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Editors' Introduction

Beyond Christianity, the Bible, and the Text

Urgent Tasks and New Orientations for Reception History

> *When I think of rereading, I often turn to a metaphor of haunting. First, there are texts that haunt us, that cannot and will not be forgotten, texts that seem to have strong if often mysterious claims over our memory, attention, and imagination and that urge us to reread them, to make them present to our mind again and again. Second, there are texts that haunt other texts, in the sense that they appear in them as expected or unexpected visitors and even, one might say, phantoms or spectres, if such notions could be freed of their sinister connotations. Since this meaning of haunting is indeed broadly metaphorical, one has little difficulty accepting the possibility not only of historically earlier texts haunting later ones, but also of later texts haunting earlier ones.* MATEI CALINESCU, *REREADING*

Let us begin at the beginning, although we will question this commonsense approach in just a moment: why *Relegere*? The title *Relegere* is a play on the journal's two primary and interwoven subjects. While the verb

relegere points to an act of reception ("to gather together," "to go over again," "to re-read"), there is also an ancient etymology connecting it with those called *religiosi*, "religious," "strict in religious observance."[1] This suggests the iterative character of religion, emphasising its ritualistic and exegetical aspects, an ironic side-effect of which might be that reception historians are, by definition, to be counted among the faithful.

We must, however, detach ourselves from etymological games and from the futile search for a pure origin, a pure text, a quest that has led many who should have known better to pursue fantastic and marvelous creatures such as the primitive-yet-noble Indo-European, whose immaculate pre-Babelic utterances would serve to reduce all subsequent reception to either pale imitation or worthless corruption. We need to discard the temptation to embark on quixotic quests of this sort, just as we cannot hope for a face-to-face encounter with the divine, though we might dare, like Moses, to hope for some passing glimpse of His—or Her—wondrous behind (Exod 34:18–23). The term *relegere*, should, then, be understood as an unavoidably arbitrary point of origin from which to approach an equally arbitrary—though not entirely random—field. In this very relationship (*relegere:religion*), we have an apt metaphor for reception history as it concerns matters of religion: the name *Relegere* acknowledges that we are already embroiled in a dispute and a contention, both social-historical and etymological. It is this disputed relationship, more than anything else, that constitutes our field of study.

Why reception history? *Relegere* is an intervention as well as an outlet for publishing innovative academic work on reception history. Our aims are to facilitate the exploration of new approaches to reception history, to push the field towards a more critical, theoretically sophisticated set of methodologies, and to publish valuable scholarly work on the many and various topics encompassed by religion and reception. Let us be clear about the central relationship expressed in our subtitle as "religion *and* reception." When we write, for example, of the Bible *and* its reception or the Qurʾān *and* its reception, the conjunction does not imply the linking of two separate fields of study, but rather denotes the necessarily intertwined character of source and reception; no source can be entirely detached from its reception. Reading is, furthermore, always already *re*-reading. Given this, reception history will continue to be of limited interest unless it contributes to an understanding

[1] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2.28. The philological probity of this etymology need not detain us here.

of the sheer complexity of the relationships between text and culture. The mere cataloguing of examples of reception can only be superficial unless it is also accompanied by some degree of analysis, not least because the very activity of cataloguing or collection carries with it presuppositions that need to be identified and subjected to critical scrutiny.

The distinct advantage of reception history lies in the particular vantage point it offers for the study of the dynamic interaction between the lives of texts and the societies that receive, read, interpret, and use them. A reception-historical approach is vital, for example, for understanding the development of European political science in the seventeenth century because it recognises the intellectual turn to Hebraic thought and its impact on constitutional change during that period (intertwined as it is with the beginnings of colonialism and Orientalism).[2] A reception-historical approach likewise furnishes the necessary analytical richness for understanding how the founding of the modern state of Israel is not only a consequence of political developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but is also inseparable from the ways in which particular biblical traditions were appropriated, both ancient Hebrew traditions of a promised land for the people of Israel, and more recent Christian dispensationalist readings of biblical texts.[3] A reception-historical approach likewise offers a more multi-faceted take on the Qurʾān's prophetic mode and its dependence on what Peter Wright calls "a variety of texts drawn from traditional biblical or para-biblical materials with which the Qurʾānic homilist expects his audience to be familiar."[4]

It is primarily in light of the complex interrelationships between socio-political developments in the nineteenth century, and the developing tendency to read biblical narratives in light of classical texts, that it is possible to understand why modern scholars, artists, and literati have come to read

[2] Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). For more on this, see the review by Andrew Crome in this issue, pages 169–72. On the contribution of religious claims rather than merely political-economic origins of Orientalism, see Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, Encounters with Asia (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[3] On Zionism in Judaism, see *inter multa alia* Jonathan Boyarin, *Palestine and Jewish History: Criticism at the Borders of Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); David J. Goldberg, *To the Promised Land: A History of Zionist Thought* (London: Penguin, 1996). On Christian Zionism see e.g., Stephen R. Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon?* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004).

[4] Peter Matthews Wright, review in this issue of Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext*, Routledge Studies in the Qurʾān (London: Routledge, 2010), pages 221–5.

the biblical narrative of David and Jonathan as being about two gay lovers, as James Harding demonstrates. Reception history also allows readers to find new layers and nuances of meaning in contemporary texts. Reading Monty Python's *Life of Brian* in light of popular ideas about biblical studies allows James Crossley to recover some of the film's intellectual naughtiness against those who seek to defend the film from charges of blasphemy. Working with a very different film, Gitte Buch-Hansen argues against reactionary readings of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* by engaging not only with the biblical Antichrist but also that offered by Friedrich Nietzsche, who renders this traditionally sinister figure as something altogether more positive. Both these authors, using a reception-historical approach, place their respective films in a long line of readings and re-readings and ultimately find these texts to be far more subversive than they might seem on the surface.

Urgent Tasks and New Orientations

> *If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement … A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.* JAMES AGEE, *LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN*

Within biblical studies, the discipline where much of what can be called "reception history" in relation to religion has been done to date, a distinction is sometimes drawn between *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, respectively "reception history" and "effective," "effectual," or "impact history." Although *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte* may be distinguished for theoretical or heuristic purposes, in the world of lived human culture, reception and impact are bound together. "Reception history" is thus best regarded, in the spirit of James Agee, as an umbrella term for the study of the social employment of religious texts, images, symbols, narratives, words, and physical objects.[5] We need, however, to say more about what precisely fits under this umbrella, and to what parts of the world we can carry it.

One of the crucial tasks we have set for *Relegere* is to broaden what we understand by reception history to encompass work on the afterlives of texts

[5] James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (1941; Boston: Mariner Books, 2001), 10. Cf. Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984), xi.

other than the Bible and to embrace the histories of other kinds of transmission. This entails moving away from an exclusive or even a primary focus on tracing the official and unofficial postscripts of written texts recognised as sacred or inspired. Nor, indeed, is there any need to remain inside the world of written texts at all. The act of reading is a far more diffuse process than the simple decoding of written documents. In Alberto Manguel's words,

> the art of reading in its broadest sense, defines our species. We come into the world intent on finding narrative in everything: in the landscape, in the skies, in the faces of others, and, of course, in the images and words that our species creates. We read our own lives and those that lie beyond our borders, we read pictures and buildings, we read that which lies between the covers of a book.[6]

Reception history, then, need be bound by neither the pages of the codex nor the borders of the scroll. Reception history can equally include the cultural histories of religious symbols, images, ideas, characters, figures of speech, even single words. It can take into account the different ways that these things are read and re-read and can include within its purview every aspect of human behaviour that can be analysed: painting, film, television, literature, oral tradition, poetry, drama, sculpture, photography, the digital arts, theatre, and so on, ad infinitum.

If reception history in the religious sphere has often been too narrowly confined to official trajectories of reception and effect, it has also been too much confined to the Bible.[7] There is now a small but growing concern with reception history within the study of Islam, not least the reading of the Qurʾān itself as an act of reception, a re-casting of narrative traditions extant on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, traditions that had a long and complex history of reception and use even before the time of the Qurʾān's compilation. Reception history can also offer a fruitful approach to the *sunna*, in which each individual *ḥadīth* begins by recounting the chain of transmission that establishes its own authority in a way not dissimilar to

[6] Alberto Manguel, *A Reader on Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), ix.

[7] This is particularly the case with respect to Europe, where Christianity—and thus Christian practices of re-reading—was for centuries dominant yet, as Ian Almond has recently reminded us, "the story of Europe … is the story of three religions, not one." (*Two Faiths, One Banner: When Muslims Marched with Christians across Europe's Battlegrounds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 218.)

the chains of transmission inscribed in the rabbinic literature.[8] However, both the rabbinic literary tradition and the Qurʾān still remain tied in some sense to the biblical traditions and their afterlives, and we must move further afield if we want truly to expand the field of study that falls under the rubric of reception history.

There has been a persistent tendency in the study of religion in Western academic contexts to overemphasise the importance of written texts, but this should not deter us from thinking seriously about the role, character, and importance of reading, re-reading, and reception in non-Western traditions. The varied Asian religions provide fertile ground for explorations of cultural memories and reception histories. The events leading up to and following the destruction in 1992 of the mosque built on the supposed site of Rāma's birth at Ayodhyā in northern India show not only the continuing potency of ideas of an ideal polity (*Rāmarājya*, "the rule of Rāma") drawn from the epic Rāmāyaṇa but also the salience of the continual "retellings of a text everyone knows."[9] The sheer size of the various Buddhist textual traditions[10] means that work on the construction of these canons remains in its infancy,[11] but also that intricate processes of reception have been at work among the pre-

[8] See esp. *Mishnah*, Avot 1.1.

[9] Sheldon Pollock, "Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 263. As A. K. Ramanujan is reported to have said, "no Indian ever hears the Rāmāyaṇa story for the first time." (John L. Brockington, "The Sanskrit Epics," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin A. Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 128.) On these retellings of the Rāmāyaṇa see Philip Lutgendorf, "Interpreting Rāmrāj: Reflections on the 'Rāmāyaṇ,' Bhakti, and Hindu Nationalism," in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, ed. David N. Lorenzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 253–87, Richard H. Davis, "The Iconography of Rama's Chariot," in *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, ed. David Ludden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 27–54, Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and Sunny Singh, "The Road to Rāmarājya: Analysing Shah Rukh Khan's Parallel Text in Commercial Hindi Cinema," *Barcelona English Language and Literature Series* 17 (2008).

[10] Comparisons are difficult, but Paul Hackett estimates that "the Kan-gyur (*bka' 'gyur*)—the Tibetan translation of the core Buddhist scriptures—is roughly 50 times the size of the Bible, while the Ten-gyur (*bstan-'gyur*)—the Tibetan translation of Indian commentaries on the Kan-gyur—is roughly 16 times the size of all classical literature preserved from Greek and Latin." (H-Buddhism mailing list, December 6, 2005.) The Chinese Buddhist canon, in turn, is four to five times larger than the Tibetan.

[11] Fundamental is Steven Collins, "On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 15 (1990): 82–126.

servers of the texts themselves, resulting in "ritual" or "practical" canons.[12] Buddhism is also notable—though by no means unique among the Asian traditions—in respect of the range of things done with texts *other* than reading them. As Mark Dennis demonstrates, texts in many Buddhist contexts are the objects of inscribing, memorising, worshipping, and reciting as much as they are of simple reading.

Critical reception histories should also be written in relation to new religious movements, from Mormonism and Spiritualism to the Happy Science movement in Japan. The Book of Mormon, for example, has had a fascinating afterlife within fantasy and science fiction literature, an afterlife that—judging by the success of Stephanie Meyer's Twilight novels, essentially Mormon morality plays in the guise of a supernatural romance—extends far beyond the confines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The Book of Mormon, along with other key texts such as *The Pearl of Great Price*, can in turn be approached as incidents of re-reading, not merely of the Jewish and Christian Bibles, but also of important strains of occult and esoteric traditions prevalent in the antebellum hinterlands of New England, where Joseph Smith forged his unique combination of biblical religion, Masonic lore, and popular divination. Tracing histories of reception, in whatever context, allows the scholar a starting point when attempting to peel back the layers of reading and re-reading that make up the life and substance of a text, a narrative, or an image. As Clifford Geertz once wrote, "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong … As in more familiar exercises in close reading, one can start anywhere in a culture's repertoire of forms and end up anywhere else."[13]

Reception history, however, cannot rest with simply tracing ideas that are re-used in later literature and media, or with noting the impact of ideas on later history, politics, definitions of gender, and so on, but needs to place the reception of the biblical texts within the wider circumstances that made possible those acts of reception in the first place. In the case of the Bible or, more correctly, the *bibles*, the object of inquiry should not merely be the text itself—if there is such a thing—but rather the bibles as situated in culture,

[12] Anne M. Blackburn, "Looking for the Vinaya: Monastic Discipline in the Practical Canons of the Theravāda," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999): 281–309.

[13] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 453.

history, reading, and re-reading. It is perhaps worth re-iterating that this approach is in no way limited to the biblical texts and the traditions arising from them, and it can be thus seen as, in some cases, a cross-cultural approach to the study of religions. The aim here is to analyse critically the myriad assumptions, positions, and material and cultural structures that create the conditions in which specific readings and re-readings can be made. This analysis, in turn, will make it possible to address what enables the Bible, the Qurʾān, the Rāmāyaṇa, the Talmud and other texts to continue to be of relevance to particular groups, sub-groups and sub-cultures, to governments and political movements, to artists, to social structures and ideologies.

Reception history, therefore, needs to expand its purview from implied, model, and ideal readers, and from minute textual analysis, towards the far messier matter of the lives and practices of actual readers situated in specific material frameworks. This may come as a challenge to some of us trained and incubated in the traditional skills of philological analysis, because it requires us to step out of our highly specialised comfort zones and into the sociological, the historical, the economic, and the political, albeit without letting go of the skills and tools that shaped our critical praxis in the first place. This means expanding our scholarly toolkits, becoming more interested in "the unpredictable meanderings of 'real' readers" and less interested in "the lockstep goose-stepping of 'ideal' readers," those "readerly cyborgs … pre-programmed by historical authors to read in rigidly predetermined ways."[14] Those who may be more comfortable with minute textual study, rather than the various forms of social analysis, need to open up their horizons and address themselves in addition to the materiality, fleshliness, and social dimensions of reception.

The task of reception-historical analysis is necessarily complex: the constructed past alters our constructions of the present, and the constructed present alters our constructions of the past. As Matei Calinescu argues, it is not only the case that historically earlier texts haunt later ones, but also that later texts haunt earlier ones.[15] It is not just that the past shapes the present: the present also shapes the past, or at least what we can understand

[14] Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, "Biblical Studies 'After' Theory: Onwards Towards the Past. Part One: After 'After Theory,' and Other Apocalyptic Conceits," *Biblical Interpretation* 18 (2010): 26–27, see further Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

[15] Matei Calinescu, *Rereading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), xi.

about the past. It follows that it is a mistake to think of exegesis as opposed to eisegesis. The mutual commerce between text and layers of reception is embedded within, and at least partially determined by larger social contexts, and therefore demands due consideration of those multiple contexts. A reception history with adequate theoretical and methodological depth will be in a position to challenge the ways in which such polarised thinking has been used to lend authority to readings of religious texts that serve to reinforce the power interests of persons, groups, and institutions who stand to benefit from such uses.

There is, then, an inescapable ideological-critical dimension to reception history.[16] The goal of reception history is not to recover the original meaning of a text or to establish an authoritative reading, or even worse, to redeem a troublesome text—as many biblical scholars are wont to do with the books of Joshua, Ezekiel, or Job—but rather involves examining the readings that have been attached to a given text or object and saying something salient about the social role of that text or object. That some of these readings may be dangerous, destructive, logically incoherent, even morally repellent, does not permit the ethically responsible reception historian to reject them out of hand, or, which is worse, to pretend that they do not follow the grain of the text. While it is certainly possible to argue that a particular reading of a text or other religious object is anomalous or poorly represented in histories of reception, it is far more fraught to argue that such readings somehow fall outside the proper boundaries of a particular religion. On the contrary, reception history should address receptions of texts that are uncomfortable, unspeakable, or occluded, for only in such investigations will the limits and inherent contradictions of hegemonic discourse be clearly visible. Reception history should not be in the business of determining the boundaries of what is, or is not, acceptable within a given tradition of reading. It should rather be interested in exploring the ways in which reading and re-reading have continued to define these boundaries.

[16] In the last couple of decades, ideological criticism within biblical studies has shown clearly how the interpretation of biblical texts has served to reinforce and promote the vested interests of interpreters, which is all the more insidious when such interests are not made explicit, or even not acknowledged. Foundational to ideological criticism was David Clines's collection of essays (*Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 205 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995)), but feminist criticism in particular has been engaged in this task for longer still.

Discipline is Dead, or the Challenge of Reception History

> *Information, a private code, innervates and saturates the social body. From morning to evening, unceasingly, streets and buildings are haunted by narratives … these tales have a function of providence and predestination: they organize our work, our celebrations—even our dreams—in advance. Social life multiplies the gestures and modes of behaviour imprinted by the narrative models; it continually reproduces and stores up the 'copies' of narratives. Our society has become a* narrated *society in a threefold sense: it is defined by* narratives *(the fables of our advertising and information), by* quotations *of them, and by their interminable* recitation. MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *ON SIGNS*

As the idea of our society as one defined by narration, quotation and recitation suggests, the relevant materials for a truly critical study of religion and reception are vast.[17] They are, indeed, potentially infinite. Moreover, as "the 'object' of investigation is not one, the method of inquiry cannot be singular."[18] *Relegere*, however, is not interdisciplinary in the sense of drawing two or more precisely defined academic disciplines into dialogue. It is rooted in the rejection of the idea that any one discipline, no matter how long-lived or deeply rooted, is ultimately adequate for the study of religion and reception. The study of the reception history of religion, then, is not limited to established field-centred academic disciplines (e.g., religious studies, biblical studies, Islamic studies, Jewish studies), but must embrace many other academic areas. Reception history should take into account methodologies and approaches that accentuate various aspects of the dynamics of the lives of texts and objects, including, but in no way limited to, intertextuality, genealogy, performativity, reader response, new historicism, historical materialism, and cultural memory studies.

There is a great deal to be learned from a theoretically complex reception history that works both within and across religious traditions; however, a final note of caution is in order. An adequate approach to reception history cannot be forged in a theoretical or rhetorical framework that presumes "religion" to be a simple, uncontestable thing out there in the world, to be studied, even discovered, by the scholar. Reception history has to look inwards as well as outwards. Re-reading classic works in the fields that feed into the study

[17] Michel de Certeau, "The Jabbering of Social Life," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blondky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 152. Emphasis in original.

[18] Mark C. Taylor, "Unsettling Issues," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 4 (1994): 956.

of reception is thus crucial. With this in mind, the second issue of *Relegere* (December 2011) will feature a special section of articles dedicated to the first one hundred years of reading Emile Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, a foundational text that continues to inform both scholarly and more popular conceptions of what constitutes a "religion." In pursuit of the same goal, we will also from time to time invite respected scholars from various fields of study to reflect critically on their discipline, as in this issue's essay by Philip Davies, "Reading the Bible Intelligently."

The history of the way the term *religion* has been closely, if often implicitly, tied to Protestant Christianity as the exemplar of what a religion is or should be is as much a legitimate topic for reception history as is, say, the study of images of the cross in apocalyptic cinema. This reflection, lest it become narcissistic navel-gazing, has its limits; there is no need to conclude, as does Timothy Fitzgerald, that "the proper study of 'religion' is the category itself."[19] There is still much work to be done on the phenomena that we include under the name of religion, though we must not lose sight of the fact that the etic and emic lines of inquiry are inextricably tangled.

Relegere, then, is a challenge; a challenge to scholars of religion not only to be inveterate readers of narrative, of image, and of text, but to be fully aware, intertextually competent readers and re-readers. As Jorge Luis Borges wrote in the 1935 preface to his *A Universal History of Iniquity*, "I sometimes think that good readers are poets as singular, and as awesome, as great authors themselves."[20] This is the task. This is our challenge.

Let us begin. Again.

Eric Repphun
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Dunedin, New Zealand
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[19] Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Barbarity and Civility: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 312.

[20] Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 3.