

Embodied Readers: Teaching about the Earliest Christians in Rural Protestant America

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the ways in which my Introduction to the New Testament class at the University of Tennessee engages with and offers students tools for understanding and participating in social activism, particularly around race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, and class. In recent years I have added new readings and class projects to the syllabus explicitly to encourage students to consider ways in which interpretations influence our conversations on LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, and racial and economic justice. In addition to covering the early history and context of the New Testament texts, my course teaches students to recognize how readers' own embodied experiences affect their culturally contingent reading of these influential texts. The region of Appalachia is largely rural and economically depressed; deeply held conservative Protestant strains of Christianity pervade "the Bible belt" region, and Donald Trump won Appalachia easily in the 2016 presidential election. A new wave of student activism has developed on campus in response to recent national events and to the concurrent rise in polarizing rhetoric in our country. I demonstrate here some of the concrete ways I am adapting my classroom teaching about the New Testament to engage with these urgent local, regional, national, and global conversations and the activism they are inspiring.

KEYWORDS

New Testament; Appalachia; Bible belt; Social Justice

While one of the main goals of my "Introduction to the New Testament" class at the University of Tennessee is to try to interrupt the harmful perpetuation of anti-Judaism and antisemitism, this article will discuss the ways in which my class offers students tools for other forms of activism, such as around race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, and class. Specifically, in recent years I have added new readings and class projects to the syllabus explicitly to encourage students to consider ways in which interpretations of some of the New Testament epistles influence contemporary conversations on LGBTQ+ rights, and racial and economic justice. In addition to teaching the early history and context of the New Testament texts, my course teaches students to recognize how readers' own embodied experiences affect their culturally contingent reading of these influential texts. The region of Appalachia is largely rural and economically depressed, and deeply held conservative Protestant strains of Christianity pervade this "Bible belt" region of America. A new wave of student activism has developed on campus in response to the candidacy and 2016 election of Donald Trump, and the concurrent rise in polarizing rhetoric in our country. This essay will demonstrate some of the concrete ways I am adapting my classroom teaching about the New Testament to engage with these urgent local, regional, national, and global conversations and the activism they are inspiring.

Introducing the New Testament at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

East Tennessee is a special place – the natural beauty of the Smoky Mountains goes hand in hand with a history of close-knit communities and an understandable wariness of those “from off” who so often exploited the labor, generosity, and land of the predominately Scots-Irish descendants who have composed the majority in this region of Appalachia since the early nineteenth century. Despite persistent and corrosive “hillbilly” stereotypes, East Tennessee has been racially and ethnically diverse since the first Europeans arrived, due in large part to the long history of the region’s Cherokee people and the complicated local “Affrilachian” history of free and enslaved African Americans. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the region has also followed the national trend of becoming increasingly more diverse by every measure. Unfortunately, like the rest of the country we have also seen an increase in public racist, sexist, antisemitic, homophobic, Islamophobic, and anti-immigrant incidents in recent years. Like so many places, the city of Knoxville that includes the campus of the University of Tennessee is a city of contradictions. There have been racist and homophobic incidents on campus and off, and an outpouring of support and compassion in response. Yassin Terou came to Knoxville as a Muslim Syrian refugee in 2011; today Yassin’s Falafel Shop is a national success story, named “Nicest Place in America” by *Reader’s Digest* magazine in 2018 and honored on ABC’s “Good Morning America” television show. Knoxville has witnessed small Nazi rallies and large progressive protests; it is a city with a progressive downtown and generally conservative suburbs.

Despite its diversity, however, the majority culture remains strongly Protestant Christian, and the Southern Baptist and evangelical majority vocally and visibly dominate much of the public sphere. Across the state, according to the 2014 Pew Research Center’s telephone survey, 81% of adults identify as Christian, including more than half of Tennessee adults who identify as evangelical Protestants. In Tennessee, 77% of adults report believing in hell, 70% report praying at least daily, 71% rank religion as “very important” in their lives, 70% agree that the Bible is the Word of God, and 46% believe that the Bible should be taken literally.¹ Billboards across East Tennessee advertise churches, shout anti-abortion messages, and showcase Christian messages like “Life is short. Eternity Isn’t. –God.” Tennessee’s state legislature was among those that passed an Islamophobic ban on “sharia law” during Barack Obama’s presidency, and state legislators periodically make “freedom of information” requests in order to examine all our syllabi that mention Islam. At the macro level, East Tennessee presents many challenges to those of us who do not map neatly onto this majority culture. Fortunately, Knoxville’s local communities offer a rich spectrum of minority ideologies and identities that increasingly make it possible for greater parts of the city and greater numbers of its inhabitants to flourish.

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/tennessee/>

Given this context, it will come as no surprise that teaching “Introduction to the New Testament” in Knoxville is filled with any number of opportunities and challenges. The course is listed at the third-year level with no prerequisites, and typically has between forty and forty-five students. It is housed in my home Department of Religious Studies, and it is cross-listed with the History Department and two Interdisciplinary Programs – Judaic Studies and Middle East Studies. Because it is one option on a list of upper-level classes that fill a College requirement, it always has a wide range of students, from first-year students to graduating seniors, from Religious Studies majors and minors, to History majors and minors, to majors from other units who have chosen it off the College list. It always has a number of students with strong evangelical Protestant convictions, as well as others who have chosen to leave a church with those teachings and who harbor some frustration or anger from their experiences there. The class also usually includes a number of students with less zealous church affiliations, one or two Jewish students, a few Catholic students, a number of students who express little personal interest in religion, and occasionally a person committed to another religious tradition such as Islam. The class usually has a small amount of diversity in terms each of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, marital status, parental status, veteran status, and age. Over the sixteen years I have taught at UT-Knoxville, I have adapted the course time and again to address my audience and our shifting local and national conversations, and it is a pleasure to share some of the strategies that have proven to be the most productive.

Setting the Tone: “What the Bible Says”

Any teacher knows that the first days of class are critical for setting the tone for the rest of the semester, and I have developed a number of talking points and class exercises in an effort to help this New Testament class coalesce around shared respectful conversations about the early history and context of the New Testament texts and the conflicting politics that they inspire in our own time. One of these initial exercises uses the first pages of Miguel De La Torre’s book, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, which demonstrates some of the ways in which a person’s race, class, and gender affect their interpretation of scripture.² At our big state campus with a stadium that seats over 100,000, American football seems like a religion itself. De La Torre’s first words, then, “All football players are damned!” immediately catch my students’ attention and open up conversations about the perspectives of biblical interpreters and the embodied contexts of differing truth claims.³ In an effort to get the class off to a strong start, I ask the students to read those first pages by Miguel De La Torre before they arrive in class the first day. While not all of them do the reading, many of them are excited to start their new classes and don’t yet have a heavy work load, and are glad to be able to get off on the

² Miguel De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 1-5.

³ I discuss this briefly also in Christine Shepardson, “Engaging Politics in the New Testament Classroom: The New Testament Today,” *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* 1.3 (2020): 91–96, <https://doi.org/10.31046/wabashcenter.v1i3.1480>.

right foot by showing up prepared for the first day. After the usual first-day introductions and syllabus review, I spend the rest of the time talking with them about assumptions that we all bring to the material, the differences between our historical approach versus a confessional approach, and how to have a respectful and historically based academic conversation about the New Testament in the midst of high-stakes local and national claims about its meaning.

I introduce the discussion by asking how many of them have heard someone say, “The Bible says...” in a bid to defend a claim about something a person should or should not be doing. There is usually universal consent that they have heard the phrase frequently in their young lives. While we talk about what behaviors they have heard the phrase used to encourage or forbid, I pass around a cup filled with slips of paper, each with a short excerpt from the Christian Bible, and I ask each student to take one. By this point, the students have started to dissect the phrase “the Bible says,” as I encourage them to think about who has the authority to make such a claim, what are the sources of that authority, and perhaps most importantly, what do we mean by “the Bible” – which books, which translation – and how does it “speak”? At this point, I say, “For example, what does ‘the Bible’ say about war? Should Christians go to war, or not, and how do we know?” As disagreements begin to arise among the students as they try to answer the question, I say, “Now, look at the Bible verse you picked out of the cup, and think about what it could be used to justify or prohibit. Ok, who has one that might help us address the question about war?” Passages that could seem relevant are scattered around the room, and students raise their hands and read their passages. After each one I ask, “And do you think that could be used to support going to war, or not going to war?” For some of the passages, such as Ezekiel 33.11 (“Say to them, ‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live’”), Matthew 5.38-39 (“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also’”), Exodus 20.13 (“You shall not murder”), Matthew 26.52 (“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword’”), and Romans 12.17-21 (“Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God... ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink’... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”), students agree that it is easy to see how it could be used to argue against war. Other passages, such as 1 Samuel 15.18 (“And the Lord sent you on a mission, and said, ‘Go, utterly destroy the sinners... and fight against them until they are consumed’”) and Matthew 10.34 (“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”), they think argue for the possibility of Christians going to war. Ecclesiastes 3.1, 8 (“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... a time for war, and a time for peace”) seems to them to allow either choice in different circumstances. Whatever passages you use, it is important to have both views represented from both the Old and the New Testaments to disallow the misperception that the Old Testament supports war and the New Testament does not.

It is critical that the students themselves read the passages aloud and offer their interpretation of how they could be used because it maximizes their engagement with the exercise and their ownership of its outcomes. The more conservative students initially feel very comfortable with the discussion and seem glad to be citing scripture directly in answer to the questions I've posed. By the time we've had volunteers read passages that lead the class to opposing conclusions, however, those students begin to get a little more wary while some of the other students start to get more engaged. As soon as someone reads aloud either Isaiah 2.4 ("They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks") or Joel 3.9-10 ("Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears"), I ask for the other passage that relates to plowshares and swords, and use this convenient coupling to open a discussion about what is happening in our process, and that starts to bring us to the heart of the day's lesson. I ask, "Well, which is it, does 'the Bible' support war or not? And what's going on with those two statements about plowshares and swords? What do we do with your comment that they seem to contradict each other?" This prompts the beginning of a productive conversation. They often say, "But you can't just take one sentence out of context like that – you're not getting the full picture," or "Those different passages are relevant for different situations." Now that the students are catching on to the purpose of the exercise, I spend a few minutes asking them to read their passage if it addresses the question of women's ordination (e.g., Romans 16.1, Galatians 3.28, 1 Corinthians 14.33-35, 1 Timothy 2), which quickly reveals another series of competing messages. By this point, the students are usually commenting that "the Bible" can be used to justify anything if you pick the right passage, and at this point we turn to the reading they did in preparation for class.

One advantage of this "what the Bible says" exercise is that it brings the students quickly and persuasively to the recognition that readers of the Christian canon pick and choose which passages to highlight (and overlook) when they use scripture to defend their views. It is a short step to take them from that realization to the recognition that different readers will make different choices based on their own lived and embodied experiences, and this is the subject of *Reading the Bible from the Margins*' introductory pages. The pages walk students through the subjectivity of reading, and the wide variety of factors that can influence how a person interprets scripture, and I ask them to brainstorm what types of things (gender, family's views, location, age, sexual orientation, race, etc.) are influencing their own perspective (i.e., influencing which passages they would choose, which interpretation they would prefer) and the perspectives of others. The reading introduces the concept of cultural normativity, and brings to the fore how those who do not fall into those societal norms experience their world differently than those who do. And perhaps most importantly, it introduces discussions of power, noting, "if I am in a position of power within a community, I could use my interpretation to create social structures that would turn by biases into societal norms, justifying and legitimizing the oppression" of others.⁴ Through an entertaining example about how in high school the author had used a clever interpretation of Leviticus

⁴ De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, 1.

14.8, which forbids touching a dead pig's skin, to condemn football players (since the football can be called a 'pigskin'), Miguel De La Torre opens up a much broader conversation about interpreting scripture from the eyes of "the disenfranchised," and the learning that happens for all readers in the process.⁵ These exercises, then, set the tone for the semester by teaching the students the importance of seeing each biblical text individually rather than generalizing about the canon as a whole, preparing the students to find different stories in the different canonical books, and training them to start thinking of their own assumptions and interpretations as shaped by their individual experiences rather than as simply "obvious" or universal. We return to these themes throughout the semester as I teach them about the New Testament's first- and second-century context, while keeping one eye on the ways in which the canonized texts are deployed in our modern context.

The Pauline and "Pauline" Epistles, Then and Now

By the time in the semester when we arrive at the letters attributed to the apostle Paul, we have spent weeks on the canonical Gospels, the historical Jesus, Gnosticism and some non-canonical texts, and have spent considerable time thinking about the diversity of early teachings about Jesus and the complex relationships between his apocalyptic Jewish followers and other Jews at the time. These themes continue into the second half of the semester, alongside an increasing focus on how later Christians have used New Testament texts like the Pauline epistles to address modern social and political issues. The course introduces students to the academic assignment of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul to three categories: Pauline, Deutero-Pauline, and Pastoral Epistles. Like other New Testament courses, we focus on Paul's imminent eschatology and the relation it has with the ways in which he answered questions from his largely Gentile communities, as well as the ways in which an increasingly delayed eschatology coincides with the teachings in the later Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral Epistles. With this scholarship in mind, students are better prepared to examine each epistle in turn, first in its early Roman context and then in some cases also regarding how it is used in much later American conversations.

There has been a new urgency among my students since the 2015-2016 political campaigns and presidential election; students who had been raised to say "yes, ma'am" and "yes, sir" to adults, to be polite and respectful, to accept the regionally dominant culture suddenly, in the slang of our time, "got woke." They protest; they march; they raise their voices; and some of them protest the protestors. They take to social media and connect with others around the country, and they arrive in our classes with a greater interest in thinking about the immediate relevance of their undergraduate coursework for the social justice work they are exploring and the political conversations they are having. In the many years since I first taught Introduction to the New Testament in 1999 at the University of North Carolina at

⁵ De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, 4.

Greensboro mere weeks after passing my doctoral Comprehensive Exams, I have increasingly supplemented the historical discussions of the early Roman period with conversations about uses of the texts in our own society. How could I introduce Philemon in the city that in 1960 started the lunch counter sit-ins of the Civil Rights movement without addressing Christian slaveholding in the U.S.? How could I discuss 1 Timothy's silent and submissive women in the #MeToo era without helping the students process the implications those words have for modern Christians? And the more I talked with the students in class, the more I learned about other interests of their own. Appalachia is among the most impoverished regions of the U.S., and some of my students each year are very interested in issues of poverty and economic disparity. The dominant culture of East Tennessee is religiously and politically conservative, and many students are also interested in thinking – sometimes for the first time – about the possibility of women's ordination or a church that welcomes openly LGBTQ+ people into its congregation or clergy. Many also arrive familiar with a narrative of American evangelical Christians suffering terribly in the face of cultural persecution, of "liberal" attacks on "the family" and "Christian values" and the so-called cultural "war on Christmas." My class remains focused on the historical context of the New Testament's origins, but it has increasingly also given students space to discuss the implications of what they learn in the classroom for these twenty-first-century conversations.

One of the most relevant ways in which I have updated my syllabus recently is in relation to conversations about race and racism, including a discussion of Christian slaveholding. The topic of slavery comes up in relation to many New Testament texts, including Galatians 3:27-28, Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and Philemon, and those passages initiate class discussions of slavery in the Roman world and in the early church. We discuss Philemon in relation to Paul's imminent eschatology, for example, and Bart Ehrman's textbook chapter challenges many students' assumption that Paul must have been against slave-holding; Ehrman asks whether Paul is even suggesting that Philemon should give Paul control over the still enslaved Onesimus ("I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me," Philemon 13, NRSV).⁶ The discussion encourages the students to wrestle with the fact that the text was not produced in twenty-first-century America, but is a first-century document written by a man who believed that the end-time was imminent. The sudden disorientation caused by Paul's apparent acceptance of slavery creates a distance between the students and the text that in turn allows for critical reflection and is a sharp reminder that all the New Testament texts originated in contexts quite different from our own.

Having created space for a more historical discussion of Paul's teachings regarding Christian slaveholding, it is then possible to discuss ways in which Christians have both defended and fought against slavery in American history. We read, for example, excerpts from "The Negro Christianized. An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity," an essay by Cotton Mather, one of America's earliest

⁶ Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 6th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Protestant preachers, that defends Christian slaveholding practices. We also read Demetrius Williams's article, "'No Longer a Slave': Reading Interpretation History of Paul's Epistle to Philemon."⁷ In addition, we read a short online *Smithsonian* magazine essay about the "Slave Bible," a collection of biblical excerpts created for nineteenth-century British missionaries to the Caribbean that hoped to teach enslaved Africans to be Christian (and how to read English) without introducing them to any biblical passages that might encourage rebellion or challenge the institution of slavery.⁸ These readings give the students an opportunity to practice discussing biblical interpretation in a modern context on an issue that is no longer controversial – while students read the biblical texts in different ways, none of them defends the institution of slavery.

After this practice, though, they also apply their critical analysis skills to current issues that are more controversial. We address, for example, interpretations of biblical texts regarding gender roles in the family and in the church, in antiquity and today, by looking at the shift in language about women's roles from Pauline texts like 1 Corinthians 7, Galatians 3.28, and Romans 16, to Deutero-Pauline texts like Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, to the Pastoral Epistle 1 Timothy. We read Clarice Martin's essay on "Free Slaves and Subordinate Women" that questions the methodological justification for her Black church to reject the modern relevance of Ephesians 6.5-9, which instructs slaves to obey their earthly masters, while accepting the continued relevance of Ephesians 5.22-33, which instructs wives to be subject to their husbands.⁹ Breaking the students into small groups for discussion, I encourage them to focus on the methodological questions of what justifies each interpretation rather than whether they agree with one view or another. This focus allows us to revisit the conversations of the first day about the diversity of interpretations and their relation to differently situated readers. Through these and other case studies, students come to understand that these overarching questions about perspective and method undergird disagreements about whatever particular issue might arise. This begins to refocus how the students think about biblical interpretation, moving away from a perception of "right" and "wrong" answers to focus instead on a diversity of possible answers, each of which is the product of different methodological decisions that were shaped by a particular history of individual experiences. These analytical skills of learning to look beyond the particular outcomes of an argument in order to identify the assumptions and methods that legitimate those claims are particularly critical to the possibility of activism in our recent world of "fake news" and competing realities.

⁷ Demetrius Williams, "'No Longer a Slave': Reading Interpretation History of Paul's Epistle to Philemon," in *Onesimus our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, ed. Matthew Johnson, James Noel, and Demetrius Williams, 11-45 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

⁸ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/heavily-abridged-slave-bible-removed-passages-might-encourage-uprisings-180970989/>. This rare Bible is owned by Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

⁹ Clarice Martin, "The Haustafeln (Household Codes) in Afro-American Biblical Interpretation: 'Free Slaves and Subordinate Women,'" in *Stony the Road We Trod. African-American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder, 206-231 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

Coming Full Circle: Ending the Semester

While the bulk of the semester is devoted to the historical study of the context, content, and early interpretations of the New Testament texts and some relevant early non-canonical material, the course is bookended by discussions of the significance of this history – its diversity, its unexpected turns, its developments over time – for considering the canonical texts and their impact in our current context. As we start the final weeks of the semester, I introduce the last writing assignment, a short “New Testament Today” essay. The goal of this assignment is for each student to choose a modern example of Christians who disagree about an issue because they identify different biblical passages (or interpretations) as relevant to addressing the topic. For the assignment, each student submits an individual essay (2-3 pages) outlining the issue they explored and the two perspectives they compared, and analyzing the ways in which each side interpreted Christian scripture to defend their point of view. I ask the students to return to the Miguel De La Torre reading and explore the different views examined in their essay methodologically, not evaluating which position is “better,” but analyzing the strategies that each side uses in choosing and interpreting biblical passages to address the issue they’re studying. As a result, most students’ essays have a thesis related to the subjectivity of biblical interpretation and the malleability with which it can be deployed on any given topic. It is not lost on me that their projects hone skills that would help them launch a persuasive counterargument to any issue, or note the limited efficacy of a scripturally based argument altogether.

While we have practiced the kind of analysis needed for the New Testament Today projects sporadically during the semester, I have recently reshaped the last few days of class to relate more clearly to this assignment. Whereas I have always spent time late in the semester on early Christian martyr narratives, I now explicitly connect the conversations about ancient Rome with our own time, calling one day “Church and State, Then and Now” and the next “Suffering for God, Then and Now.” On the first of these days I teach them that Roman persecution of Christians was largely local and sporadic for the first two hundred years after Jesus’ death before the initiation of more widespread persecutions under the emperors Decius and Valerian, and then the most violent and long-lived under Diocletian. They learn that it was this Diocletianic persecution that ended with the reign of the emperor Constantine that provided the immediate context for Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Church History*, which as a result misleadingly presents all of early Christian history as the triumphant struggle of a suffering minority against pervasive and oppressive persecution. We talk about the historical reasons that Eusebius’s narrative became so influential, as illustrated by the fact that my own students arrive in my class each semester believing that early Christians suffered near-constant persecution, a powerful storyline that popular culture and many church leaders alike perpetuate in our own time. One potentially harmful consequence of this misleading narrative is that it encourages some white American Christians who are today in positions of authority and privilege to see themselves counter-intuitively as victimized and

persecuted, and to cause harm when they act based on that conviction. I use these two days of class to help students see this narrative as a particular historical development, thus denaturalizing its authority.

For the first “Church and State, Then and Now” class, I assign the Letters of Pliny and Trajan, a brief correspondence between the Roman governor of Bithynia and the emperor Trajan in the year 112.¹⁰ While this non-Christian document confirms that some Roman authorities killed some Christians in this local community, it also makes clear that the governor has no idea who “Christians” are, or why they were brought into his court room. It ends with an order from the emperor not to seek out Christians or to prosecute them based on anonymous accusations. It also represents the governor as giving those brought before him three chances to deny that they were Christians, call upon the gods with incense and wine, make obeisance to the statue of the emperor, and curse Christ. The governor encourages them to save themselves and he pardons those who made the gestures of piety to the empire. Pliny says, “Those who remained obdurate I ordered to be executed, for I was in no doubt, whatever it was which they were confessing, that their obstinacy and their inflexible stubbornness should at any rate be punished.”¹¹ While the punishment in some ways fits into the narrative of imperial persecution that developed later, the details do not fit easily with my students’ preconceived expectations of how Christians were treated by Roman administrators. As a result, the text leads to fruitful discussions of what it means to talk about this correspondence as evidence for the active “persecution” of Christians. We discuss the text in small groups first, and then as a class, and it inevitably helps the students reconsider their perceptions of early Christian history, Christians’ early relationships with Roman imperial structures, and later narratives of suffering and persecution. We spend the last part of this day considering two online essays: one, a representation of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ views that Christians ought *not* to participate in voting, saluting the flag, or government civilian service;¹² the other, a Focus on the Family article that argues that a person’s faith *must* inform their political views and shape politicians and the policies they create.¹³ These disparate views facilitate a conversation about the variety of ways Christians relate to their government.

The next class we continue this discussion by addressing narratives of Christian suffering, first as they developed in antiquity, and then in some of their manifestations in our world today. To discuss antiquity, I assign the Letter to the Romans written by Bishop Ignatius of Antioch (d. 108) while he was being transported to Rome for his trial where he was later executed, and excerpts of the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, two women killed in the Roman arena in North Africa in 202; all are remembered as Christian saints and martyrs. I again also assign two online essays. One recounts the 2008 shooting at Knoxville’s Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church that killed two adults and wounded several others before

¹⁰ <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/pliny-trajan1.asp>

¹¹ <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/pliny-trajan1.asp>

¹² <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1102008085>

¹³ <https://dailycitizen.focusonthefamily.com/reexamining-the-separation-between-church-and-state/>

congregants tackled the gunman, whose manifesto suggested that he attacked the church in part because of its liberal politics and its activism on behalf of LGBTQ+ people.¹⁴ Now, more than ten years later, many students are shocked to learn of this local event for the first time. The other reading is a 2014 article in *The Atlantic* by Alan Noble, “The Evangelical Persecution Complex: The theological and cultural roots of a damaging attitude in the Christian community.”¹⁵ Noble writes as a professor who is also an evangelical Christian, and he challenges other American evangelicals to recognize the dangers of fetishizing suffering and exaggerating a sense of their own persecution, especially when other people are being murdered because of their religious convictions. He writes,

Narratives of political, cultural, and theological oppression are popular in evangelical communities, but these are sometimes fiction or deeply exaggerated non-fiction—and only rarely accurate. This is problematic: If evangelicals want to have a persuasive voice in a pluralist society, a voice that can defend Christians from serious persecution, then we must be able to discern accurately when we are truly victims of oppression—and when this victimization is only imagined.

Again the students spend time discussing the readings, first the early Christian sources and then the twenty-first-century essays in small groups before joining the full class discussion. The combination of readings over these two days is a powerful reminder that narratives have authors who have perspectives, so that narratives are not the historical events themselves but they are one particular view of history, often a view that is useful to the narrator. What actually happened in the past is much more complex than any single narrative can suggest, and thus narratives are always open to discussion and revision.

These discussions are simply one example of how the final days of class help the students use what they have learned about early Christian history to engage with contemporary national conversations. We also spend a day talking about Christian concepts of “family values.” For example, early Christians’ rejection of their non-Christian parents, and sometimes of plans for marriage and child-bearing altogether, led many Romans to believe Christianity was a threat to the traditional family. A satirical website further explores a shocking variety of expectations about family in the Christian Bible.¹⁶ Students read the progressive teachings on human sexuality on a webpage of the United Church of Christ,¹⁷ and the conservative webpage of the evangelical website Got Questions Ministries that echoes the rhetoric of twentieth- and twenty-first-century activists like James Dobson (Focus on the Family) and Ralph Reed (the Christian Coalition).¹⁸ As practice for the students’ own New Testament Today presentations the following week, I facilitate conversations on these

¹⁴ <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/ethics/workshop5/191874.shtml>

¹⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/the-evangelical-persecution-complex/375506/>

¹⁶ <http://skepticsannotatedbible.com/fv/long.html>

¹⁷ https://www.ucc.org/justice_sexuality-education_sexuality-and-our-faith

¹⁸ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Christian-family.html>

enormously varied Christian teachings about sexuality, marriage, and family, focusing always on the underlying assumptions each text makes and the ways in which it uses scripture to support its claims.

The New Testament Today: Engaging the Past and Present

The New Testament Today assignments are only about 10% of the students' grades, but the students invariably put considerable work into them and we devote an entire class to learning from each other about their processes and results. On the day the essays are due, I have the students break into pairs and I give them several minutes to explain their project to their partner, and then several more to listen to their partner's explanation in return while they fill out a worksheet where they record their partner's name, topic, and notes. I bring a timer to class because I want them to talk to a variety of different partners, and the new rolling desk-chairs in my classroom facilitate the quick (and entertaining) exchange of partners; after the first four minutes I tell them to switch who is presenting in their pair, and after four more minutes I interrupt to tell them to go find a new partner. The next couple times I give them three minutes each before they find new partners, and then two and a half minutes each, two minutes, one and a half, and finally just one minute each. By this point they have noticed the diminishing times, and are fully in the spirit of rushing through the chaotic fray of rolling desks to find a new partner and start telling their story. This slower start allows them to learn how to summarize their project, and the decreasing amounts of time keep them from getting too comfortable as they become more succinct in their presentations. It also forces them to decide on the key points they want to convey as they start to get a sense of what all the projects share in common. We spend the final part of class back together having a full class discussion about their topics, their discussions with their classmates, what they see as the purpose of the assignment in relation to the class, and what they are taking away from having done it. They learn an enormous amount from this project about critical analysis and the academic study of religion, and the details of their projects have in turn influenced my syllabus.

The topics the students choose range widely, and their choices help me to keep in touch with what interests them from year to year. Women's ordination is always a common choice, in part because we have spent time discussing some of the relevant New Testament texts in class, and they are aware from their own experiences that churches have different stances on the topic. There are usually one or two students each who examine views on war, divorce, birth control, and the death penalty. There are also always a few students who want to look at views on drinking alcohol, which is not surprising in a region that has both a proud history of making moonshine during Prohibition and still has 'dry' counties that restrict the sale of alcohol to this day. The regional flavor of East Tennessee Christianity is also reflected in some students' choice to study whether dancing is allowed for Christians, whether musical instruments are forbidden in church, and views on the charismatic practice of "speaking in tongues" that is common in Pentecostal communities, or on the practice of handling

venomous snakes during the church service.¹⁹ These short projects have educated not only the students but me as well about the idiosyncracies of our local Christian context, and in turn helped me teach better to the students of this campus. There are, though, two other issues where I have seen the most change among the students in my sixteen years of teaching in Tennessee.

The first of these changes relates to my students' increasing familiarity with and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people. When I arrived at the University of Tennessee in August 2003, most students in my classes were very uncomfortable with what they still tended to call "homosexuality" and "homosexuals," and many regional churches preached fiery sermons about the topic. In March 2004 the County Commission of Rhea County, ninety minutes from campus, voted that gay people were banned from living in their county.²⁰ At Halloween, local Christian "hell houses" offer popular Christian "haunted house" tours where each room introduces viewers to a sinner suffering for eternity for things like causing a fatal drunk-driving accident, having an abortion, or being gay. I started to meet LGBT students whose own coming-out stories were complicated by the trauma of a Christian "conversion therapy" that their parents had chosen for them in an effort to "heal" them from being gay. It is thus a notable change that my students in more recent years have much more progressive views toward LGBTQ+ people, and are very interested in exploring how Christian scripture is used to defend the variety of church responses to issues of sexuality and gender identity. Students' increased familiarity and comfort make it easier to facilitate open, respectful, thoughtful class discussions on the topic when we study Romans and 1 Corinthians, and each year this is one of the most popular topics for the New Testament Today project.

The other topic that has changed significantly in my class relates to poverty and economic justice, including as it relates to government assistance programs and healthcare. While my New Testament class has always spent time on the interest of the Gospel of Luke's Jesus in helping the hungry and poor (e.g., Luke 6 compared to Matthew 5), it was my students' projects that made me aware of how pressing and personal these issues are for so many local students and their extended families. As topics related to economic justice consistently appeared among the New Testament Today projects, I began to adapt my teaching to meet the students' interest. In the current course, we still discuss poverty and socio-economic status in relation to the Gospels, but we also spend more time than we did talking about the claim in Acts 2.44 that the community held all things in common, and the story of the punishment that Ananias and Sapphira received in Acts 4 for withholding some

¹⁹ This practice started in Appalachia, perhaps in Tennessee, in the early twentieth century and continues in a few small rural Appalachian churches that speak of it as following the "signs" referenced in what scholars call the "longer ending" of Mark 16.9-20: "And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mk 16.78-18, NRSV).

²⁰ This initial decision was quickly deemed illegal and ill-advised, and it was quickly reversed.

of their property. When we discuss the Epistle of James, we spend time on James 5.1-6 (“Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you...”). Finally, since 2018, prompted by the consistent interest in discussions of wealth, poverty, and economic injustice from my students and by the growing national discussions on the topics, I have added a day called “America’s Prosperity Gospel” for which they read about this phenomenon and some material from and about the wealthy Joel Osteen’s megachurch in Houston, Texas, and the controversy that erupted when it closed its doors to the desperate victims of the historic flooding caused by Hurricane Harvey in 2017. The students write short online responses to the readings that day, and it is clear that the readings are particularly thought-provoking in the context of our class conversations about the malleability of scriptural interpretation, the economic realities of their own experiences, and our current global conversations. The course is thus always evolving to take account of the interests of the students and the topics of their own increasingly visible activism.

Conclusion

While working at any university has its ups and downs, I have always loved the teaching part of my work at the University of Tennessee; in this politically and religiously conservative part of the “Bible belt,” to teach about the New Testament and early Christianity from a historical perspective is itself already a form of activism. So many of our students have grown up with such a small piece of the wide breadth of Christianity visible to them, that to introduce some of that variety is already to challenge their norms and open up new possibilities. Furthermore, Christian teachings are such a pervasive part of regional political and cultural conversations, that to introduce the diversity and flexibility of biblical interpretation is also to open new possibilities for their politics and their lives. To be sure, students arrive and leave my class with a range of religious and political perspectives. What I hope they will take away from my class is sharper critical thinking, reading, and analysis skills and some historical information to ground their discussions.

Whether a student supports women’s ordination (for example) or not, I want them to understand that the New Testament contains texts from different authors and time periods with a variety of perspectives, and that as a result Christians interpret their scripture to support both sides of this debate. Whether students are interested in economic justice, or environmental justice, or racial justice, I want them to know that the New Testament is being used to defend different points of view, and I want them to be trained to recognize the assumptions and methods that justify and legitimate those claims. In this “post-truth” world where “alternative facts” and conspiracy theories appear on news channels, social media, and websites, it is important that students leave a Humanities class having learned how to analyze information and evaluate claims. I have removed very little first-century content from my course to make room for these twenty-first-century conversations. I still introduce students to second-Temple Judaism and the Roman Empire, discuss the New Testament texts in their first-century context, and talk about source criticism, Gnosticism, and the quest for the

historical Jesus. These conversations about perspective and contemporary relevance, rather, bookend the semester, from the Miguel De La Torre essay in the beginning to the New Testament Today project at the end. But as such, they also constantly frame our discussions of the ancient texts, reminding students that these canonical texts have a long history; they have been used to justify violence, and they have shaped Western laws and ethics, including some of our own.

Our students today are part of a generation that is more actively engaged than in the recent past: they are talking about racism; they are concerned about the health and future of the planet; they support LGBTQ+ people and women's rights; and they are concerned about racial and economic injustice. Any teacher faces difficult questions about what to include in the short time that we have with our students each semester. Those of us who teach biblical studies not only have to decide how much historical context to give, which biblical texts to emphasize, and what non-canonical material to include, but we also need to decide whether and how much to engage with the long afterlife of these canonical texts and how they continue to affect our present world. Civil rights leaders taught us the importance of activism; feminists taught us that the personal is political; LGBT activists taught us that silence = death; and critical theory taught us that human narratives, including science and scholarship, are shaped by the unique embodied experiences of their authors. And so in this world where my white and able body, along with my education, economic, and citizenship status, bring me great privilege, even as other aspects of my body and identity leave me vulnerable, I have become increasingly explicit about the contemporary relevance of the history that I teach, making room to explore diverse perspectives in the "brave space" that I work hard to create each semester in my classroom.²¹

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²¹ Recent discussions have observed that while "safe spaces" where students can trust that all aspects of their complex identities will be supported are critically important, these spaces do not as fully encourage social justice activism. Rather, moving the conversation forward from tolerance also requires "brave spaces" where different perspectives can be discussed in an effort to increase understanding and empathy through honest, though often uncomfortable, dialogue.

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