

## Religious Resurgence: Taking examples from sacred texts

Anwar Tjen<sup>1</sup>

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About a decade ago, the late Dr. Eka Darmaputera in a paper stressed the following: "The present time is the time of the resurgence of religions. After being quiet, being motionless as a cocoon for nearly one century, suddenly religions are wriggling, then begin to fly like butterflies."<sup>2</sup> Yes, like butterflies they fly then alight everywhere. And of course they do not only alight, but they claim living space for themselves, nearly in total terms. If the same space is occupied by different religious communities, immediately a situation will arise that needs to be settled by a multi-dimensional theological struggle.

One fundamental dimension is the perception of a community of believers toward its holy scriptures. Interpretation is important, because most, if not all, religious movements find their most basic legitimacy in their religious texts. For prophetic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, sacred texts record the voice of "God". As the divine word, sacred texts determine the starting point as well as the destination of the community of believers. Is it surprising if so many religious revivals often return to their founding documents? For Christians, this often means to go "Back to the Bible", particularly if opposing views are to be reconciled. However, an important hermeneutical question that has to be answered is: Is the principle of going "back to the sacred text" that simple as the popular model of "theory and application"?

The community of the Holy Scriptures may have different answers. However, it is clear that the claim "voice of God", or simply "God's Word", carries an authority that demands the response of "obedience". How this is heard, perceived and translated into praxis is a hermeneutical issue.

I suggest that we do two things. First, to gather data on the reading models of the Christian community toward its sacred text. Second, to study texts related to religious revival, to analyse them in the light of the observed models and contemporary hermeneutic discussion. We will discuss both of them together to draw some conclusions and implications.

Let us start with the first one. From various Bible Study and devotional materials, it looks as if several kinds of Bible readings are dominant within the community:

(a) The Bible speaks "directly". This kind of reading is very popular among the faithful readers. People want to scrutinize God's Word "directly", without intermediary, without having to interpret much. The words of the Bible, even though coming through a translation,

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Dr. Anwar Tjen is an ordained Lutheran minister of the Christian Protestant Church in Indonesia and supervises the revision of the Indonesian Standard Bible at the Indonesian Bible Society. He completed studies in linguistics, biblical philology and exegesis at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (Th.M.), Richmond; Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome; Australian National University, Canberra; and Cambridge University (Ph.D. in Septuagint studies).

<sup>2</sup> Jurnal Penuntun 3/11 (1997).

are considered to bring a direct message and to give strength. Most commonly treated this way are "key verses". How is a text like 1 Samuel 15.22 understood in a "direct" way? "Surely to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of lambs"<sup>3</sup>

(b) The Bible speaks "personally". This kind of reading is also popular among readers. "What should I do today?" is a question which often appears in devotional readings. Understanding on an individual scale is also influenced by key verses. "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5.7) sounds very touching, e.g. when a person is worried about losing his/her job. That is also the case with a text like 1 Corinthians 3.16: "Do you not know that you are God's temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" This text is often quoted to support anti-smoking campaigns!

It is interesting to note that very seldom can we find among these so-called key verses texts with a socio-political dimension, for example: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker" (Proverbs 14.31) or "The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice" (Proverbs 13.23).

(c) The Bible speaks "literally". Perhaps this is the kind of reading that invites most theological debates, even to the extent of giving rise to various movements within Christianity. The issue of baptism, for instance, whether it should be by sprinkling or immersion, based on the literal meaning of *baptizein*, has become one of the basic teachings separating one church from another. It is to be admitted that the literal translation of *sarx*, "flesh", has helped to promote a dichotomic understanding which rejects the "body" and stresses the "spirit" and "soul".

Another example can be taken from the understanding of the word "go" in the so-called "Great Commission" text (Matthew 28:19). A literal understanding has motivated missionaries to leave their home countries to christianize the so-called "heathen" countries throughout the world. Up to now this is still encouraging the sending of missionaries from the new "heathen" countries, especially the U.S.A.

We should also note here the literal interpretation of texts that forbid women from talking in the churches (1 Corinthians 14.34; 1 Timothy 2.11; 2.12). Till now there are still many churches that reject the consecration of women as priests or pastors based on those verses.

The three models presented above are the most popular examples. Naturally, there are other ways of reading among the laity. What is the impact of such kinds of readings of various genres of the biblical text? We can discuss this question together in this workshop, particularly in relation to the response of the Bible reader toward the resurgence of religions.

Perhaps most influential but problematic is the reading of intolerant texts in the Old Testament. A "direct" reading approach may reinforce an intolerant attitude towards communities of other religions.

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<sup>3</sup> This verse has been printed in bold, e.g. in the Batak Bible.

(a) As an example we could study the text that speaks about the revival of Yahwism at the time of Josiah (about 622/632 BC). While the Temple was in the process of renovation, the Book of the Law was found (2 Kings 22.8). Its reading moved the king to act quickly through "cleansing" actions: "For great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us" (22.13).

The book that was discovered, according to general consensus among Old Testament scholars, was some version of Deuteronomy. This is reflected in various "cleansing" activities carried out by Josiah, including removing the "host of heaven" (Deuteronomy 17.3), destroying the "sacred poles" (Deuteronomy 12.3), abolishing "temple prostitution" (Deuteronomy 23:17), removing those who consult ghosts or spirits (Deuteronomy 18.11). In line with this cleansing movement, a renewal of religious ceremonies was instituted (Deuteronomy 16.1-8).

(b) If that is so, the theology reflected in the reform movement of Josiah is the Deuteronomistic theology. In this theological framework, the election of God's people (Deuteronomy 7.6) is directly proportional to an exclusive and intolerant attitude towards other religious communities. God's people are forbidden from having pity on them and from making a covenant with them (Deuteronomy 7.2-3). They have to obliterate their enemies. Their children should not marry children of other nations (7.3).

Further, this theology highlights the ups and downs in the history of God's people in the framework of "blessings and curses" (cf. Deuteronomy 11:8-32; 28.1-46; 30.11-20). In the historical books written in the spirit of Deuteronomistic theology, as is shown in the books of Judges through Kings, various national calamities, which reach their peak in the fall of the kingdom of Israel and the exile to a foreign country, are seen as punishment for disobedience and rebellion (cf. 2 Kings 17.6-23).

On the other hand, the restoration of total commitment to Yahweh is firmly believed to bring the restoration of His people in various areas of life (Deuteronomy 30.1-10). It is firmly believed that this repentance causes all curses to fall upon their enemies and adversaries (30.7).

(c) The spirit of "cleansing" in Deuteronomistic style apparently is not only limited to the theology of the book of Deuteronomy and its likes. We see a similar symptom in the revival of religious life in the post-exilic period.

Hand in hand with the restoration of religious symbols in the form of restoration of the holy city of Jerusalem and the Temple, we witness again a program of "cleansing", as conducted by Ezra and Nehemiah. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we read that after the restoration of religious symbols, immediately the religious ceremonies were restored (Ezra 6.13-22; Nehemiah 8.1-19). This program was continued with an effort to conduct "cleansing". In Nehemiah (13.23-31), contamination through mixed marriages was regretted and condemned (13.25). Then Nehemiah cleansed the priests "from everything foreign" (13.30). In Ezra, the measures taken are even stricter: in the name of loyalty to Yahwism,

wives that have been taken from the “peoples of the land” (Ezra 10.2-3) and children born through intermarriages have to be expelled from among God’s people (10.1-44).

(d) The attitude of intolerance and exclusiveness that can be observed from these two examples of revival of the mono-Yahwistic religion again appears aggressively when the issue of identity is at stake in facing the challenge of “hellenization” initiated by Alexander the Great in the middle of the fourth century BC. (Perhaps this can be compared to the phenomenon of “globalization” which has sparked various forms of local and primordial resistance).

The struggle of the Maccabean brothers in the first and second century BC (1 and 2 Maccabees) shows how this resistance against hellenization is carried out in an atmosphere that is full of intrigue and bloodshed.

Resistance against hellenization is not limited to the religious sphere, but also includes secular activities, such as sports. The point is that a foreign lifestyle (*allophyllismos*) and Greek lifestyle (*Hellenismos*) are sharply set against the Jewish lifestyle (*Ioudaismos*), as outlined by the writer of 2 Maccabees: “They despised what their ancestors had regarded as honors, while they highly prized what the Greeks esteemed as glory” (4.15).

Resistance against hellenization is marked by concrete examples, among other things in the form of voluntary sacrifice of one’s life as a martyr (2 Maccabees 6.18-7:41).<sup>4</sup> In an extreme form, we read about “cleansing”; simultaneous “restoration” efforts: circumcision is forced upon uncircumcised boys, apostates are wiped out, “the Law is saved from the hands of the Gentiles” (1 Maccabees 2.47-48).

(a) It would be quite interesting to survey how “lay” Christians read sacred texts regarding religious “restoration” and “cleansing”, particularly as these relate to other religious communities. Are there experiences that can be shared about this? “Direct” or “literal” readings are perhaps difficult to conduct, except if these “intolerant” texts are to be used to vindicate armed struggle. What about the “personal” or “spiritual” models of reading? Or, other models not cited earlier?

(b) The “Back to the Bible” principle is not as simple as it is understood by the community of Bible readers. God’s voice that one wants to study through these texts is indeed heard without any significant noise. However, often these texts which have a sacral status precisely strike a “discordant note”, because its message cannot directly be applied according to the “theory and application” model, which is often found in current devotional publications.

Developments in contemporary hermeneutics help us not only to extract the meaning of the text (exegesis) as is often done in the study of interpreting Holy Scriptures. In addition

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<sup>4</sup> We are even given a depiction of a horrible form of dying as a martyr: a Jew by the name of Razis, “preferring to die nobly rather than fall into the hands of vile men and suffer outrages unworthy of his noble birth” (14.42). He ended his life by tearing out his entrails and flinging them with both hands into the crowd persecuting him!

to becoming aware of the presuppositions that help form an understanding of the text, readers are encouraged to move further even to the point of “suspecting” the text and its ideologic load, of which they often are unaware.

Martin Buber, for example, once “suspected” that Samuel had misunderstood God, when he passed on “God’s command” to Saul to destroy all his enemies, including women and children. He held the opinion that if we have to choose between God and the Holy Scriptures, we should choose God! Is there something we can learn from the opinion of this interesting Jewish thinker?

(c) As has been stressed by the late Eka Darmaputera, the enemies of religion are not sister religions but demons! And the demons of the present time manifest themselves in forces that oppress, impoverish, make ignorant, intimidate, seize human rights, exploit creation because of greed. Religions need to be freed from the vicious circle of their demons!

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