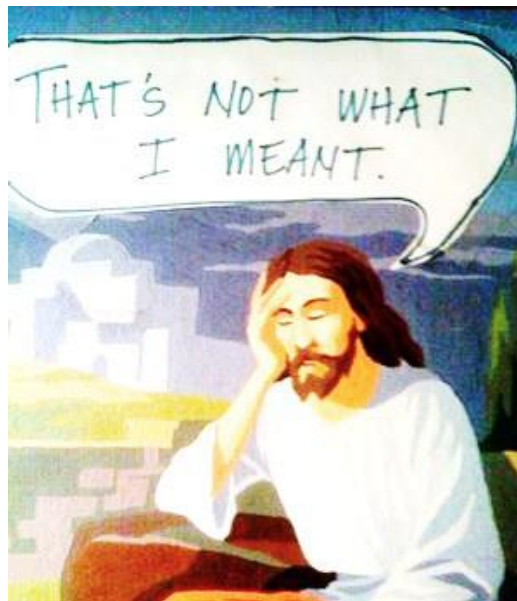


Fake (Good) News: The Bible in the Media

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Abstract:

Many of people think they know the true meaning of Jesus’s teachings (even though his own disciples seemed pretty perplexed by most of his parables). Biblical verses (including sayings attributed to Christ) are often quoted out of context or summoned in support of views that are not evidently espoused in the New Testament, by NT authors, or by the Messiah portrayed by NT authors. For this assignment, students are asked to research and identify one instance in which someone in “the media” (a politician, political pundit, famous journalist, talk show host, movie star, athlete, or anyone else who gets press) has potentially misinterpreted, misquoted, misunderstood, or missed the point of some saying, verse, or idea in the New Testament, and provide a more careful or nuanced interpretation of the passage in question.

Using historical-critical, literary, and (in some cases) theological methods of textual criticism, students should be able to provide historical context for the passage in question, explain what it seems to have meant during the time in which it was written and the literary scenario or setting in which it appears, and craft an argument for why the person who invoked it misappropriated it in his or her interpretation.

This project was designed for a high-school level course on scripture at a Catholic school, though ways of applying the project in other educational contexts are suggested below.

Pedagogic Goals – Students should be able to:

1. Understand and employ the available methods of interpretation – historical, literary, and theological - used to derive meaning from the Bible.
2. Identify and interpret ways in which the Bible is invoked in non-devotional/non-institutional contexts – i.e., in American public life.
3. Evaluate interpretations of specific biblical verses and craft written arguments, while employing sound scholarly research methods, for their own interpretations.

Possible Points of Amendment:

Typically, I limit this assignment to the New Testament, but it could be extended to verses in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible; it could also be used for scriptural texts of non-Abrahamic faith traditions.

Furthermore, we primarily examine the Bible from within the tradition of Christianity; but it might also be useful in a course in comparative religion. How have religious traditions other than Christianity approached the same text/stories? Do those interpretations differ across traditions in any meaningful ways?

This assignment could also be utilized in a course outside of a religiously-affiliated school or a religious studies department, such as an upper-level English elective on “The Bible as Literature.” And if you wanted to go farther afield from scriptural reasoning, you could extend this type of assignment to include biblical figures, narrative frameworks, or particular phrases found in other mediums beyond what I have designated as “the media,” such as works of art, film, etc. – but then you might be getting away from analyzing the contexts in which individual verses are utilized in communicative platforms by particular individuals and closer to an assignment that explores the cultural influence of the Bible.

Background Knowledge:

Typically, this would be an end-of-year research assignment after students have spent about two-thirds of the year reading the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and learning critical methods of interpreting the Bible. The textbooks I have used that include relevant exegetical methods are:

Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, *Studying the Old Testament: A Companion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007)

Bart D. Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

These provide both historical and literary context to individual books within the Bible as well as general overviews of how various methods of criticism (source, form, redaction, social-science, canonical, etc.) can be employed in making sense of scriptural texts. Ideally, students will have absorbed these methods throughout the year and have them in their “toolkit” when approaching the assignment.

Logistics:

About 1 1/2 to 2 months before the assignment is due, explain to students the assignment and ask them to begin looking for instances in which persons in “the media” invoke biblical verses. This could be on a television show, on a relevant news website, on Twitter, in a song, etc. – draw your own guidelines. It also doesn’t have to be in “real time.” I usually tell students that they can use anything from the past ten years.

Once they have identified an instance in which the contextual implications or interpretation of a particular verse seems potentially dubious, have them do independent research on what relevant authorities (religious, scholarly, or otherwise) have to say about that verse, the book in which it appears, etc. This might include:

Scriptural commentaries including *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, etc. You can adjust these to include whatever faith tradition you’re working from and whatever is available to your school community. I ask students to consult both Catholic and Protestant commentaries, but this is also a good opportunity to discuss both theological differences in particular denominations and what criteria make for good scholarly commentaries (i.e., commentaries before the 19th century may not include historical-critical methods, and may not be the best to consult unless they are from important theological figures within those traditions).

Articles from scholarly publications found through databases like JSTOR.

Relevant articles from media websites that have already commented on the potential misinterpretation in question.

Have students craft a 3-5 page paper providing an argument about why, given the critical methods available to them, they think that the instance in which a particular biblical verse was invoked constitutes a misinterpretation or misappropriation.

One of the important goals here is to have students reflect on how persons of faith have typically engaged in scriptural reasoning, and what types of modern-day critical lenses can be used to elaborate the meaning of the text, both as intended by the author, as historically interpreted by faith communities, and as normatively action-guiding for those who take scripture as a moral resource. You could also ask them to reflect on this in a final paragraph in their papers.

Debrief/Roundtable:

After students have handed in their papers, it might be helpful to take a class or two to have them informally share some of their findings with one another. The goal would not simply be to have everyone explain the scope and argument of their paper, but to draw some general conclusions about the ways in which scripture is utilized in American public life. Some questions might include:

- 1) In what ways have biblical verses been invoked to add meaning or weight to the words of the person who uttered, wrote, or displayed them?
- 2) In what kinds of contexts are biblical verses invoked?

- 3) Who is the intended audience?
- 4) What effect do we think the speaker has intended by invoking the Bible in those given contexts, and what effect do we think it actually has?
- 5) What is implied vs. overtly stated?
- 6) In other words, what are the pragmatics of citing or displaying scripture in public contexts or on media platforms?
- 7) Finally, what role does the Bible still play in “everyday contexts” of American public life?

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