
Bruce Lincoln's "How to Read a Religious Text": An Experiment of Application.

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Let me advance the observation that, like all other texts, those which constitute themselves as religious are human products. The chief way religious texts are unlike all others: the claims they advance for their more-than-human origin, status and authority. For characteristically, they connect themselves either explicitly, or in some indirect fashion, to a sphere and a knowledge of transcendent or metaphysical nature. Such claims condition the way devotees regard these texts and receive their contents, that is their *raison d'être*.

(Lincoln 2012, 5)

In presenting this little volume to the public, my wish is that there may be some inspiration left in the hearts of the dear women and girls of my race, into whose hands it may chance to fall. We are striving to save the children, both boys and girls, for in a few decades they will be called upon to face many things which we have not. Women must write, speak, sing and do everything whereby those of our race may receive inspiration. For those women who are to hang to their husbands' coats and those men who hang to their wives' apron strings, is a thing of the past, for woman is in demand. The world is calling upon her. There is an anecdote that "The best thing about Adam was his rib and that was removed to make woman."

(Duncan 1906, 244)

In *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions*, Lincoln's "How to Read a Religious Text" is anchored in decades of work with mythological texts or canonical texts: the six points deployed have their origins in his prior work, *Theorizing Myth* (Lincoln 2012, 5-15; Lincoln 1999, 150-155).¹ The sections from the Chandogya Upanishads that Lincoln uses to illustrate his points thus fall in line with a number of his selected examples over the course of his career, in addition to the analysis of relatively discrete events. This essay walks through of the utility, limits, and necessary adaptations that surface when Lincoln's categories brought to bear on other types of religious texts, ap-

plying Lincoln's six lines of inquiry to Sara J. Duncan's *Progressive Missions in the South and Addresses: With Illustrations and Sketches of Missionary Workers and Ministers and Bishop's Wives* (1906).² Aside from a brief identification of a few key figures and organizations: the who, what and where, the exposition of *Progressive Missions* will occur in response to Lincoln's points in the order he enumerated them (Lincoln 2012, 5, 9). Lincoln's queries migrate from the identification of categories (contested and/or reinforced), to shifts in those categories, comparative texts and genres, observing the categories and social groups in play, authorship, the reception of the text, and finally the possible outcomes. The steps induce a *momentary* disjuncture for the reader from the deceptively simple, elusive task of "just understanding what occurs within a text," religious or not, and shifts the focus to how and why it was produced and the observable social tensions.

Originally published in 1906, *Progressive Missions* is neither a myth nor a segment of canon, nor is it a discrete event in any typical sense. Duncan's volume is a compendium of her work and that of other authors: sermons and public addresses, religious biography and autobiography; accounts of civic and business accomplishments, and other materials such as photographs and etchings. Duncan served as the general superintendent of the African Methodist Episcopal Church's (AME) *second* women's missionary society, the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society (WHFMS). *Progressive Missions* documented her work for the WHFMS and that of other black Methodists and Christians in the South. Duncan, per the passage at the outset, shares religious narratives and the successes of her organization and black Christians in the South to encourage other Southern black women to take up Christian missionary work under the AME banner (Bender 2010, 68-9). The book provides religious narratives to elevate the visibility of this community and as a means of empowering women to understand their capacities as equals (or more) in God's creation and with an understanding of their responsibility to carry out Christian missions whatever the social and political climate.

General Superintendent Sara J. Duncan of the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society.

Progressive Missions' editor and author Sara J. Duncan was born on 1869 in Cahaba, Alabama. A member of the Southern black elite of her time, having earned a masters' degree before her tenure in the WHFMS, Duncan was vocationally valuable beyond her organizational skills. A rarity in the post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow American South, she was a black woman school teacher (Duncan 1906, 68; Jones 2010, 124). Her father, George Hatcher, was a businessman, church trustee, and Methodist class leader (Duncan 1906, 4). Duncan ascribes her organizational work to her early church participation, in the footsteps of her adopted mother, Sara J. Morgan (Duncan 1906, 65, 20-21).

As mentioned previously, the WHFMs is the AME's second women's organization that raised funds to expand missionary operations. The first organization, the AME's Women's Parent Mite Missionary Society (WPMMS), founded in 1874, was based in Philadelphia, the city of the AME's origins. The WPMMS was run by the wives of the AME bishops; among the earliest were Mary Campbell and Sarah Tanner, who like Duncan contended with unhelpful and sometimes hostile male clergy (Duncan 1906, 66-68; Dodson 2003, 102-103; Collier-Thomas 2010, 154). While Southern membership in the AME had expanded rapidly in decade prior to 1863, more than doubling, with even more growth after the Civil War, the AME leadership and the WPMMS remained in the North (Angell 1996, 277, n7; Collier-Thomas 2010, 155). Duncan was hired by one of the first Southern AME Bishops, Henry M. Turner. Turner championed the creation of the WHFMS to aid his missionary ambitions within the AME, which the WPMMS had declined to aid (Duncan, 7-10 and 65; Angell 1992, 219). Beyond internal AME tensions, in 1906, Duncan had been an AME religious organizer in the American South in the nine years following the U.S. Supreme Court's *Plessey v. Ferguson* decision—the legal foundation for Jim Crow.

So, what happens when Lincoln's lines of inquiry are applied to the contents of Sara Duncan's book?

1) Establish the categories at issue in the text on which the inquiry is focused. Note the relations among these categories (including the ways dif-

ferent categorical sets and subsets are brought into alignment), as well as their ranking relative to one another, also the logic used to justify that ranking.

Progressive Missions' authors consistently advocated for a scripture-based understanding of social and religious transcendence along multiple social categories or internal poles of activity, among them gender, race, class, the laity / clerical divide, nationalism and sense of transnational black identity, and organizational autonomy. The issues are intertwined, and ranking them runs the risk of obscuring how and when they surface with greater or lesser emphasis. Duncan documented the labors and stories of women engaged in development of the church or "Kingdom Building," and this task for the audience of this book is synonymous with racial uplift—a cosmology visible among nearly all black Protestants. Duncan contested various assertions of Southern, black, and female inferiority (Duncan 1906, 234-44; Turner 1893, 18; Evans, 2008). Duncan added to this approach not only a critique of class bias against the poor and working poor but also expanded the array of religious narratives worth capturing with the inclusion of the pious struggles of the middle and lower class laity alongside the wives of bishops. She simultaneously tried to correct the theological subordination of women and to enable the black South to show its accomplishments to an AME North clamoring for the subordination of the WHFMS to the WPMMS (Duncan 1906, 243-44, 111, 140-145).

2) Note whether there are any changes in the ranking of categories between the beginning of the text and its denouement. Ascertain the logic used to justify any such shifts.

Before drawing out an example of proposed changes with some of Duncan's statements on gender, with the reference to a single "denouement," there are two issues—neither of which invalidate Lincoln's approach—that do require a pause before proceeding. First, query two on the surface presumes a single narrative structure. To assess *Progressive Missions* is to assess the compendium and thus Duncan's project as a whole, including its individual elements, whose authors are distinct and varied. For analysts, this is about Unitization: how are large texts with smaller heterogenous components bound or divided, coded and analyzed? Second, a significant portion of the

of *Every Age* (1855), is one prominent example of an attempt to restore women to the histories for public circulation. *Progressive Missions* was less ambitious in scope. In *Setting Down the Sacred Past*, Laurie Maffly-Kipp presents the emergence of black religious histories produced in the United States (2010). Duncan does not rewrite world history, but she is part of this movement of black Protestants recording the life stories of their religious exemplars and strives for Southern representation. Duncan took issue with white depictions of blacks in an era where public displays of black life and black history were usually but not always demeaning affirmation of primitivism and white supremacy (Brundage 2003). The other genres that contextualizes *Progressive Missions* include religious autobiographies, biographies, and obituaries by AME and other Black Methodist notables such as Richard Allen, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote—stories of exemplars to affirm and inspire faith (Andrews, 1986; Franklin, V. P. and Betty Collier-Thomas 2002).

4) Establish any connections that exist between the categories that figure in these texts and those which condition the relations of the social groups among whom the texts circulate.

Duncan's text might have circulated among the members of the WPMM, but more likely it was within the territory of the WHFMS and lay women of the South, and the differences of clergy-laity tensions, kinship networks, and regionalism are intertwined. As mentioned previously, both organizations were created as the AME adapted to the new missionary landscape in the aftermath of the Civil War. The AME's Southern membership expanded rapidly during and after the war, but most of the power and AME leadership remained situated in the North: the women's organizations were simply another one arena of conflict (Collier-Thomas 2010, 160, 162-167). Southern and Midwestern AME women, frustrated by an inability to work through the WPMM and by a lack of representation, approached Bishop Henry M. Turner in 1893 to form a distinct organization (Duncan 1906, 9-10; Collier-Thomas 2010, 151). The first general superintendent of WHFM, Rev. Lillian Thurman, was from the North and a sister to future Bishop Charles Spencer Smith (Duncan 1906, 64, 101; Dodson 2003, 115; Collier-Thomas 2010, 159). Thurman departed to become a minister in the North,

and Turner turned to Southerner Sara Duncan as a replacement (Duncan 1906, 85-86).

With continuous pressure to merge and subordinate her organization and hostility from much of the Southern AME clergy for whom she was raising funds, Duncan's *Progressive Missions* was an appeal to Southern women to enter religious work and an institution that would allow them a voice—and also a justification for the continued independent existence of the WHFM in the South, controlled by Southern and Midwestern laywomen. Insisting that there was no conflict between the women's organizations, Duncan tackled those demanding a merger directly in a reprint of her article, "In Vindication of Vital Question—Our Missionary Department (Voice of People, March, 1904)." (Duncan 1906, 140-45).

5) Establish the authorship of all texts considered and the circumstances of the authorship, circulation and reception.

In addition to her own writings Duncan solicited a wide range of authors from the AME, Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, and the AMEZ. Not everything Duncan solicited for the volume arrived in time to be published and she planned the book to include material so as to be representative of as many strands of southern Black Methodism as possible (Duncan 1906, 247). We have no data on the circulation of *Progressive Missions*. From internal histories, AME women's histories, and presentations of exemplary women, Duncan's name survives, but awareness of the book does not. A chapter in Alma Polk's *Twelve Pioneer Women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church* is devoted to first WHFMS President Laura Lemon Turner. Duncan is mentioned in passing (Polk 1947, 33), but Polk has apparently neither recourse to *Progressive Missions* nor knowledge of its existence. The same holds with Octavia Dandridge's history of the (merged) Women's Missionary Society (Dandridge 1987, 8).

6) Try to draw reasonable inferences about the interests that advanced, defended, or negotiated through each text. Pay particular attention to the way the categories constituting the social order are redefined and recalibrated, such that certain groups move up and others move down within the extant hierarchy.

Outside of *Progressive Missions*, Duncan and Turn-

er demonstrated WHFMS' indispensability to the AME's coffers and global missionary aims and for a time engineered the stability of the WHFMS. Collier-Thomas notes that early in Duncan's tenure she garnered enough power that AME hierarchy moved to legitimate its relationship with the WPMMS as *the* recognized AME women's missionary group (Collier-Thomas 2010, 162-163) and restated Northern primacy. While this did not check the WHFMS, it operated in a climate of continued pressure to merge and be reorganized under the control of the Northern-based AME Parent Board of Missions for decades. Northern male hostility toward WHFM was ill-concealed. Bishop Coppin (widower of WPMMS president Fanny Jackson Coppin) in his 1916 Quadrennial Address snubbed the WHFMS (whose membership was significantly larger than the WPMMS), making but a single reference to the WPMMS' contributions to the financial well being of the church (1916, 63-4). In the end, the WPMMS and WHFM fought off a merger until 1944, when they became the Women's Missionary Society (WMS). Although women's ordination passed in 1948, the WMS went through several decades of relentless organizational domination by AME men, reinforcing the gender and scripturally sanctioned social order depicted in Illustration 1. (Collier-Thomas 2010, 168).

Conclusion

The point of critical analysis, then, is not to question the sincerity or the integrity of those who speculate about the nature of the cosmos, nor is it to charge them *ad hominem* with bad faith. Rather it is to suggest that the nature of their speculation is informed and inflected by their situation of interest, which has already been normalized and naturalized by the prior speculations of others like them.

(Lincoln 2012, 15)

"How to Read a Religious Text" clarifies some of the differences between religious belief-driven readings of texts meant to affirm or motivate a religious community and to draw in new adherents, and analytical readings of religious texts. While confessional historiography can share some of the traits of analytical work, the labor necessary to qualify a reading of a religious text as analytical is a matter of degree and accountability: a willingness to tell the less than ide-

al story or even damaging story if the evidence demands it; attention to the situated uses of language without a presumption of or proof-texting interpretive continuity over time and, where applicable, space; a drive to persistently problematize social classifications as in any way natural, or sanctioned by a divine order in order to examine and discuss the consequences of power within a social group or institution. Or, emphatically for an analytical approach, the ability to tease out internal differences and externalizing boundaries without naturalizing those differences is crucial. Assertions that something is or is not "genuine religion (racially pure, gender-appropriate, truly class consciousness)," is not a legitimate basis for exclusion or homogenization of a data in analytical work. These claims (religious, political, social, cultural, etc.) serve as plot points to map an array of competing claims in a social order working itself out.

Lincoln's lines of inquiry are denaturalizing; being responsive to his six points requires a recursive loop between the texts gathered and the lines of inquiry—a normal turn of events in historical scholarship and the development of issue-coding in the social sciences. To take two examples, specifying authorship (point five), sheds light on categories at work in the text analyzed (point one). Responding to questions raised in point one begins to answer question four. To comment on the experience of applying the steps to a religious text I am analyzing as part of a larger study, the act of writing up my responses here felt like I have exposed very raw initial coding notes and simultaneously an initial attempt to map secondary literature without a stable narrative. During an initial analysis of a text, religious or not—this is the place an analyst should be.

Lincoln's lines of inquiry bring out details that can be lost to internal religious histories shaped consciously and unconsciously for internal consumption that may or may not have acted in support of a hierarchy that authorizes their publication and circulation or retroactively creates a unity that papers over deep and abiding conflicts. For example, Dandridge's account of the history of the WMS records names and networks—a task of benefit to historians, religion scholars, and members of the AME alike. However, her account of the WHFMS and WPMMS merger profoundly downplays the protracted fight to merge the organizations (Dandridge, 9-10). In the case of African American religious history, because

of the lack of available document repositories, especially those documenting women's work, we do not know to what sources Dandridge had access when she took up her task as the historiographer of the AME Women's Missionary Society.

With the cue of the title, Lincoln's steps work well when applied to a discrete text or an event. The larger the body of texts, or pool of data sources (e.g. correspondence, sermons, newspaper columns, legal decisions, etc.) the more Lincoln's six steps need to be joined to methodologies with a clear component of qualitative data acquisition. This opens up Lincoln's work on religion to be applied through interview questions, ethnography, and coding schemas for assessing emerging media. Lincoln's mode of analysis has much common with techniques of history informed by critical and social theory. Applying Lincoln here broadly to Sara Duncan or her peers yields analysis that work well with historians Bettye Collier-Thomas and Anthea Butler in their respective work: gender, class, and institutional power across black women's religious organizing work, and the tensions between men and women in navigating the shared space (Collier-Thomas 2010 and Butler 2006). All three map social tensions among people and organizations; Lincoln provokes explicit unpacking of religious texts generated in these contexts. For those anchored in social scientific work, Lincoln is a good point of departure for religion scholars considering Critical Discourse Analysis, a compatibility noted and followed up by Titus Hjelm (in Stausberg and Engler 2011, 135).

The process of analysis should not affirm the analysts' worldview or presuppositions; the process should make the analyst painfully aware of the limits of the data that can be assembled, the context that can be ascertained, and healthy concern for what is not known. Duncan's efforts give us rare insight into but not a representative picture of the religious lives most black Methodist women in the South. Formulating and testing theories is the phase of work after an initial read of a text. What I would explicitly add to Lincoln's steps (where it is implied) for texts religious or not, is a check on the analyst. The analyst must look (and always look for) data that disconfirms emerging findings and retain the capacity to deal with internal contradictions and disjuncture without prematurely dismissing or classifying the data as aberrant. I do not think Lincoln would disagree that posited social orders are routinely disobeyed,

selectively enforced or riddled with contradictions—that people have their own understandings of what compels them to participate in a community bound in some way by religion (Lincoln 2012, 10).

Lincoln's queries remain useful to those in or outside of a religious group as cues to denaturalize language one acquires to parse religious texts and to map the issues impacting the text and history of its creation or reception—a reminder to map the array of expressions and responses or even the disquieting ones. Whatever discourse or mode of inquiry, and I would add, path through Lincoln's points we choose, it “can have profound consequences for social reality, even if cosmic reality remains serenely unaffected.” (Lincoln 2012, 15).

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Notes

1. Lincoln's original seventh point made in *Theorizing Myth*, though applicable will not be addressed at this time due to constraints of space, reads, "7. Remember that to treat pointed issues, even in the most manipulative form, is to acknowledge them and to open up possibilities for those with other interests to advance alternative interpretations and thematizations. The enunciation of any mythic variant opens up an arena of struggle and maneuver that can be pursued by those who produce other variants of the myth and other interpretations of the variant."
2. In the interests of full disclosure, Sara J. Duncan is one of four case studies for my dissertation, *AME Women, Agency and Religious Belief*. There is no space to include either elements of my somewhat more complete analysis of Duncan's individual writings in *Progressive Missions* where the text intersects with Lincoln's lines of inquiry in "How to Read a Religious Text" or salient points from Lincoln's other work or, the more robust array of references to primary texts and secondary literatures applicable to this text not the least of which are the array of black Methodist beliefs and practices documented, the role of religious experience in any understanding of transcendence and the complicated nineteenth century discourses on race and gender.