



HOW TO READ AN INTERPRETATION

INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES AND THE MAINTENANCE OF AUTHORITY

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It is not unusual for scholars to find that different religious communities interpret the same religious text in radically different and sometimes contradictory ways. What are we, as scholars, to make of all these variant interpretations? We could, of course, limit the goal of our scholarship and teaching to merely recording or cataloguing the variant interpretations. However, I suggest that our work as scholars and instructors is not complete if we stop there – we need to go beyond this to show that interpretations are strategic and to enquire what social agendas specific interpretive strategies may advance. In addition, I show that certain modes of interpretation are questionable either insofar as they are misleading in some way, or insofar as they reinforce the unquestioned authority of the text under consideration. If we sensitize ourselves and our students to the possible social effects of different strategies of interpretation, we will be able more easily to make visible those negotiations of social power that typically operate invisibly.

INTRODUCTION

It is not unusual for scholars to find that different religious communities interpret the same religious text in radically different and sometimes contradictory ways. What are we, as scholars, to make of all these variant interpretations? We could, of course, limit the goal of our scholarship and teaching to merely recording or cataloguing the variant interpretations. However, in this essay I want to suggest that our work as scholars and instructors is not complete if we stop there – we need to go beyond this to show that interpretations are strategic and to enquire what social agendas specific interpretive strategies may advance.

Much has been made of the problem of interpretation in the last several decades. Philosophers such as Hans-George Gadamer and Jacques Derrida have more than adequately shown that interpretation is always active, productive, and historically situated.¹ However, despite the fact that they show that the act of interpretation is necessarily historical, their works are often surprisingly ahistorical. Derrida, for instance, largely focuses on the general conditions of possibility of any interpretation, rather than the unique contexts of specific interpretations. This essay, by contrast, is concerned with distinguishing between different types of interpretations and with how each type does specific work in specific contexts. That is, I am less concerned with the nature of hermeneutics in general than with showing how scholars can historicize particular interpretations. While I accept Derrida's conclusions, I am more interested in framing the problem along the lines of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Bruce Lincoln, and others who have a Marxist interest in the critique of ideology.²

Bruce Lincoln's essay, 'How to Read a Religious Text,' provides us with an excellent starting point. In this essay he offers general guidelines about how to perform a critical interpretation or exegesis of a sacred scripture. The general questions that would guide such an interpretation would be the following: 'Who is trying to persuade whom of what in this text? In what context is the attempt situated, and what are the consequences should it succeed' (Lincoln 2006, 127)? He adds to these general questions a six-point protocol for reading a text (132), the use of which

would allow one to identify and track discursive or rhetorical innovations with social or political import.

When reading *interpretations* of religious texts (rather than the religious texts themselves), we can, of course, ask general questions similar to Lincoln's:

1. Who is trying to persuade whom of what with this interpretation?
2. In what context is the interpretation situated?
3. What are the consequences should it be received as persuasive?

These questions would help to bring into relief the social work that interpretations accomplish. Let me offer an example: in *American Jesus: How the Son of God became an American Icon*, Stephen Prothero stops short of asking these sorts of questions – he largely rests content with simply cataloguing a wide variety of reinventions of Jesus. He notes that African-Americans have ‘for centuries’ conflated their vision of Jesus with the figure of Moses (see Prothero 2003, 210), but fails to go on to explain why they might have done so, or what this conflation might have accomplished. He could have gone further, in order to show that in the nineteenth century the liberation-from-slavery motif present in their Jesus-Moses may have provided psychological compensation for slaves, or may have served as part of an ideology that challenged dominant social structures.

In this essay I want to recommend that we add the following to Lincoln's three questions:

1. What specific interpretive or rhetorical *strategies* are employed by interpreters?
2. Are these strategies in any way problematic from a scholarly perspective?
3. What are the implicit effects of those strategies on the authority of the text in question?

These latter questions are relevant for scholars because, as I will show, certain modes of interpretation are questionable for two different sorts of reasons. On the one hand, some modes of interpretation are questionable because they mislead the reader by distorting, masking, or making invisible the contributions of the interpreter to the task of interpretation. On the other hand, some modes of interpretation are questionable because they uncritically reinforce the unquestioned authority of the text under consideration. If we sensitize ourselves and our students to the possible social effects of different strategies of interpretation, we will be able more easily to make visible those negotiations of social power that typically operate invisibly.

In what follows, I will outline how we might begin to go about answering these questions first by considering the nature of authority and second by proposing a non-exhaustive taxonomy of interpretative strategies, showing how each mode of interpretation works, and showing the effects intrinsic to each method on the authority of the text interpreted. The taxonomy of interpretive strategies I am proposing is as follows:

1. Historical-critical exegesis
2. Speculation
3. Projection/Ventriloquism
4. Extrapolating from an invented essence
5. Refusal to extrapolate/Disabling contextualization
6. Selective privileging

7. Recreating the canon
8. Projective extrapolation
9. Displacement of associations

Throughout the paper and in my conclusion I will suggest that, on the one hand, scholars should avoid employing questionable strategies of interpretation in their own work, and, on the other hand, should labor to show how those strategies function in the texts they study and teach.

Before beginning, let me note that my examples are almost entirely from Christian traditions. This is not the result of an intentionally narrow process of selection, but simply due to the fact that my personal biography and scholarly training have made me much more familiar with these traditions. While I imagine that most of the interpretive strategies I identify in this essay may be found in other religious traditions, this is not necessarily the case. I readily acknowledge that all discourses do not follow the same rules, and I would welcome responses that show how my taxonomy may or may not be applicable to other traditions. I should note that the practices of authority in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam work similarly since each tradition is related to an authoritative canon and each follows similar rules of canonicity.³ For those religious traditions where canons are absent, more fluid, or less authoritative, my taxonomy of discursive strategies may be less helpful.

Second, let me note that by no means do I believe that everyone who uses the following strategies do so intentionally or knowingly. In fact, I assume that most people are unselfconscious and unreflective about the rhetoric they use. Interpreters develop what Pierre Bourdieu calls a ‘practical sense,’ which allows them to intuit the stakes of discursive exchanges and negotiate them by responding in ways that reflect their prior experiences and serve their future interests. For Bourdieu, one’s practical sense is ‘second nature,’ and, as such, discursive exchanges are executed naturally, without hesitation, and without conscious reflection (see Bourdieu 1990 and 1994).

When I go to the ‘Religion’ sections at Borders or Barnes & Noble – which are primarily ‘Christianity’ sections – I find rows and rows of books that will tell me what the Bible *really* means and what Jesus *really* wants for his followers. It is no surprise that most of these books arrive at varying and often opposed conclusions; I believe that these interpretive variances can best be accounted for by the hypothesis that these popular ‘interpreters’ of the Bible and of Jesus’ message take their own values and unselfconsciously project them into the text. ‘The Bible is good, right? Sexism is bad, right?’ From these assumptions it is a short leap to the conclusion that the Bible must be opposed to sexism. Similarly, other interpreters can easily come to alternate conclusions if their practical sense is predisposed to different assumptions: ‘God made men and women fundamentally different, right? Wouldn’t it follow that God wants men and women to have different social roles?’ From these assumptions it is a short leap to the conclusion that the gendered social roles prescribed in some parts of the Bible rightly reflect the way God intended the world to function optimally. While some might argue that this is an overly cynical view, I know of no other way to account for the great number of fundamentally opposed ‘interpretations’ that can come out of a single figure or text. In any case, this way of accounting for the differences in interpretation need not assume that devotees manipulate their traditions knowingly or intentionally – I assume that most if not all of the problematic interpretive strategies I will describe below are performed naturally and unreflectively.

Last, let me note that interpreters rarely use one strategy at a time. Although for purposes of clarity I attempt to analyse examples of these strategies in isolation, interpreters tend to marshal multiple strategies at once, making the procedure of sorting them out and demonstrating their effects rather complicated.

ON THE REPRODUCTION OF AUTHORITY

A number of the interpretive strategies discussed in this essay uncritically reinforce the authority of the text interpreted. However, authority is a complicated matter and it is silly to talk as if ‘authority’ were some magical property that simply resides in a text. On the contrary, authority only makes sense given a dialectical relationship between multiple elements. Authority is an effect produced by the relationship between a text, its interpreters, and various audiences. Were interpreters or audiences to cease to exist, there would be no such thing as textual authority. Consequently, it is too simple to say that these strategies reinforce the authority of the text, as if it could have authority in and of itself. Rather, when I say that an interpretive strategy reinforces the authority of a text, I mean that the work of the interpreter (1) assumes that a particular audience respects a text, (2) appeals to what the text ‘says’ in order to direct the behaviour of the audience, and (3) in doing so reinforces or naturalizes the audience’s continuing respect for the text.⁴

The reason I am attempting to draw attention to this function of authority is because authoritative texts can be utilized by interpreters to direct the behaviour of their audiences without the critical reflection of their audiences. It is often the case that interpreters can make invisible their role in the triangular relationship between interpreter, a respected text, and an audience that respects the text. Audiences may misrecognize the meaning given by the interpreter as residing in the text itself, and the active contributions of the interpreter to the ‘meaning’ of the text may indefinitely remain invisible. As a result, in a sense ‘authority ... does not restrict itself to the texts, but is primarily in the hands of those who control the texts’ (Rothstein 2007, 27). When an audience’s behaviour can be directed by a skilful interpreter who invisibly manipulates a text the audience reveres, the authority of the text is simultaneously the authority of the interpreter.

I do not mean to suggest that interpretations of texts can or should be disinterested. I think this is neither possible nor desirable. Nor am I intrinsically opposed to political advocacy in academic contexts or ethical pedagogy. It is beyond the scope of this paper to prove the following claim – and I might be wrong about it – but I am inclined toward the view that behaviour is ethical when it serves people’s interests and is not exploitative, rather than when behaviour accords with an authoritative text. On this view, if it is ethical to help the poor, that is because it serves the interests of the poor, not because Moses or Jesus or Muhammad commanded us to do so. In addition, I further believe that people are, in the long run, better capable of behaving in ways that serve their own interests and the interests of others if they are capable of identifying and evaluating how authority explicitly and implicitly functions to direct their own behaviour. If this is right, as scholars and instructors we can better serve public interests if we demonstrate to our audiences and our students how the authority of the texts we study can be deployed to direct their behaviour, rather than to reproduce uncritically the authority of the texts we study. If I argue against the reproduction of textual authority, it is not because I think that scholarship

should be disinterested, but because I suspect that reproducing textual authority is ultimately unethical.⁵

No one today, to my knowledge, attempts to interpret the law code of Hammurabi in a manner that reproduces the authority of that text; on the contrary, interpretations of that law code are usually indifferent to the text's authority, other than to point out that it was authoritative for particular audiences in particular contexts. I am unfamiliar with any attempts to discover 'What would Hammurabi do?,' to recover the text's essential meaning, to apply it to our contemporary context, or to show why it should no longer apply to our context. I remain unpersuaded that scholarly treatments of texts such as the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, or the Qur'an should be any different.

INTERPRETATIVE STRATEGIES

1) HISTORICAL-CRITICAL EXEGESIS

Historical-critical exegesis is the mode of interpretation most often used by scholars; it consists in asking the sorts of questions Lincoln raises. Who (or what group) wrote this text? For what audience(s) was it written? What did the author(s) intend the text to mean? How might contemporaries have received the text? What can we know about the social, historical, or political context in which the text was written, which might help shed light on the text's intended or unintended impact? In sum, the question of exegesis is the one suggested by Michael Cook: 'Never mind what this means to us now, what exactly did it mean to them then' (Cook 2000, 28)?

By no means do I want to suggest that scholars can fully reconstitute the context in which a text was written and arrive at absolutely certain answers to the question, 'what did it mean to them then?' However, scholars can reconstitute historical contexts to some extent and can eliminate a great number of improbable readings. For instance, scholars can know – as well as we can know anything – that when ancient Israelites referred to their god they were not thinking of an 'unmoved mover' or the 'ground of being.' Scholars can be certain that when ancient Israelites referred to 'Sheol' they didn't conjure images of red imps with forked tails and pitchforks, standing in a lake of fire.

Exegesis has no necessary relationship to the authority of the text, other than that it assumes the text is of some interest. That is, one can perform an exegesis on a text that one finds authoritative, or on a text whose authority one completely dismisses.

Exegesis may, however, be used in some contexts to challenge the authority of a text. Communities may hold a revered text as something divine in origin, historically accurate, perfect in some aspect, or entirely consistent with itself. Exegesis may challenge the authority of the text when it results in conclusions at odds with such views. For instance, many American Evangelical Christians assume that the New Testament is inerrant, meaning perfect and completely true. Scholarly exegesis, however, has challenged this view. To list only a few examples, Bible scholars have shown that some of the narrative New Testament is fictional, that the accounts of Jesus in the gospels are not completely historically accurate and are sometimes mutually contradictory, that the gospels were not written by the people whose names were attached to them, that some of the letters attributed to Paul were not written by him, that the accounts of the early church in Acts are questionable, and that different texts within the New Testament reflect different and sometimes mutually exclusive theological views.⁶ In these cases, the exegete may or may not intend

to challenge the authority of the text, but most American Evangelicals would receive this sort of exegesis as a challenge. In some cases, the intentions of the exegete are quite clear – there are some texts on the New Testament that explicitly draw attention to the credulity of Evangelicals.⁷ In these cases exegesis will be received as an attack – whether deliberate or accidental – on the authority of the text and on the ideology of communities for which that authority is sacrosanct.

2) SPECULATION

Historical-critical exegesis is easier when we have complete texts that are clearly written and when we can reconstitute the contexts in which they were written, as well as the settings in which they were first received. However, scholars never have all the pieces to this puzzle. When we do not, we must resort to speculation. When we speculate, we must construct for ourselves possible answers to some of the exegetical questions, in order to answer others. For example, we might say, ‘we don’t know who the audience was, but if it was this group, then the meaning of the text would probably have been received as ...’ Or, ‘we don’t know who wrote the text, but if it were a woman, which we suspect, this passage about “wives” should probably be read as satire ...’

In *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel*, Marc Zvi Brettler shows how an ancient Israelite story about a stabbing might be read as having a sexual pun – ‘the thrust of the dagger may be viewed sexually’ (Brettler 1995, 82). However, he also notes, ‘We know relatively little about ancient Israelite sexual terminology, particularly sexual slang’ (82). For this reason, he draws attention to the speculative nature of his reading, using qualifying language such as: ‘it is *possible*,’ ‘the *possible* sexual significance,’ ‘this term *may* also be used,’ ‘it is quite *possible*,’ ‘*if* this is so,’ etc. (emphasis mine; 82). He fully recognizes and actively draws attention to the fact that he cannot completely reconstitute the context in which the text was first received and that therefore his analysis is speculative.

There is, however, a big gap between informed, scholarly speculation and speculation-as-wishful-thinking. When I was a freshman in college I took an introductory course on the Bible, and was introduced to the fact that there are two conflicting accounts of Goliath’s death in the Hebrew scriptures (cf. I Samuel 17 and II Samuel 21). Undaunted by what I took to be only an apparent contradiction, I quickly raised my hand and suggested that perhaps it was possible that ‘Goliath’ was a common nickname for big and tall men in ancient Palestine; if that were the case, there may have been many ‘Goliaths’ running around back then, and different accounts of the death of ‘Goliath’ were not contradictory but simply the accounts of two *different* ‘Goliaths.’ Such speculation, of course, originated not in my informed knowledge of Ancient Near Eastern languages, cultures, and practices, but in my *wish* that these stories did not conflict with one another. Speculation produced out of my own wishful thinking was far from informed speculation produced by scholars whose guiding principles are those of historical-critical exegesis.

Just as exegesis has no necessary relation to the authority of the text, neither does speculation have intrinsic effects. As with exegesis, one may speculate on the meaning of a text that carries authority or on one that does not – although in some cases one’s speculations may, like exegesis, challenge the authority of the text or the authority of alternate interpretations. By contrast, speculation-as-wishful-thinking usually reinforces the authority of the text in question. This mode of interpretation is typically executed in order to allow readers to see passages in apparent contradiction as somehow consistent – that way the discovery of apparent contradictions does not disrupt the authority of the text.

3) PROJECTION/VENTRILLOQUISM

Projection or ventriloquism consists of someone or some group projecting into a text a meaning he, she, or they want it to have. For this form of interpretation, the text is for all practical purposes a puppet whose meaning is designed by the puppeteer. When the meaning attributed to the text is one that could not have been intended by the author(s), or one that could not have been conceived of by its intended audience, then what I am calling ‘ventriloquism’ is taking place.

G.W.F. Hegel provides us with a perfect example of projection in his ‘Life of Jesus,’ written in the late eighteenth century.⁸ In this short biography of Jesus, Hegel offers his own version of the section in the Gospel of Matthew that is popularly called the ‘Sermon on the Mount.’ Matthew 7:12 is typically translated as it is in the New Revised Standard Version: ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.’ Hegel’s version, however, reads as follows: “To act only on principles that you can will to become universal laws among men, laws no less binding on you than on them” – this is the fundamental law of morality, the sum and substance of all moral legislation and the sacred books of all peoples’ (Hegel 1984, 115–6). Here Hegel turns the ‘golden rule’ into Immanuel Kant’s ‘categorical imperative,’ making Jesus suggest that it is a universally applicable moral principle. In addition, he replaces the emphasis on Jewish authorities (the law and the prophets) with a type of liberal universalism, insofar as he forces Jesus to claim that not only is this the moral law prescribed by authoritative Jewish texts, but it is confirmed by authoritative texts of ‘all peoples.’ In doing so, Hegel acts as a ventriloquist and props up the figure of Jesus as his dummy – Kant’s ethical philosophy was not written until the eighteenth century, and there is no possibility that a first century figure could have made such a claim.⁹

Hegel is not alone. Due to his popularity and authority in western cultures,¹⁰ Jesus seems to be a popular object of ventriloquism. The figure of Jesus has often been co-opted for Marxist and socialist projects. Many socialist Christians write as if Jesus were a card-carrying communist. Lyman Abbott, a socialist Christian writer from the late nineteenth century, provides us with a clear example of projection in his *Christianity and Social Problems*. There Abbott explains that slavery gave way to feudalism in the middle ages, and that feudalism gave way to capitalism in the modern period. Under the capitalist economic system, there became a sharp class distinction between capitalists and laborers. What should Christians make of this state of affairs? ‘The general effect of Christ’s teaching, and of human development under its inspiration, is to abolish the class distinction between capitalist and laborer, as other class distinctions have been abolished’ (Abbott 1896, 163). Although he’s already told his reader that the class distinction between capitalists and laborers didn’t exist until the modern period, he projects this Marxist position onto Jesus. To be fair to Abbott, we should note that he deploys the strategy of ventriloquism not to serve his own interests or to bring about some sort of repressive social control – he seems genuinely to intend to bring about social effects that would relieve some of the burdens of poverty. Nevertheless, his interpretation is projective and therefore questionable.

Jesus carries an authority in our culture that other figures do not. If one can put one’s own views or values in Jesus’ mouth, they would carry the greater authority of Jesus. An important feature of ventriloquism is that it assumes and preserves the authority of the puppet being manipulated. That is, the condition of possibility for the success of a ventriloquist interpretation is that

the puppet is authoritative. The act of ventriloquism exploits this authority to further various social agendas, and, in doing so, maintains and reinforces that very authority.

4) EXTRAPOLATING FROM AN INVENTED ESSENCE

Extrapolation consists in taking a specific principle, idea, or injunction in a text and attempting to fit it to an alternate context. Unlike exegesis, which asks ‘forget what the text means for us now, what did it mean for them then?’ extrapolation says: ‘it meant this for them, but they lived in a different context – how can we make this relevant for our own context?’

One example of extrapolation is provided by the ways in which the shari’a (the body of Islamic jurisprudence) is interpreted, with respect to injunctions about fermented drinks. The shari’a forbids the consumption of fermented drinks made from grapes and dates. However, the shari’a says nothing explicitly about the consumption of vodka or rum. In order to see the injunction as also applying to vodka or rum, one must extrapolate from a principle assumed to be present in the injunction. For instance, one could argue that what is essential to the injunction is the prohibition of foods or drinks that have incapacitating effects on one’s body and mind. Although it doesn’t mention vodka in the injunction, vodka is one such drink that has incapacitating effects. As a result, one could extrapolate that the injunction should cover vodka as well as wine made from grapes. But one could just as well suggest the opposite: maybe the problem was not intoxication, but the non-nutritional consumption of food that could otherwise have gone to feed other people. If that were the case, the consumption of intoxicating drinks would be permissible as long as they were not made from food products that could be more justly utilized. The conclusion one arrives at depends on which ‘essence’ one invents and projects back onto the text.

Another example of extrapolation is provided by J.W. Rogerson in his *According to the Scriptures: The Use of the Bible in Social, Moral and Political Questions* (2007). Rogerson suggests that the essential principles found in the Hebrew scriptures (he specifically mentions Deuteronomy, Exodus, and Leviticus) are oriented toward the implementation of social practices designed to improve the material conditions of everyone in the world. He notes that the laws concerning slavery in Deuteronomy may appear to approve of slavery, but what is *essential* is the fact that in the ancient world these laws would have reduced the burdens on slaves by placing limits on how their owners treated them – ‘while the law allows slavery, it implicitly condemns it by limiting it ... Thus we can say that the *spirit* of the law is against slavery’ (81). In addition, Rogerson suggests that the Sabbath laws concerning rest were designed in part to reduce the burdens on domesticated animals (83). Concerning the jubilee laws, which required periodical forgiveness of property debt, he writes:

even if [they] were never enforced, they articulate an ideal which is a challenge to all societies. They recognize that economic factors affect relationships between people, making some poorer and other richer, and forcing some into dependence on others. This state of affairs is not acceptable among a people redeemed by God. (84)

In each case Rogerson picks out what he takes as the essence of the text in order to apply it to alternate contexts. Although few people today own slaves or rental properties, everyone who

wants to follow these Biblical texts can do so by extrapolating out to the conclusion that we should put in place and support economic structures that are beneficial to all. According to Rogerson, ‘This is a message that has increasing relevance in a global economy that is still unable to deal with the desperate poverty of millions in Africa, where, in the so-called developed world, there are unacceptably high levels of unemployment with all the social ills that unemployment generates’ (84). (In interpreting this text in this manner, Rogerson is also performing selective privileging; I will say more about this below.)

Extrapolating from an essence requires the interpreter to invent and project an essence onto the text. Authors rarely set out in texts what the essence of the message is; consequently the interpreter is usually free to invent one that suits his or her social project – although this happens unconsciously through the work of his or her ‘practical sense.’ Years ago, those who wanted to support slavery could state that the essence of the Biblical laws on slavery was the legitimation of slavery by their god. If their god wanted to outlaw slavery, would he not have done so? Since he did not, it must be because he essentially approved of slavery. Slaveholders could therefore invent an essence – our god approves of slavery – project it onto the text, and extrapolate out to the conclusion that their own practice of slavery must be morally acceptable. Despite the apparent absurdity of this argument to twenty-first century readers, this is exactly what many nineteenth-century American Christians did. Rogerson obviously disagrees with such a position, but what is the basis of his alternate invention of the ‘essence’ of the text, other than his contemporary political preferences?

This mode of interpretation is usually persuasive only when the work of inventing and projecting an essence onto the text remains *invisible* – if it were not invisible the resulting interpretation would appear to be the construction of the interpreter rather than the intention of the author. When the interpreter’s work is invisible to his or her audience, that is, when it seems as if the interpreter simply found rather than projected the essence onto the text, this mode of interpretation to some extent distorts the contents of the text – intentionally or unintentionally – and is therefore problematic from a scholarly perspective.

Slaveholders in the nineteenth century projected an essence onto the text from which they could extrapolate in order to support their own social interests – and at the expense of the interests of African-Americans whom they were exploiting. By contrast, Rogerson’s interpretation is similar to Abbott’s: he is not interested in serving his own material interests, but in setting in place liberatory social practices that would decrease the level of poverty in the world. This is an admirable goal with which I have a great deal of sympathy, but, as with ventriloquism, extrapolation is almost always a manipulation of the authority of the text being interpreted. This method of interpretation typically presumes from the outset that the text has a continuing (if not eternal) authority, and that, where it does not seem to apply, we need only extrapolate the essential principles for our own place and time. This strategy thereby assumes and reproduces the authority of the text in question.

In summary, extrapolating from an essence is problematic for two reasons: first, it is questionable insofar as it requires the invention and projection of an essence that the interpreter pretends to find in the text, and, second, this mode of interpretation assumes and reinforces the unquestioned authority of the text.

5) REFUSAL TO EXTRAPOLATE/DISABLING CONTEXTUALIZATION

Unlike extrapolation, which attempts to make some part of a text relevant for an alternate context, disabling contextualization attempts to undermine any possibility of extrapolation. Rather than say ‘how can we make this relevant for our own context?’ this form of interpretation attempts to show something like the following: ‘the context in which this was written was so different from our own context that there is nothing in it that is relevant for us any longer.’ This mode of interpretation links the text so radically to its context of authorship that any attempt to draw contemporary relevance is foreclosed. In sum, disabling contextualization says: ‘this part of the text is past its expiration date.’

One well-known example of a disabling contextualization is the apostle Paul’s rejection of the Jewish practice of circumcision as necessary for Jesus’ followers. On the one hand, Paul identified as a Jew and held the Jewish scriptures as authoritative. On the other hand, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul wants to reject the continued authority of the scriptural command to circumcise males. In his letter, Paul explains that the Jewish law (in which the command to circumcise is contained) was given to the ancient Hebrews when they were like children who needed a nanny to watch over them (see Galatians 3). Paul argues that a commitment to follow Christ faithfully replaces the need to follow the nanny’s orders – now that we have Jesus, so his argument goes, the laws on circumcision have for all practical purposes expired. Paul condemns those who recommend continuing to follow the rules laid down by the nanny, suggesting that those who do want to continue the practice should go beyond circumcision and cut off their entire penis (see Galatians 5:12)! By giving this interpretation, Paul can reject the injunction to circumcise as no longer relevant.

Rogerson’s text, discussed above, catalogs two thousand years of Christian uses of this interpretive strategy, each case of which was designed to nullify the continuing authority of the Jewish law. Most of the disabling contextualizations involved a universal/particular or essential/inessential distinction, whereby some parts of the Jewish law were categorized as universally applicable, and other parts were categorized as useful for a particular time and place, but no longer. Rogerson shows that St. Augustine, for instance, distinguished between *moral* commandments and *ceremonial* laws, and suggested that the latter were not universally applicable. Similarly, Richard Hooker makes a distinction between *necessary* and *accessory* laws, and Richard Baxter distinguishes between *essentials* and *customs*; for both Hooker and Baxter, the former applied universally, while the latter did not. In each case, the deployment of the criterion of selection allowed the interpreters to maintain the authority of the Bible in general, while rendering inconsequential those specific passages that were met with disapproval. As with the construction of an essence when extrapolating, the way in which interpreters sorted between those passages that were universally applicable and those that were no longer applicable tended to follow from nothing within the text. Rather, these thinkers tended to separate and sort the Jewish texts in ways that reflected their local social practices.

Another example of the way in which a disabling contextualization is performed can be seen in some of the interpretations made by Jews and Christians who take the Bible as authoritative but simultaneously have progressive views on gay and lesbian rights. The problem for these communities is that there are disparaging remarks in the Bible about sexual relationships between men. In order to render these disparaging remarks as irrelevant or inapplicable for our own

context (without denying either the authority of the text in general or the authority of the text for other contexts), these interpreters may perform a refusal to extrapolate. Such a reading may proceed along these lines: ‘This text was written for another time and another place, and the same-sex relationships described and criticized in the text are different from the same-sex relationships in our own society. Therefore these sexual prohibitions are not relevant today.’ According to John Boswell, for instance, the condemnation in Leviticus of the ‘abomination’ of male sexual intercourse was not really concerned with gay relationships, but was intended ‘to elaborate a system of ritual “cleanliness” whereby the Jews will be distinguished from neighbouring peoples’ (Boswell 1980, 100). Rabbi Rebecca T. Alpert agrees: ‘Clearly the prohibition [in Leviticus] does not refer to gay relationships as they exist today since such relationships were unknown in ancient times. It is probably more likely a reference to a particular sexual act – probably anal intercourse – that was prohibited along with other practices either to distinguish Israelite practices from those of their neighbours or to create an abhorrence of mixing together things that were perceived not to belong together – in this case, bodily fluids’ (Alpert 2008, 30). According to Boswell and Alpert, this prohibition was therefore primarily part of a means of distinguishing Israelite communities from neighbouring communities – presumably insofar as this ancient context no longer exists (Jews and Christians today need not differentiate themselves from ancient Israel’s neighbours, who no longer exist), contemporary followers of the Jewish law need not follow this particular injunction.

One might think that this form of interpretation challenges the authority of the text, but it does not. Although disabling contextualization suggests that some part of a text may no longer be applicable, given that our own circumstances are rather different from those of the original audience, this mode of interpretation separates out some part of the text as irrelevant or no longer applicable, in contrast from the other parts of the text that *are* still relevant and still applicable. The text retains its authority, but some parts of it apply only in certain circumstances. This interpretive move is necessary for those who do not want to dismiss the applicability or authority of a text altogether. For instance, many people are willing to dismiss the authority of the text – some people are free to say, ‘I don’t care what the Bible says about sex, marriage, gender, homosexuality, or whatever – I derive my moral norms on these matters from other sources.’ Those who perform a disabling contextualization typically do so because they cannot say this. In effect, their position is usually the following: ‘the Bible is still an important authority; it is just that this part of it is no longer applicable.’ In doing so they get to have their cake and eat it too – the text remains authoritative and parts of it remain applicable, but they can reject those parts they are uncomfortable with. Like Rogerson and Abbott, Boswell and Alpert intend to support liberatory social practices: they hope that those who accept the Bible as authoritative will ignore the heterosexist passages and avoid reproducing the oppressive discriminatory practices used against gays and lesbians in our society. Nevertheless, this interpretive strategy is problematic insofar as it functions analogously to those interpretive moves described above: it assumes and reproduces the authority of the text in question.

6) SELECTIVE PRIVILEGING

Selective privileging involves taking one part of text and assigning to it a special status not afforded to the rest of the text, or privileging one part of a text over other parts. Selective privileging is necessary when the text is dialectical, so that some parts of the text are understood to supersede

or reframe other parts of the text, or when one part of a text conflicts with another part. When there is a conflict between different parts of the text, the choice of which part to privilege over the other is rarely justified without deploying assumptions or selection criteria alien to the text itself.

An open letter to radio talk-show host ‘Dr. Laura’ circulated the internet a few years ago, and it highlights very clearly and humorously an example of selective privileging. The anonymous author of this letter states the following (which I quote in full¹¹):

Dear Dr. Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God’s law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate.

I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the [other] specific laws and how to best follow them.

- a) When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Leviticus 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?
- b) I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?
- c) I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Leviticus 15:19-24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.
- d) Leviticus 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?
- e) I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?
- f) A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Leviticus 11:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?
- g) Leviticus 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?
- h) Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Leviticus 19:27. How should they die?

i) I know from Leviticus 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

j) My uncle has a farm. He violates Leviticus 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? (Leviticus 24:10-16) Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Leviticus 20:14)

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help.

Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Your devoted disciple and adoring fan.

What this author clearly points out in this satirical letter is that Dr. Laura selectively focuses on the passages on male sexuality while blatantly ignoring the contiguous passages. Someone who agreed with Dr. Laura could, of course, slide out from underneath this criticism by attempting a disabling contextualization that saves the applicability of the heterosexist passages while rejecting the applicability of the other passages. However, as I noted above, the criteria interpreters use to separate relevant passages from irrelevant passages are typically not derived from the text but from local, contemporary customs – whether or not Jews or Christians select the heterosexist passages as applicable probably depends not on something in the text but rather on the norms or political preferences of their own community.

Despite the fact that Paul performs a disabling contextualization of the laws in the Torah, there are alternate passages in the New Testament that suggest the Torah should continue to be followed in its entirety. Jesus is reported in Matthew as having said that he supported upholding the law:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17-19)¹²

How can this command to follow ‘even the least of these commandments’ be reconciled with Paul’s rejection of the continued authority of the law? In sum, it cannot. However, by utilizing the strategy of selective privileging, interpreters of the New Testament have successfully ignored the passages in Matthew on this matter. Christian interpreters throughout the last two millennia have tended to privilege the passages in Paul’s letters over the passages in Matthew, and over the Torah itself. If they had privileged the Torah itself, or if they had privileged Matthew’s reading of the significance of the Torah, the continuing authority of the Jewish law might have turned out very differently for Christians.

Another example of selective privileging can be seen with the way in which Christian communities interpret the comments about the status of women in the Pauline and deuteropauline letters. Some passages in these letters recommend measures that we would now consider to be sexist; other passages suggest Paul apparently supported women in leadership positions. Of course, it is entirely possible that Paul and those who wrote using his name were simply inconsistent on these matters. However, for those who view the Bible not only as authoritative, but also as internally consistent, the possibility of inconsistency is rejected in advance. This was exactly the position I took in my early undergraduate studies: reconciling my assumption of the inerrancy and authority of the Bible with my view of God as necessarily egalitarian required exhaustive mental gymnastics. I tended to privilege selectively the passages that appeared to support women in leadership positions, and then I read the passages that disparaged the role of women in light of those, often attempting to interpret the sexist passages as if they were not sexist. How could the apparently sexist passages be interpreted as not sexist? Sometimes with the simultaneous deployment of ventriloquism – ‘Paul really means something completely different than what he seems to say’ – and sometimes with the simultaneous use of disabling contextualization – ‘this comment was only applicable to the specific context in which Paul was writing, and doesn’t apply to other contexts.’

As I explained above, Rogerson interprets the Hebrew scriptures as having an essence that recommends putting in place and supporting economic structures that are beneficial to all. However, in doing so Rogerson selectively privileges some parts of the Hebrew scriptures over other parts. For instance, the author of II Kings seems to think that Josiah was the greatest king ever, and that what made him so great was the fact that he was vehemently intolerant of any cultic practices in the territory that in any way threatened the authority of the Israelite cult in Jerusalem. He is praised for ‘desecrating’ and destroying worship sites outside of Jerusalem, and for murdering the priests who worked at those sites (see II Kings 23). The author praises Josiah with these words: ‘Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the laws of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him’ (II Kings 23:25). Had Rogerson selectively privileged this part of the Hebrew scriptures rather than other parts, he might have had a very different vision for contemporary societies: perhaps he would have extrapolated the recommendation that George W. Bush should instruct the police to tear down all Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, Buddhist, and Hindu places of worship within the borders of the United States, and should require every one of the ‘priests’ or other religious authorities at those places of worship to be jailed or killed. But Rogerson selectively privileges instead (thank goodness!) only those passages that can be construed to support his liberatory social project.

The various criteria interpreters use to determine which passages they will privilege are typically derived from something outside the text. Authors usually do not provide readers with a key to the order in which their text should be read. As I noted above, whether one privileges the sexist and oppressive passages or the egalitarian and socialist-sounding passages usually depends on which set of values one supports. As with extrapolation, which involves inventing and projecting an essence as if it were internal to the text, selective privileging requires the interpreter to apply an external criteria of selection. This mode of interpretation is usually persuasive, however, only when this application of an alien criterion remains *invisible* – if it were not invisible the resulting interpretation would appear to be the construction of the interpreter rather than

the intention of the author. When the interpreter's criterion of selection is invisible to the audience, that is, when it seems as if the interpretation provided follows directly from the text, this mode of interpretation is – intentionally or unintentionally – to some extent misleading, and therefore questionable from a scholarly perspective.

Like several of the interpretive strategies already discussed, selective privileging usually assumes and maintains the authority of the text under consideration. Although it renders some part of a text as relevant only in light of or in subordination to other parts of a text, the text as a whole retains its authority.

There is an important exception: sometimes interpreters selectively privilege in order to *challenge* the general authority of a text. For instance, Christopher Hitchens (2007) seems to focus narrowly on the violent or negative passages in the Bible and takes them to be central, essential, or representative of the whole – on the basis of which he intends his readers to reject the authority of the text. Similarly, the author of 'The Islam Comic Book' (see islamcomicbook.com) focuses narrowly on the passages in the Qur'an that many contemporary readers might find to be objectionable, as if they were essential for all who respect the Qur'an as authoritative. This form of selective privileging has as its purpose the erasure of the authority of the text in question. In fact, the author of this comic book probably intends his readers not only to reject the authority of the Qur'an, but also to discriminate against those who do – the entire comic book website, which associates Muhammad and Islam with 'the Devil' and refers to Muhammad as a 'child molester' and 'sex offender,' is clearly anti-Muslim propaganda. What this type of selective privileging misses, as Nader A. Hashemi so eloquently states, in a volume about whether or not Islam is 'fundamentally incongruent' with democracy, is that:

Religious traditions are a highly complex body of ideas, assumptions, and doctrines that when interpreted in a modern context, many centuries or millennia later, contain sufficient ambiguity and elasticity to be read in a variety of ways. (El Fadl et al. 2004, 51)

Challenges to the authority of a text that selectively privilege objectionable aspects and presume them to be essential for all followers are problematic insofar as they project continuity where there is change and rigidity where there is elasticity. Scholars should be more attentive to the fact that religious texts are used in new contexts in radically variable ways.

7) RECREATING THE CANON

Recreating the canon is similar to selective privileging. It consists of either creating a 'canon with a canon,' or opening an existing canon in order to extend the authority of the canon to outside texts.¹³

Creating a canon within the canon involves selecting some texts as central and reading all other texts in light of those. As I have already suggested, most Christians read the Torah and the gospel of Matthew in light of the Paul's letters, specifically his letters to the Galatians and the Romans. In this way, Galatians and Romans constitute a sort of privileged canon within the canon, and are hierarchically related to the other texts. If there seems to be a conflict between a passage in Matthew and passage in Galatians, Christians will likely prioritize Galatians and interpret Matthew in a way that appears to coincide with what was said in Galatians.

Campus Crusade for Christ's 'The Four Spiritual Laws' webpage (www.godlovestheworld.com), for instance, draws what it calls the 'spiritual laws that govern your relationship with God' from a narrow reading of the New Testament. They quote Paul and the gospel of John almost exclusively (there is one additional quote from Revelation). Their readers learn a form of Christian atonement soteriology, according to which humans are sinners who deserve death (and presumably an eternity in hell) and that only Jesus' actions can save humans from such a fate, and only if they 'receive Christ.' This form of soteriology typically goes hand in hand with their language of 'accepting Jesus into your heart' (although such language would have been alien to the people who wrote the New Testament). For the followers of Campus Crusade for Christ and similar Christian groups, who read the New Testament through the 'canon within a canon' including Paul's letters and the gospel of John, being a follower of Jesus primarily means cognitive acceptance of Jesus as a 'savior,' in sharp contrast to those liberal and socialist Christian sects that focus largely on Jesus' injunctions to help the poor (their own mini-canon) and largely ignore the Pauline texts.

Opening a canon to privilege outside texts usually takes place when interpreters 'discover' a text that they believe to be more 'authentic' in some way than the texts in the existing canon. Some Bible scholars have utilized early Christian documents outside the New Testament to provide a more egalitarian picture of Christian origins. Several ancient so-called gnostic texts, such as the gospel of Thomas, have been privileged by scholars like Elaine Pagels. In *The Gnostic Gospels* (1981), she paints a picture of early Christianity in which gnostic egalitarianism reigned, prior to the corruptions of the Catholic Church. Readers learn that these original, gnostic Christians were not patriarchal, not repressive of sexuality, not exclusivist – what Pagels perceives to be the sins of the Catholic Church. While I think it would be a stretch to say that she romanticizes these extracanonical texts in this book, she *can* be said to romanticize the Gospel of Thomas in her later work, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (2003). In the latter text, readers get the impression that had Christians followed the Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas rather than the one in the Gospel of John, Christianity might have been more tolerant and accepting of multiple 'spiritual paths.' For Thomas' Jesus, all humans have a divine spark, whereas John's gospel insists that only Jesus was divine, apparently leading to an unnecessarily exclusivist, intolerant, book-burning (or at least book-destroying), and persecuting form of Christianity.¹⁴ Pagels writes in support of 'people [who] seek ... not a different "system of doctrines" so much as insights or intimations of the divine that validate themselves in experience' (183). It is clear that she believes Thomas' Jesus also supported such mystical experiences; Pagels goes so far as to imply that Thomas' Jesus was a Thomas Merton *avant la lettre* (51).

The recovery of such a lost message from Jesus would be appealing to contemporary liberal Christians who are uncomfortable with Christian exclusivity but who nevertheless see the Jesus as an authoritative figure. Pagels' recovery of this alternate message could allow liberal Christians to drag and drop the respect they would confer on the canonical gospels onto this recently rediscovered gospel. Unfortunately, this recovery of an alternative tradition in the Gospel of Thomas uncritically assumes and reinforces the general cultural authority of Jesus insofar as it implicitly suggests that Christians should follow Thomas' Jesus rather than John's. Pagels' enterprise in this book is moot if readers don't respect Jesus' claims (inside or outside the canon) as authoritative. Hammurabi carries no general cultural authority today; if there were a secret, alternative

version of the law code of Hammurabi, I doubt it would draw Pagels interest or her readers' interest as the secret teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas has.

8) PROJECTIVE EXTRAPOLATION

Unlike extrapolation, which invents and projects an essence on the text (while making it seem as if the essence was found in the text) in order to apply it in an alternate context, projective extrapolation involves *additionally projecting one's own background assumptions* on the author when interpreting the text. Projective extrapolation proceeds by interpreting a text as if the author or a figure in the text shared one's own background assumptions. This is neither simply projection nor just extrapolation, but employs both of these modes of interpretation at the same time. Extrapolation involves asking: how might the person who wrote this text apply his or her ideas in our context? Projective extrapolation implies something additional: how might the person who wrote this text apply his or her ideas in our context – *if he or she thought like me?*

Above I noted that Rogerson invents an essence and projects it onto the Hebrew Scriptures – for him, the texts on slavery do not approve of slavery but limit it, and the essential lesson to be learned is that egalitarian economic practices are preferable to oppressive ones. Projective extrapolation goes beyond inventing and projecting an essential message by also projecting a set of assumptions. Even if we agreed on Rogerson's invented essence, we might all have different background assumptions about what makes up egalitarian economic practices. Some individuals might assume that egalitarianism means equal opportunity for all. Other might assume that egalitarianism means equal wages for all. Yet others might assume that egalitarianism means equal net worth for all. If I assume that egalitarianism means equal net worth for all, then I could perform a projective extrapolation like the following: 'The essential principle in this scripture is egalitarianism; consequently we should make sure that no one has more collective wealth than anyone else.' Of course, 'deriving' egalitarianism as an essential principle is actually the result of the projection of the interpreter; this step makes this interpretation an example of extrapolation. In addition, taking it for granted that the author means by egalitarianism the same thing I assume egalitarianism to be makes this interpretive move also projective extrapolation.

'Love your neighbour' is an oft-quoted principle among Christians and others who accept the authority of Jesus or the New Testament. However, given the fact that everyone seems to decontest¹⁵ the meaning of 'love' differently, one gets the impression that it is practically empty by itself, and that what counts as 'loving' or as 'not loving' will depend more on one's own background assumptions than anything else. All parties could agree that 'love your neighbour' is the essential message (that is, they may extrapolate in the same way), but yet still project a variety of different background assumptions on the text. If one employs Victorian-bourgeois background assumptions about gender roles, child rearing, and social welfare, one may find that what is most 'loving' will be to set in place discriminatory practices that protect the society from the social ills brought about by the sexual practices of gays and lesbians. On this view, legalizing gay rights could be analogous to legalizing child abuse.¹⁶ For instance, Evangelical speaker and psychologist James Dobson bases his views on gender and sexuality on psychological studies that confirm that Victorian-bourgeois social roles and the 'nuclear family' are not only natural but best for humanity. From these assumptions, he 'Speak[s] the Truth in Love' when he suggests that Christians 'are obligated ... to treat homosexuals respectfully and with dignity, but ... are also to oppose, with all vigour, the radical changes [homosexuals] hope to impose on the

[American] nation' (Dobson 2004, 77). If other Christians alternately employ an anti-essentialist background assumptions about gender, and assume that social welfare is best assured by instituting John Stuart Mill's liberal-utilitarian recommendations, they will probably find that what is most 'loving' will likely be to ensure equal rights for gays and lesbians. In sum, what counts as 'loving' will pivot on one's assumptions.

In either of these two extrapolations of what counts as loving, the interpretation involves the projection of background assumptions onto Jesus that would have been unavailable to him. No one in first century Palestine was a Victorian-bourgeois or a liberal-utilitarian. Extrapolating (for our own context) the meaning of 'love your neighbour' in these two ways, as recommending either the prohibition or the extension of equal rights to gays and lesbians, requires projecting assumptions on Jesus that he could not have held.

Similarly, although Jesus could not have been a card-carrying member of the Communist party, one could interpret some things he is recorded as having said in light of Marxist assumptions. To some extent Gustavo Gutiérrez's approach to the New Testament uses this interpretive strategy, which is more sophisticated than simple projection (and as a result Gutiérrez's text is not as facile as Abbott's). Rather than simply project a socialist view into Jesus' mouth, Gutiérrez 'follows' Jesus in suggesting that Christians must 'love,' and argues that this requires Christians to create a utopic vision of a fully just Kingdom of God. However, he recognizes that the 'Gospel does not provide a utopia for us; this is a human work' (Gutiérrez 1973, 238). He notes that although Jesus was concerned with the poor, '*poverty* is an equivocal term' (288). He goes on to suggest that, generally speaking, '*poverty* designates ... the lack of economic goods necessary for a human life worthy of the name' (288). Gutiérrez seeks to find the causes of poverty, in order to correct it at its source, and relies upon analyses drawn from Marx and the Marxist tradition to do so.

To his credit, Gutiérrez never suggests that Marx's analysis of poverty was Jesus', but only relies on Marx's ideas about the causes of poverty in order to determine how those who want to eliminate poverty (and thereby realize the 'Kingdom of God') might do so. Consequently, it would be unfair to accuse Gutiérrez of literally projecting Marxist assumptions onto Jesus. In this way he clearly makes visible his own contributions to the interpretation of the text in a way that most of the other interpreters considered in this essay do not. In the end, Gutiérrez arrives at this position: 'The "poor" person today¹⁷ is the oppressed one, the one marginated [*sic*] from society, the member of the proletariat struggling for his most basic rights; he is the exploited and plundered social class, the country struggling for its liberation' (301). In this manner, through the deployment of Marxist assumptions, Gutiérrez extrapolates from Jesus' injunction to love the recommendation to institute a kingdom of God that resembles a socialist society.

Although Gutiérrez conscientiously distinguishes Jesus' view from Marx's when reading one in light of the other, many interpreters are not so careful – those who utilize projective extrapolation usually project their own assumptions on the text without comment. Gutiérrez's interpretation looks like this: 'Jesus wants us to love our neighbor; if he thought like Marx, we could extrapolate that loving your neighbor would require ...' But the key part of this sentence – 'if he thought like' – is usually never made explicit. For instance, Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (1995), projects his own liberal Buddhist assumptions on Jesus when explaining what it means to follow Jesus' injunction to love. For Hanh, Jesus' command to love, it turns

out, actually means living just like a liberal Buddhist such as Hanh. For Hanh, those who follow Jesus' teachings should be 'truly open' to dialogue: 'Real dialogue makes us more open-minded, tolerant, and understanding' (196). He claims, 'When you are a truly happy Christian, you are also a Buddhist' (197). Following his attack on the Catholic Church's exclusive claims to truth, Hanh ends his book with the following claim: 'Understanding and love are values that transcend all dogma' (198). However, the normative rhetoric forbidding 'dogmatic' truth claims and recommending interfaith 'dialogue,' 'tolerance,' mutual 'understanding,' etc., was a product of modern Enlightenment thought. This discourse and its embedded assumptions would have been unavailable to anyone in first century Palestine. Hanh can only extrapolate these conclusions from Jesus' teachings if he projects back his own assumptions onto Jesus. In sum, he is saying the following, with the hidden part of his argument placed in brackets: 'Jesus wants us to love our neighbor; [if he thought like twentieth-century liberal Buddhists,] we can extrapolate that loving your neighbor would require being tolerant toward all religious traditions.' From a scholarly perspective, this is misleading because Jesus did not think like a twentieth-century liberal Buddhist.

Interpreters who use the strategy of projective extrapolation project an alien set of values on the text when performing an extrapolation, but these values are not held as authoritative in their own right. In fact, these values usually function in a projective extrapolation only when they are masked – only when it appears as if these values came from the text itself would the interpretation be capable of carrying the authority of the text. That is, this mode of interpretation is usually persuasive only when this projection of an alien set of assumptions remains *invisible* – if it were not invisible the resulting interpretation would appear to be the construction of the interpreter rather than the intention of the author. As I noted above, Gutiérrez's text is an important exception – he does not mask the fact that he employs alien assumptions, but makes it clear that he is bringing together different authorities. When this is not the case, that is, when the interpreter's criterion of selection is invisible to the audience or when it seems as if the interpretation provided follows directly from the text, this mode of interpretation is – intentionally or unintentionally – to some extent misleading, and therefore questionable from a scholarly perspective.

In addition, like most of the modes of interpretation discussed, projective extrapolation is problematic insofar as it uncritically assumes and reinforces the authority of the text under consideration. Despite the fact that Gutiérrez makes visible his own contributions to the meaning of 'love,' he nevertheless still assumes and reinforces the authority of the figure of Jesus and the sayings attributed to him in the New Testament.

9) DISPLACEMENT OF ASSOCIATIONS

Displacement is an interpretive strategy whereby the interpreter creates a chain of associations and makes them slide from one idea or figure to another. This strategy is usually deployed through the use of analogies that suggest that because two things are similar in one respect, they must be similar in all respects. Consider the case of the fallacious logical argument of the cat: 'a dog has four legs, I have four legs, so I must be a dog.' Although a cat is analogous to a dog insofar as a cat has four legs, this does not mean that a cat has all the characteristics of a dog.

One amusing example of displacement is in Cecil B. DeMille's introductory remarks to his film *The Ten Commandments* (1956). DeMille starts with projection or ventriloquism by attributing to the book of Exodus a meaning he wants it to mean rather than a meaning the author(s) could have intended: he explains that Moses story is about 'whether man out to be ruled by

God's law or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God.¹⁸ DeMille then moves onto perform a displacement of associations by attempting to associate this dualism between God's law and dictatorships with his own historical circumstances: 'This same battle continues throughout the world today.' Listeners growing up in 1950s America would have had little difficulty creating the following associations:

Egypt: dictatorship and slavery :: Israel: free souls under God

Egypt: communism and the USSR/China :: Israel: democracy and the United States

From this, I expect DeMille would like his listeners to conclude that communist states are fundamentally dictatorships in which citizens are slaves, and that the United States is fundamentally a free nation where people are godly. The analogy between the Moses story and the Cold War was – despite its absurdity – no doubt a powerful one in 1950s America.

Similarly, without explicitly stating that the abuses of modern-day America are identical to the abuses of the Roman Empire (which Jesus apparently opposed), Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw promote these equivalences in their readers' minds. These equivalences are achieved in part through the use of an atypical textual layout – their book, *Jesus for President*, is filled with blocks of text, text sidebars, drawings, photos, etc. On one page the text concerns the Roman Empire, but there is a drawing of an American flag next to the block of text (Claiborne and Haw 2008, 156). On the next page the text concerns 'Pious Rome,' yet there is a picture with a quotation from the Cheney family's Christmas card (158). It is clear that readers may well displace negative thoughts about the Roman Empire onto American Empire (and the actions of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney) and to associate Jesus' opposition to the Roman Empire with contemporary Christian resistance to American Empire.

Terry Eagleton, in his introduction to a volume that contains the four gospels in the New Testament, continually compares the sayings of Jesus to Marx, Marxism, and socialism.¹⁹ Nowhere does Eagleton explicitly claim that Jesus and Marx say the same thing, but the connection is suggested through continual comparisons and the use of Marxist phrases: 'Rather like socialism for Marx, the domain of justice [in Jesus' kingdom of God] is both immanent in the present and a goal to be aimed for' (Eagleton 2007, xxi); 'Jesus's disciples could no more bring about the kingdom of God by their own efforts than socialism for the deterministic Marxists can be achieved by intensified agitation' (xxi); 'Actually working for the kingdom ... involves surrendering or suspending some of the goods which will characterize it. The same is true of working for socialism' (xxii); '[Jesus] is no mild-eyed plaster saint but a relentless, fiercely uncompromising *activist*' (emphasis added, xxiv); 'The point of the Sabbath was ... about refusing to make a *fetish of production*' (emphasis added, xxv); Jesus once instructed 'an intending recruit to "let the dead bury the dead," a phrase which was to impress Karl Marx' (xxvi). Given the number of comparisons linking Marx and Marxism to Jesus, it would be no surprise were Eagleton's readers to project Marx's socialism onto the idea of the kingdom of God. Eagleton need not literally conflate them for his readers to displace their thoughts about one onto the other. And it is clear why Eagleton might desire his readers to conflate Jesus with Marx: some of the authority of the former might be lent to the latter.

The use of rhetorical displacement may or may not reinforce the authority of the text or figure in question. One could effect the displacement of a chain of associations by comparing Muhammad to Jesus, but one could also compare Muhammad to Hitler. The former would likely reinforce the authority of Jesus and the New Testament, while the latter would likely serve to discredit Muhammad rather than reinforce the authority of Hitler. In either case, this interpretive strategy is questionable insofar as it results in obscuring differences. The cat is not like the dog in many respects, but emphasizing the fact that they are similar in one way – they both have four legs – may obscure those differences.

I do not mean to imply that all comparisons are illegitimate; on the contrary, I believe that comparison is fundamental to the work that scholars of religion do. However, it is problematic to draw equivalences without careful attention to the particular relevance of similarities and differences for the context of the analysis. For instance, for the purposes of *medical science*, I am sure that the bodies of Muhammad and Hitler were comparable. But for the purposes of *political science*, their work and their writings were far from comparable! DeMille does not adequately demonstrate that ancient Egypt is comparable to communist states, although he seems to want his listeners simply to drag the negative associations hung on the former over to the latter. Similarly, Claiborne and Haw do not adequately demonstrate that the Roman Empire is comparable to the American Empire, although they seem to want their readers simply to drag the negative associations hung on the former over the latter. And despite the equivalences Terry Eagleton's readers might draw, although there are some similarities between the sayings of Jesus and the work of Karl Marx, their views are dissimilar in a multitude of ways that are largely ignored in his introductory essay.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to suggest that, on the one hand, scholars should avoid performing those modes of interpretation that are misleading and should work to draw attention to them where they are found.²⁰ As I have noted, projection/ventriloquism and projective extrapolation are misleading insofar as they clothe the interpreter's values in a text's authority, while the interpreter pretends to find those values in the text. Extrapolating from an essence and selective privileging are misleading when the interpreter fails to disclose and defend the criterion he or she uses to construct an essence in the text or determine which part of the text deserves privileging. Displacement of associations is similarly misleading when it obscures differences and inadequately justifies equivalences.

On the other hand, scholars should also avoid those modes of interpretation that uncritically reproduce the unquestioned authority of the text and should work to draw attention to them where they are found. Projection/ventriloquism, extrapolating from an essence, refusal to extrapolate/disabling contextualization, selective privileging, recreating the canon, and projective extrapolation all uncritically assume and reproduce the authority of the text.

In part, the reason why it is important to draw attention to these various modes of interpretation is that by bringing into relief the way in which they function, we can better understand the relationship between interpretative communities and authority. Scholars in the discipline of religion study communities that manipulate the texts they revere in order to advance their social agendas. Sometimes scholars of these communities do the same thing – a number of Bible scholars who

came of age in the radical 1960s, such as Robert Funk, Marcus Borg, and John Dominic Crossan, have been trying to recover or to pry radical leftist values out of the ‘historical Jesus’ for the last quarter of a century (see Droge 2008). Presumably they do so because Jesus carries a great deal of authority in our culture; if they can demonstrate that the *real* Jesus was practically a liberal democrat, perhaps the social agendas of liberal democrats might be more easily advanced. Attending to the relationships between texts, interpretive strategies, and the social agendas of interpreters can help us as scholars better understand the ways in which rhetoric, power, authority, and social privilege operates in communities.

In addition, a second reason why we might want to draw attention to these modes of interpretation is, quite simply, that scholars should not be in the business of reproducing or advancing the authority of the texts and traditions they study. I do not take any of the texts, figures, or traditions discussed in this essay to be authoritative for me in any straightforward manner, and I choose not to blindly reproduce their authority in my research and my teaching. Although I support leftist projects, just as many of the interpreters I have described, I do so largely because they are intended to improve the material conditions of those in the world with whom I sympathize, not because some authoritative text can be made to require me to do so.

Rather than interpret authoritative texts in ways that support our own agendas, why do we not work to reveal the modes of interpretation that make the reproduction of their authority possible in the first place? It is within our ability as scholars not only to survey various interpretations of texts, nor only to provide our own exegeses, but also to show how these interpretations function, the social agendas they advance, and the social conditions that make these interpretations possible. We are not, of course, required to do so, but if one of our goals as scholars and instructors is to provide others with the tools to think critically about religion and society, rather than remain blind to the invisible functions of authority and power (and often unimpeded since invisible), these sorts of considerations would remain valuable. Russell McCutcheon suggests – rightly, in my mind – that scholars should be ‘in the business of provoking unreflective participants in social systems into becoming reflective scholars of social systems’ (McCutcheon 2001, 170).²¹ Rather than convince my students that Jesus supports my own social agendas, I prefer them to see how the figure of Jesus can be utilized in support of various social agendas. Or, to put it differently, as instructors we can better serve our students by showing how ventriloquism works, rather than by attempting to out-puppeteer the communities we study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Jeremy Vecchi, Arthur Droge, and *The Bible and Critical Theory*’s two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this paper. Above all I want to thank Donovan Schaefer for tirelessly reading and rereading a number of drafts. I should point out, however, that the views expressed here are not necessarily their views.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Heidegger (1996), Gadamer (2005), Derrida (1976, 1978, 1981, 1982, and 1988), and Ricoeur (1976 and 1981).

² See Bourdieu (1990 and 1994), Jameson (1982), Thompson (1990), and Lincoln (1989, 1994, and 2007).

3 It is for this reason that these same interpretive strategies can readily be found in American juridical
discourses, insofar as the legal system in America is linked to the authority of the Constitution in a
4 way that follows many of the same rules of canonicity.

5 An example of the opposite of reinforcing the authority of the text might be the Buddhist tradition's
treatment of some texts as mere 'expedient means' – once initiates cross the river they may leave the
boat behind them.

6 Several of my trusted colleagues and generous critics believe that this position is far too idealistic.
They strongly argue – and they may be right – that human beings will always and necessarily have
their behaviour directed by authoritative ideologies, and my hope that we can have ethical behaviour
without ideology is misguided.

7 These claims are broadly accepted by New Testament scholars, as almost any introductory under-
graduate textbook on the New Testament will confirm. Christians have for a long time recognized
problems with the internal consistency of the New Testament; Origen, for instance, suggested in the
3rd century that contradictions in the text were divine signs directing readers to consider non-literal
interpretations.

8 In *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, Burton L. Mack makes clear his opinion of conservative views
on the Bible by using adjectives such as 'obviously embarrassing,' 'foolish,' and 'astounding' (Mack
1995: 1). Bart D. Ehrman begins his *Misquoting Jesus* with an autobiographical account of his
movement from a naïve Evangelical view to a scholarly view of the Bible. He suggests that most
Evangelicals are simply uninformed about the nature of the text of the New Testament, and offers
9 'clear reasons' for seeing it as something other than 'inerrant' (Ehrman 2005, 14).

10 To be fair to Hegel, I should mention that this was a posthumous publication.

11 It is quite possible, of course, that the author of the Gospel of Matthew was also playing ventriloquism
– but this is a matter about which we cannot be certain. Jesus may well have made this particular
claim that the gospel writer attributes to him; similar claims were apparently made by his near con-
temporaries, such as Hillel.

12 Jaroslav Pelikan goes so far as to claim, 'Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history
of Western culture for almost twenty centuries' (Pelikan 1985, 1).

This letter was circulated widely and in different forms. One form of the letter (and a few words of
explanation) can be found at www.snopes.com/politics/religion/drlaura.asp.

Many readers misunderstand this because the passage where Jesus says that his followers should uphold
the law is followed by a passage where Jesus appears to reverse the meaning of several laws. However,
the following 'you have heard that it was said [in the Jewish law] ... but I say' passages always follow
a similar form: Jesus says 'you have heard,' but then goes on to require his follows not only to follow
the law described, but to follow it *even more strictly* than is literally required. For instance 'you have
heard' that adultery is wrong, 'but I say' that even lust is wrong. Or, 'you have heard' that murder
is wrong, 'but I say' that even anger is wrong. Many people read the injunction to 'turn the other
cheek' rather than take 'an eye for an eye' as *reversing* the law, but it was probably intended to follow
the same logic as the previous 'you have heard' sayings – that is, it was not intended to reverse the
law but make it more strict. The injunction to take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was most
likely originally intended as a limitation by those who wrote the Jewish law: it was designed to prevent
one individual from overzealously responding to an offense. For example, it would have prevented
someone from killing another for a theft – according to the 'eye for an eye' limit, the most one could
do in retaliation would be to take back what was taken, or whatever was equal to what was taken.
Consequently, when Jesus says 'you have heard' that one should take an eye for an eye or a tooth for
a tooth, 'but I say' that you should turn the other cheek when struck, the gospel's readers were
probably intended to have received this not as a reversal but as a further restriction – 'you were told

previously that you could only retaliate equally, but I say you should retaliate even less than equally.' If the 'you have heard ... but I say' statements are understood as *reversals*, then the command to stick by the law in the above block quotation makes little sense. However, if the statements are to be read as requiring a *more strict* observance of the law, then the block quotation makes complete sense. As a result, it looks as if the author of Matthew believes that Jesus wanted his followers to maintain a strict observance of the law, contrary to others' claims on the matter.

13 I want to thank Arthur Droge for his helpful suggestion to include this interpretive strategy.

14 Pagels does qualify her picture of an intolerant orthodox Christianity at one point: 'although Irenaeus liked clear boundaries, he was not simply narrow-minded, and he was by no means intolerant of all difference' (Pagels 2003, 133).

15 By 'decontest' I mean that words with contested and multiple meanings can be 'decontested' or rhetorically narrowed to mean one thing in particular. Classically, the use of the word freedom has been frequently contested and can have many meanings, but particular groups will decontest it so that it means what they want it or need it to mean for their political project. Here I am suggesting that the term love is contested and can have multiple meanings, but in some cases particular groups will monopolize the term and decontest it so that it will mean specifically what they want or need it to mean.

16 Analogously, although coming from a radically different political position, Donna Haraway suggests in 'A Cyborg Manifesto' that teaching creationism should be considered child abuse.

17 Note that Gutiérrez carefully puts scare quotes around the word poor and qualifies it by adding the word 'today.'

18 The Moses story in the Torah was about demonstrating the superiority of the power of Israel's god over the gods and magicians of Egypt.

19 Verso, the publisher of this volume, primarily publishes Marxist and socialist texts.

20 Any normative statements in this conclusion should be read as conditional: 'if I am right that we as scholars can better serve public interests by showing our audiences and our students how interpretation and authority works rather than by manipulating or reproducing the authority of the texts we study, then we ought to avoid doing so.'

21 In addition, 'it is our responsibility to introduce students to a pervasive human phenomenon: the manner in which dehistoricization is routinely employed as a social authorizing practice, generating legitimacy for whichever group is doing the dehistoricization (dominant or oppositional)' (McCutcheon 2001, 171).

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Cite this article as: Martin, Craig. 2009. 'How to read an interpretation: Interpretive strategies and the maintenance of authority' *The Bible and Critical Theory* 5 (1): pp. 6.1–6.26. DOI: 10.2104/bc090006.