

Sacred Texts in a Secular World:

Teaching sacred texts in a pluralistic, multi-faith, modern university campus

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Introduction

Sacred texts occupy an ambiguous position within contemporary Western societies. On one hand, liberal democratic principles that argue for the entitlement of autonomous individuals and their communities to the public square to express their opinions and contest truth claims, while on the other, the smooth functioning of such societies calls for that to be done within certain boundaries and assumptions. This is summed up in a recent statement by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2009) which declares that freedom of expression, including both the right to religious expression and the right to express views about religion, is to be tempered by the call for ‘an appropriate balance between these freedoms and an awareness of what is sacred to people of different religions and cultures.’ Where religious differences appear irreconcilable the State may step in as the final arbiter to prevent violence or breaches of the law.

These tensions are particular apparent in the teaching of sacred religious texts within higher education. The pluralistic nature of society provides for a broad range of locations where this might occur, from private institutions affiliated with a particular religious tradition through to public secular institutions, as well as various forms of partnerships within that spectrum. This lecture will focus upon the teaching of sacred texts within the pluralistic, multi-faith modern university environment, though naturally there will be some overlap with other localities. In particular, it will look at the notion of the secular teaching institution, public theology, and issues arising from the classroom related to familiarity with sacred texts; staff, student and institutional expectations; offensive or insensitive presentations of sacred texts; and using sacred texts as a way of exploring wider cultural trends.

Sacred Texts

If we are talking about the place of sacred texts within the current university environment, which itself functions within a secular, pluralistic context it is helpful to get some idea as to

what the term 'sacred' might mean with respect to texts. An obvious connection would be to identify it with texts or collections of texts that are significant and authoritative for particular religions and often collected under the rubric of 'scriptures'. So, for example, the Hebrew Scriptures including the Torah, Nevi'im ("Prophets"), and Ketuvim ("Writings"), the Muslim Qur'an, and the collection of Christian writings known as the New or Second Testament. Moreover, other faiths and spiritual traditions have their own collections of texts, and there are wider texts such as creeds, catechisms and prayer books that might also be considered sacred. Thus, a simplistic way of talking about sacred texts is that they belong to religion, perhaps point towards, or are oriented in, the transcendent, and are thus separated in some way from the profane.

However, as practical theologian Jeffery Mahan (2007) alerts us, attempting to draw boundaries between the sacred and the profane in the everyday world is problematic. There is a porousness between the sacred and profane, highlighted in particular in the way in which people make meaning, orient themselves, and encounter transcendence through cultural works and worlds found in a variety of cultural forms including those of popular culture. As Rose Marie Berger puts it when contemplating the notions of justice and judgement, 'Almost everything I know about hell's eschatological aspects I learned from watching UPN's now-defunct series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' (2003, 11).

Similarly, Gordon Lynch (2007) rejects that the sacred, described as 'the realm of the transcendent mediated through specific spaces, rituals and personnel', and the profane or 'mundane everyday life' can be separated cleanly. Firstly, this separation fails to recognize how the mundane features in the construction of the sacred, and secondly, that contemporary societies have undergone a shift whereby the self has become sacralized, not through reference to an external religious or transcendent authority, but by emphasizing the development of a rich, inner life. Moreover, Lynch also underscores how this dualistic sacred-profane separation can lead to romantic visions of the sacred as something attached to some idyllic religious past, and the profane or secular of the current age, obscuring the many competing concepts of the sacred present in contemporary Western societies. As a response to this, Lynch offers his own definition of sacred,

The sacred is an object defined by a particular quality of human thought, feeling and behaviour in which it is regarded as a grounding or ultimate source of power, identity, meaning and truth. This quality of human attention to the sacred object is constructed and mediated through particular social relations, and cultural practices and resources. Religions are social and cultural systems which are oriented towards sacred objects. (2007, 138)

This definition captures two key features. Firstly, sacredness is ascribed to an object because the relationship that it engenders, shaping how people live out their lives and how they respond to the object in question. The object might be God, a religious text, something connected with the transcendent, or something quite mundane. Secondly, sacred objects exert a kind of ‘pull’ that Lynch contends binds people into particular kinds of identities, communities and ways of living, perhaps independent of their own choices.

This kind of definition of sacred is helpful when talking about the teaching of sacred, religious texts in a pluralistic, multi-faith, modern university, because it alerts us to the fact that what we might consider a sacred text might not be considered so by others and *vice versa*.

Secular Institutions & Religious Studies and/or Theology?

The public or state university system is often described as secular – that is concerned with temporal affairs and separate from religious influence. And yet, the ‘secular’ university exists within a world that is on the one hand permeated by secularity and also by an ongoing religiosity (Ward 2001). If the authority of traditional religious institutions in society is waning, then there is also an increase the diversity of religious and spiritual voices found within societies that are becoming more culturally and religiously diverse. It is into this world that universities aim to produce graduates that demonstrate critical thinking skills, creative problem-solving and are able to take on the responsibility of local and global citizenship (Kirkpatrick 2010). That last attribute of local and global citizenship implies, I believe, being able to engage with, and function in, the increasingly diverse and pluralistic societies that we find ourselves in, and of which religion seems to be back on the public agenda in so many ways.

Thus, one might expect to find subjects like religious studies and theology, which include critical engagement with the sacred, religious texts that are foundational to various religious traditions, within the university, and to a certain extent you do. Indeed, the three axes around which universities are oriented to varying degrees: (a) research; (b) teaching; and (c) public service – whether to the State, to industry, or to the wider community, all intersect with religion through research into questions about religion in society, teaching about various religious traditions, and producing graduates that are skilled and resourced for the wider community. Moreover, as the diversity of university students coming from that wider community increases, so too do the demands upon teaching staff to engage with that shift, and for the universities to take that diversity into account in programme development and addressing student well-being.

If, as sketched above, the contemporary state university exists within a society that simultaneously exhibits both aspects of the secular and the religious, and one of the functions identified by universities is serve the wider community and public good, then what place for theology, religious studies and/or divinity within those institutions? And if they are present, how do they engage with sacred, religious text?

David Ford (2009) notes that around the world different localities have emphasized theology or religious studies to varying degrees in their universities. In Germany, confessional theology is dominant, in the United States public institutions favour religious studies, while in the United Kingdom often theology and religious studies are often found in an integrated form. Within Australasia we see something of a ‘mish-mash’ of approaches to the teaching of theology and religious studies, with some focusing upon studies of religion, others divinity, and yet others theology. For example, in my own context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the University of Auckland has a School of Theology, Victoria University in Wellington has a strong religious studies department, and the University of Otago in Dunedin has an integrated theology and religious studies department.

Both religious studies and theology have, I believe, important things to contribute to the life of the university and wider society. In a nutshell, theology broadly tends to focus on one particular religious tradition (often but not exclusively Christianity), is taught by those within

that tradition, and often has an orientation towards its own religious communities and the wider world. This can lead to an emphasis upon teaching and public engagement, sometimes at the expense of research. Religious studies on the other hand broadly tends to consist of a community of scholars looking into or across one or more religious traditions from the outside, with a particular emphasis upon research and some public engagement. Moreover, other disciplines may also complement theology and religious studies in the university, such as sociology of religion, philosophy of religion, and cultural anthropology.

Ford argues, rightly in my opinion, that the complementary nature of theology and religious studies would promote excellence in research and teaching, a orientation towards the wider community that the university has citizenship obligations towards, and contributions to public understanding and discourse. This is particularly so, in a pluralistic world where religion and spirituality manifest themselves in powerful, and sometimes unforeseen ways, here at the start of the twenty-first century. It also reflects a desire to connect with, engage and support the diverse student body that makes up our current and future cohorts.

Teaching sacred texts...

When teaching sacred texts in the university context, a plethora of questions and issues become apparent when you approach setting out the courses, as well as a range of other challenges and opportunities that will emerge in the course of the teaching semester. Some of these are inherent in the student body present; some of these will be decided by the university context; and others will be raised by the approach to the material taken by the teacher or teachers.

In thinking about teaching introductory courses about the Christian Bible to non-religious majors, Shane Kirkpatrick (2010) notes that teaching biblical material to students requires the lecturer to clearly define what approach he or she will take to the text in question. An academic approach to the study of the Bible will require the identification and communication of particular methods, such as textual or literary criticism and particular hermeneutical perspectives. If the course is particularly interested in more narrowly focusing upon the interpretation of particular texts then, which texts should be selected, and again

which hermeneutical methods privileged. Moreover, should the interpretation of those texts move to application in the contemporary context, and if so, should that be in general or specific terms from the perspective of the students.

A sacred text might also be studied through particular religious, theological or spiritual forms of reading, such as in a course about Christian spirituality that examined at how spiritual practices such as *lectio divina* or Ignatian meditation function. This again will require consideration about what theological traditions or spiritual practices should be covered and how, if at all, those kinds of readings might be handled practically in the university context. It's one thing to talk about how *lectio divina* works, it's quite another to set an exercise where students are asked to practise it. Furthermore, the text in question might also be studied historically, examining how that text has been transmitted, translated and functioned in different historical-cultural setting, or perhaps comparing the accounts of history in the text against other parallel historic reconstructions.

Whichever approach is taken it needs to be clearly communicated to the student body, and also assessed against the wider ethos of the programme within which the course sits. For example, the University of Auckland School of Theology's incorporating mission statement states that:

The School of Theology is committed to theological research and scholarship for the provision of theological education at university level in accordance with high international academic standards consistent with the University's mission and expressive of the partnership with Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand which derives from the Treaty of Waitangi.

This is further nuanced in the School's teaching and learning plan, which expands on that as follows:

[t]he School seeks to provide a student-focused learning environment and pedagogical strategies that recognise the distinctive capacities and learning needs [theological, social, cultural and personal] of all students in a bicultural society and that will ensure that increasing numbers of students complete their theological education successfully, having attained on graduating the skills and proficiencies outlined in the School's Graduate Profiles.

Therefore, the teaching of sacred, religious texts needs to take into account not only the University and School's Graduate Profiles that direct teaching to shape graduates in mastery

of both specialist knowledge (say theology or computer science) and general intellectual and life skills, but also an awareness of how the sacred texts being studied interact with the bicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand and also with the wider Oceanian context that is situated within. Awareness of this can prove challenging, but also an excellent opportunity for students to reflect upon and articulate their own cultural experiences and encounters with sacred, religious texts.

Communicating your personal relationship with the text

Another question that arises in the teaching context is whether to declare your own personal stance or background with respect to the course content. Teachers may hold formal positions with particular religious denominations or traditions, such as a lecturer coming from a theological college or seminary in partnership with the university, or with no formal affiliation but a personal spiritual one, or with no affiliation with a tradition at all. On the whole, I think it is helpful for something of that to be communicated to students, whether to demonstrating how someone from another tradition might engage critically and respectfully with other religious traditions or how to co-teach with and negotiate differences between colleagues from other traditions.

Furthermore, some students find it reassuring that the lecturer has some personal connection with the course content, even if the way the text is handled in class may not demonstrate that overtly. Against that though are the concerns of other students that courses offered in subjects like theology in universities are open to the potential of evangelism and proselytizing. So the lecturer needs to carefully assess how much of her or his own background may be helpful or unhelpful in teaching the course material, and often that can only be known after teaching the class for a while.

Which version of the text?

Deciding which version of a sacred text to use for teaching is also something that lecturers will need to think about. In some cases, some traditions will have a certain version of the text prescribed so that will make that decision clearer, but in a general university course, which will probably be outside of a tradition, a decision will need to be made. Typically, if

examining Christian texts, this will revolve around which particular English version of Bible to use and whether to follow Protestant or Roman Catholic canons.

The selection of the text provides an opportunity to highlight to students the range of issues around the transmission and translation of religious texts. From looking at notion of a canon of scripture, and the processes and history around the formation of various canons, through to the translation of texts into various languages and styles, the utility of learning biblical languages and tools, and how different translations function better than others in academic study are just a number of the topics that simply selecting the text to be used can open up. Of course, whether students will acquire the set version of a text or simply stay with a version they (or their family or religious community) are more comfortable with is another issue, as can be the shock for some students at the range of prices and formats for the set text.

The student body

One of the key differences between teaching theology and religious material in a public, secular university and in a sectarian institution is the student body. In a sectarian institution typically students come from similar backgrounds, with an investment in the religious or spiritual tradition that shapes the life and focus of that institution, and perhaps with similar objectives in studying. In the university context, while there will be a core of body of students with some personal connection with the material being studied, there will be a wide range of students from different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, ages, gender proportions, religious and spiritual affiliations (which may include agnosticism or atheism), and reasons for taking the class. Smaller, more specialized classes, say for a BTheol, in my experience tend to have a bigger core of students with some personal connection with the material, while larger classes, such as introductory courses or courses offered to students across other undergraduate programmes will have greater diversity.

For example, the course *Theology 101G The Bible in Popular Culture* is a first year undergraduate course in the University of Auckland's General Education programme and is offered to all undergraduate degree students regardless of discipline. The class size is anywhere between 300-500 students from disciplines such as Arts, Law, Science, Engineering, Health and Medicine, Education and Theology. The student body is diverse:

students from across the Christian tradition; students who declare themselves post-Christian; students from other faiths and spiritualities; a wide range of ethnicities and cultures; mostly more female than male students; ages ranging from seventeen or eighteen to those in their sixties and seventies; those interested in the Bible; those interested in watching film, media and television; and those who are there because their friends are.

In such a class, it is safer to assume nothing about the students in terms of their familiarity with the biblical text, and indeed many of them may not have ever touched one before, let alone read one. And while there are a few grumbles about us talking about how the Bible is organized and how to find things in it using books, chapters and verses, mostly it seems to open up the text to them so they can begin to do their initial reading of it. What is clear though when teaching this group of students is that for many of them their preexisting knowledge of the biblical texts comes from what Yvonne Sherwood (2000) calls the biblical ‘afterlives’ that exist as part of some cultural legacy or representation in popular culture through the explicit use of biblical themes and characters to tell its stories. Thus, students have some understanding of who Adam and Eve are (garden, apple, naked, temptation, snake) because of their representation in advertising or the title sequence of the TV show like *Desperate Housewives*.

These biblical ‘afterlives’ highlight that for a significant number of students the primary form of sacred texts, that of printed and bound paper volumes is an unfamiliar medium, where information and ‘reading’ for pleasure come via other avenues such as eBooks, the Internet, or audio/visual media. Therefore, while the religious content of the texts may be alien to some students, the actual format of printed sacred material might also be just as alien.

One way to get the students to become more familiar with their own position with respect to a sacred text like the Bible is to use particular frameworks to get students to orient themselves in relation to the text. One such framework or typology can be constructed from the different kinds of relationships to the Bible that Marcus Borg proposes in his book *Reading the Bible again for the first time* (2001). These relationships include notions about the origin of the Bible, biblical authority, and biblical interpretation, and Borg compares how those categories are manifested differently within groups he identifies as fundamentalist Christian, evangelical

Christian, “postmodern” Christian, and a fourth category which might be termed cultural thinkers outside of Christianity.

In attempting to position themselves in the framework students ask questions of themselves as to how do they see the origin of the Bible - perhaps purely a human document, divinely dictated, or somewhere in between; what authority, if any, does it possess; and should it be interpreted literally, metaphorically, or culturally? For many students this is a surprising exercise, firstly because of where they might fall in the schema, but also when they identify categories not present in the framework. Where perhaps would a variety of mainstream Protestant believers fit, Roman Catholics, people of other faiths, groups who see the Bible as sacred yet don't identify themselves as Christian, and others who see it simply as literature? In doing this, students are forced to engage with a range of views and opinions about the sacred text in question. This, in turn, provides the basis for exploring different views, and also for more closely examining their own biases and tradition.

A similar sort of tool might be used then examining how sacred texts like the Christian gospels have been represented in film. Students are asked to consider two axes: The first asks them broadly whether they have a strong or weak connection to Jesus Christ; and the second whether they have strong or weak connections to the visual arts. From this, they can start to explore why they reacted the way they did to various cinematic portrayals of the gospels, and furthermore to start to explore the differences and similarities between the Jesus of history, the canonical Jesus, and the cinematic Jesus.

Conflict and offense in the classroom

In the course of teaching about something like the Bible in this pluralistic, and often opinionated environment, there are very real possibilities for conflict or antagonism of some sort to develop between students and teachers, students and tutors, and also between the students themselves. This is only to be expected when dealing with material that has deep, personal and communal significance for many of the students in the class, and which also engenders strong positive and negative feelings. Some students might feel that the teacher treats the text without enough reverence, or challenges their own or their tradition's

interpretations of the text, or downplays its devotional aspect. Others might feel the teacher has too personal a relationship with the text, is not objective or rational enough because they discuss how different groups see the divine present in it, or perhaps teacher is becoming too 'evangelical' about the text and its tradition. My own strategy for dealing with this is several-fold.

Firstly, at the start and continually through the courses, I highlight to students the power of the different relationships that people have with the text, and how that can shape how they might feel during the course. That said, I set out my approach to the material, emphasizing that in the university context I want them to be critical thinkers about the text. We talk about how if you disagree with an idea or concept then you can challenge the concept, but never attack the person who's putting it forward, and you must give your reasons for your critique and be prepared to have those reasons then critiqued. This is particularly the case when looking at how sacred texts have been interpreted to support or mandate certain kinds of behaviour, or even to perpetrate injustices, and the critiques raised of that.

Secondly, I realize that at many points in the course I may cause offense to the students in the class. We talk about this particularly in *The Bible and Popular Culture*, where in examining how biblical material has been used in popular culture and how popular culture might have shaped biblical interpretation, we will encounter material that may offend. This may be through the presence of profanity, violence, sex, satire, and the identification and challenging of particular stereotypes. For example, certain films have been banned in some Muslim countries (e.g. films about prophets like Moses), Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* may still cause offense, the violence in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is repugnant to others, and so on. Where possible I alert students to this before showing the film clips, while also talking about how 'objectionable' material sometimes needs to be studied within the university context. Sensitivity to the student body, and awareness of the appropriateness of the material to the course objectives is paramount, and it pays to avoid flippancy while also being an engaging communicator. Returning to Lynch's definition of the sacred, it may also be that the media texts being used in this context are also 'sacred' for some students, and so need to be handled with care as well.

And lastly, I try to make sure that students have access to me to ask questions during class, after class, and at a time of our mutual convenience. Where possible I feed the results of this back in the general sense to the tutors, so they can pick up sensitively on it in tutorials.

Applying sacred, religious texts?

What to do after studying the text is often a question in the minds of students in the class. For some students the intellectual exercise of wrestling with text, examining its historical-cultural setting and role, and how it's been interpreted in historical and contemporary situations is enough and clearly falls within what is expected in a university class. For others, though, there is little point in doing that if you're not going to, in some way, apply the text to the everyday world of faith and life. This is where it can get tricky in the university context, when academic reflection moves into devotional reflection and, at times, sermonizing.

What you do here depends upon the purpose of the course, the ethos of the department or school, the overall way the teaching of sacred religious texts fits into the wider university environment, and sometimes the needs of stakeholders or partners. In a one sense, you can always ask the students in a general way to describe how a text might be applied within the life of a particular community, and what the implications of that might be (or to compare several different interpretations and argue for one over the others showing their rationale for that). Asking for personal effect or application may clearly be inappropriate or impossible in a broad, pluralistic class. However, should the university be partnering with other stakeholders in order to provide courses that require this sort of question being asked, then those course need to be clearly flagged as such to students. I'm thinking here of courses that fall perhaps under the heading of 'Pastoral Theology', which are often set up to assist those training for pastoral ministry with study in pastoral care, preaching and worship. Assessing such application or personal reflection also poses some challenges, as the criteria for evaluating that will be quite different than for other kinds of assessment tasks.

Beyond the study of sacred, religious texts

Moving beyond the application of sacred, religious texts, one of the side-effects of studying their interpretation in the university context can be transference of those skills into different

disciplines. So, for example, if a student has studied courses in exegesis and hermeneutics – working on how sacred texts have been and are interpreted – then those skills could be reused say in examining another discipline’s texts.

A simple case might be in the interpretation of a film or television programme. Initially, the student might examine the world behind the ‘text’, identifying who authored/created it, what were their motivations were, and whose interests are served by it. Then they might involve themselves in a surface reading of the text (e.g. viewing the film), before further identifying elements such as genre and literary structure, and finally the worldview and values that the narrative in the film invites the watcher to appropriate. Finally, they might examine how the film has been interpreted and appropriated by different audiences and how that has potentially shaped aspects of their lives. This kind of transference of skills is what biblical scholar Kevin Vanhoozer (2007) calls cultural exegesis or cultural hermeneutics.

Public Theology?

This kind of discourse can move easily into the area of public theology, described in Christian terms by political theologian Duncan Forrester as:

theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church...[It] seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, and reconciliation in the public area, and so forth. It strives to offer something that is distinctive, and that is gospel, rather than simply adding the voice of theology to what everyone is saying already. Thus it seeks to deploy theology in public debate, rather than a vague and optimistic idealism which tends to disintegrate in the face of radical evil. (Forrester 2004, 6)

Access to the public square is one of the principles of our modern liberal democracies, but once you are there the issue becomes whether your message can compete in ways in which is both credible and intelligible to the public ears. Chris Marshall (2005) argues that religious communities need to become ‘bilingual’, speaking both language of faith and the language of the public square. The study of sacred, religious texts in the modern university has a positive role to contribute to that in several ways. Firstly, it assists those within communities of faith to think critically about their own traditions and how it might underpin their reasons for engaging with the public world. Secondly, it exposes people (students) to a cross section of

that pluralistic public world within the institution where one can learn to listen to the voices of others, encounter other traditions and notions of the sacred, to form relationships, and to communicate more clearly. Finally, it can shape transferable skills useful in analyzing cultural works and worlds in the public square.

Conclusion

The teaching of sacred texts in a pluralistic, multi-faith, modern university campus is fraught with challenges, but also huge opportunities to explore the diverse and pluralistic world we find ourselves in. It serves as an opportunity for students of different faiths, or no faith, to encounter some of the foundational elements of different religious tradition, to learn why they are significant to other people, and to equip themselves to live as local and global citizens. The university might be considered 'secular', but the students passing through the lecture theatres are an extremely diverse, and so is the world that they are entering into, and that is the world that universities serve in so many way. As such, careful, respectful and engaging encounters with sacred, religious texts in such an environment are well worth the effort.

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