

Randal Cummings, California State University, Northridge



Randal Cummings teaches in the Religious Studies Department at California State University, Northridge, and serves as the Director of Online Instruction and Academic Technology at CSUN and chairs the Arts of Interpretation Group at the AAR. He is currently writing a chapter on "Religion and Violence in Popular Culture" for Teaching Religion and Violence (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). He has taught various courses including "Myth, Religion, and Culture," "The Buddha and the Christ," and "Death and Afterlife."

It used to be that my greatest challenges in teaching religion were: to convince agnostic students that whether or not God existed, religion still mattered; to convince the social scientists that religion was not just another aspect of culture; to convince the reductionists that religious experience was sui generis irreducible; to engage the apathetic ennui laden perpetual-victims-of-impending-boredom idiot savants in an encounter with a world next door ever-so phantasmagoric and mind-absorbing as the latest release from Nintendo; and occasionally to remind the fundamentalists that they didn't know everything.

I was concerned with making students aware of the history of interpretation and the contemporary hermeneutical options, as well as the ambivalent, contradictory, and sometimes complementary paradigms that sift and shift through the multivalent religious traditions found in human culture. My courses were interdisciplinary, aimed for multicultural lucidity, and emphasized empathy and understanding of the other and cautiousness in interpretation of otherness. I thereby hoped to create an appreciation for the subtle, and to build an "ecosphere of the spirit" in the minds of my students that valued the quest for transcendence, human identity, purpose, and meaning within the traditions of humanity. Though my courses were primarily meant to serve as an initiation into the mysteries of the scientific study of religion, they could peripherally serve as an invitation to self-scrutiny and personal quest, but all within the safe boundaries of political correctness.

As I read it, PC was about finding ways to say everyone is right if only properly understood. This is how I used to interpret Eliade's injunction never to say of a religion something an adherent wouldn't sign. In other words, it seemed that the task was to help everyone put their best foot forward; manifest the best (perhaps hide the rest); exemplify the exemplary; sterilize negative stereotypes, and the like.

It is easy and tempting to thus present religion as a series of belles lettres, universal wisdom, and timeless truths. I no longer see this as my task. I now consciously struggle with the problem of how to straddle the phenomenological epoche of empathy and understanding with the enlightenment agenda of critique and world betterment through education. It is one thing to understand cannibalism and human sacrifice as exhibits of normative paradigms — that is, as products of well-wrought metaphysics and sophisticated theologies — but it is quite another thing to stand idly by as they are taking place.

I am now aware of dilemmas and tensions spanning theoretical and interpretive to pragmatic pedagogical concerns within our current academic and social milieu that have reached a crisis of urgency, and feel deeply the tension between the need for scholarship of religion to exercise on one hand epoche, and on the other critique. There are some particularly pressing issues between “understanding” and “explaining” religion. For example, how does the scholar address the often increasingly militant and seeming irrational stances of various “fundamentalisms” and other fixed-code intolerances within the context of the implied Enlightenment ideals of toleration and ecumenical respect? Such issues as the recent furor over images/ caricatures of the Prophet, the radical re-dating of history by academic proponents of Hindutva, the creationist arguments for equal time in science classes, the increasing subsumption of religious studies into the social sciences, all reflect serious polemical, interpretive, and consequently pedagogical issues. These issues not only affect the application of our intellectual disciplines to “proper interpretation,” that is, understanding of our subject matter, but to deeper issues of how we are going to move in and affect the world we have been given, as opposed to the world as teachers we need to help create.

Among the stickiest and most pervasive pedagogical challenges are those presented by fundamentalists in any variety of religion courses. Though I can empathize with much that is at the core of fundamentalist value systems, there is also much that is potentially detrimental to the welfare of human society as a whole. The increasingly stark direness of the either/or fundamentalist's inability to deal with shades of gray has led me to conclude that fundamentalists have what could be characterized as fundamental ideologically generated “learning disorders.” I have labeled these disorders or syndromes as follows:

“Overall Fundamental Biblical Illiteracy” consists of strong opinions with very little actual biblical knowledge. “Pastor-Says Syndrome” is the overreliance on the cult of personality charisma, authority, and teachings of individuals who are often self-appointed and self-taught, or otherwise antischolarship. “Anachronic Dyslexia,” or reading texts out of context and/or superimposing later theological developments on earlier historical strata, is often found together with “Critical Discernment Deficit”: not knowing, for example, the differences of the genres within scripture, i.e., TaNaK, let alone textual and tradition strands within those divisions. “Leaping Logic Lesions” or grossly unwarranted conclusions based on the most meager of evidences or even silences is often compounded by “Messianic Myopia,” the idea that no one but fundamentalists of the right sort are saved. Some students experience brain freeze, revealing symptoms of “Apocalyptic Apoplexy,” “Nostalgia for Paradise Paralysis,” and “Slippery Slope Finger Pointing Fixation,” by which nonbelievers, sexually active singles, feminists, gays, nominal Christians, liberals, all Muslims, and, of course, backsliders are responsible for every ill in society from 9/11 to avian flu. Not least of all, “Proof-Text Tourette’s Syndrome” can border on “Biblia-phrenia,” the need to bombast and bombard someone with huge barrages of daisy-chained scriptures and “nothing but scripture,” sort of *sola scriptura* with a vengeance.

These syndromes affect many well-meaning and otherwise intelligent students who have been rendered fixed-code in a world of shifting paradigms, one-size-fits-all in a world of polyvalent multiplicities, either/or in a world of neither/and, psychologically stunted and intellectually challenged. I could go on, but anyone who has taught “World Religions,” or for that matter, “The Bible,” knows exactly what I am trying to convey here. I want to emphasize that I treat these as learning disorders rather than full-blown pathological debilitations. This is important, since disorders can be compensated and overcome, but pathologies are generally terminal or, at worst, lethal. (I have long suspected that some fundamentalists and politicians have what I call “Armageddon Envy,” meaning they want to see an apocalyptic eclipse of history in their lifetime and are quite consciously involved in the hermeneutics to make that happen. In his article titled “‘End Times’ Religious Groups Want Apocalypse Soon,” *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Louis Sahagun wrote on June 22, 2006, that “‘End times’ religious groups want apocalypse sooner than later,” with the “endgame” to “speed the promised arrival of a messiah.”)

If these are fundamentalist learning disorders, what, then, are the assistive technologies to help overcome them? My medicine bag features *Argument, Analysis, Alternative Interpretation, and Anecdotes*

. I think we have to engage fundamentalists on two areas that they take most seriously: the interpretation of scripture and the issue of “what would Jesus do.” For the first we have to provide a more complete analysis of the conditions and context of scripture, the meaning and implications, and more thorough-going, compelling, and convincing arguments than received wisdom. For the second, we need to affirm that one cannot begin to know what Jesus would do in any contemporary circumstance till we properly understand what it is he actually did in his own historical circumstances. Fundamentalists need to be introduced to historical Jesus studies and the deep historiography and cross-discipline tools, strategies, methodologies, and

consensus achieved by that ever-increasing endeavor.

We have a marvelous opportunity to engage students via the huge popularity of such phenomena as *The Passion of the Christ*, *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown 2003), and the recent publication of the lost Gospel of Judas. They provide what I like to call “the Pedagogical Payoffs of Pop Culture for the study of religion.”

It strikes me as ironic that *The Passion of the Christ* would become such a blockbuster at the same time *The Da Vinci Code* book was on

its ascendancy. On one hand you had

The Passion

, the message of which one woman so aptly put as she shouted at the audience, “See how much he suffered for you!” and on the other, you had

The Da Vinci Code

which basically posits “See how much you have had to suffer for him and the church that co-opted him?” What delights me about the sudden popularity of these cultural foci is the opportunity to reemphasize some important scholarly achievements such as feminist scholarship provides, and to revive some works that have to an extent fallen by the wayside, such as William Phipps’s 1970 book

Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition

, with its wealth of historical contextualization on the issue, or William Klassen’s

Judas: Betrayal or Friend of Jesus?

(1996), which challenges traditional assumptions about the canonical textual evidence.

The ramifications of fundamentalism for the study of religion are serious and extensive. So let me conclude by saying that I have come to believe it is increasingly important to address the issues, not simply for the sake of solid intellectual achievement, but for the sake of the fundamentalist students themselves and the larger society as a whole. Perhaps the fate of the world is not at stake, but then again, it just might be.

Bibliography

Brown, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

The Gospel of Judas. Edited by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst. With additional commentary by Bart D. Ehrman. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society,

2006.

Klassen, William. *Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

Phipps, William E. *Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition.* New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

Sahagun, Louis. "‘End Times’ Religious Groups Want Apocalypse Soon." *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 2006.