

Paradoxes, Enigmas, and Professorship:

An Interview with Francis Landy on the Occasion of his Retirement from the University of Alberta

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This year marked Francis Landy's thirtieth as a professor at the University of Alberta, and officially his last. He is now emeritus, but to say simply that he has "fulfilled his duty" to the institution seems like a serious understatement. He is the author of countless scholarly articles and four books [*The Tale of Aqhat* (1981); *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (1983; rev. ed. 2011); *Hosea* (1995; rev. ed. 2011); *Beauty and the Enigma and Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible* (2001)]. He was, for a number of years, Editor-in-Chief of *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, Canada's foremost journal for the study of religion, which attracts submissions from all over the world. He was President of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies in 2009-10 [his presidential address was published as "I and Eye in Isaiah, or Gazing at the Invisible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131 (2012): 85-97]. He was a driving force behind the creation of the U of A's graduate program in Religious Studies. And he has been active in Edmonton's Jewish community, regularly gathering with local rabbis to read and discuss scripture. In the few short years I've known and worked with him (we first met at an SBL meeting in 2008, and I served as his teaching assistant from 2010-12), his erudite instruction and warm friendship have left an indelible impression on me and my scholarship. Without a doubt, many other students and scholars of religion who have spent time at the U of A would say the same. Recently, Francis and I conversed, over email, about his career.

Francis, educated at Cambridge (BA) and Sussex (PhD), came to the U of A in 1984, shortly after earning his doctorate. At the time, he was studying at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, reading Talmud and Midrash, and Religious Studies (then a department) hired him to fill a position in Jewish Studies. So I asked him if, back then, he was more interested in the Bible in particular or in the study of Judaism in general. He said that he is, and always has been, primarily a biblicist. The rest of our conversation went as follows:

Ian D. Wilson: What does it mean to you to be a "biblicist," and how does your scholarship fit into the category of "biblical studies" more generally? Or perhaps better: how has your scholarship (re)defined the category of biblical studies over the course of your career?

Francis Landy: What does it mean for me to be a "biblicist"? I don't know. Sometimes I think I am a "few verses in the Bible"-ist. At times I think I am not a biblicist at all, just pretending. I don't know anything, don't read any scholarship, don't understand anything. Then if I start working in the text, I get trapped by it. I love the way the biblical writers write and rewrite, and try to think their way through the immense puzzle of our lives. I like to think of the beauty that emerges slowly from 22 letters and a tormented landscape and history.

How has my scholarship redefined the category of biblical studies over the course of my career? Or how does it fit into it? I wouldn't say it has redefined the category at all. How could it? It is a vast Santa Claus sack with an infinite capacity for absorbing stuff. As for fitting in, I don't know who reads my stuff. An awful lot of people don't or never have or have never heard of me. Reciprocally, I have often never heard of them. One can't read everything, and one ends up with nothing. A lot of people

wouldn't be in the slightest interested, and have no interest in understanding. I have always been somewhat outside, even in the rather slender cohort of "literary" scholars of the Bible. For instance, I was never part of the Semeia group, and am very suspicious of the magnetic attraction of a theoretical or ideological approach to which one owes allegiance, like a flag. On the other hand, I get surprised by those people who have read what I do, and like it, and learn by it. Perhaps there are more than I think. People do say that there is no one who writes like me, that "x" is very Francis-ish. I do like that. What I like is complexity. If I can show people complexity, I am happy.

So when I die, will the seas just wash over these little sandcastles I have made? Will it be as if they have never been? Does it matter? Perhaps all that matters is that someone's eyes are opened in the garden, to human beauty and nakedness.

IDW: I must say, I think you're being a bit disingenuous about your level of knowledge; your polymathic knowledge is legendary at the U of A! You never cease to amaze us at our doctoral seminars, where you consistently offer cogent observations on papers that deal with all kinds of topics and texts, from early Christian asceticism to Islamic education in northern Africa (just to cite a couple examples). Any advice for us mere mortals? Do you consciously try to read outside your field or do you just pick things up here and there along the way?

Back to your approach to biblical studies: your thoughts on scholarship remind me of a great comment you made in one of our recent doctoral seminars: "The only method I've ever known is to stare at a text till my head hurts!" I took this as partly tongue-in-cheek, but it certainly speaks to your commitment to being, first and foremost, a close reader of text, to embracing the complexities and paradoxes one finds everywhere in the biblical corpus (and beyond). Now, you mention your lack of commitment to any particular ideology, etc., but I think it's fair to say that, in your scholarship, you have a number of reading partners, so to speak – particular thinkers whom you bring alongside you to stare at the text. Can you comment on a few of those? Who, in biblical studies or otherwise, do keep coming back to in your thoughts and readings?

FL: It is hard being a legend. But the good thing about being a legend is that it isn't true. For me at least I am very aware of how little I've read, how little I know, and I am ashamed of it.

As for reading partners, I am trying to think. No one really comes to mind. I have had periods in the past when I have had particular enthusiasms, for Winnicott and Kristeva, for instance. In a way, conventional biblical scholarship is useful. It is a rather solitary profession. There is myself, the text, whoever is behind the text, and anyone else is a distraction. Perhaps because I have read so little. There is this wonderful book I am just trying to read by Rachel Havrelock called *River Jordan* [University of Chicago Press, 2011] – but have I finished it? There are the endless distractions and exhaustions. I do find other scholars in the field valuable, as a way of showing me questions or keeping me honest, especially if they are different. Most biblical scholars, as you know, are very boring. I keep on thinking of people I meet and like (like Friedhelm Hartenstein, for instance), and others, whom I won't name, who raise doubts in my head.

As for companions I've gone back to: There's Robert Carroll's essay on blindness and the vision thing [pp. 79-93 in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah* (ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans; Brill, 1997) – there's lots else by Robert; he had a deep interest in existentialism and postmodernism. There's an essay by Hillis Miller on what writing about painting wants [*Critical Inquiry* 34, no. S2 (2008): S59-97], which I have quoted a couple of times – just one paragraph – because it so neatly encapsulates for me what writing is about, walking blindly not knowing where one is going. I like Derrida, as you know, more for his relentless thinking and not ever being able to let go of any question than for any particular thing he says. Again, I am not sure if this answers your question. Certainly they

are not with me in my head when I write or try to write. Perhaps, at times, the biblical writers. But not now.

IDW: Yes, I too am a big fan of Carroll's work, as you know. It's a shame he died so unexpectedly; I think he had a lot left to say. You mention Winnicott and Kristeva; psychoanalytic theory has held a prominent place in your thinking. Can you comment a bit on how this has impacted your thoughts on the study of religion?

FL: I think you will find that psychoanalysis is less and less overtly present in my work. I have read some Freud, certainly not all of it – not as much as Peter [Sabo] – some Lacan, but ages ago, Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* [Tavistock, 1971] (again and again, but nothing else, and it is a very short book), some Kleinian stuff – I find Jung rather unreadable. I enjoy a lot of it.

Let me start with my work in biblical studies. I have actually written about it. Psychoanalysis I think is fundamentally about the unconscious at work. For a writer, a poet, the work is always something mysterious, something greater than himself or herself. The biblical writers were writing out of their deepest, most fundamental experiences, about the terrifying and mystifying forces in their lives – forces of life and death, including death wishes and life wishes. A writer writes sensuously, imaginatively, out of the flotsam and jetsam of the world. So I think that in reading and writing about these things one has to be very attentive to precisely what one cannot know – the minute intonations of the words, the "hearing beyond the hearing of the ears", to the dream world that is being fostered. Of course, that doesn't touch on the question of collectivity and collective consciousness/unconsciousness, the way that texts cannot but express a society's deepest fears – the way a society constructs itself – and the society as a discourse, a way of thinking, as well as the individual writer's reactions to those thoughts, experiences and practices. For example, I was looking only yesterday at an article of mine on the sotah – the woman suspected of adultery [see Numbers 5:11-31] – and the Nazirite [see Numbers 6], two texts which, in my opinion, threaten the entire fabric of the elaborately constructed, beautiful priestly world [the article is forthcoming]. The woman suspected of adultery – the most impure of the impure – enters the sanctuary and swallows the blotted out name of God. What an image! Now I don't know who wrote it, or if anyone wrote it, but there is an incredibly intense process of thinking going on there, as well as an artistic shaping of the words – it is powerfully crafted, and extremely ugly. And of course, it is basic stuff – sex, desire, the desire of patriarchy to assert itself, vulnerability, the insane forces that overcome "men" (the spirit of jealousy, in this case) that come from God knows where, or perhaps God doesn't know where.

So perhaps psychoanalysis is a sort of practice. Now when it comes to the study of religion, I did try to teach a course (twice now) on psychoanalysis and religion. I think it was an almost complete failure. Most psychoanalysis of religion has a rather bad press – reductive etc. – and certainly most recent things I've read have been shallow. I liked Celia Brickman's book *Aboriginal Populations of the Mind* [Columbia University Press, 2003], a study arguing that, for Freud, religion = women = Judaism - the primitive = the repressed etc. I like the writings of Gananath Obeyesekere, like *Medusa's Hair* [University of Chicago Press, 1981]. Some of the anthropologists, like Victor Turner, are really good on psychoanalysis and religion.

For myself, I would say that the study of religion and psychoanalysis touch on the same things, our deepest, most fundamental experiences. My teacher in Cambridge, Sita Narasimhan, died last year. I remember she liked to quote D.H. Lawrence, "I am a small clearing in a large forest, in which the forest gods come and go."

IDW: A related question: you've cotaught RELIG 475/575 ["Theory and Method in Religious Studies"];

recently renamed “Contemporary Theories of Religion”] with Willi Braun for a number of years; how has teaching this course with Willi, whose scholarship takes a much different approach to the subject of religion, shaped your thinking over the years? Students (including myself) have always enjoyed the lively and collegial debates between the two of you. Can you share some about the teaching of this course and its import for your work?

FL: I love Willi, but that doesn't mean that our minds meet. I have no idea at all what a materialist approach to religion is or can be. I puzzle and puzzle over it. So I suppose its influence on me has been to help me puzzle. It's nice to know that one is in a strange world with strange people, whom one happens to like. I can cope with Jacques Derrida, but not with Russ McCutcheon. I read and read him and make no sense of it. And RELIG 475/575. Last year, I deliberately went from outside to inside, from the general, rather obvious stuff about the parameters and perimeters of the discipline – Bruce Lincoln, Masuzawa, Regis Debray and so on – to ritual, to the imagination, to deconstruction, to what I think of as the poetry of religion. I don't think students thought it was the best course (at least the evaluations complained rather about having to read Derrida). It is depressing that like biblical scholars so many students like that which is easy, controllable, where there are the right answers, which don't challenge their existence. And I see that voice, that element, in myself. But I like the vertigo that comes from feeling that I am standing on the edge of a cliff, that I don't know where I am.

I think about spirituality a lot. Why is it such a dirty word? For me, spirituality is the essence of religion, though of course also religion without religion. Last week I visited an old friend in Kingston – ex professor at the U of A – a brilliant composer. His compositions are not easy, loud pieces, or conventional crowd pleasers, like most of what you hear; they are intense, abstract, sometimes short, weirdly surprising, and absolutely phenomenally beautiful. And you can tell that for him they are spiritual, they come from the deepest place inside him, they are his reason for existence.

IDW: Well, speaking of minds not meeting, I think the best colleagues are the ones who puzzle us, and who, in turn, are puzzled by us, but who still want to continue the conversation. It is easy to forget that disagreement and debate is what we do; we want to puzzle others and raise new questions. If we all agreed all the time, what would be the point! Anyway, I want to close with another question relating to the program here. You and Willi recently coauthored a kind of retrospective on the formation of our interdisciplinary program in Religious Studies, which you called "a work in progress" ["Wither or Whither: The Study of Religion at the University of Alberta," *Religion* 41 (2011): 145-48]. Now, several years later and on the verge of your retirement, how do you see the program progressing? Ideally, where is it headed and how can it grow in the coming years and respond to inevitable changes in the human and social sciences in general?

FL: What a difficult question. To some extent I am reluctant to answer, because I don't think the program is in my hands any more, and I've been careful not to interfere.

We've certainly gone back on the vision of an interdisciplinary program that Ehud [Ben Zvi], Willi and I had, with all members of the Religious Studies Council equal, whether cross-appointed or not, and it not mattering if a course had a RELIG label or not. We have gone back to reasserting disciplinary boundaries, perhaps because of the constraints of the system which is still very inflexible, and also of visibility. Everything really depends on whether we can have replacements for those of us who are retiring or will be retiring in the next few years.

All the best.

IDW: Thank you, Francis. I wish you all the best in your retirement!