Ground zero: Forming students through the Bible

by Frederick A. Niedner in the April 18, 2001 issue

Few bytes of humor have logged more miles on the Internet than certain bloopers and gaffes collected by Richard Lederer (in *Anguished English* and *More Anguished English*), and those excerpts having to do with religion seem to circulate most widely. Consequently, most e-mail users have seen such Sunday school gems as "Noah's wife was called Joan of Ark," "The seventh commandment is thou shalt not admit adultery" or "When Mary heard that she was the mother of Jesus, she sang the Magna Carta."

Teachers of biblical studies can match these examples of mangled scripture with our own private stashes of things discovered in exams and papers. College students have amazed and amused me over the years with descriptions of events such as Moses and the Israelites barely escaping the Pharisees—who had pursued them through the wilderness. In one paper, a student explained that "when Moses went to the Sermon on the Mount where he died, the dream was worked out that loving everyone included our enemies." And the Book of Ruth, I've learned, tells the story of a "good woman who married Boas and eventually found out she was David's grandmother." One can't help but wonder if the Bible makes any sense whatsoever to a student who could write, "Jesus' last words in Mark were, 'My dear Lord, why have thou portrayed me?'"

The most disconcerting feature of these misunderstandings is that they appear *after* classroom study, not in the initial discussion. Moreover, it sometimes seems that attempts to teach the stories and provide their historical context confuses rather than clarifies. At the end of a unit on portions of scripture that involve the people of Israel's time of exile, a student once wrote, "The temple was the home of God's 'name' and 'glory,' although the exile allowed God to move around and be transcendent."

As a matter of principle, I never share the students’ bloopers with them. I have occasionally thought to amuse them, however, by reading from Lederer’s compendium of anguished theology. But when I do, I am struck by how few of the items get any reaction. As with exchange students from another culture, catching the humor in jokes takes longer than finding the restrooms or deciphering a menu.

Nearly all of the students in a typical undergraduate class at a church-related college consider themselves Christians, and most come from families more or less active in a church. Nevertheless, the world of the Bible is a mostly foreign land.

Mixed in with these “resident aliens” are some who startle us with what they know. I recently asked a group of freshmen what the word “theology” means. A student astonished me by responding, “Faith seeking understanding.” He had attended a Catholic high school, found mentors within the order that operated the institution, and read extensively in the writings of Thomas Merton. His familiarity with the discourse of theology approximated that of a first-year seminarian, not a garden-variety 18-year-old.

Some young people—an increasingly small minority—arrive at college with extensive knowledge of the Bible. They know its contents and even have a general grasp of biblical history. While these students seem more receptive to biblical study in an academic setting, they represent a curious mix. Some are steeped in a piety that employs the Bible as a vast, flat strip mine from which one picks and applies texts without giving any attention to problems of interpretation. Other students come with firmly fixed ideas and opinions that they feel bound to honor.

I’ve seen something like primal chaos descend during discussions of the creation accounts in Genesis: students have insisted that the earth initially had above or around it a physical firmament or dome that shielded animal life and vegetation until mature species and systems could thrive without protection. This assertion, apparently taught in the religion classes of some parochial high schools, comes from attempts to view all of Genesis “literally.” Once a student told me that her pastor had included among confirmation vows the pledge that she and her classmates would never in their lives, under any circumstance, entertain a theory of evolution.

If we take familiarity with basic elements of Christian tradition as a reflection of how effectively “formation” happens in our homes and congregations, we must admit to remarkably mixed results. This is not to say, however, that the current student

generation lacks common components of formation.

For several years I have asked students in introductory theology classes to make a list of the half dozen most important and foundational things they believe about themselves, the universe and their place in it—convictions that clearly affect the choices they make and the ways they choose to live. As one might expect from students at a church-related university, most cite things like “I know my parents love me” or “God loves me” or “I am a child of God.” A goodly number list principles such as the Golden Rule or “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

But the single most common item on this list is some version of the maxim “I can succeed at whatever I set my mind to do or become.” Today’s youth seem to share that much formation—a tribute, no doubt, to the efforts of Mr. Rogers, school guidance counselors, high school valedictorians and commencement speakers. A related bit of formation, although it often remains an implicit, unexamined corollary, is the belief that, since any one of us can truly succeed at whatever we choose, failure comes from a deficiency of will. Those who don’t live out their dreams have only themselves to blame. From there it’s a short step to asking why the successful have any reason to care for the poor or for others who have apparently chosen failure. This element of formation rubs uncomfortably at times against some parts of the Bible, like the oracles of Amos, many of the psalms or Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

Another piece of nearly universal formation that generates confusion when it encounters the Bible is the Enlightenment legacy that says truth can reside only in science and history. For those who unwittingly assume this and also find truth in the Bible, all parts of the Bible necessarily represent science and history (including Genesis 1-11 and the story of Joshua’s long day in the sun). Conversely, those who can’t accept creation accounts, miracle stories or somewhat contradictory passion narratives as either science or history must therefore judge them to be lacking in truthfulness. The former group generally makes its opinions known in the classroom. Members of the latter sit back quietly, hoping not to look impious despite their skepticism, and confess misgivings or outright dismissal of scriptural material later, in the privacy of a paper that only the instructor sees.

Add to this mix a handful of international students, most likely from a Middle Eastern, Islamic culture or from an Asian society in which people deem it strange to share any religious conviction, and we have an assembly that we could address only

if the miracle of Pentecost touched our tongues. Failing that, we have before us, each semester, a fugitive work crew straight from the tower of Babel.

A generation ago, when students entering church-related colleges seemed to have more in common and a greater familiarity with the Bible, biblical studies typically began with a textbook that surveyed biblical history and introduced the canon's books and authors. Where it was safe to teach from a perspective informed by historical criticism, successive editions of Bernhard W. Anderson's *Understanding the Old Testament* served as a standard introduction. Where historical criticism remained suspect or forbidden, works like Samuel J. Schultz's *The Old Testament Speaks* played that role.

Today, biblical studies publishers offer similar introductions too numerous to mention, and many instructors still use them in a game attempt to introduce the whole Bible in one or two semesters. In my own experience, these forced marches too often result in scenarios that find Moses confronting the Pharisees, or pitiful essays about Job, "a faithful, God-fearing Christian into whose life Jesus brought sickness and sorrow, even killing his family members and friends, to see how much Job loved and cherished him."

One alternative is to concede the grand sweep, proceed more like a hedgehog than a fox, and concentrate on a few, limited portions of the canon. This approach allows introduction of the many approaches and tools biblical scholars use today, from older methods such as form and redaction criticism to rhetorical, literary and social-scientific study to reader-response, poststructuralist and feminist interpretation. A semester or two of such work leaves students familiar with the shape and texture of a few stories, poems and oracles, and hopefully whets their appetite for more. This approach also tends to put students on a more or less level playing field regardless of their familiarity with the Bible. All of them must learn to use new tools. Like the older alternative from which it deviates, however, this approach may also leave students overwhelmed, particularly with the magnitude of what it takes to become competent at biblical study. A student once commented that my course had convinced him no one could understand the Bible without a Ph.D.

Few of us, at least on our better days, consciously set out to scare students off our turf or protect the secrets of a biblical studies high priesthood. We teach for love, not for power. We try to engage others in studying scriptures because at some point we fell in love with these texts. We have become intimate with them. We wear them

like a habitus. We cohabit with them. We lie down with them in the evening and wake up to them in the morning. We yearn to hear their familiar words and phrases, no matter how many times this loved one has repeated these same things to us before. We continually find new features and new avenues to probe, and we invite others into a similar relationship.

The kind of reading we practice approximates what Paul J. Griffiths has called “religious reading,” as distinct from “consumerist reading,” which makes us users, buyers and sellers of texts. Consumerist readers are interested primarily in moving quickly from one text to the next in search of things that will excite, titillate, entertain, empower and give them some advantage over others.

Religious readers, on the other hand, assume they have come into the presence of a text with inexhaustible depth. They read with reverence, humility, obedience and the presumption that difficulty in understanding reveals more about their limitations than the excellence or effectiveness of the text. Religious readers incorporate, internalize and memorize texts. They read slowly, hoping not to miss anything.

Many of us in the academic world would trade body parts for students able and willing to read anything, whether part of a sacred canon or not, with such care. Those who teach Dante and Dostoevsky, for example, read their works religiously and not as consumers, and they invite students to enter a similar discipline. How can we lure students into entering a kind of disciplined love affair with the texts we teach? Griffiths thinks monasteries have the last, best chance at keeping this ancient tradition alive. He despairs of teaching or practicing religious reading in universities because higher education in the U.S. has sold its soul to capitalism. Universities must justify everything they do by showing how these things help students to gain some advantage, become wealthy and develop bigger consumer appetites.

In addition, while colleges and universities teach critical thinking, truly religious readers strive to remain obedient to canonical sources, not to be critical of them. Griffiths likens a religious reader engaged in critical thinking to a balance-beam gymnast who keeps one eye on the floor as she does her somersaults. Athlete and scholar alike make a shambles of their practice when they attempt to do both, and those who teach students to focus on epiphenomena rather than on obedience to the texts drag others with them into the abyss of consumerism.

Moreover, teaching the Bible in a context that values critical thinking inevitably causes pain for some of the students and seems to disable for a time whatever religious reading they might have done prior to our classes. For those who come to this study in “first naïveté,” a semester of biblical study resembles open-heart surgery without benefit of anesthesia. We dissect living things in our classes. Though we assure students that the outcomes, which they can’t yet imagine, will prove worth the pain and fear, we cannot protect them.

On top of all this, we give grades.

Still, we ask students to come along. We invite them into a dance that might lead to intimacy and religious reading. We don’t do so only because we need jobs, or because students who should learn close reading for future success might as well learn it from reading the Bible, Augustine or Kierkegaard as from anything else. Rather, we invite them to join us on a path toward a dwelling place with rich pastures where a table is set before us and our cup runs over.

Most of us have found that place somewhere on the far side of a shadowy valley that stretched from the wreck of our own first naïveté to the point where we finally gave up the need for sure answers to every question. We learned instead to trust that God’s hold on us would ultimately prove stronger than our tenuous grip on God. There we entered a second naïveté, and likely fell in love again.

To this grand affair we beckon students. Some of them come along, lured, I believe, not so much by the beauty of our methods, maps and tools as by the quiet contagion of our love for the material, the remarkable, inexhaustible “thing” we gather round. Our varied approaches to scripture, our theories about depth versus breadth of coverage, and our work and worry over students with vastly different degrees and kinds of formation don’t matter nearly so much as the ways we practice and embody the virtues of a faithful lover or a religious reader. These same virtues, Mark R. Schwehn reminds us, befit the whole of a scholar’s life and work: humility, faith, self-denial and charity.

We practice these virtues when we interact with students, both the tender and the recalcitrant. We also demonstrate and teach these qualities when we remain students ourselves. In that role we share the thrill of discovery, and model the courage and humility necessary for letting go an old assumption in order to receive something new. Ultimately, love or charity becomes our magnum opus, though it

doesn’t show up in obvious ways on faculty service reports or résumés.

For better or worse, the flow of gaffes and bloopers remain a constant feature of our work. These curious sayings signify in part the size of the task we take on as teachers, and the distance between what we think we communicate and what students actually hear. Occasionally, however, a bit of pedagogical wisdom comes in these unlikely wrappers, like this from a student who concluded an essay on Matthew’s Gospel: “We must all follow Christ’s final command: ‘Go and make disciples of yourselves!’”