

Beth Elness-Hanson and Jon Skarpeid
A Critical Study of Classical Religious Texts in Global Contexts, Challenges of a Changing World
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Beth E. Elness-Hanson, lecturer in Old Testament at Johannelund School of Theology in Uppsala, Sweden, and Jon Skarpeid, Associate Professor in religious Studies at the University of Stavanger, Norway, have edited a book with a wide scope. Together with seven colleagues from Norway (Ådna, Eidsvåg, Holter, Lavik, Pharo) Sweden (Svensson) and Denmark (Hammer) they present several perspectives and approaches on what may seem like different themes and issues.

Seen together, however, they present overriding reflections on what is the main theme of the book, how local and individual or group-related conceptions and interpretations of religious texts relate to situations way beyond the local context where they emerge.

The book points at the importance of realizing the limits of western, post-enlightenment ways of seeing – or ways of knowing. This is a very pertinent point, and in the message of the book is just that: We are part of a larger world than we tend to imagine. Still the West plays a hegemonistic role – particularly in academia. The book is itself an example of how difficult it is to break the western pattern of dominance, as there are no direct southern voices in the book. Thematically, however, there are.

The chapters vary in both approach and scope. One might suggest that some of the chapters relate more immediately to the overarching theme of the book, than others. But when read together, they interconnect better than I expected. I find that all the chapters share perspectives that open a large space for reflection on my work, all the stories told, in different ways resonate with experiences that I have made.

I approach issues raised in the book more for a practitioner's than from an academic point of view. As a post-enlightenment Westerner, I tend to overlook the many parallels that are there between a pre- and a post-modern pattern of how we deal with information. I found that reading Svensson's chapter on basic human ways of dealing with information, as a kind of mentalization, was a helpful approach. Seen together with Marta Lavik's stories and reflections from encounters with the terminally ill, this confirms the cross-historical and cross-contextual connections: it is both the immediate message, the non-interpreted, non-distilled message you *want* to hear, and you therefore hear; and the reflected upon, the appropriated, inferred interpretation, that you receive and interiorize. In a way, Lavik demonstrates that in certain situations, the understanding and interpretation of a text, is widened beyond the more narrow,

Western way of reading and of “reading”.

In his introductory chapter, Jon Skarpeid draws up the matrix that helps us place and sort the different stories the varied bits of information that the book shares. He suggests that we look at the following four relations:

- Minority versus majority
- Diaspora versus homeland
- Center versus periphery, and
- Secular versus sacred/religious

All these four dimensions highlight the issue of power and power-relations, a question pointed at in different ways in several of the chapters in the book. From my more practical point of view, a number of issues are touched on by raising the power-issue: who has the right of definition? What *is* racism? What are the delineations between integration and accommodation? There is knowledge and suggestions in this book, that I can make use of to enlarge my understanding of many of these issues.

Majority – minority: What is a minority? It may seem easy to answer, but in many cases, it is quite complex matter, and the status of being a minority is ambiguous, at best: Often it is a limited right that certain groups have access to, like first nations, original peoples, or the Sami here in Scandinavia. In groups defined as a minority there may be a history of disempowerment and discrimination and of forced assimilation; recently also by trying to find ways to reinstate former rights, such as rights to land, and religious identities, fishing rights etc. In some instances, there are processes of reconciliation going on between the majority and minority population – and all these issues become part of the package when we start looking at the relationship between majority population and minority. In other regions the delineations between majority and minority is not so easy to establish. In the Middle East, the issue of majority and minority the issue is not one of numbers, but historical rights.

Diaspora – homeland: It also relates to the question of homeland and diaspora: This is the issue discussed in Ådna’s article about Turkish and Uighur background young Muslims. The role of the Arabic language, and that of the holy places, definitely play an important role in the life of the young Muslims. However, she demonstrates that perhaps the similarities between how faith is lived and practiced by young Christians and young Muslims, are less different that one may tend to believe. She demonstrates how both the mosque as an institution, its leaders as identification-objects, and the fellowship experienced among and between the young people in question, are important factors in the transmission of Muslim identity across generations, and across cultural and national borders; and that the global role of Islam in practice plays a minor part. Perhaps I need to change, or at least to nuance my conception of translation and the role of language in Islam, as opposed to the translatability of Christianity (as Lamin Sanneh has argued for). With the exception of sacred texts used for *Baraka*, this seems to be shared also by Svensson.

Center – periphery: Elness-Hanson asks us what are the blind-spots? She relates it specifically to Western academic theology. But the question is pertinent and should be asked. Most of us are blind to our own power. We do not see to what extent we, as westerners, still decide what the world should accept as “self-evident”. As a middle aged (or elderly) male member of the white race, I am in a privileged position. Elness-Hanson’s chapter, (and several others in the book) points at that, and thereby reminds us of the thesis of one of the powerful people of mission studies, Andrew Walls, who argues that renewal always comes from the periphery.

Secular – sacred: In the study of the place of religious or Christian stories in two different Norwegian Kindergarten, Eidsvåg points out that a kindergarten is not a secular space, neither in theory nor in practice. He demonstrates how two different approaches, or two varied definitions of the value basis of the kindergarten, has clear implications for how religious stories are presented. He more than suggests that one approach creates a larger room for accepting pluralism as a reality. It remains not clear to me if that means that the children become more able to negotiate between different world views or religions, and therefore are better equipped to encounter other stories than the ones they primarily grew up with a single story, whether a basically secular story or a religious one.

In her article on multi-epistemological exegesis, Elness-Hanson starts by asking what our blind-spots are. And she relates this to the two large questions: How do we know what we know? And: What really exist?

The article helps me redefine my way of reading and interpreting; and through that opens doors for new ways of learning and accepting knowledge and a wider world view.

There is a clear connection from this to Holter’s reading and re-readings of the Jesus-story of the loving father. There are several interesting points in that story, that serve me with new information regarding how a story is read and understood. And precisely the re-reading of well-known stories through the questions asked by others, are important sources of information, and of necessary information. The message of this book should be required reading before any heated discussions regarding ethical or theological issues related to interpretation of biblical texts.

Now, to my second and briefer main point: How do I apply the information that the book gives me? I hope that the material presented here, will be made accessible to many who operate in the border of reflection and practice: The four overriding perspectives presented by Elness-Hanson and Skarpeid are of importance for how we see the presence of religion, and of the Christian faith in our time and our place. The four issues of Majority – minority, Diaspora – homeland, Center – periphery, and Secular – sacred, are not dealt with once and for all, but remain perspectives that are there to take into account and reflect on. In different ways, they relate to the question of power and power-structures.

On a more practical level, I wish to mention some other issues: Ådna: Perhaps there are things to learn from how young Muslims relate to the Mosque and to their leaders

here in their minority situation, that may be applied to local church youth work. A further issue could be how Norwegian diaspora function, the role of the Seamen's churches in Europe and South America, and how can these groups relate and learn?

Lavik and Hansson: We read the stories of healing, and we feel the power of the word of God; there is however, not one but many ways of seeing what the story is, and what the Bible represents. But as Lavik point out, they give solutions and cause tensions: are they all equally good? Or true? Do they all represent sustainable life, sound and healthy spirituality and religiosity? How do we, as professional practitioners of religion and as religious people guide our constituencies and our confidants so that what they receive is not false, but true, not unsteady but steadfast, so that what we offer is a platform to build on when the answers are good or when life is threatened?

For several decades now, many churches have experienced energy loss because of an everlasting discussion on issues of human sexuality. It seems to me that there should be room for learning from the experience of multiple bible-reading experience and multi-epistemological exegesis. There are themes where we can be certain, that the only way of assuring *one* solution or conclusion, is through the use of force. In these cases, perhaps we may learn directly from the experience of multiple bible-readings – by allowing different readings and interpretations to live side by side – and even to enrich one another. At least one can dream about it!

Limits of diversity: In my work as a pastor and church leader, I have tried my best to be inclusive and understanding. But there comes a time and a place where you face your own limitations – and you are convinced that if you cross this line, you are leading sheep astray. How does one as a steward of Christianity, deal with these two conflicting interests? I think that the reflections made here, can be helpful and relevant, also in that respect.

The editors and the authors deserve thanks for inspiring reflections that have widened my scope, and that I need to take with me into the future – and on the tone of Lavik – none of us know what that implies.