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Bible and Yoga: Toward an Esoteric Reading of Biblical Literature

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Buddhist-Christian Studies

University of Hawai'i Press

Volume 25, 2005

pp. 133-146

10.1353/bcs.2005.0067

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Bible and Yoga: Toward an Esoteric Reading of Biblical Literature

Susanne Scholz

The Problem

We live in a post-biblical world—a world that sentimentalizes the Bible, ignores it, or is indifferent about the sacred text of the Christian and Jewish religions. Our daily lives are not shaped by biblical rhetoric, imagery, or practice, but by our everyday efforts of making a living, staying healthy, and raising a family. By "we" I mean those of us who are part of North America or Western Europe and belong to the culturally and politically dominant group of white, middle-class, educated people. We live in societies that are largely secularized, perhaps even "anti-religiously" oriented, increasingly digitalized, and economically organized by a capitalist system that eradicates equal and just distribution of wealth nationally and internationally. In our world the Bible plays, at best, a privatized, individualized, and societally marginalized role. Sometimes, especially in the United States, Christian fundamentalists organize politically to foster change, trying to reinstate the Bible's political centrality. The effort to place stone sculptures of the Ten Commandments in the Alabama state court house,¹ or—related primarily to middle and high school education—the insistence on the validity of creationism are prominent examples for the Christian fundamentalist involvement in the secularizing developments of Western countries. Mostly, however, such reactionary struggles confront an indifferent majority that favors the Western scientific worldview over biblical primacy. And even among many American fundamentalists, the Bible is mainly a privatized source of religious piety.

My comments come from and speak to the particularities of the Western secular context. I do not want to be understood as making general statements about locations different from the Western one since they face different priorities. For instance, in Asian countries biblical traditions have never enjoyed a majority position as they did in Europe or North America. Historical, cultural, and religious differences do not, however, imply that other locations have nothing to contribute to the understanding of the Bible in post-biblical societies—on the contrary. But

here my comments focus on the situation of the Bible and biblical studies in the West. **[End Page 133]**

The Situation: Biblical Studies Today

The familiarity with biblical literature is dramatically lower among people younger than forty-five than among those older than forty-five. The so-called Generation X (those born after 1960) and the generation afterward (those born after 1984) know little of the Bible and have little use for it, except if they affiliate with a Christian or Jewish organization. This fact raises important questions: If the younger generations in post-biblical societies do not read the Bible, what is the future of this sacred text in the West? Will it simply turn into a relic of the past? And what does this trend indicate for the academic field of Bible research?

Biblical scholarship—until the 1980s a largely Western endeavor—is still indifferent about these generational developments in our societies. To many biblical scholars, the fact that we are living in a post-biblical world is a nonissue and does not affect their daily work with biblical literature. Accordingly, many, if not most, publications in biblical studies continue operating within a nineteenth-century mindset that regards "the Church" as the powerful opposition to the historical and literary study of the Bible, although by now mainstream religion has little cultural, political, and religious authority and power. Furthermore, much of biblical scholarship is not read by laypeople, who remain mostly ignorant of the issues discussed in the field. And even when some scholars recognize independence from religious institutions, they seldom reflect on the limited relevance of their work to larger society.

Perhaps oblivious of the changed circumstances or unable to relate to post-biblical discourse in Western societies, many researchers do what they know best: they apply historical and literary methods to biblical literature, as if nothing else is needed in our era. Accordingly, many Bible scholars hardly notice that they talk only with, and among, themselves. They seem undisturbed that their work rarely, if ever, has an impact on cultural, religious, or political discourse. In fact, many of them would not



ESSAYS

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