliefs perspective (Sperber, 1996), a scripturalist tradition is defined by the processes that reproduce it. Scripturalist traditions must induce people to produce *just such artifacts* and to perform *just such actions* that at least some observers will go on to *do the same all over again*. They do this by a uniquely scripturalist way of making community such that the continuing life of the community reproduces at least the

Scripturalism: A theory

core elements of the scripturalist tradition. If scripturalist traditions offer communities a stable but flexible means of adaptation, one can see why scripturalism might be relatively stable within a community, and spread to others.

In the interest of clarity, *scripturalism* is described as a set of named hypotheses. So little information is available about day-to-day practices of scripturalism “on the ground” that, for examples, I have had to rely heavily upon my own fieldwork among evangelical Christians in a medium-sized Midwestern American church (Malley, 2004). The discussion of magical and mantic uses of scriptures draws upon two surveys of English-language folklore related to such uses (Malley, 2006, 2015). But the examples are intended only to be illustrative, and the empirical adequacy of the present model—its fit or lack of fit with observed practice—must be adjudged by others. An enormous amount of research remains to be done, but I take heart that, sometimes, scientific understanding is advanced more by the failure of bold proposals than by the success of timid ones.

(p. 169) Questions

The parallel development of scriptures in different traditions raises two basic problems: the definitional, comparative problem of what exactly makes a scripture, and the explanatory, anthropological problem of how such texts can remain in use so long.

The Definitional Problem

The last century or so has seen a number of anthologies of sacred texts, the most comprehensive of which is F. Max Mueller’s fifty-volume series *Sacred Books of the East* (Winteritz & Müller, 1879–1910). In contrast to Mueller’s encyclopedic endeavor, most anthologies are single-volume affairs that incorporate short selections from the better-known scriptures. Each such project raises afresh the thorny questions of (a) what exactly distinguishes “sacred texts” from other literature, and (b) what exactly justifies their inclusion in a common category. The various editors of these works have offered different criteria to explain their selections, their endeavor being to find a rational basis for a category that they *intuit* but do not really *understand*.

In wrestling with this difficulty, Miriam Levering (1989, pp. 8–9) developed the following characterization of the intuitive notion of scripture, shared by many scholars:

- There are often beliefs that the text is of divine origin, or the product of special insight.
- Whatever their origin, they are regarded and treated as sacred, that is, powerful and inviolable, to be treated with respect.
- They are regarded and consulted as normative, authoritative for a community in various aspects of its religious life: for worship, doctrine, and behavior.
- The texts, whether written or oral, are regarded as closed and fixed, not to be added to or subtracted from. In other words, they are treated as a canon.

Scripturalism: A theory

- When the sacred text is in the form of a book, it is considered complete. It contains everything of importance, and can be applied to all aspects of human life.
- The texts are used by members of the community in religious and ritual contexts.
- Sacred texts testify to that which is ultimate.

Levering proceeded to describe the difficulty with this conception:

These are intuitively appealing generalizations, yet they are curiously misleading. I suspect that these characterizations are so intuitively appealing because all but one of them belong to the widely shared common sense characterization of the Bible. But a fully formed comparative study casts considerable doubt on the universal applicability and fruitfulness of these characterizations. Characterizations that are strongly (p. 170) true and significant about the Bible or the Qur'an at certain historical moments turn out to be only weakly true, and far less significant (or significant in a different sense), as statements about other scriptural texts.

As Levering notes, the common-sense notion of scripture is not exactly wrong, but neither does it capture what is common to the different scriptural traditions.

Levering, following W. C. Smith, suggested that what unites the “sacred texts of the world” has to do not with the texts but with the human belief and practice surrounding them. In *What is Scripture?*, Smith wrote:

On close inquiry, it emerges that being scripture is not a quality inherent in a given text, or type of text, so much as an interactive relation between that text and a community of persons (though such relations have been by no means constant). One might even speak of a widespread tendency to treat texts in a “scripture-like” way: a human propensity to scripturalize. (1993, p. ix)

Smith's ultimate proposal is that “being scripture” is an existential attitude (p. 239): “[Scripture] is best characterized as ... a relation—an engagement—among humans, the transcendent, and a text”—this text being a kind of global uber-scripture in which the various existing scriptures are mere strands. Perhaps because of this grand design, Smith's discussion offers little insight into the actual practices of scripturalism. Nonetheless, Levering's and Smith's shift of focus from scriptural texts to the cultural beliefs and practices surrounding them effectively recasts a literary problem of genre as an anthropological one of tradition.

The Explanatory Problem

James Fieser and John Powers (1998), introduce their anthology *Scriptures of the World's Religions* with what seems a simple observation about the place of scriptures in religious traditions:

Scripturalism: A theory

The present text introduces the world's religions through selections from their scriptures. There are special benefits to this avenue of exploration. In most cases the sacred texts are the oldest written documents in the tradition, and one gains a sense of immediate connection by studying the same documents that followers have been reading for millennia. The texts are also foundational to a religion's important doctrines, rituals, and social and ethical positions. Thus, they explain the authoritative basis of traditions that might otherwise seem incomprehensible, or even groundless. (p. xix)

This observation about the relative age of scriptures resonates with the belief of many religionists in the eternity of scripture. In human terms, however, such longevity presents a puzzle.

(p. 171) It may seem that written texts endure because of the resilience of the media upon which they are inscribed—they do not dissipate as does the sound of speech. This is indeed an advantage of literacy, and has import for the formation of some scriptures. But in fact, fixity presents a challenge to a text's longevity.

Our spoken texts are generally unique productions, motivated by a speaker's agenda, formulated for a particular audience in a particular situation. Most of our speech is *improvised* rather than *rehearsed* because our agendas, audiences, and situations are constantly changing. Scripts—planned utterances—can be and are used in situations that are highly recurrent, such as greetings, customer-service communications, legal procedures, and so forth, but scriptures are (relatively) fixed texts facing circumstances that have changed dramatically over their lengthy histories. Is not their fixity a serious hindrance to their continued use?

The fixity of texts presents a grave difficulty for functionalist explanations of scripturalism. Consider a hypothesis to the effect that the Bible continues in use because of its legitimation of male authority. This hypothesis certainly explains some rhetorical uses of the Bible, but it presupposes rather than explains Biblical authority: the Bible can be used to legitimize male authority only because it was *already* considered authoritative. The utility is derived from the authority rather than explaining it.

Might not a text rise to authoritative status because of its uses? Yes. But *that* text would not be the text of the Bible, or the Qur'an, or any other actual scripture. No actual scripture is optimized for any particular rhetorical purpose, or even for any specifiable set of purposes. Existing scriptural texts have mostly been written and compiled through a combination of writers' occasional needs, material availability, rhetorical art, historical accident, individual ambition, and political compromise. In the case of the Bible, the resulting text has never been perfectly suited even for Christian doctrine and practice!

The one thing that a fixed text might plausibly do is to convey a fixed message, a static "meaning." Might not the function of a *fixed text* be to establish and maintain a *fixed set*

Scripturalism: A theory

of beliefs and practices? In fact, is this not a reason that informants explicitly give for reading, reciting, and studying scripture?

Belief that a community's doctrine and practice represent that community's interpretation of scripture has underlain the publication of most of the sacred-text anthologies. Chung Hwan Kwak gives it voice in his preface to *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*:

These sacred scriptures contain essential truths. And they have immeasurably great historical significance, for they have influenced the minds, hearts and practices of billions of people in the past. They continue to exert tremendous impact in the present, and we have every reason to believe that such influence will continue into the future. The words of truth in sacred scriptures form the core beliefs of religion and thus, of civilization.

(Wilson, 1991, p. xiii)

The supposition is that by reading a religion's scripture, the student of a religion is "reading over the shoulders" of the religionists (cf. Geertz, 1972), acquiring an (p. 172) understanding of their beliefs from the same source they do—and in those beliefs' definitive, scriptural form.

Implicit in statements like these is an epistemological model, *scriptural foundationalism* (Keller, 2005; Malley, 2004, 2011). Scriptural foundationalism consists of two hypotheses:

1. *The interpretive-belief hypothesis*. The beliefs and practices of a religion stand in an interpretive relationship to a scripture; the scripture is the text, and the religious beliefs and practices are interpretations of the text.
2. *The authoritative-text hypothesis*. The semantic relationship is established by the text's authority; the community regard for the text is a basis on which one can legitimize or justify beliefs and practices.

Both of these hypotheses are so intuitive as to seem indubitable, but let us doubt them anyway.

Empirically, scriptural foundationalism is supported by three basic kinds of observations, commonplace in scripturalist communities:

1. *Statements of scriptural authority*. Community members say—quite readily and explicitly—that the text is authoritative for their beliefs and practices. Not only do community members say it, but institutions explicitly avow the text's authority in their published self-descriptions, and it has often been the subject of reflection within traditions.
2. *Scriptural explanation*. Community members explain—again, readily and explicitly—their beliefs and practices by appeal to the scripture. They say that the scripture's instruction and authority are the reason they believe and behave as they do.

3. *Conformity.* There are clear points of correspondence between the semantic content of scripture and the beliefs and practices of community members. At least some of the time, people do what the text says they should.

Scriptural foundationalism thus seems a self-evident case of people doing exactly what they say they are doing.

Yet, since when do people go about describing their normal behavior? Why would anyone do that? The articulation of scriptural foundationalism as a part of normal practice ought to cause suspicion. Let us take a closer look at the three lines of evidence just discussed:

1. *Statements of scriptural authority.* To say that scripture is authoritative for a community is to repeat what its members say about it. Moreover, these self-reports are often themselves traditional: community members have been (p. 173) taught to describe their communities in terms of scriptural authority, and they often do so using fairly standardized language. Of all the community's many attributes, why should this particular one be singled out and articulated? And why traditionally?

2. *Scriptural explanation.* Scriptural explanations are justifications rather than autobiographical accounts of how the individuals have come to those beliefs and practices. When I asked informants specific questions about how they had learned their beliefs and practices, they easily distinguished this question of personal history from the question of scriptural justification, and were perfectly willing to relay how they had learned them in Sunday school or from their parents. Significantly, *the scriptural justification was itself part of what they were taught*: beliefs were true and practices obligatory because they were from the Bible. So when people explain their behavior by appeal to scripture, they are relating a traditional behavior along with a traditional justification. I do not doubt that scriptural authority provides some people with genuine motivation for behaving as they have been taught. But in general, people's explanations of their behaviors by appeal to scripture are *not* evidence that they behave as they do because the scripture says to do so; this shows only that people have been *taught* to explain their behavior in this way. But why do they explain their behavior in this relatively circuitous way?

3. *Conformity.* People may perform actions enjoined by scripture simply because the actions themselves are normative. The coincidence of practice with scriptural teaching is evidence of scriptural authority only when (a) alternative practices are equally effectual and available and (b) the influence of other authorities can be excluded. And what about nonconformity? In the community I studied, the straightforward instruction "Greet one another with a holy kiss" was simply ignored. I have seen wealthy donors treated with special consideration—exactly as is forbidden in the Epistle of James. Similar cases of neglect and even outright contradiction may be observed in many scripturalist communities, but these have largely been ignored despite the problems they pose for scriptures' alleged authority.

When evaluated as an explanation of actual Scripturalist practice, scriptural foundationalism is not so impressive after all. Scriptural foundationalism clearly does represent some

communities' understanding of their own practices. This self-understanding structures much of their discourse and formal epistemology. I developed an outline of this model in my analysis of evangelical Biblicism in the United States (Malley, 2004), and Eva Keller (2005) independently discovered the same structure underlying Seventh-Day Adventist practice on Madagascar. The mistake comes in taking scriptural foundationalism as the explanation for rather than as part of the phenomenon to be explained.

(p. 174) **Distinctions**

An understanding of scripturalist traditions requires distinguishing between artifacts, texts, and performances.

Text

A *text*, as I shall use the term, is an ordered set of words. This definition seems simple but requires some explanation.¹

Given that evangelical Christians regularly reference “the Bible” and that they use a variety of particular Bibles, I inquired into the relationship between “the Bible” and these particular books. Systematic questioning revealed that my informants expected “the Bible” to be a text in the sense used here, as an ordered set of words. Those words could be written, spoken, audio-recorded, impressed in braille, or beamed across the galaxy on radio waves, but they had to be words—not pictures, enactments, tunes, or anything else. “The Bible” is a *text*.

The tendency to conceptualize linguistic performances as texts may be traceable to the organization of working memory, specifically the role of a phonetic loop in which the order of speech sounds is preserved. This, combined with the lexical organization of languages, almost guarantees that in any society some public representations will take the form of texts, even if they are performed only for citation and mockery.

Although the words of a text must be ordered, they need not be grammatical or have any other internal organization. Magical spells are often aggregations of words, nonsense syllables, and names with no semantic content in any normal sense of the term. Other texts, such as signatures and some receipts, serve as evidence of events without respect to their semantic content. A text may be *no more* than an ordered set of words.

No distinction is necessary between written scriptures and oral sacred texts. If it really is a *text* that is sacred—not a plot or style or story—then it remains a text whether it is inscribed or not. Conversely, if what is sacred is not a text but an oratory *style* or *narrative*, then writing down a corresponding text does not create a sacred text but merely a textual example of the sacred style or sacred narrative. The Iliad and the Odyssey, for example, have a distinctive vocabulary, meter, and narrative that are thought to be part (p. 175) of their performance, and their texts should not be mistaken for scriptures just because someone put stylus to parchment.

Scripturalism: A theory

Oral texts may well be scriptures. Even in highly literate societies some texts exist only in oral form. During my fieldwork, members of Creekside Baptist Church recited the Lord's Prayer fairly regularly, in a standard form:

Our Father, Who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven, Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, As we forgive those who have sinned against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

This text does not appear in *any* version of the Bible. It is most similar to the text of the Revised Standard Version, with the longer ending of the King James Version, but the change from "trespasses" to "sins" was directed from the pulpit and thereafter followed without comment. In this community, the Lord's Prayer had always existed as an oral tradition, transmitted independently of any particular Bible translation.

Writing does, of course, make a difference. In a society without literacy, texts can be associated with artifacts but not inscribed on them, and this limits their length. Going forward, I will refer to the texts of scriptures, as opposed to their artifacts and performances, as *scripture-texts*.

Text-Artifact

In "The Natural Histories of Discourse," Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (1996) describe a text-artifact as follows: "The text-artifact is the physical medium that seems, on the face of it, to carry an organization of information, sometimes narrative information, that we decontextualize as the denotational text we are reading" (p. 5). Their caution is well measured, because it is in fact difficult to identify precisely what it is about a text-artifact that allows it to be recognized (read, interpreted) as an inscribed text. Fortunately, this uncertainty seldom arises in scripturalist traditions, so we can simply stipulate that any physical expression or instantiation of a text is a text-artifact. When an artifact bears a scriptural text, I shall refer to it as a *scripture-artifact*.

It has often been observed that scripture-artifacts are the focus of special effort in reproduction, decoration, distribution, and handling. Ritual actions performed upon scripture-artifacts include bringing a Bible to church, placing a Qur'an upright on a shelf, or bowing to the Adi Granth. Such acts are generally conceived to be within the power of the performer.

Greater effects are purportedly achievable by means of scripture-artifacts. E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley (Lawson & McCauley, 1990; McCauley & Lawson, 2002) point out that acts performed by means of special objects are often said to produce (p. 176) superhuman effects. Thus, rituals to heal or harm sometimes involve the production and manipulation of scripture-artifacts, for example:

Scripturalism: A theory

If a woman is forsaken by her lover, she has but to write out the CIX Psalm, send the copy of it to him, and he will never thrive.

(Gregor, 1881, p. 87)

And:

A farmer near Clun had an animal suffering from a bad knee joint. The charmer wrote a verse from the Bible on a piece of paper and put it into the boosey (or manger) for the animal to eat with its hay. The animal recovered.

(Hayward, 1938, p. 230)

The use of scripture-artifacts to achieve superhuman effects is widely reported but quite difficult to explain. If the text-artifact is just going to be eaten by a horse, why should its semantic content matter?

Text-Performance

A text-performance is an oral performance of a text, such as in the example of the congregation's recitation of the Lord's Prayer. I will refer to performances of scriptural texts as *scripture-performances*.

The most common ritual action upon a scripture-text is reading or recitation. These are usually carried out in a stylized manner, as when, on May 31, 1934, Muhammad Rif'at became the first person to recite the Qur'an on Egyptian Cairo Radio, performing it in the style *tasweer al-mana*. The reading of the Torah by Jewish men—at bar Mitzvahs and in study—is another example of this type.

In other rituals people perform actions *by means of* scripture-performances, such as protecting oneself against fairies, exorcising ghosts, or relieving a curse:

When Mr. Jones was curate of Llanyblodwel a parishioner sent to ask the "parson" to come to see her.... In the course of conversation Mr. Jones ascertained that the woman had sent for him to counteract the evil machinations of her enemy. "I am witched," she said, "and a parson can break the spell." The clergyman argued with her, but all to no purpose. She affirmed that she was witched, and that a clergyman could withdraw the curse. Finding that the woman was obdurate he read a [Bible] chapter and offered up a prayer, and wishing the woman good day with a hearty "God bless you," he departed. Upon a subsequent visit he found the woman quite well, and he was informed by her, to his astonishment, that he had broken the spell.

(Owen, 1896, pp. 244-245)

Many folklore reports suggest that reading the Bible or reciting specific Biblical texts is efficacious for protection, healing, and more. What we lack is an explanation of why scrip-

ture-artifacts and scripture-performances are reported to have such uses. Might it have something to do with the conceptualization of scriptures?

(p. 177) **Scripture-Concepts**

What do people have in mind when they refer to scripture-concepts, such as the Bible, the Qur'an, or the Long Discourses of the Buddha? Do these scripture-concepts have any special properties, different from the ways in which people think of other texts? I suggest three hypotheses—unification, recognition, distinctiveness—concerning the structure and dynamics of scripture-concepts.

Unification

It ought to be a striking fact that scripture-texts are so often *named* collections. In modern, highly literate societies, we are accustomed to texts having titles, by which we might refer to them, but many ancient texts—in fact, most scripture-texts—have no original titles: they were named only after composition, by readers who wanted to reference them. Scripture names like the Bible, Qur'an, or Tripitaka designate not individual texts but collections of independent works. The *unification hypothesis* proposes a historical tendency among scripturalist communities to gather their scripture-texts into a single named collection—a *canon* of scripture, to use the traditional but ambiguous term. It holds that where a plurality of scripture-texts are in use—whether different works or different collections of works—scripturalist communities will collect them into a single category designated by a simple name. The unification hypothesis does not suggest the elimination of other names for scripture texts—the prediction is simply that there will develop a single term for the entire scriptural library.

Recognition

Scripture-concepts need not necessarily define the categories they name; one need not know the defining features of the Bible to recognize Bibles, or the precise definition of a Qur'an to recognize a “copy” of it. The *recognition hypothesis* holds that everyday recognition of scripture-artifacts relies on a set of formal recognition features rather than a definition. Christian evangelicals need not define the Bible so long as they can reliably *recognize* Bible artifacts. To identify the criteria used in recognition, I asked informants how they would determine whether a given artifact was a Bible. Once the title was taken out of consideration, they looked to stereotyped characteristics—leather binding, a brown or black cover, two-column text, fine paper, enlarged capital letters, column headers, a ribbon marker, and so forth—to decide. This reliance on recognition criteria rather than verbiage afforded them a convenient textual eclecticism. But even when definitions of scripture are culturally available, as in the Islamic case, they are not essential, because the recognition of scripture-artifacts depends on readily observable features—formal properties—rather than a definition.

(p. 178) **Distinctiveness**

Scripturalists' understanding of their scriptures—whether as a unified corpus or as individual works—requires that they be understood as instances of some higher or superordinate taxon, as species of some genus. The *distinctiveness hypothesis* holds (a) that scriptures will be understood as relatively distinct from other taxa at the same level of abstraction, and (b) that scriptures will be considered atypical members of their superordinate taxon. My informants classified the Bible as a text, comparable to other texts and not comparable to things other than texts, such as giraffes or Tuesdays. In the terms of the distinctiveness hypothesis, they regarded the Bible as relatively distinct from other texts—more different from other texts than other texts are from one another—and as an atypical—indeed, unusual or special—instance of its superordinate category, text.

The recognition and distinctiveness hypotheses together facilitate the specialization of scripture production. Given the small capacity of working memory, it is efficient for the day-to-day recognition of scripture-artifacts and scripture-performances to be based on a relatively small number of highly evident formal characteristics, and for the production of scripture-artifacts and scripture-performances to be entrusted to specialists. It is, then, in the interest of the specialists, who derive their influence and perhaps livelihoods from the esteem people have for their products, to make those products highly recognizable. To that end, scripture-artifacts are often specially decorated because such marking (a) helps community members to recognize them as instances of their scripture and (b) lends substance to members' sense that the scriptures are unique. Both are critical for the role of scripture in the community.

Traditions about Scriptures

The traditions concerning scriptures are famously varied in form and content. However varied, such scriptural lore—stories, doctrines, legal prescriptions, and other discourse about scripture—must convey (a) the *principle of scriptural authority*—that the scripture is authoritative for the community—and (b) the *principle of scriptural uniqueness*—that the scripture is distinctive, quite different from other literature. These principles guide reasoning, discourse, and practice in scripturalist communities.

The Principle of Scriptural Authority

Statements about scriptural authority convey important features of a scripturalist community's *normative self-understanding*: that is, community members (a) regard their (ideal) beliefs and practices as the (true) meaning or (correct) interpretation of scripture and (b) rationalize and legitimize this relationship by appeal to the scripture's (p. 179) authority. This self-understanding is at the heart of scripturalism—in part because it does *not* describe actual practice.

Authority in Principle

Philosophers have long noted that any proposition may be understood as a statement about the world or as a statement about language. In much the same way, statements about scripture may serve as statements about the cosmos or about the scripturalist community. So it is with statements about scriptural authority: although formally they are statements about a text, they function as statements *about the scripturalist community*. To say that a scripture is authoritative is (a) to identify with the (real or imagined) community that recognizes the scripture's authority and (b) to invite the audience to join that community, either explicitly by stating agreement, or tacitly, by going along with the supposition. In being expressed, statements of scriptural authority reproduce the very authority they purport to describe.

The nature of scriptural authority is different from normal literary authority. Scriptures are authoritative *in principle*. This is most clearly evident in community members' open-ended commitment to the scriptural authority. Biblicists believe what the Bible says, even if they *don't know* what all it says. This contrasts starkly with normal literature, where agreement with the text can be decided only *after* it is read.

Authority and Unification

The principle of scriptural authority attributes authority to the scriptural corpus as a whole. It is therefore the engine driving the unification hypothesis, the source of communities' tendency to gather all their scripture-texts under a single name.

Unification can have a significant consequence for the interpretation of scriptural self-reference. In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul writes: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." In the original context, "all Scripture" referred to the Jewish scriptures of the time, constituting—at most—the Septuagint canon of the Old Testament. But today, this statement is commonly used as a description of the authority of the entire Christian Bible, including the New Testament.

Unification creates an asymmetry that is important for scriptural authority: the authority of the scriptural corpus can potentially, but need not actually, devolve upon any particular passage therein. The authority of the entire corpus is logically available to be rhetorically applied to any constituent text, but need not automatically be so applied. This affords the community a flexibility in the practice of scriptural authority that belies the generality of the principle of scriptural authority.

Authority Grounded

The principle of scriptural authority is what Roy Rappaport (1999) called an *ultimate sacred postulate*. Rappaport proposed that all communities have at their conceptual core a small set of statements that are regarded as sacred and unquestionable. These (p. 180) postulates are *ultimate* in that they provide the (ostensible) basis for community dis-

Scripturalism: A theory

course. Ultimate sacred postulates (USPs) are different from mere presuppositions in three ways.

Explicit transmission. USPs are explicitly communicated as statements of great importance. USPs are explicitly communicated because the acceptance of the description as true *reproduces the community's self-conception* in any listener who identifies with the community, such as a child or new convert.

Symbolism. Unlike presuppositions, USPs function symbolically—associatively, evocatively—rather than propositionally. Statements like “the Bible is the word of God” are used not for their (often modest or trivial) propositional content but because they represent, in a looser, more associative fashion, assumptions that are important for the community. Dan Sperber (1975) has noted that the propositional vacuity of such enigmatic statements grabs listeners’ attention and triggers a search for associations that might illuminate their relevance. The public expression of USPs makes them potent symbols of the community and its norms.

Generativity. Without much relevant propositional content, seldom can the USPs logically generate the specific set of principles that guide community practice, but they are nonetheless *thought* to do so by community members. The authority of the principles guiding community practice is attributed to the USPs when in fact the guiding principles are normative in their own right.

The principle of scriptural authority functions as a USP in scripturalist communities. In the community I studied, biblical authority was communicated emphatically to children in Sunday school curriculum and to adults in the church-membership process. It’s reinforced by regular reference to the Bible as “God’s word.” Yet the sense of this phrase is vague: in discussing it, my informants often echoed 2 Timothy 3.16, describing the Bible as “inspired by God” or “God-breathed.” They were uncertain what these phrases might mean, but certain that they entail that God is the ultimate author of the Bible, and that the Bible is true and authoritative. Such enigmatic talk functioned not semantically but formally, as a signal of commitment to Biblical authority.

Scriptural authority is often attributed to and purportedly derived from some other authority or event. Such derivations present the authority or event as logically more fundamental than scriptural authority, but they are psychologically secondary: it is scriptural authority that is primary, and the purported derivations rationalize this fact. The real force of scriptural authority comes from the shared understanding that *if you are one of us, then you will regard the scripture as authoritative*. Acceptance of scriptural authority is tied to community membership because the community understands itself in terms of scriptural authority (among other things). The principle of scriptural authority is that we—the participants in *this* community or *this* tradition—recognize the scripture’s authority, in contrast to others—outsiders or defectors—who do not. The scriptural foundationalism they espouse does not describe Scripturalist practice: it *conditions, evokes, causes* that practice.

Scripturalism: A theory

(p. 181) As many have intuited, the ostensible derivation of scriptural authority from some more fundamental event or source is a result rather than the cause of scriptural authority, the *rationalization* of scriptures' authority. It is for this reason that variations in different revelatory accounts or alternative theories of scriptural authority are normally of merely academic interest to members of scripturalist communities. So long as scriptural authority is maintained, members sense intuitively that nothing important depends on such details. It is only when a narrative distinction signals a social difference that people sit up and take notice.

The community basis for the principle of scriptural authority may be one reason the authority is often regarded as an *inherent property* of the scripture: from the viewpoint of a community member, there is little difference between the description of reality and the statement of an accepted social understanding. The reification of social authority in a scripture justifies community tradition and naturalizes scriptural behaviors as rational responses to cosmic reality.

The Principle of Scriptural Uniqueness

The second key proposition essential to scripturalist traditions is that their scriptures are unique, distinctive among texts. This principle is the social, motivational engine that drives the distinctiveness of the scripture's taxon relative to its coordinate taxa. Because the principle of scriptural authority serves to define a community, the distinction between members and nonmembers implies the uniqueness of scripture among texts.

The *principle of spiritual uniqueness* is that a scripture is unique among all texts—those that exist now and those that may be discovered or created. As a claim about texts, this quite problematic: given any text, it is always possible to create another text that is almost arbitrarily similar. The *Wicked Bible*, for instance, differs from other Bibles by one small word: *not*, specifically in “Thou shalt [not] commit adultery.” No scripture-text can really be all that different from other texts. The principle of spiritual uniqueness, then, attempts to project a *social distinction* onto a *verbal continuum*.

Lore about scriptures often communicates their uniqueness formally. Probably the most common way of communicating a scripture's uniqueness and rationalizing its authority is the origin story. Scriptures' origin stories often occur in varied forms even within a given community, but they all share a common implication: that the scripture is special, distinctive among texts, *because of the event narrated*. The scripture stands apart from other texts not because the scripture's origin is different in its narrative details but because the scripture's origin is of a *different kind entirely* from those of other texts. Likewise, doctrines of scripture, theories of inspiration, and stories about scripture miracles communicate that scripture is quite different from all other texts.

The principle of spiritual uniqueness is reinforced by the decoration and handling of scripture-artifacts. The lavish decoration of and artistic investment in scripture-artifacts are intended to show that the scriptures are uniquely valuable to (p. 182) the community. So too, ritual: To swear on a Bible, to properly handle a Qur'an, to bow before the Adi

Granth—each practice implies the uniqueness of scripture. The principle of spiritual uniqueness thus explains the special treatment of scriptures as artifacts or performances. Such practices not only reflect the reverence participants feel for their scriptures but also reproduce the scripturalist tradition, by lending substance to scriptures' distinctiveness.

Scripture Citation and Interpretation

Whatever else people may do with scriptures, they read them. To understand scripturalist reading, it is essential to distinguish four phenomena:

- 1. Interpretation.** An interpretation is a statement that is attributed to a text. An interpretation consists of (a) some concept or statement and (b) the attribution of this concept or statement to the scripture. Statements are often assertions (propositions about the universe) or exhortations (injunctions for or against some action). They may be in a semipropositional form, in which case there is often discussion about what the proposition actually is or what specific action is enjoined. The attribution may be to the scripture-text as a whole, "the Bible says ..."; to some portion of the text, "John 3.16 says ..."; or to some person or event reported in the text, "St. Paul says ..." or "Jesus showed us by ___ that ..."
- 2. Traditional interpretation.** A tradition in which ideas are communicated *as interpretations*, that is, paired with an attribution to a text. In many cases particular *points of relevance* are also transmitted, implicitly or explicitly, alongside the interpretation. In these cases the interpretation is passed on as an interpretation relevant to some question or topic. Traditional points of relevance can exert a very strong constraint on the socially acceptable uses of a traditional interpretation.
- 3. Interpretive process.** The mental process of producing an interpretation from a text. It is the reading process triggered when a person perceives a text-artifact and adopts a *semantic stance* toward it. The semantic stance is the assumption that some features of the text-artifact can be treated as a verbal signal.
- 4. Hermeneutic prescription.** Some—not all—scripturalist traditions include descriptions of and prescriptions for the interpretive process. As descriptions, these are psychological propositions: claims about how a person infers a meaning from a scripture-text. As is the case in traditional logic, hermeneutic prescriptions are formally a mixture of description and prescription, but their rhetorical deployment is almost always *prescriptive*. Even brief inspection reveals that these traditions are not so much scientific as normative. It is unclear how often, and to what degree, hermeneutic prescriptions actually affect interpretive processes.

(p. 183) With these phenomena distinguished, let us take a look at the elements of scripturalist tradition.

Interpretive Traditions

A scripturalist community has, as a part of its culture, a mental library of interpretations. This important part of a scripturalist tradition is its interpretive tradition—that is, the entire set of interpretations passed down *as* interpretations. A community's interpretive tradition is the set of traditional interpretations known by any member of the community. The entirely mental library need not—in fact, cannot—be shared by all community members: there will always be individual variations, but what members do share is the expectation that some sets of traditional interpretations are shared, and a respect for a common authority.

Vitally, not all interpretations are the result of an interpretive process, of *any* actual reading of the scripture. One interpretation I observed being drawn in a Sunday school class was a proposition originally deduced from theological argumentation and only later—centuries later—attributed to Bible passages. In this case, the interpretive tradition was passing on, not the product of any interpretive process, but a rationalization for a proposition already established on other grounds. (I have occasionally heard Christian scholars refer to such rationalizations as *eisagesis*—“reading into”—the opposite of exegesis.) In my lifetime I have seen many trends in belief or practice—most impressively, aerobics and recycling—come to be attributed to the Bible, as if they were authentic teachings somehow overlooked for millennia.

Interpretive Process

It has sometimes been assumed that scripturalists derive their interpretations from their interpretive processes, so that differences in beliefs and practices are explained by differences in the *methods* by which readers interpret a scripture. But as so often happens in social and psychological analysis, our intuitive understanding is backward.

If one simply sets, side by side, scripture texts and their alleged interpretations, it quickly becomes evident that no deductive process can possibly produce the latter from the former. Table 10.1 lists a few of the interpretations I observed among American evangelical Christians, along with the texts to which they were attributed at church events I witnessed.²

(p. 184)

Scripturalism: A theory

Table 10.1. Some Bible interpretations

	Biblical attribution	Proposition
(1)	Thou shalt not kill.	We should not kill [people, except in self-defense or in military service].
(2)	Jesus cared for the poor.	We should care for the poor.
(3)	You should not eat meat sacrificed to idols if it causes your brother to stumble.	You should not drink alcohol if doing so angers a fellow Christian.

Consider the rules required to turn the Biblical texts into their observed interpretations.

1. Thou shalt not kill. → We should not kill [people, except in self-defense or in military service].

It is not difficult to see how one might take “Thou shalt not kill” and derive from it the belief “I should not kill.” In the event I observed, the preacher interpreted this rule collectively, for himself and his audience, making it “We should not kill.”

The only interpretive inference here is to assume that the reader is a member of the text’s intended audience, a person addressed by the deictic “Thou.” Yet readers do not keep the Sabbath, enjoined in a parallel way in the same passage.

2. Jesus cared for the poor. → We should care for the poor.

Here the text—Jesus cared for the poor— is a declaration, not an instruction. To conclude from this that “we should care for the poor” requires a background assumption along the lines of “we should do what Jesus did.” Yet to introduce this background assumption creates many difficulties, because Christians do not in fact try to reproduce most of Jesus’s actions.

3. You should not eat meat sacrificed to idols if it causes your brother to stumble. → You should not drink alcohol if doing so angers a fellow Christian.

The third example introduces the kinds of metaphor that are so important in scripturalist interpretation. Here the problem is that any interpretive process capable of these transformations must also generate many other, equally imaginative interpretations, presumably from even the most prosaic passages. To be sure, there are many imaginative interpretations in the history of Christianity and other scripturalist traditions, (p. 185) but it is hard to see how any process sufficiently flexible to generate them could generate *only* the

Scripturalism: A theory

imaginative interpretations we actually find. If these are regular outputs of some inferential process, how can it fail to produce many tens of thousands more bizarre interpretations?

These examples illustrate the general problem. It has never been shown, for any scripturalist tradition, that texts and their purported interpretations are related in any systematic manner. At most, researchers have found that in some communities there are hermeneutic prescriptions and that these are sometimes followed. But claims to the effect that sizable communities are really using prescribed interpretive processes for reading scripture have little empirical support. Any prescribed hermeneutic, or regular interpretive process, would be far too restrictive for life in a scripturalist community.

One might reasonably ask whether scripturalist communities are really engaged in the interpretation of scripture-texts at all. Scripturalists certainly read their scriptures, and are eager to connect them to their lives. But instead of interpretation, what we see is the *practice of scriptural authority*.

The Practice of Scriptural Authority

The practice of scriptural authority is the logical and rhetorical grounding of belief and practice in scripture. It requires the establishment of *transitivity* between a scripture-text and the thought-world of community members. It is by transitivity that the normative authority of scripture is extended to people's beliefs and practices.

What Bible readers actually do in reading the Bible is to search for relevant connections between the Biblical text and their beliefs or behaviors (cf. Bielo, 2009). It is this goal—not the “meaning” of the text, but a relevant connection to it—that structures their actual practice of Bible reading. The limits of attention being what they are, the only ways to establish such a connection—in literature, in preaching, in discussion, even in personal reading—is to constrain one side of the search or the other: to proceed either from some delimited scripture-text to life or from some delimited part of life to the scripture-text. Each direction has its own assumptions and requirements.

The Textual Study

The purpose of a textual study is to establish the relevance of some scripture-text to the lives of community members. In the community I studied, this process often began with the selection of a scripture-text for reading or study.

In the group Bible studies I observed, participants took turns making interpretive proposals—a particular reading of the scriptural passage and a suggested take-away from it—for others to consider. Participants would begin by reading a portion of the text aloud, adding intonation and stress in accord with their proposed (p. 186) understanding, and possibly drawing on textual alternatives (from the margin) or translation alternatives (from other Bible versions) for variants. These variants were understood not as true alternatives—disjunctive sets from which a single reading must be selected—but rather as *sets of optional renderings* of different phrases, from which any combination of selections could consti-

Scripturalism: A theory

tute the scripture text under discussion. Even when only one Bible text is considered, different readings are afforded by the semantic range of specific words and the ambiguities of grammatical form. Most texts can be read in a variety of ways, and scripturalist traditions have often made use of this flexibility.

The presentation of a proposed reading is often followed by discussion involving two types of consideration: (a) comparison with other Biblical texts or doctrines and (b) anecdotes from the media or participants' experiences to illustrate its practicability. Comparison with other Biblical passages or doctrines results from an implicit expectation of rationality: consistency is support; inconsistency, an objection. Practicality seems a weaker consideration but one that is nevertheless perceived as relevant. Ideally—and in fact, most of the time—the discussion concludes with one or two points of relevant connection between the scripture-text and the issues that are important to readers. Such issues form the point of departure for a topical study.

The Topical Study

The purpose of a topical study is to establish a relevant connection between some concern in the lives of community members and any scripture-text. The structure and dynamics of topical studies are most manifest when the studies are carried out by groups.

Among evangelical Christians, topical studies begin with the suggestion of a topic or issue, and Bible study or Sunday school-class participants are invited to consider what the Bible might have to say about the topic. Significantly, the whole of the Bible is considered potentially relevant to any topic. There is no a priori restriction on the passages that might be relevant to a general topic, and the assumption is that the Bible speaks to almost any modern topic consistently throughout. Neither is there any restriction on the kind of connection that might be drawn between a text and a topic: a coincidence of vocabulary, thematic relevance, analogy of situation, generality of principle—any type of connection may be cited.

As the discussion begins, individual participants suggest a variety of scripture passages: each proposal involves a particular Biblical text and some indication of its relevance to the topic at hand. Once an interpretive proposal is made, other participants may take it up—or not—depending on the implication for the topic at hand. The same criteria—consistency with other Bible passages or doctrines, practicality of the implication—are adduced in favor of or against the suggested connection. In such contexts, participant-proposed biblical connections are seldom rejected on the grounds of the Biblical text's context, or because the passage is addressing some other topic. Ideally, the topical study concludes with "applications" of a variety of scripture-texts to the subject of interest.

(p. 187) Transitivity

What often gets described as scriptural interpretation is really a *search* process, and one guided not by interpretation—discovery of the text's "meaning"—but by the logical and practical requirements of connecting scripture to life.

Scripturalism: A theory

Whether it begins with the text or a life concern, the interpretive process is a concurrent search through two fields: possible readings of scripture-texts and permissible implications for real life. It is driven by relevance, the same as the rest of our communicative efforts (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Presented with an authoritative text, readers naturally—intuitively—look for its semantic relevance to their lives. It is for this reason that scripture interpretation can be carried out without any special instruction as to its procedure: it is just regular reading. Among less literate people, other types of relevance—such as the potential efficacy of scripture-artifacts for healing—may have seemed equally obvious.

The object of the search is the establishment of transitivity between scripture and life, such that a reading is connected to a socially acceptable course of action. To establish a connection between the text and one's life, one need only find some link—*any* link: verbal, logical, analogical, whatever—between the text and an issue or concern (actual or potential) in one's life. The major constraint is not on the link to scripture but on its implications.³

Interpretive proposals face tacit expectations about the kinds of things the scripture might enjoin. In the community I studied, suggested implications, to be plausible, were expected to be prosocial and polite, to affirm traditional beliefs, and to not ask anything obviously impractical or, in fact, seriously threatening to a middle-class American way of life. Proposed implications that ran counter to acceptable behavior were rejected. The most common response (in social settings, anyway) was simply to ignore the offending suggestion: it was met with silence, and after a moment's pause the discussion moved on.

Transitivity is the legitimization that results from relevant connections with acceptable implications. It is the logical basis of authority, extending the authority of a scripture to a specific idea or action. Once accepted, the belief or action is established as a “teaching” of the scripture—and added to the interpretive tradition. Ultimately, it is transitivity that makes scripturalism work, because it enables a scripture's authority to be extended far beyond its literal contents. It enables scriptures to be relevant in situations quite different from those for which they were originally intended, and is, I think, one of the features that has made the historical proliferation of scripturalist traditions possible.

(p. 188) Conclusion

With the invention of writing came history, and historical time is largely a story of the increasing inscription of human communication: receipts, contracts, records, stories, missives, declarations, constitutions, and websites. Even death has a certificate. In a broad sense, scripturalism might be understood as the notion that one can organize a community around an authoritative text. In this perspective, the history of religious and many other kinds of communities have increasingly gravitated toward this structure. Why? Three factors, I suggest, make scripturalism an especially successful form of culture.

Scripturalism: A theory

First and foremost, people seem to have difficulty recognizing the implications of textual authority. To propose the appointment of (or consent to) an authoritative person immediately raises an alarm, fears of what that person might do with that authority. In comparison, a text seems innocuous. It would seem there could be no hidden motive, no secret agenda, for all that it says is known in advance. The attribution of authority to a text thus appears neutral. Indeed, the potential to read a text in various ways means that it is often easier for interested parties to agree on particular verbiage than a particular idea or proposition. This is evident in the wrangling about verbiage that is the specialty of legal experts and speech writers. Textual authority does not set off the same cognitive and emotional red flags as does human authority, and people seem to agree more readily to textual authority than to human authority.

A second advantage of textual authority is the perceived longevity of the text. A text long in use gives the impression of institutional continuity and consistency, tending to hallow it with ancestral authority. The ongoing relevance of such a text can then be seen as an indication of its divine origin or eternal nature. The ongoing relevance of an ancient text creates a powerful rhetorical appeal.

But this perceived longevity also has a functional importance. Adaptability, whether of an organism or institution, requires rigidity *and* flexibility. For an organization to adapt, it must change but still remain itself. Some part of it must be conserved, to serve as a frame on which the changes may hinge. When what must be conserved is a community's sense of identity, continuity perceived is continuity achieved. Thus the apparent conservation of texts is, in fact, an important part of a scripturalist tradition.

The actual conservation of the text is much less important than the perceived conservation, and in fact, between the text-concept and the text-artifacts that constitute its extension there can be some flexibility, as in the case of the Bible. Conservation of the principle of scriptural authority can serve as the frame within which the practice of scriptural authority permits extensive adaptability to different times and circumstances. The text and its authority thus seem part of a long-standing tradition, even as the actual implications of that scriptural authority are highly adaptable.

This adaptability is, I suggest, an important consideration in understanding the proliferation of scripturalist traditions. Although the story of the Bible is often told as one continuous, widespread tradition, its history has always been one of local communities adapting their particular brand of Biblicism to their local circumstances. What the (p. 189) many communities really share is the Biblicist framework for adaptation: the Bible remains authoritative (in principle), while (in practice) its implications for readers' lives are changed to fit local circumstances.

Finally, one must not forget that scriptures can be a tremendously powerful aid to individual reflection and maturation. Regardless of how it comes about, the attempt to articulate the observations, warnings, and instructions of an alien text with one's own particular circumstances and perspective is likely to generate inferences that, precisely because they

Scripturalism: A theory

take one's mind in new directions, become useful tools of reflection. Comparing an alien perspective with one's own is almost bound to lead to new observations and insights.

And in the main, scriptures are genuinely great literature. In considering the power of the institutional processes described here, I often asked myself whether an old-fashioned phone directory might not, in some way, come to serve as a scripture. I think not. I think the scriptural texts that we see today are works of genuine quality in their own right, and their influence is due not only to the institutions that adopt them but also to their own literary excellencies.

Questions for Further Research

1. Do participants in scripturalist communities intuit that their communities are characterized by recognition of scriptural authority?
2. Are there any clear cases of a community acting on the basis of scriptural authority when all other considerations—practical, social, ethical—are against it?
3. When considering variants or potential variants in stories of their scripture's origin, do scripturalists consider variations bearing on scriptural distinctiveness more important than other types of variations?
4. Are performances of scriptures more different from performances of nonscriptures than performances of nonscriptures are from one another?
5. Do scripturalists consider their scripture more distinct from other literary works than those other works are from one another?
6. Do scripturalist communities have mechanisms for resolving the cognitive dissonance caused when readers discover that what the scripture says differs from what the community normatively practices?
7. In scripturalist communities where a scripture-artifact is officially (doctrinally) regarded as just an artifact, are participants nonetheless more susceptible to suggestions that the scripture-artifact is indeed special than they are to suggestions that other text-artifacts are special?

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ The use of the term *text* in the humanities has been greatly confused owing to its adoption as a model for social action (Ricoeur, 1971), and *reading* as a model for the observation and analysis thereof (Geertz, 1973). One cannot use this model for the explanation of scripturalist traditions, in which the hermeneutic relationship is itself part of the explanandum, without begging important questions.

⁽²⁾ Many interpretations are attributed to more than one passage, though seldom are all those passages supporting any particular idea marshaled together. Interestingly, the possibilities for interpreting a text are never foreclosed: any given interpretation can *always* be supported by some other passage, if some connection can be established.

⁽³⁾ It is the constraint of acceptable implications that ultimately prevents any widespread use of prescribed hermeneutics. For people to adhere to prescribed hermeneutics, they would have to (a) reject otherwise acceptable interpretations simply on methodological grounds—something I have occasionally seen in written works but never in normal social interaction—and (b) adopt socially unacceptable interpretations simply because they were generated by the prescribed hermeneutic. The same considerations, I suggest, make it unlikely that any large community will rely upon an interpretive process more determinate than a search.

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Scripturalism: A theory

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