The Three Dimensions of Scriptures

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Description/Abstract
This article proposes a new model for understanding the ways that scriptures function. Several big media stories of recent years, such as those surrounding controversies over Ten Commandments monuments in U.S. courthouses and Qur'ans desecrated at Guantánamo Bay, involve the iconic function of scriptures. Yet contemporary scholarship on Jewish, Christian or Muslim scriptures is ill-prepared to interpret these events because it has focused almost all its efforts on textual interpretation. Even the increased attention to the performative function of scripture by Wilfred Cantwell Smith and his students does not provide resources for understanding the iconic roles of scriptures. This paper addresses the gap by theorizing the nature of scriptures as a function of their ritualization in three dimensions—semantic, performative, and iconic. The model provides a means for conceptualizing how traditions ritualize scriptures and how they claim and negotiate social power through this process.

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