Religion in the Early British Literature Classroom: The Challenges of Teaching Religion and Literature to Students of Faith

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Religion in the Early British Literature Classroom: The Challenges of Teaching Religion and Literature to Students of Faith

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Religion in the Early British Literature classroom is unavoidable, though a great deal of energy has been spent in an attempt to ignore it. Two scenes from my graduate experience, long ago, I admit, will illustrate. In the first, an eminent professor drapes herself over the podium on the first day of class, declaring, “I hate Milton” (the subject, if you haven’t guessed, of the class). One could hate Milton for a variety of reasons, I suppose, but hers was pretty clearly the poet’s theology which, in her view, left humankind very little wiggle room. In the other, I had just finished my prelim presentation on that beloved poet George Gascoigne when a long-standing member of the Renaissance area at my university leaned back in his chair, tossed his pen onto his pad and declared over his half glasses (I’m not making this up!), “I just don’t see what all this fuss over Protestantism is about!” The academy has to some degree shifted in the intervening years, so that sessions at national conferences on, say, “Shakespeare and Religion” overflow into the halls; it’s hard to determine whether this is the effect of a post-modern openness to various voices (though the terms “openness” and “post-modern” are oddly juxtaposed) or rather just one sweep of a pendulum.

One might also consider the university English classroom where, since the New Critics (who were not all oblivious to religion) the goal has often been to shake the metaphorical (if not the literal) hayseeds out of the hair of students, replacing their provincial notions regarding religion, politics, and morality with more urbane ones. We’ve tried to make students more sophisticated, more skeptical, more secular. In its more recent manifestations, this means, in Mark Edmundson’s characterization, that “The student is taught not to be open to the influence of great works, but rather to perform facile and empty acts of usurpation, in which he assumes
unearned power over the text” (45). The “disciplines discipline,” as Edmundson, citing Foucault, points out, and Edmundson fears that the contemporary humanities classroom is shaping students in ways that do not serve them well:

The sense of superiority that current liberal arts education often instills rhymes with some of the least creditable trends in our culture. It rhymes with a superior and exploitative relation to the natural world, with condescension to the poor, with a sense that nothing in the world matters unless it matters to Me. (46).

If that sounds a bit like a religious critique of current culture, you understand why Edmundson, my guru in these matters, suggests that “Religion is the right place to start in a humanities course” (25) both because the subject matter of, especially, literature classes is full of questions and answers about life and because students, as Edmundson puts it, “are full of potent questions; they want to know how to navigate life, what to be, what to do. Matters of faith and worldliness are of great import” to them (28). Thus we neglect religion in our classrooms to our peril; more to the point, we neglect it to the peril of our students, who long to answer the questions religious inquiry asks: who am I? Where do I fit in the big scheme of things? To what do I commit myself? How do I live—and why? As we know, these are precisely the questions that are embedded in the great literature we teach.

But aren’t all these difficulties solved in the classrooms of a Christian college where, presumably, we share “one faith, one hope, one Lord” (or “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” if you prefer Ephesians to the choral anthem), where we put off worldly things and might even pray before we begin class (I don’t, by the way)? Let me say at the outset that a shared worldview has tangible advantages for both professor and student. It’s one of the things I most enjoy about teaching at a religiously-affiliated college. Community in the classroom may be formed in many ways, but a classroom, even a curriculum, that is grounded in a shared worldview may constitute an effective discourse community, where shared meaning emerges out of shared commitments and mutual understanding. As Flannery O’Connor writes about her
fiction, “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it” (34). And we may share a stock of stories—from the Bible, especially—as well as some shared reading practices, a matter to which we will return. It has been a serious responsibility and a deep delight for me to teach students whom I run across not just in the grocery store but also in church. These communal connections are not a feature only of Christian colleges, but they do form an important aspect of the Christian college experience.

Yet you may be surprised to learn that students at a religiously-based institution may resist reading literature in terms of religion. Like many of us, they tend to compartmentalize—they read the Bible one way (for meaning; for instruction) and literature for another (for enjoyment; for critique and analysis). Neglecting the interdependence of these two, they read the Bible literally and literature figuratively. Part of my goal for them is a bit of transference: to invite them to read Scripture using the tools of analysis they learn in their classes and to explore the religious implications of the literature they read, even when the subjects are not explicitly religious. A second issue is this regard is that students who choose to attend a Christian college tend to be more settled in their beliefs than the average college student. They’ve been churched, schooled, and catechized, many of them, into a fairly determined set of beliefs, and there are pressures—from parents, from constituents, from boards, from administration, even from themselves—to protect those beliefs rather than allowing them to be challenged, adapted, or expanded. This is good—they know where they are coming from—and bad—they tend to scribe narrow circles. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to play the role I critiqued above and prompt my students to question their faith. Rather, I want to invite them into a deeper understanding of the implications of their beliefs for their academic inquiry and for their lives. I have a colleague, a wonderful, gentle teacher of philosophy about whom students on evaluations regularly ask, “Is this guy really a Christian?” mostly because he asks open-ended questions about beliefs and actions. Appearing not to know, or not dispensing wisdom, is suspect. Is this why I usually find
a way to tell my students I’m a seminary drop out? One year of seminary training and I “saw the light,” abandoning Greek and hermeneutics for Early Modern English and literary criticism. I leave it to them to figure out how far I’ve come.

To take just one example, many of my students are most happy to recur to a medical or psychological explanation of Margery Kempe’s spirituality rather than to see her as touched by God. Of course, hers is a complicated case, and surely psychology and sociology are not irrelevant to them. But Margery offers a challenge not only to the religious status quo of her contemporaries, but also to that of my students. And so we talk about the power and autonomy Margery gains through her religious expression but also about debates in their own churches about the role of women. And we consider, to invoke the gospel song, that “Maybe God’s Tryin’ Tell you Somethin.”

So I have attempted to describe in general terms the situation of religion in the Early British Literature classroom. Let me use the time I have left to suggest three models for approaching the topic. These models are not discrete boxes—they overlap and complement each other. They are: religion as context; religion as framework, and religion as response.

Few would dispute that religion forms an essential context for reading and understanding much of Early British Literature. Indeed, Brian Cummings declares, “Without reference to religion, the study of early modern writing is incomprehensible” (6). The same could be said of all Early British Lit. Thus it is illuminating to recognize that the Venerable Bede is writing a sort of Acts of the Apostles for the English church, and that when he incorporates the story of Caedmon, he is using him to describe—maybe even influence—the transition from pagan to Christian in his own context. Also, it is crucial to measure Chaucer’s portraits of the clergy against his own religious setting. In my experience, Chaucer’s methods of comparison, juxtaposition, and gradation do most of this work for us—it’s hard to miss the rich context he invokes (though my students tend to bring an anti-Catholic bias to the table). Furthermore, it’s not at all irrelevant to put passages from Calvin next to Sidney’s description of the poet’s
“erected wit” and “infected will,” and Hamlet’s Lutheran leanings are worth exploring. Finally, uncovering the fault lines between Milton’s God and the Gospels’—but also the deep scriptural engagement of the writer—form the work of reading Paradise Lost. By the way, it takes my students between 1 and 3 books to get over feeling that they are reading something very close to blasphemy. Religion as context, then, while it may elicit the “duh” response as being unremarkably what we do to explore literature in an era where Christianity and literature inevitably overlap, is a fruitful and necessary aspect of Early British Literature. It can be applied as a thin wash or as a thick plaster, I suppose, but it is certainly part of the décor.

Things get more interesting when we consider religion a framework for studying literature. Let’s be clear first about what I am not talking about. I’m not talking about measuring literature against a religious yardstick. Nor am I talking about prioritizing certain kinds of literature that “fit” a framework. I occasionally get asked by a prospective student (more likely, her parents) whether we read only “Christian literature” or “other kinds.” I have to listen carefully to decipher the assumptions behind the question, not that this changes my answer. Those that expect a curriculum that focuses on C.S. Lewis and John Bunyan (both of whom I teach on occasion) at the expense of, say Chaucer and Shakespeare (good Christians, both, I’d say) usually thank me very much and move on.

By framework, I mean a way of seeing, a perspective, a point of view—a worldview. In other words, it comprises a set of assumptions—call them beliefs—about reality and (especially relevant to studying literature) human beings. These may be summarized in a catechism or a statement of faith; they may be expressed in a scripture; they may be deeply held or merely what one has been told. But mostly, they are the set of beliefs that are foundational to how one lives. For you see, most persons of faith—with all due attention to history, context, and culture—hold to some fundamental beliefs which are unchanged over time and space. These include the nature of God as, in the Christian faith, a being both Three and One, for instance; they also include a belief that humans are radically fallen but redeemable through grace; and they include
an understanding that death is not the end and that the universe has a *telos*—not an end but a
goal. Please note that this is not the same as fundamentalism, a static approach to the
‘fundamentals’ which means that history, context, culture have virtually nothing to do with
belief.

So one important way that religion functions in my classroom as a framework is that I
invite my students to put their belief in conversation with what they read. I encourage that
process to be generative: that is, I ask students to be alert for ways in which their understanding
of human beings—fallen but graced, let’s say—show up in Shakespeare. As Nicholas
Wolterstorff puts it, “our narrative identities lead us to notice things and believe things which
otherwise would almost certainly go unnoticed or unbelieved” (quoted in Smith 56). David I.
Smith, who is explicating Wolterstorff, calls this “perspectival reading, in which the meaning of
texts is weighed against the backdrop of Christian convictions” (10). I’m not looking for
confirmation so much as discovery, for students to be on the lookout not only for the truths to be
found in literature and the arts but also for the truths and assumptions they bring to their
reading. So, for instance, if Augustine is right that we are restless until we rest in God, what
does that mean for a fictional character who seems quite content? At the risk of reifying
dualistic assumptions, I sometimes prompt them with Frederick Buechner’s observation that
“The world speaks of holy things in the only language it knows, which is a worldly language”
(63). Traversing that ground is a way to bring one’s worldview to light—to run it up against the
power of imaginative literature to get it right.

I do not wish to neglect devotional reading—reading poetry or prose, as in a sonnet or
sermon by Donne or an essay by Annie Dillard—for the purpose of spiritual reflection and
instruction. I suppose anything can be read in this way: after all, the theologian Karl Barth
declared, “God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming
shrub, or a dead dog. We do well to listen to Him if He really does” (CD I.i.55). I tend to avoid
greeting card poetry and cereal boxes, but I would hate to put parameters around devotional
reading (or walking or seeing or hearing). Much of what we consider great literature was written out of devotional motives and for devotional ends: we think of Julian of Norwich, “The Second Shepherd’s Play,” Wyatt’s Psalm translations, Donne’s sonnets, sermons, and Devotions. These texts were written, at least in part, as acts of devotion and they are, like other forms of religious art, designed to evoke a devotional response. Donne’s “Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward” is my usual classroom reading on the occasion mentioned; among my goals it that it remind us of other ways to read. And if you are an unrepentant Calvinist like me, believing all life is religious, then seeking the spiritual dimension of any text is a natural move. In addition, our literature is full of potent reading moments, from Augustine’s “Tolle, legere,” to Luther’s discovery of grace while reading Romans, to Bunyan’s Christian “clothed with Raggs, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own House, a Book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back” (10).

However, the kind of “spiritually engaged reading” I wish to focus on is broader than purely devotional reading, and here I rely on the interesting work of David I. Smith, John Shortt, and Alan Jacobs as represented in the collection of essays titled Teaching Spiritually Engaged Reading, as well as on Jacobs’s book, A Theology of Reading. As Smith and Shortt point out, the Christian tradition has encouraged reading, particularly as a means to reading Scripture well: the story of Protestantism is closely tied to the story of reading—reading printed texts, reading aloud, to one’s family. It has also focused on what is appropriate reading. Less attention has been paid to what is perhaps the most important aspect of reading—how we read (5). Here is how Smith and Shortt put it:

Believers grow in, clarify, inform, and correct their faith through acts of reading, whether of Scripture or of other texts in which orientation is sought or found and the qualities that characterize those acts of reading (hurried, reflective, nuanced, careless, self-serving) can both result from and contribute to the shape of a person’s faith. (5)
First the claim: readers may put their reading to the use of spiritual formation or growth. They may read not only to know but to grow. The challenge of inviting ourselves and our students to this kind of reading are deep, and not all of them are religious. Coverage of texts, eras, and movements competes with engaging writers both on their own terms and on ours. Breadth versus depth—the old song. So does the desire to impart and receive information (Do your students prefer to learn about a text rather than to engage it? Is it easier to lecture than to give discussion over to students?). Furthermore, the answers our culture teaches us to seek tend to be scientific or technological (there must be an app for that!), rather than literary, artistic, or spiritual.

Yet we all know that deep engagement with literature is formative, and it important for us not to let the pressures of coverage and analysis overwhelm these effects. One approach is to encourage repeated reading. In one of my classes, we re-read Donne’s “Holy Sonnets” at least five times. And while it is true that analysis is the goal (there’s a paper involved, and on different days the focus is on text and order, say, or secondary readings), I do encourage students to read the sonnets in different ways and in different orders, hoping they will engage the poems on various levels.

As Smith and Shortt point out, particular reading practices lend themselves to “spiritually engaged reading”:

Qualities such as humility, charity, patience, and justice are goals of Christian maturation, basic ways of approaching the world whose scope and validity extend to how we approach the written words of others. . . . Encounter with texts can therefore be a place where such virtues are practiced, and perhaps also where they can be developed. Reading itself can be a form of spiritual discipline . . . . (6)

This is what Alan Jacobs (Baylor U via Wheaton) means by the “hermeneutics of love,” the subtitle of his book, *A Theology of Reading*. Beginning his approach with Augustine’s dictum
that any interpretation of Scripture which points to love of God and neighbor is valid, and invoking both Bakhtin and Wayne Booth (the latter with reservation), Jacobs suggests

It is [a] commitment to faithfulness that we must bring to our lives as readers if we would govern our reading by the law of love. This is a debt that we owe to all the books we read, because those books become, for the duration of our reading and perhaps long afterward, our neighbors—as do, in subtly differing ways, the books’ characters and authors. (64)vi

Thus for Jacobs (and friends), reading is attuned to living—one reads as one attempts to live, and indeed one may practice (in the full sense of the word) one’s beliefs in the approach one takes to reading. What if we treat books, and their authors, as neighbors, say like someone who shows up on our doorstep with a pear pie, saying, “Here; I made this for you.” The virtues of love (agape, to use the New Testament word), which comprise humility, selflessness, and believing/acting in the best interest of the other put us in a position to receive what we read. This approach does not make us passive recipients (we may enjoy, tolerate, or even dislike the pie), nor does it invite us to appropriate texts solely for our use (we don’t, I hope, hoard the pie, or re-gift it as our own). As C.S. Lewis puts it, “The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way” (19).

And so I am back to Mark Edmundson’s thesis. Edmundson, who calls himself “a longtime agnostic” (27), argues that “A liberal [arts] education uses books to rejuvenate, reaffirm, replenish, revise, overwhelm, replace, in some cases (alas) even help begin to generate the web of words that we’re defined by” (31). Spiritually engaged reading does not need to be confined to classrooms on Christian college campuses. Wherever we allow—rather, encourage—using literature to prompt questions about who we are, whose we are, and where we are going, we are engaged in in the kind of formation that religion calls for. This used to be called Christian Humanism, and while these two words have gone their separate ways, perhaps setting them down for a long talk together, let’s day with Erasmus as moderator, is not such a bad idea.
Mark Edmundson relates a conversation with a humanities professor who explains, “every generation of humanities teacher has worked, subtly and quietly, to make students into more progressive people. We’ve encouraged them to be skeptical about religious belief. We’ve helped them to be more open-minded. . . .” (85).

David I. Smith, whose formulations influence my own, explores four “models of Christian reading”: allegorical, perspectival (my “framework” model), charitable, and responsive (10).

Smith adds,
This does not mean that no one else could ever see what the Christian notices, or that the Christian will be unfailingly perceptive, or even that the Christian might not be less likely to perceive some things; it merely suggests that is becomes more likely, all other things being equal, that certain things will be noticed and believed by readers who bring Christian expectations to bear in their reading. (56)

Cummings says of Luther, “The story of his religion is a story of reading and writing” (9).

Augustine writes,
Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the diving Scriptures or any part of them in such a way that does not build the double love of god and of our neighbor does not understand at all. Whoever finds a lesson there useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived, nor is he lying in any way. (On Christian Doctrine)

Jacobs’s perspective is familiar to anyone who has read C.S. Lewis’s An Experiment in Criticism:

Good reading, therefore, though it is not essential an affectional or moral or intellectual activity, has something in common with all three. I love we escape from our self into one other. In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person’s place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity. In coming to understand anything we are rejecting the facts as they are for us in favour of the facts as they are. The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandize himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts we are doing this. Obviously this process can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary annihilation of the self. But that is an old paradox; “he that loseth his life shall save it.” (138)


