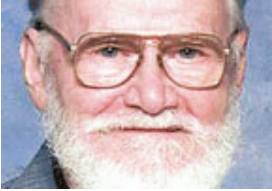


What Good Are Sacred Texts? Why Bother With Them?



Willis E. Elliott

Minister, teacher, author

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Should a lay person read sacred texts alone, without the help of clergy or community? How do you read and study sacred texts?

1.....The questions make assumptions worth looking at before answering.

(1) The "lay person" - the laity, non-professionals in a religion - can read. A huge assumption: more than half of us six billion human beings can't read. History's strongest impulse toward *literacy* has been the desire that the Bible be read and the desire to read the Bible.

(2) The assumption that a particular laity's language has been reduced to writing. Somebody must make visible signs representing audible sounds. The Russian alphabet was invented by two Christian missionaries. Indeed, most of the world's languages have been made visible (that is, reduced to writing) by Christian missionaries intent upon advancing literacy.

(3) A third assumption is that the sacred texts of the religion of a particular laity have been reduced to writing. Most of them have been. Some texts - passed on by oral tradition - are older than the invention of writing.

(4) And a fourth assumption is that the sacred texts of the particular religion are available to its laity in its laity's particular languages. (In whole or in part, the Bible is available in almost 2,000 languages, covering all but about 1% of humanity.)

2.....Much of sacred literature was oral before written. And most of the Bible was written primarily to be heard. Typically, the public reader expounded the meaning of what had been read (as did Jesus in synagogues: Gospel of Luke 4:14-44). The general hearer-in-community (synagogue or church) need not have been literate.

3.....Literacy is required for the laity to "read sacred texts alone." Oxford philosopher-theologian John Wycliffe wanted the Bible available to "every plow-boy" in the plow-boy's own language, and Wycliffe's Bible in English (translated from the Latin Vulgate) came out in 1384. The church rightly warned that the plowboy, unguided by clergy, would run off and make who knows what errant sense of the Bible. Wycliffe admitted the danger (which has often become reality), but argued that the *gain* in public literacy and personal freedom outweighed the danger.

4.....As literacy spread to enable Bible-reading, what had happened to Bible scholars happened to plow-boys: the authoritative Book in their hands gave them some distance from live human authorities: they became what Western Civilization means by "*the individual*."

5.....While Wycliffe was never excommunicated, the Council of Constance (1415) condemned him for relying on "the Bible alone" (*sola scriptura*) over against the authority of the Church and for making the Bible available to the laity. A dozen years after his death, the Church had his bones dug up, crushed, and burned, his ashes then thrown into the river. (Wycliffe is remembered as the earliest "reformer before the Reformation" and the earliest essayist on the separation of king-and-priest powers - leading eventually to the American separation of the institutions of church and state.)

6.....Biblical literacy got a huge boost from technology in 1455. Gutenberg's Bible (in Latin) was the first movable-metal-type book ever published, and the first mass-produced book. Luther's Bible (1534, translated by him from the original Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek) was the greatest literary influence in the formation of the modern German language, as the King James Bible (1611) was the greatest literary influence in the formation of modern English.

7.....The formation of *the modern mind* began with the Bible in the plowboy's hand - in everybody's hand. For us Protestants, the Bible continues to be the primary resource and norm for Christian faith and life.

8.....The Catholic temptation has been and is over-control of people. The Protestant temptation is individualism, the *under-control* of people, to the neglect of community. We are living in the ruins of "every man for himself" on under-regulated Wall Street and in money-mad corporate

boardrooms; yes, and in our consumerist mentality and chaotic homes.

9.....The Bible *balances* the needs/duties of the community and the individual. So, in the first question of "On Faith" this week, I must affirm all three terms: "alone," "clergy," "community." As for the second question, I personally "read and study" the Bible alone, in family, and in church. Alone: for more than 60 years I read the Bible daily in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, and English.

10.....Why have I concentrated, in my life and in this column, on *the Bible*? All of the world's sacred texts are worth attention and got my attention before I taught "The World's Religions." But I would not be a Christian if I did not think that the Bible is the best of the lot. Besides, it is *our* sacred text, the formative scripture of the West, including America.

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http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/willis_e_elliott/2009/02/what_good_are_sacred_texts_why.html