

Epistemic Violence Applied to the Graphic Communication of Religious-Cultural Memory

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.913COM005>

Received: 21 January 2025; Accepted: 29 January 2025; Published: 03 March 2025

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the application of *epistemic violence* upon the graphic communication of religious-cultural memory, a phenomenon manifested in the destruction of books and libraries (*libricide*) and *script devaluation*. With periodic frequency, *libricide* and *script devaluation* have been administered to diminish or eradicate the externalized graphic memory (*exogramic memory*) of a rivalling tradition or ideology. The article attempts to highlight the vulnerability and manipulation of the externalized memory storage of knowledge through dominating, destructive forces implementing *epistemic violence*, consequently causing religious-cultural erosion, eradication and delegitimization. The theme has been examined from four perspectives of inquiry: (1) *religious libricide*, (2) *religious script devaluation*, (3) *religious script concealment*, and (4) *digitalization countering libricide*. This brief article on an unmistakably vast theme, focuses on letterforms and writing in the religious-cultural context drawing upon a selection of relevant historical and contemporary examples to demonstrate and typify the reoccurring, diverse phenomena of *epistemic violence* administered upon *exogramic memory* that has consequently and substantially contributed towards shaping religious-cultural evolution.

Keywords: Epistemic violence · libricide · script devaluation · exogramic memory · religious evolution

INTRODUCTION AND EXPLANATION OF TERMS

During research investigating the influence of graphic communication on religious evolution numerous examples of *religious libricide*, *religious script devaluation*, and *religious script concealment* emerged in the framework of religious and cultural evolutionary processes, both past and present. In 1988 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942 -), in an essay entitled *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, coined the phrase *epistemic violence* (Spivak, 1988). It has been loaned here, albeit unconventionally, with the intention of respecting the original definition as a conceptual umbrella term for this research article. Although Spivak's argument was used in the context of the *subaltern* and *colonialization*, the term appeared to be a suitable 'modus operandi' expression to describe letter formed instances of hegemonial religious and cultural delegitimization. This delegitimization refers to the epistemic, cognitive knowledge base that may be willfully devalued, eradicated and not uncommonly replaced through force. Claudia Brunner acknowledged Spivak's academic contribution stating that Spivak's essay is: "... von epistemischer Gewalt paradigmatisch und mittlerweile kanonisiert" (English transl.: "... is paradigmatic for the understanding of epistemic violence and has since been canonized") (Brunner, 2020, pp. 97-98). The term *epistemic violence* could be understood on two levels, the formal etymological and the conventional application of contemporary use. The adjective *epistemic* refers to, in simple terms, the 'how we know what we know' of knowledge, while violence refers to the exercising of adverse force. On the second level, the conventional application relates to Brunner's suggestion of a "canonized" understanding, an achieved concomitant, correlative conventionality in the use of a word or term. A word or term gains meaning from transmission to the recipient through the convention of mutual comprehension. Ideally, the source of transmission and the recipient share a common or replicatable understanding of the word or term, which may not always be the case. Ludwig Wittgenstein stated that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language." He further suggested that this applied to "... a large class of cases—though not for all ..." (Wittgenstein, 1986 [1953] sec. 43). The term is therefore, to use a simplified literal definition, violence upon, "how it is known what is known"—a personal or collective knowledge and

memory base. The tendency in academic implementation has focused on cases relating to societal power balance concerning such issues as racism, gender and naturally, colonialism.

The term *epistemic violence* has a close relationship with the Latin term *damnatio memoriae*. Although this was not a term used in antiquity, it has been used in modern times with reference to memory erasure, specifically projected towards individual rulers, that attempt to secure their position of domination. For example, the destruction of iconic representations or inscribed names of preceding rulers with opposing political or religious views or to eliminate unfavorable comparisons. The process of predecessor negation has been a regular strategy throughout the history of cultures, although this aspect of *epistemic violence* has significance and relevance for this investigation it is not the central focus of enquiry. This aspect could be described, with yet another word amalgam, as *epigraphicide*. Stone and metal inscriptions are more sustainable than less durable writing surfaces, such as papyrus, parchment or paper which have a reduced chance of survival, although it is generally accepted that these decomposable materials were extensively used.

The founder of the short-lived Qin dynasty in the third century BCE, Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇- meaning the first emperor, transliterated as 'qín shǐ huáng'), famous for the unification of China, the Terracotta Army and the Great Wall, who, it was claimed, attempted to eradicate Confucianism. As Syed Tahir Abbas has stated: "He commanded the burning of Confucian writings and the execution of academics who disagreed with the officially sanctioned ideology in 213 BCE" (Abbas, 2024, p. 180). This, however, possibly reflects a popular, perhaps somewhat distorted narrative. The actual occurrences may have been more differentiated, especially concerning the initial critical accusations towards the Confucian scholars, that were formulated by Li Ssu, Qin Shi Huang's Grand Councillor. Li Ssu also appears to have been the principal architect of reform, albeit in the name of Qin Shi Huang during the Qin dynasty's short period of governance (Bodde, 1938, pp. 80-84; Chan, 1972, pp. 101-108). Categorizing Confucianism is a much-debated theme, however the measures taken by Qin Shi Huang were undoubtably undertaken in the interest of maintaining an absolute governing power monopoly. Li Ssu convinced Qin Shi Huang of the discontent that could arise from the intervening influence of Confucian scholars. The solution was to destroy historic literature appertaining to preceding rulers and to Confucianism that could threaten Qin Shi Huang's power base. The exemptions were, as Derk Bodde records from documents concerning Li Ssu's biography: "Books not to be destroyed will be those on medicine and pharmacy, divination by the tortoise and milfoil, and agriculture and arboriculture" (Bodde, 1938, p. 83).

The scenario of *epistemic violence* is generally facilitated through a dichotomy of domination and subordination. *Epistemic violence* may embody the concept of *symbolic violence* as described in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, in being a passive complicity between actors in their sociological interplay. This article engages with *epistemic violence* both as a physically destructive force towards erasing *exogramic* (the term will be more closely explained in the following paragraphs) religious memory and the accompanying or resulting *symbolic violence* that consequently builds a psychological condition of domination and subordination, a negation process as in the Hegelian master and slave (also translated as 'lordship' and 'bondsman') concept. Robert Schmidt notes that the concepts of *symbolic power* and symbolic domination are closely related. While the former refers to the possibility of exercising symbolic violence, the latter indicates its perpetration through implementation (Schmidt, 2009, p. 231). According to Christopher McCammon, who has provided a definition of domination as a basic idea in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "... domination is a kind of unconstrained, unjust imbalance of power that enables agents or systems to control other agents or the conditions of their actions" and "... involves imbalances or asymmetries in power" (McCammon, 2018). Both Georg Wilhem Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) theorized, albeit contrastingly, on the underlying philosophic processes involved in the roles of the master and the slave. While Hegel focused on a reciprocation of master and slave identities, Nietzsche's theory emphasized the master's moral nobility. In Nietzsche's *Will for Power* the following statement appears:

"A morality with such reverse intentions, which desires to train men for the heights, not for comfort and mediocrity, a morality with the intention of training a ruling caste—the future masters of the earth—must, if it is to be taught, appear in association with the prevailing moral laws, in the guise of their terms and forms" (Nietzsche, 1968 (transl. date), p. 502).

The link between power and knowledge, a theory investigated by Michel Foucault, for example in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Foucault, 1995 [1977]), has credibility in its conjunctive manipulation to the phenomena of *epistemic violence*. As Alan Barnard states, in the context of Foucault's writing on power and knowledge: "Power is not something to possess, but rather it is a capability to manipulate a system" (Barnard, 2000, p. 144). In a comparable context of colonialization Aníbal Quijano analyses the distorting effect of Eurocentric knowledge on Latin America's "history and reality" (Quijano, 2000, p. 222). The example of Bishop Diego de Landa (1524-1578) and the Maya civilization finds reference in the descriptive section on *libricide* (1).

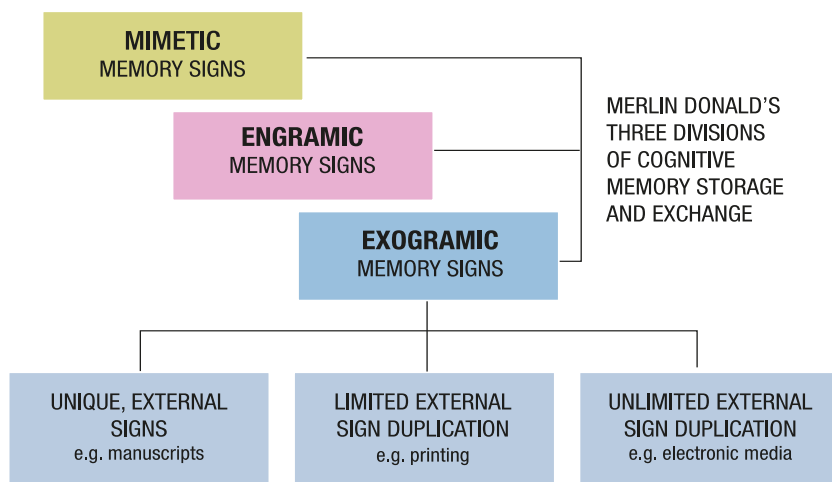


Fig. 01: A diagram extending Merlin Donald's structure of cognitive memory storage and human communication development. Concept derivation and diagram: G. Wiseman

To maintain a mutual comprehension of the terminology used in the article, it may be beneficial to further explain the term, *exogramic memory*. The languages for communicating ancient religions were traditionally oral (*engramic* - internal memory record) in their formative years, later developing into the *exogramic* - external memory technologies (Donald, 1993, pp. 314-315) in the form of images and graphic signs, above all writing, both in instances of unique and reproduced multiples, onto surfaces such as papyrus, parchment, paper and in the current era, digital screens. With few exceptions major religions accessed the written word for the purpose of cognitive processing and the propagation of their doctrines. A notable exception is the Indian subcontinent with its protracted oral tradition. Robert N. Bellah points out with reference to India that "... oral transmission continues to this day and seems to be accurate to the smallest detail ..." which he notes has been referred to as "hyperorality" (Bellah, 2011, p. 482).

The object of *libricide* and *script devaluation* is to erase, with reference to the psychologist and neuroscientist, Merlin Donald's (1939 -) expression, the individual or group's 'ESS' (external symbolic storage), (Donald, 1993), that shapes the epistemology that constitutes specific cognition and knowledge configurations. The 'ESS' appears in Merlin Donald's *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (1993) to describe the third stage in the transition of human memory storage and communication (ref: fig. 01). The duplication of *exogramic* (externalized) memory has facilitated transmission in near-perfect multiple imitations. In the *exogramic* stage memory transmission gained an unprecedented potential of distribution. The economics of mass production also contributed to the facilitation of wider dissemination. For example, the development of printing technologies eventually made visual communication affordable for the many, while manuscripts had previously been the exclusive privilege of the few. It is generally acknowledged that Martin Luther's Reformation movement is indebted to the early development of printing in Europe for its rapid success. Merlin Donald defined three stages in humankind communication development of memory exchange, the *mimetic* — gestural communication, the *engramic* — the internalization of memory storage for communication (e.g. orality) and the *exogramic* — the externalization of memory storage for communication. As seen in the diagram, fig.1, the categorization has been extended in this article to differentiate between unique applications (e.g. manuscripts) and print and digital duplicated

applications (ref. fig 1). Although Merlin Donald refers to K. S. Lashley's (1950) term *engram* (Donald, 1993, p. 314), Sheena A. Josselyn and Susumu Tonegawa in the Journal *Science* refer to Richard Semon defining and using the term in 1904, stating: "In 1904, Richard Semon introduced the term 'engram' to describe the neural substrate for storing memories" (Josselyn & Tonegawa, 2020, p. 1). The term as used by Merlin Donald shifts away from identifying the cellular, biological properties and location, as pursued by Lashley to a focus on the cognitive processes of memory storage and communication. Merlin Donald provides an interpretation of his *exogram* concept stating: "An exogram is simply an external memory record of an idea. In both engrams and exograms there are retrievable traces of past experience that can be used to determine future interpretations of the world" (Donald, 1993, pp. 314-315). Letterforms are *exogramic* sign coding components of objectified memory, applied, for example, to objects such as clay tablets, funerary caskets, chamber walls, stelae, monuments, manuscripts, books, newspapers, magazines and digital screens. These objects represent the transmission 'hardware' that facilitates and accommodates the 'software' coding to create a symbiosis of objectified memory.

Letterform memory may be seen as a phenomenon of Bourdieusian *objectified, symbolic capital* (ref. Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-258) through the possession of language communication codes that may be implemented for information dominance as a representation of power. The acquisition of literacy becomes a symbol and attribute of power. For a simplified example let us consider that person A can only understand Chinese, and person B can only understand English, while person C understands both. Person C's importance as an interpreter is consequently elevated in social value and status. Writing competences are closely related to class distinction and supremacy, especially in earlier cultures with limited literacy. In Ancient Egypt writing represented an elite magical gift for communicating with the divine realm of the gods. Many ancient cultures have divine, mythical legends surrounding writing, for example, the gods Thoth and Seshat, who were seen as the creators of writing in Ancient Egypt or Cadmus, the mythological king and founder of Thebes, who according to legend introduced the alphabet to the people of Ancient Greece. Some individuals, for example the 2nd century BC Jewish-Hellenistic historian Eupolemos, have attempted to align Moses with the invention of the alphabet, but this appears to remain in the realm of the devotional, wishful thinking. Ancient cultures aligned writing to a means of magical transmission between the human and supernatural realms.

METHODOLOGY

The research topic has intentionally sought to pursue a broad-based approach, bringing strands of evidence together from multiple sources to offer a panoptical perspective of the phenomena. It was tempting to use the popular, ancient analogy of the blind men asked to describe an elephant in its intended meaning concerning the inadequacy of fragmented knowledge, however, this undermines the value of these contributions. It is through the fragments of knowledge, that a composite of the whole can be constructed. However, the frequent academic approach has been to engage with the microscopical, while paying less attention to the 'big screen' of understanding.

The investigative methodology adopted for this article follows a qualitative path offering descriptive accounts of selected examples to typify the cause and effect of employing *epistemic violence* towards letter formed knowledge and memory in the context of influencing religious evolution. The intention is to build a framework heightening awareness through identification, recognition and an understanding of the phenomenon of *epistemic violence* from the perspective of letterforms as agents of *exogramic memory*. The investigation has also followed the systematic advice for identifying patterns in comparative historical research as suggested by Matthew Lange (Lange, 2013). Furthermore, the method of categorizing the comparative phenomena of *epistemic violence* in the letterform context within historical processes and events is intended to underline the religious-cultural links and the manipulation of religion's evolution through agencies of governing dominance. It will be argued that these processes and events have contributed progressively to shaping religious evolution.

A selection of typified, descriptive examples (1-4)

(1) Religious libricide

Violent interventions in negating *exogramic memory* of the 'other' have been demonstrated by numerous specific, or series of incidents appearing throughout history. The destruction of libraries and manuscripts can

usually be placed within a timeframe defining specific events such as the library of Antioch destroyed by the Christian Emperor Jovian, because of its alleged pagan literature, between 363-364 CE; the Buddhist monastery library of Nalanda in the Indian state of Bihar burned in approximately 1193 CE by the Turko-Afghan military leader Bakhtiyar Khilji, who has commonly been attributed with the deed, although the historical accuracy of this account has been questioned; Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, a high-ranking Castilian clergyman, who had a close relationship with the monarch Queen Isabella of Castile ordered the books from Granada's Madrasa to be burned in public on the city's Bib-Rambla esplanade in 1499; the Sikh Reference Library in Amritsar's Golden Temple, burnt during the Indian military's *Operation Blue Star* in 1984; or the Mosul Public Library that was desecrated by the IS using explosive devices in 2015.

Examples of *libricide* reoccur with historical frequency through manifold circumstances. Although the term focuses mainly on targeted *epistemic violence*, ranging from restrictions to bans and to absolute destruction, some of the legendary destroyed 'lost libraries' in history suffered through violent territorial conflicts, where libraries were within the proximity of destructive encounters. The loss of these libraries represents cases of indirect *epistemic violence*, where the motivation for the conflict was not primarily the destruction of books - *exogramic memory*, but the result of violent circumstances, in military terms, of 'collateral damage'. A curious example is the destruction of the 7th century BCE, Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal's Nineveh Library. Nineveh was looted and set afire in 612 BCE. The clay tablets broke through the floor of the library and were hardened by the intense heat of the fire. Over 30,000 fragments from Ashurbanipal's Library are in the British Museum collection containing extensive documentation of royal matters and a large number of oracle or divination texts (Fincke, 2017, pp. 208-211). These tablets have delivered invaluable information of Mesopotamia's ancient civilizations, including the foundations of a number of later biblical religious narratives. One of the oldest documented instances of *libricide*, book burning in a religious context, perhaps more correctly referred to as scroll burning, can be found in the Hebrew Bible from the Book of Jeremiah as King Jehoiakim destroyed the words sent by God given to Jeremiah and written on a scroll by Baruch, the son of Neriah (ref. Jeremiah 36:4). The incident is described in the following verse from the Book of Jeremiah: ²² 'It was the ninth month and the king was sitting in the winter apartment, with a fire burning in the firepot in front of him. ²³ Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe's knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire' (Jeremiah, 36:22-23 NIV).

According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the early historian of church history, the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered the destruction of Christian churches, scripture and the arrest of the clergy, from whom apostasy was demanded. This edict was officially made public in February, 303 CE (Corcoran, 2008, p. 248) Eusebius states (in translation):

'All these things were fulfilled in us, when we saw with our own eyes the houses of prayer thrown down to the very foundations, and the Divine and Sacred Scriptures committed to the flames in the midst of the market-places, ...' (Eusebius, 340, pp. Vol. VIII, Ch.2).

Likewise, the Portuguese Archbishop of Goa, Aleixo de Menezes (1559-1617), demanded the destruction by fire of Syriac manuscripts used by the South-west Indian Thomas Christians that did not adhere to Latin, Catholic Church conformity. In the same century, religious zeal was the initial aim of implementing *libricide* by Bishop Diego de Landa (1524-1578) after his arrival on the peninsula of Yucatan, Mexico. His methods of enforcing his interpretation of Christian doctrine onto what remained of a Mayan culture was accompanied by a brutal form of ethnic cleansing. After arriving in Mérida from Spain in 1549, de Landa eagerly set about converting the Yucatan inhabitants to Christianity condoning harsh means of persuasion, that even went beyond the measures set by the ecclesiastical authorities of the inquisition in Spain at the time (c.f. Fery, n.d.). These examples highlight *epistemic violence* exercised through internal religious governance coupled with the backing and enforcement of political power. Surprisingly, Diego de Landa attempted to decipher the Mayan script. This represents a duality of academic interest and hegemonial authoritarianism. A similar phenomenon was witnessed in colonial 19th century India as British academics and missionaries translated, typeset and printed Indian scriptures while retaining their perspective of Christian superiority.

In the 20th century, the burning of books by the Nazi regime demonstrates an unmistakable attempt to extinguish Jewish culture, a culture that is inseparable from the Jewish religion. Sem C. Sutter in his

contribution to the collection of essays in *Lost Libraries: The Destruction of Great Book Collections since Antiquity* (2004) relates the tenacity and desperation of the inhabitants of the Vilna Ghetto in maintaining a library that represented their hopeless hope for their future and that of their culture. Sutter underlines the emotional impact of the Vilna incidents using a subsection headline to his article entitled: “Vilna: the Jerusalem of Lithuania”(Sutter, 2004, p. 223). The title suggests a highly emotive association through combining the two locations in the headline. While, Adolf Hitler’s National Socialists attempted to destroy the contents of the library, the Jews sought to clandestinely save as many books as possible (Sutter, 2004, pp. 226-227). Following the end of the Nazi regime the books that had survived were housed in a new museum for Jewish art and culture. However, this optimistic phase was short-lived, in 1948 “... the Soviets closed and ransacked the museum, ...” (Sutter, 2004, p. 229). Book burning of Jewish authors during the period of National Socialist rule during the 1930’s proved, as commonly known, to be a preliminary for the later genocide.

Libricide has been exercised through a gamut of varied methods and dimensions. On a smaller, yet dramatic scale, in 1989 the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran drastically condemned the Indian born British-US author, Salman Rushdie, after the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). The Ayatollah’s ‘fatwa’ (an official statement by an Islamic religious leader – in this case from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was the religious and political leader of Iran), following the accusation of blasphemy, called upon the execution of Salman Rushdie and his publishers led to several assassination attempts, including the stabbings in 1991 of Ettore Capriolo, Rushdie’s Italian translator, and Hitoshi Igarashi, Rushdie’s Japanese translator, who died from his injuries. William Nygaard, his Norwegian publisher, was shot, although he survived the assassination attempt. Salman Rushdie himself was blinded in one eye after an assassination attempt in 2022, during a lecture in front of a large audience in New York. The ‘fatwa’ imposed upon Rushdie had a reverse effect on the book’s propagation, instead of elimination it brought unprecedented international attention to Salman Rushdie and his book. In 1989, Rushdie’s book was burnt in Bradford, U.K, as a symbolic gesture of protest. Burning books in the 21st century has frequently been a symbolic act, as seen in the case of a spate of Qur’an burning in Sweden, notably in 2023.

(2) Religious script devaluation

Epistemic violence in the form of *script devaluation* performed through neglecting, undermining, banning and eradicating script is usually a progressive process. *Script devaluation* has not uncommonly followed power shifts or the replacement of governance through an overthrowing, conquering force. Forces that impose their culture on the conquered. The imposition of culture through shifts in power of governance is also, not unexceptionally, accompanied by the religious or non-religious idealism of the dominating bodies and their approved literature and their identity-building writing systems. The *script devaluation* phenomenon can be observed through numerous historical examples; the vast territories of the Islamic conquest promoted the introduction of Islamic belief and the Arabic script; the Spanish conquest of Central and South America imported Catholicism and Latin script; the language and script hegemony in the territories of Africa and Asia represented colonial domination; and the Soviet-Union’s non-religious idealism replaced many ethnic scripts in their drive towards unification.

A symptomatic example of letterform suppression and religious-cultural matrix substitution can be seen in the *Avesta* script derived from the *Old Palhavi* script by the followers of Zarathustra for the transmission of the *Avesta* scripture. Following the Arab Conquest of Iran, the *Avesta* and *Pahlavi* scripts were successively replaced by Arabic. This pattern of script Arabization was propagated by the spread of Islam in many regions following the Arab Conquest. As Florian Coulmas notes: “The Arabic script is the youngest of the North Semitic scripts and began in the fourth century AD” (Coulmas, 1989, p. 150). Coulmas adds:

“As a script of the Qur’ān it spread out from the Arabian Peninsula throughout the Near East, western, central and south-eastern Asia, as well as to great parts of Africa and some peripheral regions of Europe. It adapted to more languages belonging to more families than any other Semitic script. Some of them are Turkish, Farsi, Urdu, Kashmiri, Malay, Uighur, Kazakh, Somali, Swahili, Berber, Spanish and Slavonic” (Coulmas, 1989, p. 150).

Script repression or imposed neglect as a form of *epistemic violence* has been experienced in many cultures as indicators of ethnic and religious dominance where the minorities are subordinated, for example the Copts in Egypt, the Rohingyas¹ in Myanmar or the Uighur Muslims and Tibetans in their autonomous regions, governed by China. The resulting script devaluation has a sweeping cultural and religious influence. The devaluation contrasts with cases of script's cultural blending that has been historically experienced through religious propagation with its accompanying religious-cultural overlapping or cultural exchange.

Script devaluation has often evolved through subtle measures. For example, both autonomous Chinese regions, Tibet and Xingjiang, experienced constraints on religious freedom that resulted in the degeneration of language and script importance. The Tibetans faced repressive physical violence towards their national identity in the mid 20th century during China's *Cultural Revolution*. Current Chinese policies are more subtly prioritizing the unification and standardization of language and script which contingently influences cultural and religious identities. An EFSAS (European Foundation for South Asian Studies) study paper from 2022 explains the Chinese promotion of *Putonghua* (also referred to as Standard Mandarin) "... means that economic prospects of individuals and communities become coupled to the command of Standard Mandarin" (EFSAS, 2022, pp. 10-11). This represents a subtle path of reducing the significance of Tibetan script, that is interwoven within the traditional Tibetan culture and religion. On 6 February 2023 the UN's office of human rights issued a press release related to concern expressed by independent experts on the situation of Chinese education for Tibetan children. The communiqué stated that the Chinese government's cultural assimilation measures, through residential schooling, were affecting approximately a million Tibetan children. This concern was raised by the UN experts, Fernand de Varennes, UN expert for minority issues, Farida Shaheed, UN expert for the right to education and Alexandra Xanthaki, UN expert in the field of cultural rights. Quoting the experts, the article states: "As a result, Tibetan children are losing their facility with their native language and the ability to communicate easily with their parents and grandparents in the Tibetan language, which contributes to their assimilation and erosion of their identity" the experts said' (OHCHR, 2023). The educational and economic measures taken in the TAR (Tibet Autonomous Region) have indirectly influenced the interlinked conservation of religion and script. The growing global concerns linked to forms of radical Islam were ostensibly professed to justify restrictions and the delegitimization of Islamic practice and identity, in the XUAR (Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region). Furthermore, according to Huizhong Wu in a Reuters article Chinese authorities had ordered the removal of signs using Arabic script from Halal restaurants and food vendors. Huizhong Wu states that, "[t]he campaign against Arabic script and Islamic images marks a new phase of a drive that has gained momentum since 2016, aimed at ensuring religions conform with mainstream Chinese culture" (Wu, 2019).

In her article on the conflicting interests of Sri Lanka's Buddhist Sinhalese and the Tamil minority Rachel Seoighe makes reference to the demographic changes that support Sinhalese nationalism, which consequently influence religion. She cites the example of road signs in the former stronghold of Northeast Sri Lanka being replaced with "... Sinhalese script rather than in Tamil or English" (Seoighe, 2016, p. 12). Seoighe further defines Sinhalization as "... the production of a post-independence national identity, marked ethnically as Sinhalese and religiously as Buddhist. The process naturalizes the Sinhala-Buddhist character of space, and minoritises Tamil, Muslim and non-Sinhala difference" (Seoighe, 2016, p. 12). The link between *script devaluation*, culture and religion may sometimes appear mundane, for example, Liora Bigon and Amer Dahamshe's researched road sign prioritization of Hebrew in the Galilee region of Israel. The article was entitled: *An anatomy of symbolic power: Israeli road-sign policy and the Palestinian minority* (2014). The authors underlined their findings through referring to Pierre Bourdieu's theories on the acquisition and impact of attaining *symbolic power* (ref. Bigon & Dahamshe, 2014). For both Israeli Jews and Israeli Muslims,

¹ An independent Rohingya script is a relatively late development. In the 19th century an adaption of Arabic was used. Later developments reflected Urdu and English influences for geo-political reasons. In the 1980's Mohammed Hanif and his colleagues developed *Hanifi*, a script especially created for the Rohingya language. A unicode version of *Hanifi* has been created to numerically standardise Rohingya script for all digitisation purposes. In Myanmar, the Rohingya language and consequently the Rohingya script development had been neglected by the Myanmar authorities.

language and script principally created cultural identity. Script is closely interwoven with religious identity. This was evident in an incident reported by the BBC and other news outlets in February 2024. As Caroline Davies, the BBC Pakistan correspondent, states: “An angry mob in Pakistan accused a woman who wore a dress adorned with Arabic calligraphy of blasphemy, after mistaking them for Quran verses”(Davies, 2024). The actual text was the Arabic word ‘Halwa’ meaning sweet, and by association beautiful. The incident highlights the strong identity relationship coupling Arabic and Islam identity.

(3) Religious script concealment

The threat of epistemic violence has also often played a role in the survival of letter formed religious artefacts. The protective measure of hiding objects from a potential aggressor has resulted in the survival of numerous artefacts. Of the many examples of manuscripts and books hidden to avoid destruction, the *Scrolls of Qumran* (also referred to as the *Dead Sea Scrolls* or collectively as the *scrolls of the Judean Desert*) and the scripted artefacts from the *Magao ‘Library’ Cave* in Dunhuang are probably, historically, the most prominent cases of concealment as a protective measure against graphic *exogramic memory* eradication, at least from the perspective of academic research. The Qumran scrolls, discovered in 1947, are dated approximately from the second or third century BCE to the first century CE. Significantly, the latter date relates to the fall of the Second Temple. The Second Temple period began in approximately 516 BCE, and it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The Roman purge on the Jewish population and their sacred artefacts offers a convincing reason why a community in Qumran would attempt to hide their sacred scrolls. Regardless, vigorous debate has continued amongst scholars concerning who and why the scrolls had been hidden. One of the most common arguments is based on a religious community, the Essenes. Although they are recorded by Josephus, Philo of Alexandria, and Pliny the Elder there is no mention of them in Jewish or Christian scripture. Scholars have provided diverse dating ranges. Some of the scroll fragments have been radiocarbon dated (carbon 14 dating) to quell the disagreement amongst scholars on the paleographic dating issue.

The sealed ‘*cave 17*’, discovered in 1900, also referred to as the Library Cave of the Magao cave complex of Dunhuang on the ancient Silk Road trading route at the edge of the Taklamakan Desert in China has similarly provided scholars with unprecedented material for cultural and religious research. As no records exist upon why the artefacts were sealed into the so-called *Library Cave*, the reason is a subject of academic speculation. Xinjiang & Hansen argue that as the latest document that ‘can plausibly be dated’ is 1002 CE, the fall of Khotan to non-Buddhists in 1006 CE “provides a more likely motive” (Xinjiang & Hansen, 1999, pp. 274-275). Other examples include the Nag Hammadi scrolls (named after the nearby town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt) discovered in 1945, which were claimed to have been hidden in an earthenware jar, as had the Qumran scrolls. The authors Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blount, describe in an article entitled *Rethinking the Origins of the Nag Codices* (2014), the discovery as, “... perhaps the most compelling find-story of any ancient Egyptian book cache”. These authors question the longstanding theory of hiding the codices, suggesting that they may have been buried as the funerary objects of private citizens, through reasoning upon the Ancient Egypt tradition of burying texts with the dead (Denzey Lewis & Justine Ariel Blount, 2014, p. 399).

The cultural artefacts of *objectified exogramic memory* preserved and accessible in the world’s museums are often the subject of rightful ownership disputes. The circumstances of gifts and purchases surrounding many acquisitions are not easily verifiable. It appears clear that many acquisitions have represented historical or geo-political hegemony in a variety of forms. The argument for rightful ownership with artefacts of cultural heritage is complex, for example what would be the fate of the Bamiyan, Buddhist manuscripts in present day Afghanistan with a Taliban government, or who do the Sogdian Buddhist manuscripts from Dunhuang belong to today? Sogdia ceased to exist in the 11th century CE. Its former borders are spread across a number of Central Asian countries. Regardless, some of the acquisition narratives remain highly controversial.

(4) Digitalisation countering libricide

To fulfil his ambition, William Tyndale (ca. 1494? - 1536) printed his vernacular version of the *Newe Testament in Englyshe* (New Testament in English) in Worms (1526). The ban on his translation from Latin led to the destruction of most copies. William Tyndale met with the same fate as his books that were

demonstratively burned at Paul's Cross in London "... at the behest of Archbishop William Warham". Tyndale was burned at the stake for heresy in Belgium (Hillebrand, 2006) in 1536. As printing allowed multiple replication a few survived, three of which can be accounted for today. The replications served as a source for numerous later copies. Printing made the effective eradication of *exogramic memory* a difficult undertaking through facilitating reproduction. In the era of digitalization this phenomenon has reached immeasurable dimensions. Through digitalization civilization has leapt further forward allowing the written word even greater multiplicity of replication. The digital era has brought advantages and disadvantages in externalized memory conservation. However, the destruction of *ESS* – *external symbolic storage* is undoubtedly less effective through forms of *libricide* in the digital era. Digital reproduction of scriptural content is progressively replacing the hard copy transmission of religious knowledge and veneration. This development has created the necessity for critical debate, especially in the Islamic context, as the Qur'an is now available on digital pocket device.

The trend towards the digitization of manuscripts and books for broader public access provides a virtual library storage system. The process is labor intensive and consequently the careful cataloguing comes at a cost. In many cases the potential dangers of loss have been miscalculated in the past. Darshan S. Tatla cites the case of the Sikh Reference Library that had not anticipated the military action, or even that it had not been capable "... for anyone to imagine a scenario of a full-scale armed operation inside the Golden Temple". Consequently, there had not even been photocopies of the valuable artefacts (Tatla, 2020, p. 393). Loss of *external symbolic storage* through relying on the continuation of hard copy is not the only danger. Digital data loss for diverse reasons can also inhibit or even hinder or destroy *exogramic memory* access.

The digital era has introduced a new and malevolent variant of *libricide*. Apart from the obvious damage caused by the incorrect handling of digitized data or incorrect storage, criminal activities under the umbrella term 'cyber-attacks' have become more common in recent years. The British Library's operations and services were victims of such an attack in October 2023. Although, according to the British Library's public document reviewing the incident, the overriding criminal intention had been the acquisition of personal data. Regardless of the motives, the British Library's operations were severely hampered by the attack. The British Library was not prepared to pay the ransom demanded by the perpetrators of the crime, consequently the data, according to the British Library "... was put up for auction and subsequently dumped on the dark web" (British_Library_n.n., 2024). In November 2020 Harriet Sherwood, in a Guardian online news article, reported on the Vatican's implementation of 'bots' (an autonomous software application used for specific network tasks) as a protective measure for their library to combat the "onslaught of hackers". This service was being provided to the Vatican library by a specialist software company, "Darktrace", which had according to Sherwood been founded by "Cambridge University mathematicians" (Sherwood, 2020).

The age of digitization, respectively digitalization, has brought extensive research and conservation benefits for culture and religion, not only cataloguing and digitalizing manuscript collections for research access but also applications such as fragment recognition. Fitting together the puzzle pieces of fragmented artefacts is now being carried out using AI technologies, for example the project 'Fragmentarium' initiated in 2013, was developed in phases, phase one was a pilot project building digital platform networks (2015-2018), the second phase, operating with support from the Swiss National Science Foundation began in 2019 to expand activities and services. In 2022 the University of Fribourg integrated 'Fragmentarium' into their "newly founded Manuscript Research Center ..." (Fragmentarium, 2024).

Astounding technological advances have been made in reconstructing ancient texts. In 1970, an archeological sensation was discovered at En-Gedi (Hebrew: עֵיִן גֵּדִי, also spelt Ein-Gedi), west of the Dead Sea, close to Qumran. This location was inhabited by a large Jewish community from the late eighth century BCE until its fire destruction around 600 CE. The Holy Ark of the En-Gedi synagogue was discovered and an ancient, charred scroll. As it was considered the scroll would disintegrate when being unrolled, it was stored for decades, following the discovery. Over forty years after the En-Gedi scroll discovery a computer scientist, William Brent Seales and his team of experts, were able to present "... the oldest Pentateuchal scroll in Hebrew outside of the Dead Sea Scrolls", by using a highly sophisticated digital scanning process referred to as "virtual unwrapping", a method that "allows textual artifacts to be read completely and noninvasively" (Seales

et al., 2016). The narratives of purposeful destruction of the scroll by fire is difficult to authenticate or deny, making speculation an enticing, yet unreliable, temptation.

DISCUSSION

The theme of this article has been examined, using a selection of typified examples, from four perspectives: (1) *religious libricide*, (2) *religious script devaluation*, (3) *religious script concealment* and (4) *digitalization countering libricide*. As demonstrated in the limited capacity for presenting examples, *script devaluation* and *libricide* follow a process of both violent and non-violent expurgation, destroying scriptural heritage and epistemic identities, while *concealment* is a counter, protective measure to preserve the written word from threatened *epistemic violence*. As discussed, the digitization of artefacts for the digitalized, contemporary world has altered the capabilities and capacities of *exogramic memory* application and conservation, albeit with a potential of accompanying pitfalls.

In the religious context the process of procuring domination over another religious group's epistemic ideology is usually through the superiority of a force implanting a counter-epistemic understanding of religion, or as in the cases of those, already mentioned, 20th century revolutions in Russia and China, the enforcement of non-religious states, that consequently renders sacred literature superfluous. *Epistemic violence* in the religious letterform context may be openly sudden and brutal, subtle and slow, or a combination of both. The examples of *script devaluation* and *libricide* in the Chinese autonomous region of Tibet demonstrate these phenomena. During the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards exercised brutality upon the Tibetan monastic community. Later the Sinicization process for ethnic Tibetans has been a more gradual process of eroding cultural traditions and its interwoven religious constituent. The direct effect of *epistemic violence* is the forceful implantation of a dominant cultural matrix, which is frequently interwoven with a religious dimension. The matrix may result in a partial or blanket religious transition which may be experienced as a graded blend, a partial or complete reconstruction. Embedded into the conquering and the conquered religious-cultural matrix are the *exogramic memory* artefacts and competences, for example books and literacy. The dominant forces may reconstruct belief systems through a mix of elements or a replacement epistemological template. This blending of matrices is demonstrated in locative-cultural influences, when language and script are superimposed or ethnically blended. For example, following the Spanish conquests, Christianity in South- and Meso-America retained specific ethnic characteristics of identity as did the extensive diversity of locational cultural influences following the Islamic conquests.

The historical and contemporary examples of *libricide* and *script devaluation* relating to the brutal measures of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, and in recent years China's strategically implemented re-education of young Tibetans could also be interpreted from the Chinese perspective as the implementation of security measures to retain or maintain the compliance of state unification. As seen in the early Chinese dynasties political unity was of paramount importance in maintaining undisputed governance. The example of Qin Shi Huang, the self-acclaimed first Chinese emperor, or the 20th and 21st century attempts to maintain a unified socio-cultural matrix, have comparable intentions, the eradication of potential dissent through enforcing unification. The regionality of communication development is distinctly reflected in religions. The process of rationalization has with increasing speed reduced fragmented plurality, endangering and devaluing many languages and scripts. The Chinese rationalizing interests were focused upon unification for the purpose of political stability and governmental compliance.

A curious narrative of script defamation occurred in the first half of the 20th century: Adolf Hitler's National Socialist regime attempted to destroy Jewish culture, religion and ultimately Jewish, physical existence in an egregious example of violent excess and genocide in the modern age. The scurrilous example of Hitler's denunciation of Blackletter script, a legacy of medieval manuscript letterform styles, through an irrational and unfounded claim that Blackletter, which had been habitually used by the Nazis before an official ban by decree in 1941, were claimed to be 'Schwabacher Judenlettern'. This reference used the Jews as convenient victims of blame for a change of script style that Adolf Hitler had never favoured. According to Friedrich Beck (2006), Adolf Hitler had previously, officially opposed the identity of Blackletter type, deriding it during a 1934, national party conference (Reichsparteitag) speech in Nürnberg. He described the script as backward and that it could be considered a fossil in a museum. Fraktur had over the centuries developed a definitively strong

German identity (Beck, 2006). This historical narrative displays, albeit erroneously, the inherent identity factor that script represents.

In Cambodia the *Kmer Rouge* under their notorious leader Pol Pot sought to create an agrarian communist state, which apart from the devastating human tragedy of genocidal dimensions, the regime sought to eradicate Buddhism. Although Pol Pot's regime lasted a little less than four years the traumatic years left a deep scar in the psyche of the Cambodian population. Writing for the Los Angeles Times, Charles P. Wallace reported on the efforts to reconstitute Buddhism after the downfall of the Pol Pot regime. Wallace wrote: "Because the Khmer Rouge burned all Buddhist texts, the students have no books. They are learning the intricate language from monks, using their memories and blackboards" (Wallace, 1990).

The perpetrators of the *epistemic violence* and eradication of *exogramic memory* were predominantly ruling authorities or their representatives, both of religious and civil governance. This article has attempted to present a destructive aspect in religious-cultural evolution by borrowing the term *epistemic violence*, implemented from the perspective of *exogramic memory* (externalized graphic memory) persecution. The willful destruction of written artefacts is not only reflected in major historic 'power-shift' examples but also in the contemporary world. The cultural-religious link has also been the victim of *epistemic violence* in the, at the time of writing this article, ongoing war in Ukraine following a full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. In June 2022 the occupying Russian forces in Mariupol destroyed the Petro Moyla Church Library. According to Anastasiia Kalatur reporting for the Ukrainian online news portal *Ukrainska Pravda*, and quoting from a claim by Petro Andriushchenko, the advisor to the Mayor of Mariupol, in June 2022 the Russian forces in Mariupol burnt the books from the Church Library (Kalatur, 2022). It should be noted that this is based on a Ukrainian report. In May 2024, the Ukrainian printing house Factor Druk was struck by a missile, in what is believed to have been "a targeted strike", killing seven people and destroying 50,000 books. Printing at the Factor Druk covered a wide range of themes, including educational - school and faith books. Fearghas O'Beara, writing for the Parliamentary Research Service of the European Parliament suggests that Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, sees a religious dimension to the conflict between Russia and the Ukraine through a 16th century "... Polonising and Latinising" of Russian territory. As O'Beara further suggests this is a projected reason behind Putin's perception of a delegitimized Ukrainian statehood and identity (O'Beara, 2022). This consequently creates a fissure of disputed sovereignty and governance between the two Orthodox Churches. It is historically a frequent tendency for nations, respectively their governing authorities, to interpret their histories in school textbooks with narratives based on their preferred national perspectives.

Many of the examples provided in this article are distinctly projected towards religion while others are linked through the interlocking elements of culture and religion. The factors and the weight of distribution are often unclear, however, the role of *religious libricide*, *religious script devaluation* and *religious script concealment* are undoubtably major contributors towards the evolution of religions. Perhaps the human destructive urge could be best analyzed through the lens of animal behavioral psychology, where domination and subordination, hierarchical structuring and reproduction priorities are key motivational factors. The strongest agency establishes governance, territorial proprietorship and reproduction privilege. Exercising physical and symbolic violence towards *exogramic memory*, as demonstrated in this article focusing on letter formed graphic communication, extinguishes the potency of the challenger. In the case of religious letter formed epistemology, the potency lies in the imbued religiosity of both the material object and the sacred content of the letter formed phenomena.

CONCLUSION

Through implementing selected historical examples in compiling this article an awareness of confronting the tension between distinguishing historicity and myth became apparent. Roland Barthes argued that "[m]yth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are no formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones. Everything can be a myth?" (Barthes, 2009 [1957], p. 131). Documented interpretations of history are susceptible to misconstruction, the myth becomes an accepted narrative, and events are proffered as justification or damnation that feign accuracy and authenticity. Equally, contemporary perspectives are in continual flux, attitudes and perspectives in observation of the past alter incessantly. This has been demonstrated in recent dynamic debates on gender, ethnicity and cultural

sensitivities. Although historical narratives often have a vulnerable predisposition for simplification and misinterpretation the abundance of documentation on the investigated phenomena allows for a factor of error that does not diminish the general tendencies that have highlighted the link between *epistemic violence* and *exogramic memory* eradication.

Culture and religion are interwoven entities. Religion is, as Niklas Luhmann would suggest, a social subsystem self-defined through its communication. The replicated patterns of communication codes are used to define what it both is and what it is not, in Luhmann's terminology 'system' and 'environment', that which is internal to the system and everything else that is external to the system (ref. Luhmann, 2013 [2002]), (ref. Luhmann, 1982). The matrix or template of a replacement subsystem is interlinked with other subsystems of the overarching social system. *Libricide* and *script devaluation* alter and, not infrequently, erode religious-cultural matrices. The interlinked subsystems within a social system respond and adjust to the changes creating a redrafting of identities. These identities become a mix of underlaid and overlaid matrices with differing opacities. Lower opacity facilitates a higher frequency of a blended religious, cultural mix, while higher opacity moves towards eradication of the subordinated system.

The written word has repeatedly been the victim of *epistemic violence* through power conflicts and power enforcement that consequently redirects and remolds the religious-cultural foundations of memory and understanding. This article has attempted to highlight the vulnerability of letterforms as religious-cultural transmitters and storage of *exogramic memory* in history's consistent shifts of power. Using a selection of typifying examples, it has been argued that *epistemic violence* applied to externalized graphic memory has profoundly influenced the path of religious-cultural evolution.

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