Arie VAN DER KOOIJ and Karel VAN DER TOORN, eds., *Canonization and Decanonization: Papers presented to the International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR) held at Leiden 9–10 January 1997.* Leiden: Brill, 1998. xxiii + 515 pp. Cloth, ISBN 90-04-11246-4.

PERHAPS THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL act in defining the identity of a religious tradition and setting the perimeters of orthodoxy is the establishment of a canon of scriptures. As with the definition of dogmas, once the canon is in place it throws into the shade the complex historical processes behind its formation. Both dogma and canon are mythologized as divinely established, and the contingent circumstances and human decisions behind them are airbrushed away or seen as foreordained to the divinely willed end. The modern process of decanonization probably begins with Luther's emphasis on the Pauline gospel of justification by faith as a "canon within the canon" (so named by Alexander Schweizer, 1808–1888) and his dismissal of James as "an epistle of straw." Such judgments begin to dilute the absolute qualitative difference and the rigid demarcation between canonical and extracanonical. Historical research brings further demystification. It becomes apparent that the status and significance of Scripture depend in large part on how it is used by the community, and the delimitation of canon is part of that use. Canonformation is one of the means whereby the community calls a halt to Derridian dissemination, binding itself to a somewhat contingent and arbitrary definition of the historical origin and core content of the tradition. Canons are never as pure as one would wish. The claim that they embrace only divinely inspired compositions is a convenient idealization. As enduring records of a past revelational moment, their chief purpose is to bring that moment alive again for later generations, a purpose they fulfill thanks to the generous arts of listening and reinterpretation the later community brings to them. Fundamentalism, in contrast, is a mean-spirited use of the canon, refusing to accept its human and historical texture and to subject its testimony to the flexible arts of translation that all ancient documents require. Does insight into the function of canon cause it to lose its hold on us, or does it provide a basis for a new confidence in canons? This is the question that haunts the engaging and erudite papers in *Canonization and Decanonization.*

Joachim Schaper discusses the role of the biblical canon in reorganizing Judaism after the crises of the period from the Jewish War to the Bar Kokhba revolt: "The distinctness of the canon reinforced the distinctness of the community that had chosen to adhere to it" (p. 100) and "made it impossible for covert heretics to remain within the fold" (p. 102). Peter J. Tomson shows that the New Testament, as "the embodiment of evolving Christian attitudes towards the Jews" (p. 107), ultimately came to play a similar role on the opposing side, despite the ecumenical intentions of Paul and Luke: "The sad irony of history seems to be that the New Testament grew out of a Pauline protocanon as interpreted by a movement within Paul's churches which he himself fundamentally opposed for its lack of respect for Judaism" (p. 129), a movement reflected in Ignatius of Antioch's stark opposition of *Christianismós* and *Ioudaismós.* Ziony Zevit, however, remarks that "the closing of a Christian

canon [in the fourth century] was not in response to Jewish practice, but benignly imitative of it," and was seen as "common sense" (p. 158). Whether as urgent defense or as calm institutional consolidation, the establishment of the canon serves to build a high wall around the religious community, no matter how capacious the space it demarcates. But the canon also focuses and limits the teachings that claim the believer's attention and submission. What a relief it is for Christians not to have to take seriously the ravings of Gnosticism, or to treat the Fathers as binding authorities. To be sure, canons of doctrine—creeds, councils, papal teachings—make their equally heavy supplementary claims, but when these become oppressive they can be countered by appeal to the supreme authority of Scripture.

David M. Carr considers the current restriction of the Song of Songs to its literal meaning as nontheological love literature to have effectively decanonized the text. He finds an eros transcending the merely sexual in the Origenian tradition that saw the Song as addressing Christ, the soul's Bridegroom, and also in Jewish readings of the text. As exegesis the results are a jumble, but as "a canonically sanctioned way for both men and women to image their theology of dependence on God" (p. 182), the Song was well used in its communities of interpretation. Today, individuals draw on the Song in their erotic-spiritual quest, but "the juxtaposition between the intensely corporate and historical character of the constitution of Scripture and the individualistic character of a post-critical encounter with it is troubling" (p. 187). "Is a new encounter with the poetic world of the Bible really a post-critical 'recanonization,' or is it just the lingering afterglow of canon in an ever more disenchanted post-canonical context?" (p. 188). Recalling Dietrich Bonhoeffer's declaration that the literal sense of the Song is itself the Christological sense (the acceptance of erotic love as blessed), I would like to see de-allegorization as enlarging our conception of canonicity. The canon is a basket containing all kinds of fish, and asking us to extend our mind in various directions. Once the smooth paths of allegory are blocked off, we are thrown back on a struggle with biblical literature that is less immediately edifying but perhaps ultimately provides a better anchor for a historically-grounded faith.

Aziz al-Azmeh's essay (badly edited) registers the gap between the history of the composition and definition of the canon on the one hand and the dogma of its divine status on the other: "The crystallization of the Qur'anic text and the cognitive and cultural forms which are now recognizably Muslim were not pre-existent, but took place in the fullness of time and in full view over many centuries" (p. 191). The process of the formation of the Qur'an has been inadequately studied, and its canonical status is maintained by "a ceremonial of textual repetition with a pronouncedly obsessional character" (p. 199). The frontiers and criteria of canonicity are complicated by the existence of six canonical collections of narrative *ḥadīth*, which function as a dogmatic and hermeneutical supplement to the Qur'an, along with a much vaster body of quasi-canonical *ḥadīth* having the same function. The principle of *naskh,* whereby one canonical text can overrule another, applies not only to contradictions in the Qur'an, but even allows a *ḥadīth* to overrule the

Qur'an. Such complex procedures of interpretation remain overshadowed, however, by mythical representations of pure origins and semimagical transmission. Medieval thinkers such as Ibn Rushd and Shāṭibī presented Islam as a natural religion of humanity, *dīn al-fiṭra,* and this "conflation of the natural and the revealed, the religious and the secular, the canonical and the rational, is at the heart of modern apologetic treatment of the Muslim canon" (p. 214). The canon is invoked pragmatically and its ahistorical status is boosted. Historical studies of the canon as "a worldly corpus of texts produced by humans under determinate conditions" have been few, because of "indifference, ideological antipathy, or considerations of prudence" (p. 222). When Islam faces its own historicity, as Judaism and Christianity have begun to do, it will be weaker, but saner.

Catherine Cornille observes canon formation at work in the Japanese New Religions. The Tenrikyō canon, for example, comprises the *Ofudesaki,* words of the God Tsukihi to the foundress; the liturgical chant *Mikagura-uta;* and, of lesser authority, the *Osashizu*, posthumous communications of the foundress. Cornille claims that Daisaku Ikeda's *Human Revolution* has canonical status within Soka Gakkai, after the *Lotus Sūtra* and the works of Nichiren; "there is reason to believe that it might rise in canonical status due to the excommunication of Soka Gakkai by the priesthood of Nichiren Shoshu in 1991… Ikeda has been working on his *New Human Revolution,* a text which already possesses canonical authority even prior to its publication" (p. 285). I wonder if the word "canon" is in danger of being stretched too far here. In its wide sense it means a repertoire of approved books (e.g., the canon of English literature); in its strongest sense it is a list of the works having absolute authority. Cornille notes the "close relationship of the canon to ritual practice." Texts that give "teachings for daily life" (p. 290), such as Ikeda's writings, belong to a less numinous sphere; they are perhaps more comparable to papal encyclicals or catechisms than to sacred scripture.

Cornille concludes that the canon-formation process in these new religions is "not particularly original or different from the way in which canons have come into being throughout the history of religions" (p. 290). I suspect an element of leveling essentialism here. Homologies between canons are probably as uninstructive as homologies between narratives or legal codes or medical treatises. The word "canon" designates an original creative achievement in each historical situation. Even within Chinese and Japanese Buddhism (as discussed in the contributions of Paul Swanson and Lucia Dolce) there is a great variety, from the comprehensiveness of the Mahayana Tripiṭaka, to its ordering in variously centered schemes of doctrinal classification, to Nichiren's singling out of the *Lotus Sūtra* or its title. Jonathan Z. Smith notes Kendall W. Folkert's distinction between Canon I, "carried by some other form of religious activity," and Canon II, "viewed as independently valid and powerful, and as such, as being absolutely closed and complete" (p. 301). One could perhaps say that Nichiren's cult of the sutra title approximates to the Catholic use of the Bible (Canon I), while the authority he claims for the sutra as a whole recalls the Protestant use (Canon II).

H. J. Adriaanse asks whether "modernization is a process by which canons

and canonicity are rendered obsolete" (p. 316), the authority of science replacing that of ancient codes. Within theology, Semler (1725–1791) reduced canon to a mere "agreement for the public society and the public exercise of religion" that could not bind the free individual conscience (p. 324). The application of intrinsic criteria of value to the canon, begun by the Reformers, ends in this devaluation of canonicity. To the "emaciating quest" for a canon within the canon Adriaanse opposes the golden mean: "a canon must stand midway between excess and deficiency." "Canons must enforce authority and they must also provide living space. Decanonization, therefore, can occur as a result not only of excessive narrowness, but also of excessive liberality" (p. 320). Canons that have this life-giving role are less likely to be thrown off as obsolete yokes. On the other hand Karl Barth's doughty defense of the canon as something that imposes itself by its own authority "ignore[s] the odour of violence and compulsion typical of the Christian canon" (p. 327). Adriaanse finds himself obliged to abandon theological claims and to see canon simply as "a sociocultural phenomenon… a means to establish some elements of cultural tradition in order to save them from temporal change" (p. 327). But even this phenomenon may belong only to premodern cultures. Against these melancholy conclusions, I would plead the rarity of supreme excellence in literature and of revelatory breakthroughs in religion. These rarities form the vital core of any canon. While the margins of literary and scriptural canons are contestable (and have always been so to some extent), their core has an intrinsic enduring power. It is this core that saves the canons, not the canons that prop up the core.

Yet, having said this, I find Adriaanse's questioning post-Barthianism more sympathetic than Abraham van de Beek's uncompromising rehearsal of the *Belgic Confession* (1561) on the *autopistía* of Scripture: "the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God" (p. 339). This clearly cannot apply to genocidal texts such as Numbers 31, now that we can no longer spiritualize them away or submit to them as mysterious counsels of God. The smelly fish in the basket of the canon demand of us moral discernment, the courage to oppose the life-giving Spirit to the letter that kills. Van de Beek has a romanticized and doctrinaire idea of how the inspired authors felt when penning the sacred texts, and rejects Barth's more realistic attitude. Though he insists on the liberty of the believer to accept as having divine authority only what the Spirit convinces one of, he does not show Adriaanse's seasoned awareness of the problems the biblical canon presents to the contemporary conscience.

Henk M.Vos advocates a mitigated or low-key canonicity, which admits that ultimately "no texts are sacred" (p. 352). Only in their free reception can texts be spiritually illuminating. Lieven Boeve points to the ungraspability of the divine self-communication that our culture-bound traditions point to in a dynamic and constantly changing way, in "ongoing processes of canonization and decanonization" (p. 379). But within this vision it is not clear what function he would ascribe to the quite rigid and unchanging contours of the biblical canon.

I am not sure that the postmodern sensibility adds much to the classical modern objections to the canon, as expressed by Semler. Pierre Legendre's

essay, the last in the volume, offers a Lacanian corrective to postmodern blitheness as well as to modern rejection of authority. He compares canons and totems: "(a) the totem is a theatrical figure; (b) the totem draws its being from the discourse that has staged it; (c) to the totem a series of normative effects is imputable" (p. 425). The maker of canons, for example Gratian compiling his *Decretum* in 1140, claims to guarantee the status of the texts retained and their relation to truth, and sets them forth as codes for human beings to live by. But there is a constitutive aporia in this legislative scene. "The Roman pontiff presides over the textual ensemble, mythologically," and theatrically, marking a limit or closure to Gratian's rationality. The Pope "closes the canonical scene, because he is in the dogmatic position of both *origo* and *auctoritas*" (p. 428), providing the canon laws with their final ground, which is no longer a rational one. The ultimate source of the laws is a fictive projection, be it the Pope, the People, or the State. The ultimate arbitrariness of canons gives them the stamp of paternal authority and thus secures their role in the symbolic order. Decanonization, in this perspective, is transgression, regicide, and paradoxically confirms the structure of canon as a symbolic montage, scientifically unjustifiable, but in some form or other essential to human civilization.

For the reader still eager to chew on the enigma of canonicity, there is a seventy-page annotated bibliography.

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