



THE WABASH CENTER

JOURNAL ON TEACHING

DESIGN & ANALYSIS

Engaging Politics in the New Testament Classroom: Excavating a Syllabus

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ABSTRACT

Teaching the historical study of the New Testament and early Christianity at the University of Tennessee requires creativity, confidence, and compassion. The forty-person, upper-level “Introduction to the New Testament” course that I teach every year is my most challenging and most pedagogically interesting class, and also the most rewarding. My goal in this class is to make space for a variety of responses to the material while teaching the context and history of the New Testament texts as well as how to think critically about the politics of their interpretation. The challenge is to take the diverse passions that my students bring to the class and help them all to engage together critically with both the historical study of early Christianity and the politics of its interpretation that are so visible in the world around them.

KEYWORDS

New Testament, pedagogy, “Bible Belt,” critical thinking, Tennessee, politics

Teaching the historical study of the New Testament and early Christianity at the University of Tennessee is not for the faint-hearted—it requires creativity, confidence, and compassion. The forty-person, upper-level “Introduction to the New Testament” course that I teach every year is my most challenging and most pedagogically interesting class, and also the most rewarding. While some students take the material in stride, for many the experience is life-changing—for some because it upends what they believed were certainties and challenges them to ask new questions, and for others because it offers alternatives to teachings that felt restrictive or otherwise harmful. My goal is to make space for all of these experiences while teaching the students the context and history of the New Testament texts as well as how to think critically about the politics of their interpretation.¹ Some of my colleagues elsewhere in the country say it can be a challenge to get their students interested in early Christianity. Fortunately for me, most of my students arrive in class already interested, many because they are an active member of a church they love, or because they have recently left a church in anger, disgust, or frustration but still find themselves surrounded by conservative Protestant images and rhetoric. The challenge in my classroom is how to take these diverse passions that so many of my students bring to class and help them all to engage together critically with both the historical study of early Christianity and the politics of its interpretation that is so visible in the world around them.

I teach at the public land-grant and flagship campus of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, located in Appalachia near the beautiful Smoky Mountains. I offer my New Testament class in my home department of religious studies and cross-list it with Judaic studies, history, and Middle East studies; students who take the course are often majors or minors in one of

¹ On this use of the term “politics,” see [Upson-Saia and Doerfler \(2020\)](#).

these programs, or take the class as an elective. Each class, however, includes first-year students and seniors, as well as those with some relevant historical or biblical knowledge and those with very little. Regardless of their previous coursework, the majority of the students who come to my New Testament class are already deeply engaged with the Christian Bible, whether from a passionate commitment to a local church community or from an equally passionate disillusionment with the same. East Tennessee is a place where conservative Protestant expectations permeate social and political norms, and most students grow up familiar with certain strains of exegetical traditions whether or not they agree with them. In this context, many students arrive in the beginning of the semester with a host of pressing questions about how biblical texts impact their lives and the lives of their family and friends.

Given this audience, I do a lot of work in the first days of class to set the tone for the semester regarding our historical and critical approach to the New Testament and how to recognize different perspectives and treat them respectfully. To begin, before students arrive in class the first day I ask them to read the first five pages of Miguel De La Torre's book, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (2002), which addresses how a person's race, class, and gender affect their interpretation of scripture. Its first words, "All football players are damned!" catch my students' attention at our big state Southeastern Conference football campus, and open up conversations about the perspectives of biblical interpreters and the embodied contexts of differing truth claims. After the introductions, attendance, and discussion of the syllabus in the first class, I ask how many students have heard someone use the phrase "the Bible says," and invariably all of them smile ruefully and raise their hands. Handing around a cup of Bible passages on slips of paper, I ask students to take a passage and think about what behaviors the one they chose could be used to justify or prohibit.

Passages in hand, I name a topic—for example, women's ordination, war, slavery—and ask students to read aloud the biblical passage on their slip of paper if they think it relates to the topic. As students volunteer to read their passages one by one, it doesn't take long before there are uncomfortable looks and nervous shifting in seats as they start to hear passages that clearly could be used to support diverse positions with respect to these complex topics. On the topic of war, I always get particularly surprised looks when one student reads, "They shall beat their *swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks*; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4 [NRSV]), and another offers, "Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near; let them come up. Beat your *plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears*" (Joel 3:9-10 [NRSV]). It is important to have the students themselves contribute the biblical passages to the discussion because it makes them participants in the apparent contradictions. It is much more pedagogically effective to have them tell me (rather than vice versa) that they find the verses contradictory, and then to discuss together the possible causes and consequences of that observation. This is a disorienting exercise for many students, making some anxious and others excited, but making all of them interested in learning more.

I take advantage of their dawning recognition that it is easy to pluck out verses from the Bible to defend opposing perspectives by initiating a discussion that engages with the first pages of De La Torre's (2002) book, and before they know it, they are deeply involved in conversations about perspective, identity construction, normativity, and the politics of biblical interpretation. The exercise demonstrates to them that to make a claim about what "the Bible says," a reader first needs to choose a passage they believe is relevant to the discussion topic, and then choose an interpretation of that passage that supports their claim. We consider along with De La Torre (2002) some of the differences (such as age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, education, ability, family, and religious traditions) that could affect a reader's choices, and why different interpretations could seem self-evident to people in different circumstances. Having just read different verses, I can ask them, for example, what might lead one person to address the question of women's ordination by referring to 1 Timothy 2 versus Galatians 3:28 or Romans 16:1, and vice versa. Because De La Torre's (2002) interpretation of Leviticus 11:8 (that one should not touch a pig's carcass) as a condemnation of football players (because the game's ball is nicknamed a "pigskin") seems reasoned and yet so counterintuitive to my students, it is a useful way to start a conversation about how a person's reading of scripture is shaped by their own particular interests and circumstances. Throughout the semester I remind students that there are people with different backgrounds and perspectives in the class. The context of East Tennessee has already prepared many of my students to be sensitive to strong religious viewpoints, and my reminder is usually sufficient to produce respectful conversations. I also remind them repeatedly that the purpose of the class is not to evaluate whether different interpretations are right or wrong, or good or bad, but to understand the assumptions and logic that motivate them and the consequences of those views in our current context.

The second day of class I build on the first day with two additional exercises, both designed to make those who think they already know all there is to know about the New Testament and those who arrive nervous that they don't know enough feel like they have something to contribute and something to learn in the class. I begin this second meeting by sharing my hope

that this course will “make the unfamiliar more familiar, and make the familiar more unfamiliar.” I read a passage where Bart Ehrman describes the first-century Greek pagan philosopher Apollonius of Tyana in ways that echo Gospel descriptions of Jesus (2016, 44-46). I ask the students to identify the person being described, and then to brainstorm all the ways they “know” it’s about Jesus, such as his special birth, the miraculous healings, that he is called the Son of God, and that he appeared to his followers after his death. This helps many students, especially those who are more conservatively Christian, contribute to the discussion and feel comfortable in the class. The big “reveal,” that this passage describes a pagan philosopher, results in many surprised faces. We talk through what students are feeling (confused, worried), which helps them to identify and process some of the assumptions they brought to the class, such as that Jesus was the only person who had these things attributed to him, and to see the room they have for learning. It is important to acknowledge that the Ehrman passage is purposely written to cause this mistaken identity, and to respectfully help the students see the learning value in being surprised in this way—that is, the value in recognizing their unfamiliarity with the New Testament world.

Finally, I do one more exercise on the second day to try to jolt loose even more of their entrenched assumptions and open space for new ways of thinking about the material, this time involving the stories of Jesus’ birth. I ask students to brainstorm what they know about Jesus’ birth, and I write their answers on the board. Students who know the stories well often seem relieved to be on more familiar footing and glad to be able to contribute to the discussion. Christmas pageants form the basis for most of their knowledge, and it is easy to develop a list of the wise men and the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, the virgin birth, the angels, the manger, and other familiar parts of the story. I interject a few questions as we brainstorm—“Okay, born in Bethlehem. And why were they in Bethlehem? Oh, because there was a census. Wait, who visited his birth? Magi. But how did they find him? King Herod. Ok, but wait—who called the census? And did the magi visit before the shepherds or after? And when did they flee to Egypt?” Before long, students sense that they can’t quite remember enough details to be able to answer my questions, so I ask them where we would go to read the story. We start by looking at Mark’s Gospel, then we move to John’s. They are relieved when we get to Matthew and Luke and start to find the passages they remember. By that point, however, they are paying closer attention to detail and we talk about the significance of each Gospel telling the story in its own way, and what is gained and what is lost when we think of the life of Jesus as a single story versus as four different stories, each with their own emphasis and themes. A quick thematic survey that connects Luke’s “Blessed are you who are poor” and “Blessed are you who hunger now” (Luke 6:20-21) with the birth-story’s shepherds (Luke 2:8-20), and Matthew’s “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:3, 6) with the birth-story’s magi bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11) is enough to persuade even the most knowledgeable student of the Bible that they can learn interesting new things in the class and that they need to pay attention to which book is telling which story and with what details in order to keep up with the class discussions. Whether because it seems new or because it covers familiar texts, most students seem excited in these first days to continue the conversations.

I carry the threads of critical awareness, detailed analysis, and diverse perspectives through the semester by means of a variety of in-class conversations, readings, and two- to three-page “Analysis Topic” essays that complement the themes of the New Testament books we are discussing, such as social class and poverty with Luke and Acts, race and slavery with Philemon, and gender and sexuality with Romans, Galatians, and 1 Corinthians. The Analysis Topics assignments are particularly helpful in this regard, since they provide the occasional reflection on the contemporary relevance of the texts in the weeks when the class discussion is otherwise largely historical. These sporadic assignments pose thought-questions in the syllabus about the day’s readings, and even though each student only writes an essay on half the prompts (to allow for flexibility in people’s schedules and to allow for more frequent small-group discussions), everyone spends time discussing the questions in small groups on those days. The syllabus might ask, for example, “What do these writings say about Jews and Judaism? Is Christianity inherently anti-Jewish?” or “What do the Pastoral Epistles tell us about authority in the early church, particularly in relation to the role of women? How do they relate on this topic to the epistles that scholars agree are by Paul?” After students pick a small group for the first topic and rearrange their groups as they choose for the second topic, they stay in the new groups for the rest of the semester, which allows them some initial flexibility in choosing their group and then some consistency in order to build trust. The small-group discussions give them a safer space to try out new ideas and hear the ideas of their peers before the full class discussion where they can hear some of the ideas from other groups and share their perspectives. By the end of the semester, the students are well practiced in reading early Christian texts in their first- and second-century historical context as well as thinking about the impact that the canonical texts continue to have today due to the very fact of their canonization.

When I teach this course, I want my students to learn the history of the New Testament texts’ early context, but I also want to help them to consider the contemporary politics of their interpretation. At the end of the semester, I assign a “New Testament Today” project in order to allow the students to return to the questions that initially brought them to the class but with the added analytical and methodological skills they have learned through the course of the semester. I use this assignment to

point out the contemporary relevance of the early history we are studying, and also to give them practice applying the critical analysis skills they have learned during the semester to a particular case study that interests them. The fact that these topics are usually on the front lines of politicized national disagreements makes the projects challenging as well as engaging. In my experience, this combination of history and contemporary culture provides not only information, but perspective that helps them see the idiosyncrasies of their own assumptions. One of my favorite student comments has been that the class “made me start evaluating everything to make sure I knew why I thought how I did.”

For this last assignment, each student writes a short paper on competing contemporary interpretations of the New Testament. The prompt reads,

Each student will write a short paper (2-3 pages, plus bibliography) on the use of the New Testament in our world today. Topics must be approved by the instructor and should be a balanced study (neither criticizing nor evangelizing) of two different perspectives on the same topic, such as a church that ordains women and a church that doesn't and the biblical justification used by each side. Focus on the method of how each side uses scripture to defend their position; consider using our Miguel de la Torre reading.

Students can work alone or in small groups to research an example of the Bible (with an emphasis on the New Testament) being used today to legitimate at least two different sides of an issue, but they are each responsible for writing their own individual paper. I ask them to engage with the pages we read at the beginning of the semester from Miguel De La Torre's *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (2002, 1-5), with an eye toward the methodological questions of perspective, embodied reading, cultural norms, and power dynamics. After a semester of practicing such conversations in the Analysis Topics, students generally throw themselves into this project with an enthusiasm and effort far exceeding what you would expect for the relatively small percentage of their grade the assignment represents. They frequently choose to study differences on questions of women's ordination, responses to LGBTQ+ people, teachings about Jews and Judaism, and stances regarding physical violence, including the death penalty. In the last case, for example, students often contrast Christians who defend their stand against capital punishment by using passages such as Jesus turning the other cheek (for example Matthew 5:39) or releasing the woman caught in adultery (John 8) with other Christians who defend the death penalty by prioritizing passages like Genesis 9:6 or Paul's call for his audience to obey the government (such as Romans 13:1-7). They have, however, chosen a wide variety of topics including whether music or dancing is acceptable, responses to wealth and poverty, the relation of the church to the state, and teachings about drinking alcohol, childrearing, and marriage.

The day the projects are due, they spend the whole class period paired up and sharing their findings with a series of partners in ever-diminishing periods of time until everyone is laughing from the speed-dating-like quality of the shrinking discussion times. This process gives the students practice summarizing their projects and identifying the key points in increasingly succinct ways. We end that day with a class conversation about what they learned from their projects and from their peers, and it has never yet failed to be my favorite day of the semester, to hear them speak in such articulate, thoughtful, and sophisticated ways about the questions that drew many of them to the class to begin with—namely, the complex, pervasive, and powerfully influential politics of biblical interpretation that shapes so many of our lives. In a regional context where many grow up hearing that the Bible has one clear answer to any given question, it is often challenging but exciting for students not only to see the scriptural support for opposing views, but to think methodologically about how each side makes its case, and the significance of seeing that opposing sides both cite Christian scripture. In a region where the dominant Protestant culture can feel monolithic, our class discussions highlight the diversity of Christian teachings from antiquity until today.

There is no doubt that the “New Testament Today” exercise would look different in different pedagogical contexts. In East Tennessee I have the advantages and disadvantages of teaching students who predominately already see a contemporary relevance in the New Testament texts, and who tend to be very aware of ways in which these texts are deployed politically and socially. Class size would also affect the shape of this exercise. Over the years I have tried different incarnations of it. Sometimes it requires a Powerpoint presentation that is posted to the class website the day before so that students can look at each others' projects. Sometimes it involves each student presenting to their small group, or small groups that worked together presenting to the class. One important part of keeping the exercise on track has been to stress that these projects are not meant to defend one point of view, but to show how two different uses of scripture can lead to different perspectives on the same topic. For this reason, I require their essay to cite the De La Torre (2002) reading or another of our methodological readings from the semester. I find that this helps ensure that their focus is methodological, looking at their topic as one example of how people read scripture differently, rather than trying to determine the “best” position on their specific topic.

Many students arrive in my New Testament class suspicious of me and the course material, having been explicitly warned by their family about the spiritual dangers of studying religion at our public state campus. Such students would be wary and defensive if I were to announce from the front of the classroom the first day that the Christian Bible “contradicts itself,” or that readers’ own perspectives shape what they believe the biblical texts “say.” As a result, I have shaped my class around exercises that I hope will surprise students and bring them face to face with some of the assumptions that they bring to the class. I have found students most willing to engage sincerely with unfamiliar perspectives about New Testament texts, historical and contemporary, after they first come to realize that their own perspective is likewise idiosyncratic and particular to their own embodied experiences. Most of the course is spent introducing Jesus and Paul in their first-century Roman context of Jewish apocalypticism. This is most effective, however, when students have the methodological tools to recognize that reading is an act of interpretation, and that the New Testament texts’ meanings necessarily shift as they are read by different people in different times and places. Teaching my New Testament students critical thinking and analysis skills thus helps them understand the history and historical context of the New Testament at the same time that it helps them recognize the ways in which those texts are deployed in religious, social, and political conversations today.

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