Informative, Formative, and Transformative Reading in Christianity and Islam

Keywords: reading, reading practices, Christianity, Islam, religious information, the profound, information use, information seeking, lectio divina

Abstract: In this paper, we explore three conceptions of religious reading (informative, formative, and transformative) to illustrate the diversity of information use in religious contexts. “Informative” refers to contexts of discovery, “formative” concerns education, while “transformative” points to ideals of enlightenment, fulfillment, or self-improvement. We provide instantiations of these conceptions across Christianity and Islam and highlight similarities and differences between these religious traditions through a review of relevant literature, textual analysis of prescriptive documents in Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, and select preliminary data gathered through current ethnographic research on Muslim converts in the Greater Toronto Area.

Our discussion builds upon Buckland’s (1991, 2012) notion of theological information, Kari’s (2007, 2009) understanding of information as revelatory knowledge, and Kari and Hartel’s (2007) discussion of profound phenomena. It assumes an inclusive concept of reading which applies to a wide range of information sources, such as texts (e.g., pamphlets or scriptures), other persons and communities (e.g., listening to or conversing with another person; overhearing a conversation), and even the world (e.g., interpreting natural signs apparent in one’s environment).

This is an exploratory paper. In future research we intend to clarify the three conceptions of reading through textual analysis and ethnographic research in Christian monastic and Muslim communities. This research will contribute to existing Information and Communication Studies scholarship on the normative or prescriptive aspects of religious reading practices (Illich, 1996; Stock, 2007), congregational belief formation (Freeburg, 2014), and knowledge production and control in the wake of new media (Anderson, 2010; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003).

References


