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I teach about religion-inspired violence because it exists. I was doing this before the attacks of September 11 brought the issue to the forefront of scholarly discussion. Since I am a Western specialist, with research and teaching focused on the biblical period and the formative era of Judaism and Christianity, I primarily address the biblical warrants for violence as they manifest in action in different historical periods. So my task is the difficult one of persuading students to turn the critical eye inward, toward their own tradition. In this article, I will attempt a partial taxonomy of the difficulties, most of which are variations on the old double standard. To generalize about the philosophical and pedagogical difficulties, I analyze two historical forms of violence that come up in several of my courses: slavery and anti-Semitism. Further, I examine the special problems of comparison between religious traditions.

I discuss slavery in classes on biblical studies and the history of Christianity. Modern slavery was a large and long-lived institution, and the violence that accompanied it, ended it, and followed its end, spans a range from coercive deprivation of rights to intimidating physical violence that we would today call terrorism (beatings, lynchings, church burnings, etc.). In all cases, I pose the problem as one of biblical interpretation and the historical nature of the biblical text. First, I explain the differences and similarities between ancient and modern slavery. This simple historicist move already challenges the ahistorical assumptions of much proslavery biblical interpretation. Then, shamelessly playing devil's advocate, I lay out the proslavery case. Finally, I ask students to construct an abolitionist case from the same biblical text.

This approach has produced widely different results with different classes. One New Testament class looked to historicism for help, while another class argued that it simply was not feasible for Paul to abolish the slavery that was so ingrained in his society. Nevertheless, students found, in his treatment of Onesimos as a Christian on par with his owner Philemon, an intent to eliminate slavery. I thought this was a remarkable feat of reading Paul's mind rather than his text, but at least their hearts were in the right place. However, many of the students who contributed to this interpretation had rejected historicism outright when I covered the Synoptic problem. I pointed out this selective use of historicism with little success at convincing them of any inconsistency. Still, if they were willing to criticize an earlier age's interpretation as historically conditioned, perhaps there is hope that they might turn that awareness on the present. In an unsuccessful use of the same strategy, the class simply refused the task of constructing an abolitionist position and instead spent forty-five minutes telling me that slavery was not that bad. I suspect that the defensiveness about this period of the American past overrode their ability to hear what I was asking them to do.

The second issue is anti-Semitism. It comes up in several of my classes, but I want to focus on the introduction to the New Testament. There is a lively subfield of New Testament studies devoted to this question, and a diversity of scholarly opinion on the subject. I always present it to my classes as a question: "Are the Gospels anti-Semitic?" I review at least three different responses to the question (since my students often labor under the illusion that there are only two sides to every issue), and then open the discussion. As with slavery, the majority tends to harmonize the biblical text with current standards of tolerance. They see the classic passages (Matt. 28, John 8, et al.) as representing only the views of, and only directed against the Jews on, the scene in the narrative. On this reading, the Gospels represent the hatreds of some people against some others, without presenting this state of affairs as normative. Later interpretations may be anti-Semitic, but the texts themselves are not. Given this response, I ask them to examine the interpretive moves that justified violence against Jews, and also their own interpretive moves in absolving the text of one of its more violent legacies. I have had, more rarely, a response that I find truly disturbing. One student said that the Gospels were not anti-Semitic because Jews really are as the Gospels depict them. More on this below.

The above gives merely two major instances of biblical interpretation in violent practice. Since 9/11 I have also witnessed a certain kind of tendentious comparison that I do not myself introduce. Two examples will suffice. All of the students in my "World Religions" class do a project on a topic of their choice. In Fall 2002 one student gave his oral report on passages in the Qur'an that direct violent invective at Jews and Christians. He then compared the Bible in a favorable light, arguing that its recommendations of genocide are "less specific." I challenged this with examples of specific targets: Canaanites, Amalekites, etc. (leaving aside the question of whether these actions occurred as narrated). He replied that these were smaller groups of people. "And that makes it more acceptable?" I asked. He backed down, still grasping for a distinction that would make the Bible come out better in a contest of whose invectives are worse, on the page or in practice. The other students were amused at this exchange, but I am

certain that I did not convince this student of the weakness or tendentiousness of his comparison. Comparisons of whether one religion is more peaceful or violent at a specific historical moment can be done effectively; it is the texts themselves that I find so evenly matched on warrants for violence. (I do not discount biblical warrants against peoples who no longer exist, or give greater weight to Qur'anic warrants simply because the named groups are still around.)

The second encounter was with a student who interviewed me in preparation for an oral report in a public speaking class. He, too, came armed with some of the most violent passages in the Qur'an, with no context and no awareness of the history of Islamic interpretation. I tried to provide the missing context by pointing out that sacred texts, much less a handful of passages, do not exist in a vacuum; it can make a great deal of difference how a community interprets them. The student surprised me: he knew of differences within the contemporary Muslim community on this issue, even knew personally a few young Iranians who disagreed with the extremist interpretation of these passages. But he himself thought that the "Muslim liberals" were "sweeping stuff under the rug" in their refusal to interpret these passages broadly and act on them; he believed that terrorists groups were in fact interpreting correctly. It dawned on me that this student was grading Muslim interpreters according to the literalist-inerrancy type of interpretation that he learned from his own kind of Christianity. I was at a loss how to respond to this. The interview ended with some irritation on both sides, but it alerted me to a possibility of which I had earlier been unaware: that those who learn a certain kind of scriptural interpretation from their own tradition may recognize similar interpreters in other traditions as doing it "right," even though they think these same people are wrong from scratch. If this sort of approach is used to construct both Christianity and Islam under single, narrow, and "correct" versions of each, then the rest of us are in for a very long war.

All of these discussions have raised certain core problems that run deep in religious studies. No matter what the specific question, my students' reactions fall into two categories: refusal to see a problem and/or selective reading to make it go away. In the first category, I include the students who have defended slavery and insisted that the NT portrayal of Jews is accurate for all times and places. Their stance amounts to what I call "epistemic exemption": they believe that the Bible is an unimpeachable source of knowledge. Since they do not admit that reality can differ from biblical depictions, they simply do not see slavery as something that can be inherently wrong, or Judaism outside of the New Testament presentation of it. Evidence from historical records or scientific investigation is subjected to a standard of proof so high that nothing could meet it, and the biblical text enjoys a presumption of "true until proven false" by this impossibly high standard. I confess that I still do not know what to do with this mind-set, but it is dangerous. I cannot respect it as a worldview, and cannot accept an epistemology so weak that it would make no distinctions between this belief system and the efforts of historical research, scientific experiment, and philosophical ethics.

There have been major trends within religious studies scholarship that attempt to put religion on a philosophical footing that would exempt it from the demands of a correspondence theory of truth and falsehood; most of these are liberal attempts to preserve some sort of value in religion while mitigating exclusive truth claims that run afoul of empirical science and pragmatic ethics. But we should think twice about whether cutting religion loose from epistemology is worth the intellectual and practical implications. Too often, I have seen students seize on epistemological relativism as a justification for replacing standards of evidence with a feeling of certainty in what they already believe.

The second group of students could make fine scholars one day, for they are adept at selective reading of sacred scriptures. The cases I use put them between a rock and a hard place: they believe that slavery and anti-Semitism are wrong, and also that the Bible is right. This group does take in knowledge from extra-biblical sources, but wants to preserve the authority of the text in some other way. So the typical solution is a combination of blaming the interpreters, selective use of historicism, and occasionally a little mind-reading. My own reactions to this are mixed. On the one hand, it's a relief that they recognize other sources of knowledge, instead of adjusting all reality to their reading of the Bible. On the other hand, there is no principled justification for their selectivity. Where, for instance, is the distinction that would let one historicize Paul's allowance of slavery, but not the Gospel's depiction of Jesus? What would justify selecting peaceful passages over violent ones, if the goal is to understand the text as it is?

Perhaps there are other goals, but I am not sure what these are for scholars and instructors of religion. Whether practiced by what we would call liberals or fundamentalists, selective interpretation is dishonest about the nature of the text. The student who interviewed me about the Qur'an had a point: exegetes of any religious scripture can and do sweep things under the rug. Actual violence, except in self-defense, is wrong on its own. However, the intellectual error of selective interpretation is the same, no matter what course of action is supported by selective reading. As scholars and teachers, our task should be an accurate and honest appraisal of the text. Shepherding students from one form of selectivity to another, without questioning the underlying exegetical practice, only leaves in place a poor reading habit that can be benign or malignant. Better to confront the habit itself, in ourselves and in our students.

## Resources

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