

# The Political Power of Sacred Texts

Conference Held at the American Academy in Rome, Via Angelo Masina 5

Thursday 19 October 2017

Co-sponsored by the Pontifical Biblical Institute

9.00-9.05 AAR Welcome

9.05-9.20 **Dominik Markl (Rome)**

*Do Sacred Texts Have Political Power?*

9.20-10.00 **Katell Berthelot (Aix en Provence)**

*The Political Power of the Biblical Texts Pertaining to the Conquest of the Promised Land, from the Hasmonean Period to the Present*

10.00-10.40 **Harold Attridge (New Haven)**

*What are the Political Implications of a Kingdom “not of this world”?*

10.40-11.10 Break

11.10-11.50 **Angelika Neuwirth (Berlin)**

*The Jerusalem Temple Disputed? A Momentous Qur'anic Verse, Q 17:1, and its Explosive Potential*

11.50-12.30 **Holger Zellentin (Cambridge)**

*Originalism and Traditionalism: Innovating Sacred Law in Late Antiquity and Beyond*

12.30-14.30 Break

14.30-15.10 **Gavin Flood (Oxford)**

*Hindu Political Theology and the Bhagavad Gita*

15.10-15.50 **Tiziana Lippiello (Venice)**

*The Political Power of the Four Books (sishu 四書) in China: Past and Present*

15.50-16.30 **Eckart Otto (Munich)**

*The Political Influence of the Bible in Max Weber, Hermann Cohen, and Ernst Troeltsch during World War I – the Urkatastrophe of the Twentieth Century*

16.30-17.00 Break

17.00-17.40 **Ron Hendel (Berkeley)**

*The Bible in the Modern Political Imagination: Politics and Violence*

17.40-17.50 Closing Remarks

**Admission free.**

**Please note: Valid photo ID is required for entry into the American Academy in Rome.**

**Backpacks and luggage with dimensions larger than cm 40 x 35 x 15 (inches 16 x 14 x 6) are not permitted on the property. There are no locker facilities available.**

# The Political Power of Sacred Texts

Sacred texts, catalyzed through extremely different hermeneutical approaches, have had great political influence in both Eastern and Western cultures. This conference explores the interaction between canonical texts and the array of hermeneutical modes – from fundamentalism to contemporary philosophy – through which they are culturally activated. Do sacred texts and their specific normative content actually have political influence? Or are they just objects of use or abuse by players whose ideologies are informed by motivations independent of the sacred texts they advocate? What cultural contexts favor fundamentalist approaches, and where do open-perspective philosophical attitudes towards sacred texts develop? Is there any possibility for mutual illumination among advocates of these seemingly incommensurate positions? These issues will be discussed in a one-day conference. Scholars from different religious background will analyse test cases, showing how specific sacred texts have been used in diverse historical and cultural contexts as well as their contemporary political relevance.

Organized by Dominik Markl (PBI), Ron Hendel (UCB) and Lindsay Harris (AAR).

## Abstracts

### **Katell Berthelot (Aix en Provence)**

*The Political Power of the Biblical Texts Pertaining to the Conquest of the Promised Land, from the Hasmonean Period to the Present*

In this lecture I shall first provide a brief overview of the main historical cases in which a political reading of the biblical texts pertaining to the conquest of the Promised Land has played a role: the advent of the Hasmonean dynasty in Judea in antiquity, which led to wars of conquest in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE that are commonly interpreted as a re-enactment of the biblical commandments to conquer the Land and expel or eradicate its former inhabitants; the European settlement in America; the settlement of the Afrikaners in South Africa; and the creation of the modern State of Israel. Second, I will deal with alternative readings of these biblical texts proposed by the rabbis that somehow neutralize their political implications and their potential violence. The legacy of the rabbinic readings shall then be assessed in light of the contemporary development of both non-religious and religious Zionisms, the approaches of which to the Bible are closely associated with Zionism's political project and have been characterized by scholars as "literalist".

### **Harold Attridge (Yale)**

*What are the Political Implications of a Kingdom "Not of This World"?*

The Fourth Gospel, famous for its saying of Jesus that his kingdom is "not of this world" has been read as indifferent to ethics in general and to political ethics in particular. In recent years scholars have challenged that consensus and found in the gospel an "implicit" ethic in general and an "anti-imperial" political stance in particular. Some recent scholars have also argued that the gospel seriously engages philosophical issues more generally. This paper will explore the possibility of a political ethic in the Fourth Gospel that hinges on the way in which "of-ness" works.

**Angelika Neuwirth (Berlin)**

*The Jerusalem Temple Disputed? A Momentous Qur'anic Verse, Q 17:1, and its Explosive Potential*

Archaeology – both of material culture and texts – has in the modern era advanced to the rank of a prime source of “truth.” To question or contradict its evidence is considered a grave epistemic flaw. In the case of the Jerusalem Temple, in view of its status as the emblem of Jewish national identity, the fault amounts to a moral offence. Is the denial (or at least marginalization) of the Temple’s historical reality conveyed by Palestinian tourist guides in the Dome of Rock simply to be understood as an act of suppression of historical knowledge in the service of political propaganda? Or is it rather a position rooted in the pre-political exegetical tradition of Islam which designed a picture of Jerusalem substantially different from the Jewish/ Christian tradition? The collision of scriptural myth and archeology is not unusual in the Holy Land. Focusing on the core Qur’anic testimonies not as literal statements but as antitypes of Biblical prophecies, I intend to shed light on the hermeneutical shibboleth underlying the Temple conflict and to unfold the problematics that becomes virulent only with the modern political situation.

**Holger Zellentin (Cambridge)**

*Originalism and Traditionalism: Innovating Sacred Law in Late Antiquity and Beyond*

Societies and cultures that shape, and are shaped, by sacred texts face a continual dilemma: how does one adapt the reading of one’s canon to changing times? At the example of Jewish, Christian and Islamic law, this lecture will explore two starkly diverging modes of innovation found in all three traditions. Originalism, on the one hand, emphasizes an utmost dedication to the letter of the law in its supposed “original” meaning. Traditionalism, on the other hand, holds that the sacred text itself contains an original mandate to form a “tradition” by developing the text’s meaning in light of new circumstances. I will argue that throughout the centuries, Jews, Christians, and Muslims oscillated between fielding originalist and traditionalist arguments in order to justify various types of innovation. Considering this hermeneutical aspect of legal and religious history offers a new perspective on Jewish, Christian and Islamic origins in Late Antiquity, on religious reform movements throughout the ages (including the Reformation), and on the current debates pertaining to the interpretation of sacred and sacralized political texts (such as the constitution of the United States of America).

**Gavin Flood (Oxford)**

*Hindu Political Theology and the Bhagavad Gita*

An interesting question in the study of Hinduism is whether there could be a Hindu political theology? A political theological engagement as envisaged by Schmitt or even as might be entailed by Augustine’s *Civitas Dei* implies a particular kind of evaluation of the social world and affirmation of worldly endeavour. Within a Hindu context, one dominant way of thinking is to accord value beyond the world and to posit gnostic escape from the flow of death and rebirth as the highest human good. On this view, political action to affirm human goods in the public realm is secondary if not completely redundant. And yet one of the foundational texts of Hinduism, the *Bhagavad Gita*, has been used in the twentieth century precisely as a political text to inspire political action, on the one hand by Tilak who wrote a long commentary on it urging active resistance to British colonialism, and on the other by Gandhi urging passive resistance. The text is still relevant to a contemporary political Hinduism. This paper will examine the issues at stake.

### **Tiziana Lippiello (Venice)**

#### *The Political Power of the Four Books (sishu 四書) in China: Past and Present*

The study of the Classics in China was always a fundamental requirement in the educational system of the imperial bureaucracy until 1905. The writing and editing of the classics, partially destroyed during a fire in the year 213 BCE, developed during the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), thanks to the works of some literati who criticized the system of law adopted by Emperor Qin Shihuangdi (221-210 BCE) and the government of the First Decades. The Five Classics (*Wujing*) and the Four Books (*Sishu*) were regarded as “sacred” texts in Chinese tradition and were dominant in the *curriculum studiorum* of the civil servants, so much so that the exegesis of these works inspired social and political reforms in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Man and the art of government in China have always been at the centre of philosophical and political achievement, with the Chinese classics and Confucianism influencing the art of government in the history of China, albeit not without criticism and periods of rebuke. In our age we are witnessing the “renaissance” of Confucianism and “Asian values” inspired by Confucianism. This movement is emerging in the midst of a new dialogue with Western philosophy.

### **Eckart Otto (Munich)**

#### *The Political Influence of the Bible in Max Weber, Hermann Cohen, and Ernst Troeltsch During World War I – The Urkatastrophe of the Twentieth Century*

During the First World War – the primary catastrophe of the European continent – three leading intellectuals of Germany, the Lutheran theologian and philosopher of religion Ernst Troeltsch, the Jewish theologian and neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen, and the sociologist and economist Max Weber wrote some of their most decisive essays about the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. They interpreted the catastrophe of their time through the categories of the Hebrew Bible and saw themselves to some degree in the role of the ancient prophets. They influenced each other, but at the end the Jewish and Christian approaches clashed and the idea of a Christian-Jewish cultural synthesis failed, in what was a *mene-tekel* of the second catastrophe in Germany’s history in third and fourth decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Ron Hendel (Berkeley)**

#### *The Bible in the Modern Political Imagination: Politics and Violence*

In the wake of the crisis of legitimacy in the post-medieval world, the grounds of political legitimacy and biblical authority – and their mutual relationship – needed to be reconstituted. Political theorists responded by fashioning what we now call “political Hebraism.” I will examine this tendency in the political theories of Machiavelli, Grotius, Hobbes, and Spinoza, focusing on the role of the Mosaic polity and Mosaic politics in their theories. I will then examine the transformation of these ideas in modern extremist groups that advocate violence justified by Mosaic politics, and will consider how the early modern theorists offer resources to cope with these contemporary problems.