

QUESTION:

Do you ever get a student in your class who doggedly insists upon the inerrancy of the Bible? If so, and if they write their term papers in support of Biblical inerrancy, is it possible for them to get a passing grade in your class?

RESPONSE:

HA! That's a great question!

So, part of the deal of teaching in the Bible Belt is that lots of my students - most of them? - have very conservative views about the Bible as the Word of God. A few years ago I used to start my class on the New Testament, with something like 300 students in it, by asking the students a series of questions, just for information. I would ask:

- How many of you in here would agree with the proposition that the Bible is the inspired Word of God (PHOOM! Almost everyone raises their hands)
- OK, great: Now, how many of you have read the Harry Potter series? (PHOOM! Again, almost everyone raises their hand).
- And now, how many of you have read the entire Bible? (This time: scattered hands, here and there, throughout the auditorium)

Then I'd laugh for a minute and say, "OK, so I'm not telling *you* that *I* think the Bible is the inspired Word of God; you're telling *me* that *you* think it is. I can see why you might want to read a book by J. K. Rowling. But if God wrote a book - wouldn't you want to see what he had to say???"

What I have found over the years, consistently, is that my students have a much higher reverence for the Bible than knowledge about it. Most of them would say, at the beginning of the course, that there can be no mistakes in the Bible. But of course they haven't actually read the Bible in order to *see* if there are any mistakes in it. They've just learned, from childhood, that it's a perfect, flawless book.

The goal of my class is NOT to deconvert anyone from their religious beliefs or to convert them to become an agnostic like me. I don't see that as a viable goal - especially in a secular research university funded by the state. The state is not and should not be in the business of promoting one religious view or agenda - or one anti-religious view or agenda - over another. The state, when it comes to education, is in the business of educating its young, and not so young, people, And so my goal is to get students to learn more about the Bible from a historical, not a religious/theological, perspective.

And that's what my class sets out to do. I never ever have any writing assignments in which students have to defend their religious views, about God, Christ, the Trinity, the inspiration of Scripture, and so on. And so in direct response to this very good question, I never ask students to support a view of biblical inerrancy.

But what I do do is have them look critically at the Bible - and to draw their own conclusions. And so rather than ask them to lay out for me their theology of Scripture, I will give them an exercise such as this: I'll ask them to read carefully the accounts of Jesus' resurrection in Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20-21. I ask them to list in detail everything that happens in each account, one by one. And then I ask them to compare their

lists. They then are to indicate all the things that are in common among the Gospels and all the things that are different. And then they are to indicate if they find any of the differences to be irreconcilable.

It's a fantastic exercise (all semester we do exercises like this), because it does not involve me telling them that there are differences, even discrepancies, even flat out contradictions in the texts. They see them for themselves, and have to figure out what do to about them.

In class I will lecture about how scholars deal with problems like this, what scholars think about the sources behind each of the Gospels, and how scholars have isolated discrepancies both in small details (which women went to the tomb? how many were there? what did they see there? what did they hear there? what were they told to do? did they do it?) and in big matters (did the women tell anyone or not? did the disciples stay in Jerusalem and never leave until long after Jesus had returned to heaven? Or did they immediately leave Jerusalem and go to Galilee and there saw the resurrected Jesus, not in Jerusalem?).

And I will talk about how scholars have found these differences significant, not for their theological views of the inspiration of Scripture, but for their understanding of the relationship among the Gospels, the distinctive emphases of each of the Gospels, and the historical reliability of the Gospels.

In my class, students are NOT required to accept the views that I lecture on based on standard, critical scholarship. If they want to hold on to their views of inerrancy, then I urge them to try to figure out how they can reconcile what appear to be contradictions. If they can't reconcile them, then I suggest that whatever it is they believe, it should be consistent with the facts that they themselves agree to.

Some of my students end up shifting their theological views about the Bible during the class. Others find it all very confusing, and it forces them to think about their views while they are, at present, unwilling to change those views. Yet others of them hold fast to their views very firmly. It's not my job to tell them what to believe, but to instruct them about biblical scholarship. And to get them to *think*.

My view is that a course on the NT, especially in the American South, is ideal for a university education. If one of the major *points* of a university education is to get people to THINK, then this kind of course is perfect. If students are relatively alert and sober, they find that historical realia create problems for their religious convictions. If these convictions are important to them, this FORCES them to think about them - either to change them or to develop more sophisticated ways of understanding them. Either way, they become far more thoughtful, both about the facts of history and the beliefs they hold dear. And I think that is a very good thing indeed.

(BTW: students do *not* need to agree with historical scholarship to do well in my class. They simply have to know both what scholars have to say about historical issues and what evidence scholars adduce in support of their views. If they know these things, they're free to believe, religiously, anything they choose, as far as I'm concerned. If they choose to continue to believe the Bible is inerrant, I simply want them to believe it in a thoughtful rather than in a mindless way.)(I want my agnostic and atheist students to be more thoughtful about their views as well!)

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