

## **Oral Tradition in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Introduction**

**Werner Kelber and Paula Sanders**

The present issue of *Oral Tradition* stands as a tribute to a conference initiated and convened by Werner Kelber and Paula Sanders on the topic of Oral-Scribal Dimensions of Scripture, Piety, and Practice in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Rice Conference was the seventh in a series of Orality-Literacy Conferences that was inaugurated in 2001 in South Africa and over the years convened in Africa, Europe, and the United States. The series has focused on issues such as colonialism, the world of the Spirits, memory, diversity, ritual, and tradition—always from the perspectives of orality-literacy dynamics. Information about this and the other Orality-Literacy Conferences is available at <http://voicetexts.rice.edu>, a website dedicated to new theories about the verbal arts.

At the Rice Conference, April 12-14, 2008, sixteen active participants (a keynote speaker, four specialists in each of three world religions, and three respondents) met to examine the aesthetic, compositional, memorial, and performative aspects of three faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) in their appropriate media contexts. In many ways, this approach differs from, and indeed challenges, historical scholarship. Beginning with the pre-modern period and reaching into our postmodern world, the strictly philological, textual paradigm has served as the intellectual premise for classical and biblical scholarship, for medieval studies, and for the study of world religions as well. The Rice conference and the papers that emanated from it are designed to provide the philological, textual study of the monotheistic faiths with fresh insights and to suggest significant modifications. The largely Western paradigm of the three monotheistic faiths as quintessential religions of the book is, thereby, called into question in the present issue of *Oral Tradition*. If the flourishing discipline of orality-scribality-memory studies has shown anything conclusively, it is that prior to the invention of print technology the verbal arts were an intricate interplay of oral and scribal verbalization, with manuscripts often serving as mere reference points for recitation and memorization. The papers that follow show that this scenario applies with special relevance to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

A distinct feature of the Conference was the presence of experts in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam who engaged in a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary discourse. Our intent was not to aim at unifying the three faiths into a single orality-scribality based paradigm—if such existed at all. The sacred texts treated in this volume admit of a vast repertoire of communicative strategies,

varied themes, and sensibilities, and the consultation of their relevant bibliographies makes the range in oral, scribal, memorial configurations even wider. And yet, the focus on the communicative dimension brings out issues that run across the papers and allow us to take first, tentative steps toward comparative thinking. In this regard the readers are encouraged to pay close attention to the respondents' essays that summarize, complement, and expand the issues, raise new questions, sometimes challenge assumptions, and consistently cast fresh light on the propositions advanced in the papers.

The guest editors express their gratitude to the keynote speaker, John Miles Foley,<sup>1</sup> for globalizing our sense of media technologies by drawing analogies between oral tradition and the Internet, and by allocating various manifestations of democracy to different media domains. Next, we sincerely thank the twelve colleagues who presented their essays for discussion at the conference sessions, and in particular to the ten among them who submitted their work for publication in this issue of *Oral Tradition*. A special word of appreciation goes to the three respondents, two of whom (an Africanist and an Islamicist) submitted their reflections for publication, helping us to view our respective disciplines in broadly transcultural contexts. Many thanks as well to the external reviewers who contributed both time and expertise in making constructive suggestions and adding further depth to the papers. We were fortunate in obtaining the expertise of Eugene Botha, then at UNISA, Pretoria, South Africa, who videotaped the venue and part of the proceedings of the Conference, producing footage that adds pictorial enrichment to the verbal texture of the volume. A Conference of this disciplinary plurality and international dimension requires a significant amount of preparation and administrative skills. Our deep-felt appreciation goes to Ms. Katie Zammito, whose judicious and tireless assistance contributed a great deal toward making this Conference possible at all.

We wish to alert readers to the fact that we have not removed references to papers or responses to them that were not submitted for inclusion in this volume. We believe that maintaining traces of these voices at our Conference—rather than omitting them through conventional editorial processes that would create an illusion of completion and consistency in the published volume of the Conference papers, one that will no doubt stand as an “official” memorial of the Conference—is in keeping with the theme of our inquiry on the intricate interplay of orality and scribality of the verbal arts.

Finally, we make grateful acknowledgement of the generous Rice sponsors of the Conference. A very special debt is due to the principal sponsor, the Boniuk Center for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance. Additionally, our hearty thanks go to the five co-sponsors: first and foremost to the Ken Kennedy Institute for Information Technology as well as to the Humanities Research Center, the Office of the Dean of Humanities, the Department of History, and the Department of Religious Studies.

The Conference papers that treat oralities, scribilities, and their variegated intersections in the three monotheistic faiths are themselves products of complex communication processes. Never fully secured as definitive properties, they underwent a series of media changes. Initially, the papers were electronically authored and pre-circulated in advance of the Conference proceedings. At the Conference, the authors vocalized abstracts of their works and initiated a

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<sup>1</sup> For relevant scholarship, see Foley 2002, 2004, and the Pathways Project (Foley 2010-).



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