

Daniel Boyarin, University of California, Berkeley



Daniel Boyarin is Professor in the Departments of Near Eastern Studies and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, where he pursues research in Talmud, Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity, religion and systems of sex and gender, rhetoric of interpretation, and the politics of rhetoric/philosophy in Antiquity. His publications include *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity (2004), Sparks of the Logos: Essays in Midrashic Hermeneutics (2003), Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man (1997), and A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity (1994).*

Mooney: How would you characterize the difference between teaching graduates and undergraduates?

Boyarin: For me, the difference is incredible, but it's partly a condition of where I teach as well. I teach entirely different kinds of things to undergraduates than graduates. My undergraduate courses are most often fairly large, lecture-type courses on general topics, like "Judaism in Late Antiquity." Half of my teaching is in the Rhetoric Department, where I give a course on the history of rhetoric in Antiquity. The other half is in Near Eastern Studies. It's a very, very different experience than graduate teaching, which for me is more like sitting down with a group of junior colleagues and working through a text together — an experience during which I learn a great deal from the students.

Mooney: Do you have any problems capturing your audience at the undergraduate level?

Boyarin: Well, for the most part no. I'm a good lecturer, which is something I just figured out over the last few years, because before I came to Berkeley I never taught undergraduate courses. Also, I went to a college where there were no large lecture courses given. So I'd really never had the experience of it. I learned how to do it by team teaching with another, much younger colleague who had had a great deal more experience with that kind of teaching. I learned from her.

Mooney: As teachers-to-be, and often very young ones, we were seldom given any instruction in what you might call the rhetoric of teaching.

Boyarin: Right. And it's turned out I've got a flair for it. It's just a gift. I'm funny, I'm spontaneously funny. And that turns out to be a tremendous asset. I actually enjoy that type of teaching, which I had dreaded throughout my entire career.

Mooney: One often runs into the presumption that teaching big classes of undergraduates is not the most desirable thing to do.

Boyarin: This was actually new material to me, the material on ancient rhetoric. I got so excited doing the preparation. I spent a whole year preparing it before I had to give it. That changed the course of my research. I actually have an entirely new research project that was generated out of the necessity of having to teach this undergraduate course.

Mooney: So there's an unexpected payoff.

Boyarin: A tremendous one. And that research payoff has also led to the teaching being exciting, and therefore more exciting for the students as they are actually, excitedly thinking and learning and developing what I want to think about, too.

Mooney: How has your specialty changed over the last few years?

Boyarin: I was trained as a Talmudic philologist. I worked extensively with manuscripts and lexicographical linguistic matters of interpretation on a very local level, for many years, both in my scholarship and in my teaching. I taught in Israel before I came to Berkeley, and in Israel I taught in a Talmud department. There I did not need to explain what the Talmud was or why it was important or interesting. That was a given, both for the undergraduates and graduates. The research and the teaching were very much in the tradition, but in the terms of the tradition, not against the grain.

In coming to Berkeley, there was a shift in all this. It was partly a result of my coming here, but also caused by a shift in my own desires. I wanted to translate, as it were, in such a way that these texts would become part of a larger intellectual canon — in the university and the research enterprise, but also in the university and the teaching enterprise. That was the goal I set for myself, very explicitly, in terms of my own work, in terms of my pedagogy, and in the terms of the pedagogy of my writing as well.

Mooney: How would you characterize the kind of inquiry that comes out of the Talmudic interrogation of texts in contrast with the Socratic questioning of positions that universities take to be definitive of what they do?

Boyarin: That's what my current research is about. It's exactly on that question. My current project is a book called *Exit Plato*. The subtitle is *Rhetoric, Politics, and Sex in the Ancient City*. I ask: "What is the status of dialogical engagement — dialectic? How is truth conceived of? How is language understood to communicate or not communicate truth?" I want to know how these questions are dealt with in the three traditions: in ancient Greek thought, early Christian thought, and Rabbinic writing.

Mooney: So it's really a three-way project.

Boyarin: Yes, with the ancient Greek material understood as one of the most important inputs into both early Christian and Rabbinic traditions. With regard to the notions of truth, authority, democracy, I look at the possibility of there being multiple truths. There's also a deep consideration of the role of the Sophists, and Sophism in the formation of ways of thinking in the Hellenic/early Christian/Rabbinic world.

Mooney: Do you see your work as social science or something closer to literature or parts of the humanities?

Boyarin: I find it difficult to understand the kind of work that I do as being very different from the work an anthropologist does, or an interpretive sociologist, or a historian. Obviously, there are different intellectual formations involved. I could understand calling what I do humanities and have that be not much different from what my brother does, and he calls it social science. We're in conversation with each other, we think about the same kinds of issues, use the same kinds of theoretical materials. He's called a social scientist because he was trained as an anthropologist, and I'm called a humanist. The idea of a big difference makes no sense to me whatsoever.

Mooney: Did you always know that you would be a teacher?

Boyarin: No, not always. When I went to college I thought I was going to be an actor, and it was during my undergraduate years that I became first of all religious, which was one key thing. Then I determined that what I wanted to spend my life doing was being a scholar of the Talmud. I didn't think I was so much choosing a teaching career, as much as a life of scholarship, and teaching was the obvious concomitant of having chosen a life of scholarship.

Mooney: There are certainly a number of things going on in the world that are religious in origin and impact. Do they affect your teaching?

Boyarin: For at least the last twenty years I've been conceiving of my teaching and my research as having an explicitly political design.

Mooney: Is it about the presentation and acknowledgement of differences, so there can be dialogue instead of wars?

Boyarin: That's certainly the most general formulation of it. I've been very committed to three kinds of social/ethical/political causes: feminism, the struggle against all forms of homophobia,

and the struggle against all forms of racism. I'm sure that sounds like a very familiar, very politically correct listing, but that's my listing. Especially in the latter category, for me it's been the struggle against Jewish racism as manifested in our Jewish politics directed at our immediate others, the Palestinians. Lately, what has come to the fore is the ways in which in the United States religion is being mobilized in what I think is the devil's work — anti-feminism, homophobia, etc.

Mooney: So scholarship plays out against the background of these wider things, even if the classroom doesn't turn out to contain these particular problems.

Boyarin: Exactly. It's not as if I'm promulgating a particular political line; that would be heavy-handed — and abusive — because of the power relations in the classroom. Through a kind of historicism, I try to open up possibilities for the other ways in which things could have gone. I'm giving a course called "The Rhetoric of Religious Discourse." We've been reading Paul's Letter to the Galatians. I tell the students, many of whom are committed Christians, that it's not my goal to make anyone less or more religious. But I do want them to understand that there are other legitimate ways of looking at and understanding the very texts that they claim as their basis — not to delegitimize their readings, or say that their readings are wrong, but to allow for the possibility that others in good faith have other readings of the same texts. Now that is an intervention in their religious lives. A part of many of their religious traditions is that "ours is the only possibility," so to that extent I am subtly intervening. But that seems to me to be an entirely legitimate kind of meddling within the very terms of university teaching.

Mooney: If the university never meddled with the hearts or minds of students, then it probably would have failed. If you had a teenage nephew or niece entering their freshman year of college who asked you what to read and mull over this summer on the beach, what would you recommend?

Boyarin: Well, one book I would recommend very strongly is Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion*. That strikes me as richly reflective on the study of religion. In a more specialized way, I would recommend to anybody to read Peter Brown's biography of Augustine, just to show to what level aesthetic or literary religious studies can aspire, at their best. For a person interested in Judaism, there's a book by one of my great teachers, Abraham Joshua Heschel, may he rest in peace. It's called *Heavenly Torah: As It's Been Refracted through the Generations*. It is a masterpiece of writing on religion as well as religious writing. It's a beautiful book, and also good beach reading: it's 800 pages long.

Mooney: You mentioned that you became religious in college, as an undergraduate. Was there a particular text that was important there?

Boyarin: Initially I got very attracted to Far Eastern mysticism. We were reading the Taoist classics. At the time I was seeing a therapist, and he said, “Well, don’t you know anything about Jewish mysticism?” And I said, “I didn’t even know there was a Jewish mysticism.” And at that point he told me about the Zohar. I got an English translation, and I read it and got very interested. Then, at about that time, I had a dream that I was in Israel studying. I took this as a sign that I should be in Israel studying. I arranged to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to study the Zohar and Kabbalah. Of course when I got there people told me I couldn’t possibly study the Zohar and Kabbalah if I didn’t first study the Talmud. So I began studying the Talmud, and I was hooked. I could not have been more enchanted. But I was still not religious. During that year I met the woman I married. We had to go see the rabbi who was going to perform the wedding. I remember him asking me why I’m not religious, why I don’t keep the commandments, and I said “Because I don’t see any light from them.” And he said, “From the study of the Talmud do you see light?” And I said “Yes.” And he said to me words I’ll never forget. He said “Keep studying!” He didn’t try to persuade me to become religious, he just said “Keep studying,” out of this complete faith about what the Talmud says about studying — that it would bring one to the light of God. As it happened, it was only a few months later, I was already married, and we were living in Vermont when in the middle of the night I had a vision. I’m not sure whether I was asleep or awake, but I had a very, very clear vision of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. I was so impressed by this vision that I woke up my new, young wife, and I said I wanted to become orthodox. And she said, “Fine — let me sleep!” [Laughing] We woke up the next morning and called the local rabbi and said, “Ok, we want to be orthodox, how do we do it?”

Mooney: So you’ve traveled a path from religious studies, in the broad sense, to entering into a religion in a serious way, and now each feeds the other.

Boyarin: Yes.