

Inter-faith column: People of the Book
Bonni-Belle Pickard

Recently I was sharing in an interfaith session with a local cub troop working on their World Faiths badge. Several members of our local interfaith group did simultaneous 20-minute sessions with small groups of the children, explaining briefly about our various faith traditions. For my session on Christianity, I had brought several items in a bag: a cross, a portable communion set (for Extended Communion), a Bible, a hymn book, one of my preaching stoles. After pulling each item out and talking about it briefly, I would pass it around for each to hold and examine, before displaying them on the floor in the centre of our small circle for all to see. When I put the Bible down with the other items, one child got very upset: "You're putting a holy book on the floor!" He picked it up again and held it tightly in his arms. "It will get polluted," he explained with big eyes. I realised he was Muslim, and so we talked a bit about the importance of holy books and different ways of recognising they were special. It was a learning moment for us all.

What is it about a book that makes it 'holy'? What is it about a collection of writings that make them 'scripture'? When doing doctoral research on interfaith marriage, I determined early on that I would only cite references from scriptures of the various faiths to back up concepts. That sounded fair enough, until I remembered that some faith traditions don't have written scriptures, and some regard several different sets of writing as authoritative.

Nearly all scripture began as oral transmission of stories and accounts of divine interactions. These were told time and again over fires in the evening, over meals, perhaps while working in the home or fields, in communal gatherings, in worship services. The ones that resonated most with the community persisted and the most essential details preserved, sometimes long after the context of those details had disappeared. Until relatively recently, priests such as those in the Zoroastrian tradition had to memorise long passages of scripture word for word. I used to tell my students that most anyone can learn to read, but once they had memorised a passage, it was theirs forever.

Those who study oral transmission of stories find that the details of those pre-literate renditions are often amazingly 'correct'. The variations seem to arise when stories are told by different people in different places or from different perspectives, such as our four gospel accounts. There comes a time in most faith traditions that the stories and accounts are indeed written down. That writing makes it somewhat easier to share the stories, yet written accounts also require persons able to read. Priests began to be literate, which gave them further status, but it also meant that memorising wasn't as important. Is there still something special about knowing something 'by heart'?

Some scriptures were written down immediately. The prophet Mohammad's messages from Allah are a case in point; it's understood they were written as they were received. Since Mohammad received them in Arabic, that language became 'holy'. To this day, translations of the Qur'an are never considered authoritative; learning Arabic is essential for one who wishes to truly understand.

We know that many of the Jewish scriptures were probably written during the period of the Babylonian exile, when having reliable access to the scriptures was strained by distance and lack of learned priests. The Bible that we Christians know is a combination of the Jewish scriptures, the gospels, and a compilation of letters and epistles written to keep a scattered

church connected. Even though these were *written*, debates still took place in subsequent generations about which were authentic. Throughout the fourth and fifth centuries CE, the authoritative 'canon' we now used was formed.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims, then, are all known as 'people of the Book.' But each of these has its own version: the Jews have the Hebrew Bible, to which we Christians added the New Testament, and Muslims have the Qur'an, which includes many stories about Jesus and especially his mother Mary, several of which are not included in the Bible. As indicated in my beginning story, Muslims became especially enamoured of the written text; they regarded other religions which did not have written scripture as inferior. That was particularly the case with the Zoroastrians whom they encountered in modern-day Iran; Muslim opinion (and subsequent persecution) was one of the main reasons that Zoroastrians decided to write their oral scriptures down.

Hindu scripture consists of ancient stories about the gods and goddesses; the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, among others, are 'myth' in the best sense of the word: they give meaning to human life through story. They describe situations of bravery, of loyalty, of love, of war, of treachery. Like the foundational Jewish story of God delivering the Israelites from Egypt, Hindu myths remind listeners and readers how the Divine has interacted with humanity. Buddhist and Sikh religions regard Hindu scriptures as foundational and have their own interpreters. The scriptures of the Baha'i Faith glean truth from several faith traditions.

Each faith tradition uses scripture to teach new generations what is most important in life and in death. Scripture reminds us of what is 'holy' and how God has spoken to humanity in the past with lessons for all time.