

Teaching Torah and Testament: On the Pedagogy of Sacred Texts in the Liberal Arts Curriculum

Michael Dobkowski and Richard Salter

This article provides reflections and analysis on the pedagogical benefits and challenges of co-teaching “Torah and Testament,” a sacred texts course that focuses on the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible and is taught by a specialist in Judaism and a specialist in Christianity. We recommend this model as an alternative pedagogical approach that structures difference and dialogue into approaches to reading sacred texts. In this model of teaching, the varieties of reading and interpreting, informed by the respective traditions, illuminate one another, posing questions to one another and challenging one another, thereby providing students with alternatives that would not otherwise be present. As a secondary benefit, the course contributes to interreligious dialogue and understanding.

Keywords: co-teaching, dialogical teaching, exegesis, hermeneutical stance, interreligious dialogue, midrashic, pedagogy of sacred texts

Introduction

We teach at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, a small (2,300 student) liberal arts college in Central New York. Although Hobart has Episcopal roots, our college is now secular and nondenominational; there is no curricular requirement for courses on religion, so the students who enroll in our religious studies courses do so strictly voluntarily. One of us, Professor Dobkowski, teaches Judaic traditions, while Professor Salter teaches Christian traditions.

In the late 1990s our department began an extended generational shift. Not only were older faculty members retiring and younger faculty members replacing them, but our students were also changing. Whereas once it might have been expected that students would be familiar with the basic stories of Judaic and Christian traditions, by the early 2000s that was no longer the case. We now recognize this as a precursor to a more general shift among millennials with regard to religious commitment and the study of religion.¹ As part of those generational shifts, our department began to rethink some of our course offerings. While Bible courses had been offered in the past, they had tended to be more specifically focused (for example, on detailed explorations of Paul’s epistles) than what the department thought it needed given the new students. We wanted to offer a general course on sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity that required neither foreknowledge of either tradition nor experience of the subject matter from our students. In addition, since our department is relatively small, and since there is significant important overlap of the

¹ On changing levels of religious commitment among first-year college students, see M. K. Eagan, E. B. Stolzenberg, J. J. Ramirez, M. C. Aragon, M. R. Suchard, and C. Rios-Aguilar, *The American Freshman: Fifty-Year Trends, 1966–2015*. (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 2016). On the study of religion, see Randall Reed, “A Book for None? Teaching Biblical Studies to Millennial Nones,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 19, no. 2 (2016): 154–174. DOI: 10.1111/teth.12329

Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible, we thought that the course should be applicable to a Judaic studies concentration and a Christian traditions concentration, both of which are offered by our department.

However, we were profoundly aware of the multiple different stances the two traditions take towards the texts, and the different premises of interpretation held within the two traditions, and we were aware of the risks of being dismissive or unevenly appreciative of the texts if any single faculty member were to teach them at the same time. Since our department has had a long history of co-teaching, we thought we might avoid those difficulties if we offered a course taught by two members of the department, one a specialist in Judaism and one a specialist in Christianity.² The result is the course “Torah and Testament,” a course we have typically taught biennially for the last fifteen years.

As far as we know, our approach of simultaneously co-teaching a sacred texts course is not widespread in undergraduate education, and thus far we have only found one course at the graduate level with a similar pedagogy (a Jewish–Muslim sacred texts course taught at the Graduate Theological Union).³ Here we recommend it as an alternative pedagogical approach that structures difference and dialogue into approaches to sacred texts. Although our course focuses strictly on the Hebrew Bible and Christian Bible, we see no reason why this pedagogical technique could not be used to approach other shared texts, stories, or figures.

In what follows, we first provide background on the type of course we teach, distinguishing our approach from comparative religion courses. Although unintended, we have been pleasantly surprised to see that the course contributes to interreligious dialogue. In the next section we discuss the place of this type of course in general education, noting that our course is meant to accomplish two tasks: familiarize students with material, but also form them to particular habits of reading and ways of approaching texts that can be generalized to other forms of learning. The key to the course is its co-taught structure. After elaborating that structure, we present some specific practices we use in the course, discuss the weakness of the approach, and close with a brief discussion of other possibilities that the co-teaching model opens.

Background: A Dialogical Course

It is important to note that the course as we developed it is not a “comparative” course, but a sacred texts course: its focus is the texts themselves, not necessarily a

² The generic term “co-teaching” can refer to many different formal relationships among teachers. In our course we might more accurately be said to “team teach” because we are both teaching all of the material all of the time and there is no hierarchical relationship between us (as, for example, when a professor and a graduate student co-teach). Vogler and Long include a literature review that summarizes the various permutations of co-teaching. See Kenneth E. Vogler and Emily Long, “Team Teaching Two Sections of the Same Undergraduate Course: A Case Study,” *College Teaching* 51, no. 4 (2003): 122–126, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27559153>.

³ Sue Fishkoff, “Jewish–Muslim Study Course Grounds Interfaith Dialogue in a Sacred Text,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, February 9, 2010, <https://www.jta.org/2010/02/09/life-religion/jewish-muslim-study-course-grounds-interfaith-dialogue-in-sacred-text>.

comparison of how the texts are read. In other words, while we consider various Jewish and Christian readings of the texts (and have incorporated atheists’ readings too), these readings are juxtaposed in the classroom space rather than systematically explored with any formal comparative method. In this way, we sidestep many of the problematic methodological questions associated with ill-conceived comparison.⁴ Yet comparison happens regularly, either in actual dialogue among the professors and students, or informally as students process for themselves the varieties of interpretations offered. Our understanding of dialogue borrows Cheetham’s summary of Forward, where dialogue is defined as a “working through” of worldviews to a greater truth.⁵ We emphasize the process of working through, but not the promise of arriving at a greater truth.

Similarly, although the course was not initially conceived as dedicated to interreligious dialogue and understanding, it has become clear to us that it directly contributes to both, albeit in ways that may not fit with conventional understandings of interreligious dialogue. We should add that both faculty members are religiously observant in the traditions that they teach, though that was not the case for Salter when the course was first designed. We do not think that the co-teaching approach suggested here requires that the faculty be religiously observant, but it may help. We are aware that our approach to the class may be informed by our particular understandings of our respective traditions. Moreover, we know that student perceptions of us may be quite different from our self-perceptions, and for them it may add a level of legitimacy to the class when they see two faculty who are participants in different religious traditions actually engage in the practice about which we are teaching.

We have been struck particularly by the practical results of simultaneously teaching about texts from multiple perspectives. To use a simile from classical music, the course unfolds like a fugue: the biblical texts (and the episodes and characters in them) are the theme and our elaboration and exploration of them from the different traditions are the voices that are played and replayed in different pitches and in different relationships to draw out the amplitude and depth of the original theme. Although we might say that simultaneously co-teaching the texts is teaching them in parallel, that metaphor is not particularly apt because strictly parallel lines do not intersect. In this model of teaching sacred texts, the streams flow into and out of one another, illuminating one another, posing questions to one another, conflicting with one another, challenging one another, and providing the course participants with alternatives that would not otherwise be present. It is in these respects also that the course contributes to interreligious dialogue: while Jewish and Christian mutual understanding are not the articulated goals of the course, the co-teaching format is conducive to these ends. At the same time, simultaneous teaching by two faculty members specializing in different areas serves as a guard against an unconscious liberal desire to smooth over differences in the traditions, to suggest that they are fundamentally the same, or for one tradition to dominate the other.⁶

⁴ For a discussion of ill-conceived comparison, see Aaron Hughes, *Comparison: A Critical Primer* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2017).

⁵ David Cheetham, “The University and Interfaith Education,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15, no. 1 (2005): 16–35. DOI: 10.2143/SID.15.1.583339.

⁶ Our concern that this can happen arises from two places. First, we see it happen. Second, we learn that it happens, and its almost inescapable logic, from theorists of social reproduction (e.g., Bourdieu’s social

Although reading the same religious texts from different religious perspectives implies a kind of division (though surely one that can and has been managed), we have found that a process or practice of reading together that assumes multiple interpretations contributes to a respectful classroom and, without in any way eliminating division (or its positive correlate, “difference”), fosters an appreciation of complex reading. We take seriously the criticism from Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe, who theorize that poor religious studies classes, taught as part of an unexplored strategy in higher education to inculcate humanistic values, can become simple “religion appreciation” courses.⁷ But we think that the co-teaching model and the focus on texts themselves take important steps to reduce that risk. One of the books that we have used in the course is *The Genesis of Ethics* by Burton Visotsky.⁸ He argues that reading the Hebrew Bible with a group and exploring the multiple meanings of a text, and particularly the moral ambiguities in the text, forces the readers to think morally and develop a capacity for moral reasoning. Insofar as moral reasoning implies critical judgment and the ability to articulate one’s judgments, we accept his thesis. In this course, we extend it beyond reading from just one tradition to reading in two traditions that at times are in tension. The capacity to read sacred texts together foregrounds the kind of practical tolerance that is necessary (but not sufficient) for future comparative study, interreligious dialogue, and interreligious understanding. That is, reading sacred texts together implies at least the minimal habits of letting others speak, considering that the text may hold more than any one of us can fully know, and waiting while someone else unfolds, however tentatively, a meaning before us. It may even create a capacity in us to unfold meanings before others. We do not expect that in the end students will accept new readings of the texts, nor do we expect students to appreciate the texts themselves. We do expect that students will recognize, accept, and acknowledge the struggle that all traditions have with seriously engaging sacred texts, and we think that the university or college classroom is the right place to do this. As Alasdair MacIntyre has put it, universities fulfill their function:

. . . only when and insofar as the university is a place where rival and antagonistic views of rational justification . . . are afforded the opportunity both to develop their own enquiries, in practice and in the articulation of the theory of that practice, and to conduct their intellectual and moral warfare.⁹

reproduction in misrecognized forms) and critical theory. As this is primarily an article about a teaching method, we do not want to ally ourselves too closely with any particular pedagogical theory. In seeking to avoid the reproduction of domination, in this case of a Jewish understanding by a Christian understanding, or a particular religious understanding by a universal religious understanding, we see ourselves concerned with pedagogies ranging from Freire’s to hooks’. Yet we are also sympathetic to pedagogies like Gur-Ze’ev’s, which caution us about the ways that utopian ideas of liberation can also reintroduce domination. See Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury, 1970); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Ilan Gur-Ze’ev, “Toward a Nonrepressive Critical Pedagogy,” *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4, 463–486.

⁷ Luther H. Martin and Donald Wiebe, “Religious Studies as a Scientific Discipline: the Persistence of a Delusion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2012): 587–597. DOI: org/10.1093/jaarel/lfs030.

⁸ Burton Visotsky, *The Genesis of Ethics* (New York: Three Rivers, 1996).

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Theories of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 222.

In other words, learning to argue about texts is part of the university’s function, and in our class we argue about Jewish and Christian sacred texts.

And yet, MacIntyre’s words about “warfare” suggest only antagonism. Although we do not want to diminish the intensity of people’s attachment to particular interpretations, what we aim for is more akin to deep play with the texts. Conflict can be part of that play, but play is not always constituted by conflict. For example, in each iteration of the course, we have included books by Avivah Zornberg. These are perhaps the most difficult secondary sources in the course, but we include them not only because of their content, but because they model deep play and engagement. Even when students do not understand the historical, philosophical, literary, or psychoanalytic context of Zornberg, they can still see what she is doing. Zornberg shows what we aim for at a very high level; our hope is to draw students in to doing this at a more introductory level.

There are a few reasons to model this kind of engagement with the text, and some are particularly timely: in the first place, complex readings of the texts, including readings that cannot necessarily be reconciled, are a necessary historical corrective to the common view that texts simply interpret themselves—almost always “literally.” In fact, the anachronistic perspective of literalism detaches students from the traditions in which the texts are embedded and makes them that much more difficult to understand. Secondly, recognizing struggle with texts can help create a situation in which hegemonic readings can be questioned, both within the traditions and outside of them. A good example of why this might be important outside of a religious studies classroom is the recent quote of Romans 13 by Attorney General Jeff Sessions in the context of the debate about undocumented immigrants and the separation of children and parents at border checkpoints.¹⁰ In that situation, the text was presented as clear and unambiguous, devoid of the text surrounding it, the tradition of which it was a part, its historical context, or the context of its subsequent interpretation. Teaching students models for reading sacred texts as ambiguous opens up possibilities for conversation about government and authority as opposed to simply shutting them down as the quote seemed to be meant to do.

Arguably, contemporary US culture places a high priority on understanding texts to the point of closure, but in this course we might say that our priority is on “not understanding” the text, at least not understanding the text with finality. When questions are left productively unclear, we have succeeded in opening up not only the text, but also the space between reader(s) and text, a space where deep play and engagement can take place. Unfortunately, “opening a text” does not often seem practical to students, especially now that goals like “getting a better job” and “making more money” have grown in

¹⁰ Attorney General Sessions cited Romans 13 as a reason to obey governing authorities, an interpretation that White House spokesperson Sara Huckabee Sanders modified to suggest that enforcing the law is good biblical practice. We would note that many responses to Sessions’ use of the quote also refused to engage the text, simply calling it a passage used to justify slavery. Both responses to the text diminish the richness of the tradition that gave rise to it and foreclose further discussion.

importance as goals for incoming college students.¹¹ Nonetheless, we consider introducing students to this type of inquiry to be the heart of higher education, and we think it is necessary more than ever in our present context.

The Bible in General Education: Information and Formation

Before turning to the specifics of our course, we think it is important to place it in the context of J. Z. Smith's thinking about the role of teaching the Bible as part of what is often called "general education."¹² Smith distinguishes between three meanings of the term "general education." First, Smith distinguishes "general education" as a form of education that treats of subject matter that is important for all students, and a form of education that privileges what is considered essential knowledge for all well-educated people (e.g., "core" knowledge). He names the second form of general education as "generalist education." This form of education emphasizes the need for breadth in student education and, thus, asks students to integrate a wide variety of approaches under the rubric of what are often called survey or introductory courses. The third form of general education described by Smith is "generalizing education." In this form, the student is asked to integrate material in a way such that new conclusions can be drawn later in the student's career. This form of general education deals primarily with teaching students processes for integrating of information.

Smith's conclusion with regard to the place of the Bible in higher education draws on his distinctions between the various tasks of general education:

First, that the prime object of attention is not the Bible, but rather a corporate agreement as to an educational project to which the Bible may be brought as an appropriate example. Second, that the ways in which the Bible might be taught will vary, appropriately, according to the ways in which that educational enterprise is understood.¹³

While Smith gives us examples of how the Bible is taught in the first two senses of general education (to wit, as the "book of books" in the first form, and in Bible surveys in the second form), he states:

"Generalizing education" in relation to the teaching of the Bible is more difficult to describe in that I know of no actual example of its application in pure form. But surely, it would not be difficult to imagine examples of courses in comparative "scriptures" or "canons," or comparative "reformations;" courses concerned with generic matters of literacy and/or orality, of religious authority, of the relation of the text to linguistic and/or ritual interpretation fruitfully utilizing the Bible as an "e.g." alongside of,

¹¹ The orientation towards more practical goals such as these is notable over the last fifty years. See Eagan, et al., *The American Freshman*, 68–70. Especially notable is the jump of 14% between 2006 and 2009 in percentage of students saying that "to be able to get a better job" is a "very important" reason to go to college.

¹² J. Z. Smith, "Teaching the Bible in the Context of General Education," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 1, no. 2 (1998): 73–78. DOI: 10.1111/1467-9647.00016.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 75.

and presuming acquaintance with, the traditional focused courses offered to majors on particular aspects of biblical materials.¹⁴

We would characterize our course as most closely resembling the “generalizing education” model insofar as our emphasis is on how to read sacred texts and the sorts of questions that arise when considering sacred texts in relation to one another. There are many benefits to this approach, but for our purposes here two are particularly important to mention. First, the generalizing education model allows us to start with no particular conclusion about what the “sacred” is and why the texts are “sacred” (other than that people say they are). We do think that the texts are worth taking seriously, but that does not mean we are theological apologists for the texts because we can easily ground our claim in reasons accessible to religious and nonreligious people alike (for example, their historical, cultural, or political influence).¹⁵ Second, as generalizing education, the approaches and questions that students learn from this course can also be applied when reading other sorts of texts, including texts that may overlap, borrow from one another, or be embroiled in conflicting interpretations (for example, for those students who might continue on to read secular legal texts).

In thinking about our course as primarily focused on how to read sacred texts, we have become aware that this course also treads what is sometimes conceived of as a narrow line in religious studies between content and skills acquisition (the former of which overlaps with Smith’s first sense of general education and the teaching of the “book of books;” the latter of which overlaps considerably with critical thinking). On the one hand, we want students to learn and appreciate a set of sacred stories. We want them to recognize figures like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Mary, Jesus, Nicodemus, and Pilate. On the other hand, we want to inculcate in students and habituate them to particular modes of reading; that is, we want to form them towards complex readings of the texts. What is complicated is that the modes of reading to which we are habituating them are also often modes of reading that come from the traditions in question: thus, “midrash” might be said to start with a particular orientation to the text that assumes a kind of preformation in Judaism. Christian biblical exegesis also is done within a framework that often starts with the “Christ event” and guides acceptable and unacceptable interpretations from there. Thus, in addition to framing our course in terms of general education, we have also thought about our course in the contexts of the particular traditions that we teach.

In a set of articles published in *Teaching Theology and Religion*, six authors discuss what is the relationship, as they put it in their abstract, “between the academic knowledge of the guild and the formation [around religious and ethical commitments] of students in the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁵ That taking the texts seriously might make us theological apologists is a conclusion we draw from Donald Wiebe, “Taking Religion Seriously’: Eric Sharpe’s ‘Comparative Religion: A History’ as Apology,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 1, no. 1 (1989): 71–79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23549504>. For articulations of secular reasons why the texts should be taken seriously, see Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); and Reed, “A Book for None?”.

classroom.”¹⁶ Their discussion came out of Barbara Walvoord’s studies that note that students tend to be more interested in spiritual development in college than their professors.¹⁷ The authors of the articles in *Teaching Theology and Religion* found it useful to distinguish between the approaches geared towards spiritual formation and those geared to information in religious studies. We have also found a wide range of goals among our students, including religious and spiritual goals, and thus we constructed our course with the goal in mind of neither highlighting nor discouraging spiritual formation in the classroom. In our course, any spiritual formation arises from engagement with the texts. Insofar as the specific traditions we teach link spiritual formation with a particular sort of engagement with the texts, we might be said to be fostering spiritual formation. In engaging the texts we raise the sorts of profound questions with which we think, and others have historically thought, that these texts deal. Our solution, then, to the tension between content and spiritual formation has been similar to the question-oriented approach that Walvoord describes as successful with students seeking spiritual answers.¹⁸ Although not our original intention, our question-oriented approach elicits the voice of the questioner in students too, and this voice can be helpful for students seeking spiritual engagement as one of their own goals for the course. In fact, after a few iterations of the course, we started centering student questions about the texts into the start of each period (a process described briefly below).

We would leave it to others to judge whether our course presents a kind of “crypto-theology.” They might ask, “Do we inculcate or support a notion of sin by raising a question of sin?” Such questions seem inevitable in this sort of course because the texts themselves talk about sin, and to avoid the topic would be to avoid important themes in the very texts we are reading. But to be clear, we do not expect students to respond in any particular way to the question of sin. It is okay for them to say, “This does not make sense to me,” as they often do when discussing Genesis 3. And, since we are simultaneously reading from different traditions, there is never only one interpretation on the table at a time, so when the notion of original sin arises, and the Judaic studies professor says that this does not make sense in the Jewish tradition, the students are authorized to question it.

Our course was constructed from the start with this awareness of the dynamic interplay between conveying information, on the one hand, and teaching students certain habits of reading, on the other.¹⁹ We are, after all, teaching sacred texts that are central to their respective traditions, so it seems appropriate to habituate students in ways that help illuminate the traditions. At the same time, we are teaching a variety of modes of reading that are both central to the two traditions and, we would argue, foundational for all critical reading. It is simply not possible to read these texts well without taking them seriously, yet

¹⁶ Fred Glennon, Douglas Jacobsen, Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, John J. Thatamanil, Amanda Porterfield, Mary Elizabeth Moore, “Formation in the Classroom,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2011): 357–381. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9647.2011.00740.x).

¹⁷ Barbara E. Walvoord, “Students’ Spirituality and ‘Big Questions’ in Introductory Religion Courses,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 11, no. 1 (2007): 3–13. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9647.2007.00391.x. Also see Barbara E. Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

¹⁸ See Walvoord, “Students’ Spirituality.”

¹⁹ Insofar as critical thinking involves habits of reading, it too is a kind of formation.

both traditions affirm that taking the texts seriously involves meeting the texts with profound questions.

In this course, our informational objectives are that students should become familiar and comfortable with discussing a small number of important sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity. As our starting point, we have chosen Genesis, Exodus, Matthew, and John, each of which is emblematic of some major concerns of their respective traditions. In addition to the more general informational objectives of the course, we also want our students to be informed of and by multiple approaches to sacred texts, and we would like for them to be able to recognize these different perspectives. For example, we want students to read midrashic approaches to the texts, do scriptural exegesis, engage the text artistically and through literature, read philosophical inquiries about the text, and understand critical-historical approaches to the texts. Additionally, though neither professor desires to theologically influence students, we do want students to be able to see the texts and explore the texts theologically—that is to say, we would not characterize this as simply a “Bible as literature” class that brackets religious concerns in favor of plot lines. To state it very directly, we want students who bring theological questions to the texts to recognize their questions precisely as theological questions.

Our critical thinking objectives have to do with developing in students the possibility of sustained engagement with a sacred text, an ability to imagine multiple interpretations of a text, and an ability to imagine how ancient sacred texts may remain important for specific groups or individuals today. We do not steer students away from constructive theological engagement with the texts. Both professors feel comfortable acknowledging that we hope students come to appreciate the texts in all of their complexity. We do not expect students to like the texts, to find them meaningful for themselves, or to use the texts to deepen their own religious commitments; yet, should students do any of these things, we do not regard it as being outside of the bounds of the course (nor outside the bounds of religious studies as a field).

The Structure of the Course

The structure of the course is very straightforward. We start with assigning short close readings of the biblical texts themselves. Two choices we made early in the planning of the course were, in retrospect, crucially important: first, in discussing which translations to use, we opted to order two Bibles. To read the Hebrew Bible, we use the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation. We were concerned that most students would appropriate the Jewish texts if they were not presented as in some way independent. Although it is *de rigor* in our professional lives to refer to the Hebrew Bible and Christian Bible as distinct (though related), our non-Jewish students still tend to use the term “Old Testament” and read the text through stereotypical lenses (e.g., that the “Old Testament” God is wrathful, but the New Testament God is loving). Using a separate text, though more expensive, is worthwhile because it physically preserves the independence of the book and emphasizes that we are reading from two distinct traditions. Moreover, the JPS version of the text is printed in parallel columns of both Hebrew and English translation, respects the formatting of the scrolls, and is opened from right to left, like the Hebrew text would be. Using this text thus also preserves something of the foreignness of the text to those who may

already be familiar with the stories. Simply by opening the text, the professors have the opportunity to highlight difficulties and multiple readings that result simply from translation and formatting.

In terms of the Christian Bible, we order an Oxford Revised Standard Version for students to purchase, but we also explicitly allow students to use other versions should they choose. We also actively encourage students to use online sources (such as, for example, biblegateway.com) to compare a variety of different translations. Translation has been a distinctive (though not uncontroversial) characteristic of Christian (and particularly Protestant) approaches to the text, and using multiple translations brings this issue into class discussion quickly. We remember one discussion in particular when Romans 13 was being discussed. A student who had been using The Living Bible read Romans 13:

² So those who refuse to obey the laws of the land are refusing to obey God, and punishment will follow. ³ For the policeman does not frighten people who are doing right; but those doing evil will always fear him. So if you don't want to be afraid, keep the laws and you will get along well. ⁴ The policeman is sent by God to help you. But if you are doing something wrong, of course you should be afraid, for he will have you punished. He is sent by God for that very purpose.

Those using the Revised Standard Version pointed out that the word “policeman” did not appear in their translations:

² Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer.

Those with other translations chimed in, and the conflict of translations opened an excellent discussion of what it might mean to translate in general, a key question for a complex reading of any text.

Beyond specific examples like this, since Christian and Jewish traditions approach the question of translation differently, the juxtaposition of our requirement for the JPS version and our willingness to allow any translation of the Christian Bible structures the question of translation into the course from the start.

As we mentioned above, after teaching the course a few times, we began to include student questions about the texts more centrally. We simply ask students to write a question or two about the text on a sheet of paper to turn in at the end of class. The questions can come from their encounter with the text, or it can emerge from the class discussion. We have found that this exercise keeps student questions at the forefront of the class, and when

we prepare for the following class, we sort through student questions to decide on the themes that are resonating most loudly.

We should note that we always begin the course with *Bereshit*/Genesis because it belongs to both traditions. The Gospels seek to reframe earlier texts, so it is crucial that students encounter these earlier texts prior to their being overlaid with Gospel interpretations. Starting with *Bereshit*/Genesis allows us to jump straight into our method of critical reading.

After several weeks of close reading of primary texts, we turn to critical-historical treatments of the text. While we have used a few texts over the years, those which seem to work best are Friedman’s *Who Wrote the Bible?* and Burton Mack’s *Who Wrote the New Testament?*²⁰ Our goals for this segment of the course are that students should learn what a critical-historical read of a sacred text looks like, how it might be helpful to look at the texts with historical and sociological contexts in mind, and where or how approaching a sacred text from a critical-historical perspective might challenge other, particularly certain theological, readings of the texts. It is in this section of the course that students are introduced to key academic concepts like the Documentary Hypothesis and the Two-Source Hypothesis.

From critical-historical readings, we turn to literary, philosophical, and other readings of the text. We are equal opportunity offenders of the texts in this section of the course in the sense that, when we first designed the course, we were careful to include fictional treatments of figures in both sets of texts. For example, for many years we used Anita Diamant’s popular novel, *The Red Tent*, as an example of fiction dealing with the family of Jacob and his daughter, Dinah.²¹ *The Red Tent* has been helpful in getting students to consider a range of questions, including “how do we deal with the absence of women’s voices in the texts?” and “to what extent is it responsible to elaborate a story in order to draw out themes and interpretations that are not fully developed?” This latter question often takes the form of a question about the meaning of midrash (loosely conceived) and how to distinguish responsible from irresponsible midrash. *The Red Tent*, and novels like it, are also helpful to us in making the case that the stories of Jewish and Christian sacred texts are still relevant and are still found to be meaningful even to those who do not count themselves as Jewish or Christian. Literary perspectives on the New Testament have included Anne Rice’s *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, LeHaye and Jenkins’ *Left Behind*, Shusako Endo’s *Silence*, Norman Mailer’s *The Gospel According to the Son*, and Nikos Kazantzakis’ *The Last Temptation of Christ*.²² Each of these raise important christological questions.

²⁰ Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); and Burton Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

²¹ Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: Picador, 2007).

²² Anne Rice, *Christ the Lord Out of Egypt* (New York: Ballantine, 2006); Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1995); Shusako Endo, *Silence*, trans. W. Johnson (New York: Picador Modern Classics, 1969); Norman Mailer, *The Gospel According to the Son* (New York: Random House, 1997); Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, trans. P. A. Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

In a recent rendition of the course we decided to use two novels by well-known atheist author Jose Saramago, *Cain* and *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*.²³ In these texts Saramago interrogates God's moral qualities through close elaborations of key biblical scenes and the invention and insertion of non-biblical characters and plotlines into the lives of key biblical figures. At times students from both traditions found Saramago's treatment of the primary texts to be offensive: Cain has extended sexual encounters, God is a bumbler, a rebel angel has to bail out Isaac during the Akedah, and Cain thwarts God's re-creation by killing Noah. On top of that, Saramago's free literary play allows Cain to travel not only space, but also time, making the text confusing for some students. Our response in each case is to start by listening to the students' responses. Students learn that it is okay, and even beneficial, to be offended by a text, for it helps us to see our own expectations in the text. And, since we do not expect students to like the texts, acknowledging their offensiveness can authorize a full range of reactions to the text. Of course, it is not just Saramago that is offensive: students reading closely are offended by Jesus' anti-Semitism in John 8 or Abraham passing his wife Sara off as a sister in Gen 12:13 and Gen 20. Saramago is helpful because he allows us to show the utility of the primary texts in arts and culture, and we are able to raise important critical questions about the limits of interpretation, responsibility to the original text, and the need for respect for other traditions in order to take the questions seriously. Saramago, for all of his vehement atheism, knows the biblical texts and the traditions that surround them exceptionally well. He also respects the depth to which the biblical texts have shaped the world in which we live. In reading his novels, we show the students what a serious exploration and critique of the texts looks like, providing them with an alternative to the shallow and dismissive treatment of the texts to which they might typically have been exposed on Comedy Central or on the Bill Maher show.

At the end of the course we typically assign more philosophical and exegetical works. Avivah Zornberg's works are typical of this part of the course and we have used *The Beginning of Desire* as a commentary on Genesis and *The Particulars of Rapture* as an extended commentary on Exodus. More recently we assigned *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers*.²⁴ These are very difficult and at times cumbersome texts for students, who are often not able to follow Zornberg's forays into psychoanalytical theory or appeals to the traditions of the rabbis. Yet, we assign them as a challenge to students, so that they may be exposed to deep philosophical and theological reflection on the texts. We have augmented these works with books such as *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis* by Karen Armstrong.²⁵ Recently we included a reading of a sermon from Martin Luther King, Jr. ("What is Man?"), as an example of how a different genre (the sermon) struggles with the texts and uses them as a ground for ethical action.²⁶

²³ Jose Saramago, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, trans. G. Pontiero (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1991); and Jose Saramago, *Cain*, trans. M.J. Costa (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

²⁴ Avivah G. Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995); Avivah G. Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001); and Avivah G. Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015).

²⁵ Karen Armstrong, *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis* (New York: Ballantine, 1997).

²⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., "What is Man?" Sermon delivered January 12, 1958, available at The King Center digital archive, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/what-man>.

We typically finish the course with an extended essay by Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*.²⁷ In several renditions of the course we have also used his commentary on Christianity, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, but in recent years we have opted instead to use our class time and lectures to highlight the connection of his reflections on Judaism to Christianity.²⁸ We find that Cahill provides a fitting closure to the course by reminding the students not only of the stories contained in the Hebrew Bible, but also by exploring the ways in which these stories are different, or seem different, from other Near Eastern traditions. Cahill allows us to emphasize at the end of the course that, regardless of one’s personal interpretation of these texts, they have been central to world history, and that contemporary humans ignore them at their own peril.

Teaching Practices

In terms of the actual teaching of the class, we hold the class as a large discussion. While one of us always starts with the preliminary questions of the day, we have found that teaching simultaneously (i.e., interrupting, disagreeing with, and affirming one another) works best. In practice this means that, after a preliminary meeting in which we discuss student questions and the reading for the day, we both go to class prepared to discuss particular aspects of the texts. Typically we focus on particular passages, but at times we also explore larger themes, such as the theme of freedom in Exodus or a comparison of the themes of creation in Genesis and John. With certain key passages, such as the “eating of the fruit” in the Garden, we read the text slowly with the students (often reading line by line or word by word) and offer insights or explanations from the various traditions we are teaching about. In the case of the “eating of the fruit,” we also find ourselves following the lead of the students, discussing things like the different concepts of “sin” found throughout the two traditions. What this means in practice is that each time the course is taught, the discussions head in different directions. While in some years students have been focused on the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 and what that might mean in terms of “sin,” in other years we have devoted far more time, for example, to the concept of covenant.

Grading in this type of course is slightly complicated. Typically we have divided exams into parts so that one professor grades all identification questions and another grades exam essays. When it comes to student papers, the best system seems to be for both professors to read and grade all papers, and then to meet and reconcile grades with one another.

Weaknesses of the Approach

The most obvious weaknesses of the approach are practical: it requires two faculty members to teach one course, and that can strain resources, especially if the total number of students enrolled is small. Typically our classes range from 25 to 35 students, so it is quite possible using two professors to maintain a sustained discussion. We are not sure if this

²⁷ Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed How Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Talese/Anchor, 1998).

²⁸ Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus* (New York: Talese/Anchor, 2001).

course could be taught in a large lecture format, since engagement and dialogue are crucial to our pedagogy. At the minimum, a large lecture format would have to be supplemented with small discussion groups, themselves led by faculty or graduate students familiar with the respective traditions. It may be the case that this pedagogy can only be used with small to medium-sized groups or that co-teaching such small classes is only possible at small liberal arts colleges. If so, we think this is one of their distinct advantages.

Beyond the practical issues, co-teaching requires a real reflexivity about the relationship between the faculty members, for the design of the course places the co-teachers in equal positions (as both experts and as nonexperts), and without a conscious awareness of this leveling, it would be possible for one person to dominate the discourse (and the other person to be secondary). In fact, we have seen this happen in other co-taught courses, and if one or the other faculty member is not comfortable with taking the role of the expert and taking the role of the learner from time to time, we think the course as designed would probably not succeed. Moreover, when an inequality in the classroom is mapped onto an inequality in the department, as for example when one faculty member has tenure and the other does not, there is a potential for that power differential to structure the course. Similarly, when one faculty member is in a position to review or recommend promotion for the other, there could be a tendency to defer to the faculty who is in the position of evaluator. In fact, these are all situations that we have faced and that are not only manageable, but that serve to strengthen the relationship among faculty because of the openness required.

In terms of pedagogy, although the course is generally successful, we often run into two difficulties. First, we never have enough time for everything that we want to do with each text. At the start of the course, we typically allocate two weeks for each Hebrew Bible reading and one week each for each Gospel reading. Without exception, we have found ourselves already running behind schedule at the end of the first week. This difficulty is endemic both with courses involving more than one religious tradition and co-taught courses because there is, by their nature, twice as much material to teach and twice as much that the faculty members want to say about the materials. It may also be endemic to approaches that try to elicit the voice of “questioner” in Walvoord’s sense: the first three lines of Genesis alone have generated days of questions to explore.²⁹ We have become stricter with our time, but this is only a partial solution. More realistically, over the years we have decided to focus our discussion of each text on the most emblematic episodes. Thus, for example, when reading the Gospels, we do not consider each miracle, apothegm, or encounter with authority. When reading Genesis, we have tended to give Noah short shrift in favor of “getting to Egypt,” the sine qua non for starting Exodus.

A related difficulty has to do with moderating the pace of reading in the course. In our department we typically assign seven to nine books per semester. In this course we also assign that number, but because the vast amount of material in the first few weeks of the course is contained in a relatively few number of pages, we find that students sometimes do not read the shorter readings at the start of the course with the depth that the readings require (in part because they have not yet learned the kind of reading necessary to plumb

²⁹ Walvoord, “Students’ Spirituality.”

the depths of a text), and they get overwhelmed by the high number of pages at the end. To solve this problem, we assign paper topics and select questions for exams that require that students have done all of the readings and attended class.

Both of the above weaknesses are structural and, insofar as we are committed to two faculty members co-teaching, plus including two traditions and multiple texts in the course, they cannot be fixed. But here we must remember that this is a course meant to best fit J. Z. Smith’s earlier mentioned idea of “generalizing education,” where the primary goal is for students to learn processes that they can continue to use after graduation to integrate more material.

A more significant difficulty that we have faced has to do with an initial inability or unwillingness of some students to engage the texts. We have noticed this happening more in the last five to eight years, so it may be related to Reed’s observations about the approach of millennials, and especially millennial “nones” (those who have no religious commitments) to sacred texts. Our observations have led us to note that an unwillingness to interpret the texts is more common among students with Christian precommitments, though it is also interesting to note that students with anti-religious precommitments have also expressed difficulty accepting interpretations that clash with their preconceptions of what the religion is. We have noticed that Jewish students, and particularly those who have attended some form of Jewish school, tend to be more comfortable with flexible inquiries into the text, and have been less reluctant to push the limits of what the texts are assumed to say.

While teaching the course in spring 2013, we faced the difficulty of rigid student interpretations. In one paper assignment we asked students to compare a theme or motif in Genesis and John and show how it unfolds in the text. After elaborating on the theme, we asked students to disclose the “hermeneutical stance” that allowed them to see that theme. To our surprise, a number of students simply indicated that their “hermeneutical stance” is as a Christian, and that stance led them to see the texts as the infallible word of God. In these cases, the students believed not only that the texts required a literal interpretation, and that a literal interpretation was possible, but they also seemed unaware of the variety of questions with which they would have to deal in asserting a literal interpretation. From our perspective, regardless of our respective positions regarding literal interpretations, an uncomplicated and unreflective stance toward the texts is antithetical to the purposes and presuppositions of the course. We do not teach sufficient numbers to know if that particular rendition of the course was an aberration (and, in fact, we did not perceive this problem the next time we taught the course), but it is a problem of which we will have to remain cognizant and that may be related to how millennial identity is formed.

Pedagogical Possibilities

Our course generally has been successful in getting students to simultaneously engage sacred texts from multiple perspectives. The co-teaching pedagogy has been central to that success. Co-teaching has allowed us to focus on the process of reading texts without, consciously or unconsciously, privileging one tradition over another. Co-teaching has also meant that multiple interpretations of the texts are always simultaneously in play, and it

makes explicit the norm that it is not necessary to agree with one another about an interpretation in order to engage a text. Beyond that, the practical requirement for a certain level of classroom decorum models respectful dialogue without assuming an underlying agreement at the start. But could this pedagogical method be used in other areas of religious studies where there is not the same degree of overlap as there is with Jewish and Christian texts?

We think it is worth consideration. Our department includes two courses on Jesus. The first, “Rethinking Jesus,” explores Jesus from historical, literary, pop cultural, and various theological perspectives. The second, called “Muslim Jesus,” explores Jesus within Islam. What might it look like to combine these courses and teach a course on Jesus from Christian and Muslim perspectives? If nothing else, such an approach would avoid an implicitly proprietary approach to Jesus, treating Jesus as if he belonged only to one tradition (as most students would assume). And it would avoid what could be perceived as the paternalistic approach of including just one book on Muslim perspectives on Jesus within a course that is otherwise structured by Christian approaches.

The co-teaching model inherently destabilizes the authority of the professor because it alternately shifts one of the professors into the role of nonexpert (and even into the role of student), thus allowing faculty the opportunity to model the sorts of engagement to which students might aspire. For example, in “Torah and Testament,” one of us routinely asks about the meaning and translation of Hebrew words, modeling the kind of “not knowing” that drives engagement with texts. The other frequently pushes us to explore the uncomfortable anti-Semitism of John (e.g., John 8: 44–45), and the anti-Semitic use to which passages like this have been put. In theory any one could ask about anti-Semitism in John, but because the person asking the question is a professor of Judaic studies, what might be perceived by some students as an uncomfortable (or impolite) question is instead authorized and openly discussed.

But what about courses where there is even less overlap? This is an area ripe for pedagogical exploration. Our own final conclusion is that the pragmatics of teaching schedules and student enrollments should not be the final arbiters of the structure of courses, and co-taught courses ought to be considered as a model alongside of the traditional single-faculty course.

Michael Dobkowski is Professor of Religious Studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges with a focus on Judaism and Jewish history. He is the author or editor of a number of books that deal with various aspects of the Jewish experience, including the American Jewish experience, Holocaust survivors, anti-Semitism, and comparative genocide.

Richard C. Salter is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and focuses on Christian traditions, particularly in the Americas and the Caribbean.

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)* are the authors’ own and do not reflect or represent those of the *JIRS* staff, the *JIRS* Board of Advisors, the *JIRS* Board of Reviewers, Boston University, or Hebrew College.