

1994

# Not Reading as a Christian: The Christian Scholar and the Pursuit of Truth

Joel M. Westerholm

*Northwestern College - Orange City, joelw@nwcsiowa.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nwcommons.nwcsiowa.edu/tenurepapers>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by NWCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Tenure Papers by an authorized administrator of NWCommons. For more information, please contact [ggrond@nwcsiowa.edu](mailto:ggrond@nwcsiowa.edu).

Dr. Joel Westerholm  
English Department  
Northwestern College  
Orange City, IA

## Not Reading as a Christian

### The Christian Scholar and the Pursuit of Truth

When my father, a pastor, visited us last summer, he complained of difficulties with church members who had gone for counselling and had gotten advice that he considered sinful. Counsellors were telling people that they should break up marriages for reasons that my father considered inadequate, usually a lack of personal fulfillment. My father complained that their counsellors encouraged these people to be more self-involved. I had recently read *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World is Getting Worse*, in which the Jungian James Hillman and Michael Ventura argued that psychotherapy did just what he complained of: it taught people to be so self-involved, so concerned with personal fulfillment, that they lost political engagement, lost the impulse to reach out to others. But I could not recommend the book: it transcribes two lengthy conversations the authors had, and the conversations are replete with obscenities. My father would be so offended by the language that he would probably not even notice that they confirmed his observation.

I found curious how I thought I should not recommend the book to my father. I, too, am offended by the kind of language that I read in *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy*, but I

had read past it. It had registered in my consciousness: I knew not to tell my father to read the book. But I had found the book valuable anyway. I had consciously profited by what the book said that I as a Christian could use, while I unconsciously ignored the offensive language.

My point is this: when I filled out the initial application form for this job at Northwestern, I wrote in the slot that asked about my philosophy of the integration of faith and learning that I thought T. S. Eliot's statement about religious poetry, that the best kind was unconsciously Christian, written by a poet who was so deeply Christian that she wrote Christian poems even when she did not intend to do so, applied to teaching and scholarship, too. As I read, I continue to find that I can profit from texts that are not Christian, some that are even intentionally anti-Christian, like *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy*, without consciously trying to eliminate what disagrees with my Christianity. I am afraid that such a conscious effort to disagree with what I find non-Christian will eliminate the possibility of learning some truth that would make me adjust my understanding of who Christ is and how I should understand Him and His relationship with the world. I have said many times that I do not try to integrate faith and learning because I did not know that they were segregated. That is what I mean.

But I can complicate my answer somewhat, for in some ways I guard myself against doing Christian readings. Texts, I know, are not simple communications of truth; because they use language, they involve ambiguities of word and phrase meanings.

Mikhail Bakhtin has observed that one of the ways in which all utterance is social is that it has an extraverbal context "comprised of three factors: (1) the *common spatial purview* of the interlocutors . . . (2) the interlocutors' *common knowledge and understanding of the situation*, and (3) their *common evaluation* of that situation" (99). What is true of all utterance is particularly true of texts, which exist anywhere they are read. Since readers and authors separated by space and time have no common spatial purview, no common knowledge and understanding, and no common evaluation of the situation, readers can rarely fill in the gaps as an author might intend.

Readers fill in what texts leave vague to create consistency within the work, in the process Wolfgang Iser has described in an important and useful book, *The Act of Reading*. Iser argues that all texts are mixtures of passages of varying degrees of determinacy. Passages are never absolutely determined: someone who has lost contact with reality can always read in them something bizarre. Nor are they absolutely indeterminate: deconstruction's idea of infinite freeplay is certainly a mistake. For example, in Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*," the poem certainly involves a description of a nun's physical death in a shipwreck. But what does the poem say the tall nun saw before she died? The lines are:

There, then! The Master,  
Ipsē, the only one, Christ, King, Head:  
He was to cure the extremity where he had cast her.

Anyone who says the tall nun saw an elephant balancing a ball on his trunk has obviously missed the point. On the other hand, anyone insisting that she can only have seen a hallucination, or a physical Christ, or some penumbra lying between the two, has filled in the gap more absolutely than the text alone will allow.

Readers complete the text by filling in the gaps out of their own store of experiences and beliefs, a process Iser calls "consistency-building." Filling in the gaps leads to the creation of a text that is at least somewhat consistent, in harmony with itself. Of course, different readers will fill in the gaps differently, producing different readings. We fill in gaps according to various extraverbal contexts, and the context we choose for a particular gap substantially affects how we understand the text.

Until relatively recently, critics usually imagined either (rarely) that language was absolutely determinate, or that the extraverbal contexts they have chosen, the historical background in which they have placed the text, have suited either the author's intention or some notion of objective truth grounded in the certainties of language and history. In fact, the selection of an extraverbal context has been largely a product of beliefs and ideologies so deeply assumed that the critics have tended to believe themselves objective. The beliefs and ideologies are most usefully described in terms of master narratives, stories of history that account for our present position, usually validating ourselves as the sole right readers, the only truly objective evaluators of the past. It is a condition C. S. Lewis has

described as "chronological snobbery" based on the nineteenth-century faith in progress (10-11), and not at all one that Christians ought to find sympathetic--though they all too often have done so. The most useful and penetrating analysis of the nature of the master narratives we use in criticism that I know is in Brook Thomas's *The New Historicism, and Other Old-Fashioned Topics*.

Thomas points out that historicism is nothing new: its origins go back at least to nineteenth-century Germany. Historicism has always resisted teleological readings of history: our own position, after all, is as contingent, as determined by our place in our own time, as the position of anyone in the past. New Historicism, then, may be a redundancy (and thus his subtitle), for such recognition of one's own contingency probably makes being new impossible.

The only way in which the present historicists are new is that they come after the post-structuralist movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. And they have used post-structuralism's critique of perspectives, the observation that any viewpoint taken emphasizes some data and virtually ignores other (they call it "foregrounding" and "backgrounding," but I have a constitutional squeamishness about turning nouns into verbs that will not let me do so). Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* is probably the best-known such critique, particularly the chapter "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (278-293). In fact, as John Ellis pointed out in *Against Deconstruction*, Derrida was either unoriginal or wrong.

But the material in which he was right though unoriginal was a recapitulation of the rather obvious point that perspective does change our grasp of truth, that choosing a different center changes what we see as peripheral.

The best historicists' attitude toward their own work is a healthy skepticism of their own point of view. They recognize that their master narratives are, in fact, subjective, and the material that they reveal from their own perspective may be insignificant from another perspective. The New Historicists have tended to construct different, often more complex master narratives, but they have found doing without a master narrative impossible, even though they know that such narratives inevitably emphasize some things and virtually ignore others. Jane Tompkins, for instance, has pointed out the flaw in declaring the canon (a vague abstraction, certainly, but she uses the term in the sense of "the works typically studied in college") a collection of the best aesthetic objects. In fact, aesthetic standards have been much more flexible historically than canon-defenders like to admit. She has argued in favor of constructing a canon of influential works, which she measures by popularity in making the case for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But she merely constructs a new master narrative: history as the train of thought expressed in the works most bought. Thomas illustrates how she merely revises the old master narrative by quoting an ironic title she gave a paper: "Susan Rowsan, The Father of the American Novel." She cannot escape the old master narrative, so she rewrites it. Thomas also asks whether popularity is indeed a measure of

influence: people who buy books may do so more to have their minds confirmed than changed (27-31).

But Thomas's point is not the particular problems of the master-narrative that Tompkins constructs, which, by the way, is a much more nuanced, complex, and inclusive one than was typical perhaps twenty years ago. His point is simply that such narratives appear to be indispensable. Marxists have long argued that ideological constructions of history not only are inevitable, but because they are inevitable, we should all simply grin and bear it, constructing master narratives to suit our own ideologies. I welcome their approach, with two caveats. First, we must treat our narratives as disprovable: some kinds of evidence, were they presented and demonstrated to be factually accurate, must be able to show that we were wrong. Otherwise, our ideologies have become circular arguments. Second, we must always recognize the contingency of our master narratives. We must recognize that a different story would reveal different aspects of truth in its emphasizing and ignoring certain data.

Perhaps the way to study literature, then, is to construct a master narrative to suit one's ideology. A Christian, then, would read the *Star Wars* trilogy as demonstrating that a form of Christian pacifism overcomes evil by redemptive love, not violence. However, so to read *Star Wars* ignores how the climactic battle only comes about by the violent victories of Skywalker's allies; and how the movie lacks any suggestion of a personal God, leaving it a sort of pantheism, in which we are good and powerful because we feel and sympathize with the



pain of victims everywhere. I also find such a reading unsatisfactory because it ignores the movie's impact on its recipients: children were, after all, much more taken with the weaponry involved than they were with the pop theology.

One could argue that the failure of this reading of *Star Wars* is merely bad reading, not a failure of method, and Christians still ought to be reading this way. But I do not think so. Instead, I would argue that the problem with such readings is that their power to emphasize and ignore tends to make them circular. In such narratives we can too easily glide over contradictions: "Yes, but Han Solo is not as wise as Luke Skywalker, so Luke's pacifism must be right. And you assume that a bunch of eight-year-old children waving pretend light-sabres understood the movie properly--surely you would not do that with a child who read *Moby Dick* and ran around the street with a harpoon." Of course, such answers can provoke counter-answers ad infinitum (how many eight-year-olds would read *Moby Dick*, anyway?), but the ability to answer such charges suggests that we are dealing here with an ideology that cannot be disproven, a circular argument.

Academia is replete with such ideologies held religiously. In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that Freudians are circular in their arguments; others have said the same of Marxism. We certainly may hold our Christian ideology and never let it be challenged, but I would prefer not to. Instead, I want my Christian-ness in my academic field, my integrated faith and learning, not to be a circular argument, but an hypothesis, the

best understanding I have of my Christianity at the moment. Christianity certainly is not contingent: it exists because the one force that is outside our contingency-making history once entered that history and became man. But His becoming man has not made me infallible in my attempts to grasp Him. Unless I simply want to confirm myself in my understanding of Him, I must avoid Christian master narratives that cannot be challenged by the data.

But I do not mean that all narratives can be equally Christian. While many master narratives can be used by Christians, and all can be read and thought with profitably--if truth is multi-faceted, then any angle on that truth will reveal something that cannot be seen from other angles--genuinely Christian master narratives probably should share certain characteristics.

First, they should all be oppositional. Christ promised us His salvation, His own presence with us, His personal return, but He also promised us persecution. He has called us (through Paul) to be in, not of, the world. The world to which He refers must be the culture in which we live, whatever that culture is. America certainly has not created a Christian culture: its emphases on materialism and acquisition, and its tendency to turn anything good into a commercial commodity, either to be sold or to sell other things, strikes at the heart of Christ's message in Matthew 6 that we are to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, and leave material matters in God's hands. But if we, then, oppose the idea that each individual should be

primarily concerned with her own economic welfare, we certainly oppose our culture, and we oppose those who find a necessary connection between Christianity and capitalism. I do not mean to argue that America is uniquely non-Christian. Christians must be oppositional in any culture: as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "The Church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community" (quoted in Ford 29) Such a position certainly impels us to be oppositional. I often explore Marxist ways of reading partly because within our society they are oppositional, and where they are hostile to Western Christianity's complicity in many of the parts of Western civilization that we consider immoral (imperialism, the exploitation of the poor), they correct certain understandings of Christianity.

Second, a Christian should oppose any master narrative that denies full humanity to some segment of the population. We always recognize that God has not only created human beings, but has loved them so much that Jesus died for them. What God so values, we cannot denigrate, and while we can read and profit by understanding the thinking of racists, sexists, homophobes, and others who demonize or deny the full humanity of human beings, we cannot share their thinking. For this reason, I often use feminist ways of reading: they show how women particularly have been written out of the human race by many authors who have long resided in the academic canon. I do not know whether the canonical writers have done more to create or confirm racism, sexism, and hatred, but they have certainly done both, and unless

we can teach people to read them critically, they shall continue to do both.

Third, Christian master narratives must not deny the power of religious faith in people's lives, and here I step out of what is currently academically fashionable. Feminism and Marxism are certainly popular ways of thinking within my field, but both, for reasons of varying legitimacy, have thought Christianity the enemy. I can see from their perspective how Christianity looks as it does: the church has compromised far more than it should with capitalism, and it has confirmed patriarchy in some of its worst excesses. That said, it has also supplied many of the best oppositional voices throughout history. Evangelicals in Victorian England were among the first to be concerned with the plight of the poor in the new society industrialism had created. And though many church leaders opposed the nascent women's rights movement, Josephine Butler and William Booth were among its earliest supporters. The case can even be made that John Wesley himself saw women's roles as too limited in society and in the church (Krueger 47-48).

To me the most interesting questions of literary study are bound up in the issue of what effects literary works have had on their society. I study the history of the reception of literature because I am particularly interested in what literature does within the individuals and the society that receives it. The master narratives I construct (they are legion) largely involve people's ways of reading and understanding. They are Christian master narratives in the ways I have defined, and

they continue to teach me how to see both the works I read and my own contingent position in history. I do not believe that I have integrated faith and learning: they were never segregated. I have merely tried to follow to their logical conclusions what my understanding of my faith and my understanding of my academic field have taught me. Not surprisingly, the journey has been single, not double. After all, the most multifaceted Truth of all is Jesus Christ Himself.

## Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail/V. N. Volosinov. *Freudianism: A Critical Sketch*. Translated by I. R. Titunik. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley. New York: Knopf, 1953.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Eliot, T. S. "Religion and Literature." *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Edited by Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975: 97-106.
- Ellis, John. *Against Deconstruction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Ford, Charles E. "Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Resistance, and the Two Kingdoms." *Lutheran Forum*, 27, no. 3 (August 1993): 28-34.
- Hillman, James, and Michael Ventura. *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Edited by Norman H. MacKenzie. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Krueger, Christine. *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Thomas, Brook. *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.