Scripture in the Foreign Language Classroom: Colonial Spanish American Literature

Dwight Ten Huisen
Calvin College
Grand Rapids, Michigan

According to their website, the mission of the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities is “to advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth.” The integration of faith and learning has long been a hallmark of my institution, and thus every semester since I have been at Calvin I have been evaluated by students on the effectiveness of that integration in my classroom. While I find it impossible to discuss colonial Spanish American literature without looking at the religious discourse and justification for the conquest of the New World present in these texts, I have found the explicit use of scripture in the classroom to be more problematic.

The sources of my hesitations are multifaceted, but besides my lack of training in Hebrew, Greek, and biblical hermeneutics, there are two principal factors that have contributed to my reticence to include scripture explicitly in my classroom. First of all, I think the discussion of any biblical text, no matter how small the pericope, requires investing a considerable amount of class time to understanding the context, both historical and textual, of the passage. Given the time constraints of my classes, I have thus been loath to include additional texts that require careful readings. My second fear is that by including shorter, more manageable biblical passages, they will be interpreted as pious attempts at using texts for shallow display purposes or superficial attempts at meeting the requirement to integrate faith and learning in the classroom.[1] My struggle then has become how to integrate scriptural texts into the literature classroom in a meaningful and coherent way that illuminates and dialogues with the texts which are the principal focus of our study, i.e., colonial Spanish American literature.

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My use of scripture in the colonial Spanish American literature class as it has developed is primarily intended to get students to think more carefully about a few relevant biblical themes and passages as they relate to the course. It is also designed to get them to consider the possible ramifications of enforcing faulty biblical interpretations, both in the past and the present, and encourage them to read carefully before jumping to the short-sighted "here and now" interpretation.[2] Often my approach is intentionally disconcerting as I attempt to distance students from readings that have become overly spiritualized, symbolized or turned into harmless, disembodied metaphor. And I must confess to leaving my students on occasion with no resolution to tensions that I point out. While this may be a reflection of my personal aversion to the tidy conclusion, I take this all as part of the call for the intellectual courage required for true integration of faith and learning.

In my Colonial Spanish America class I attempt to establish the following themes which we trace throughout the course: Alterity, identity formation, the construction of boundaries between Self and Other, and universalism versus particularism. After reviewing the syllabus the first day and defining some of the terms, I ask students to describe what they think the Bible has to say about their relationship with the Other, especially the foreign and/or non-Christian Other. Normally the Second Greatest Commandment and the Good Samaritan are brought up. We also look briefly at Exodus, "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt," (22:21 and 23:9), Leviticus, "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt," (19:33), and Deuteronomy, "And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt." (10:19). Having discussed these and the important tie to the memory of servitude in Egypt, we discuss these two quotations which become epigraphs for the course:

> "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28

> "This religion [Christianity] seeks to be universal and is thereby intolerant." Tzvetan Todorov[3]

While students nod with enthusiasm at the verse from Paul, the Todorov quote sometimes leaves them a bit perplexed. While they don't have difficulty seeing historical cases of Christian intolerance (this is a course on Spanish colonialism in the Americas, after all), they don't always understand the connection that Todorov is making. We finish this discussion by looking at

another text which is continually referenced throughout the course, i.e. the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 29:18b-20). After taking some time to compare Matthew's version to those found in Mark and Acts, students tend to make several observations regarding textual differences. Thus a great deal of the general setup and prefacing of the course starts from well-known scriptural passages and the students' understanding of them.

The first few days of class time are then dedicated to reading and discussing two ancient texts, Joshua and *The Odyssey.* These texts are important for establishing the themes for the course for a number of reasons. Not only does Joshua provide the Castilian crown with the historical precedent and justification for the conquest and several key laws (including the reading of the *requerimiento*), it also establishes clearly several important Old Testament themes that they will trace throughout the course. [4] Most importantly, however, it provides a prime example of a Biblical text which most students have read but not thought about critically. In her study of the Old Testament, Regina Schwartz argues that "The narrative of conquest has been elaborated in Christianity, where it has been universalized and spiritualized" (158), and this is the type of reading that most students have of Joshua.[5] One need only consider a verse from "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" to see how deep this tradition is: "When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside; death of death, and hell's destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side." This metaphorical reading of Joshua is in keeping with tradition. In fact, the president of Calvin College stated in his convocation address in the fall of 2003 that "Our charge, as a Christian college community, is the same as the one Joshua received: 'Be strong and courageous, do not be frightened, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.'" While I concur that Christian education requires courage and strength of conviction, I am more than a bit uncomfortable suggesting to students that they are called to be like the conquering Joshua. Thus in the discussion of the text, students look at some of the standard "spiritualized readings" of Joshua, usually starting with a discussion of how they talked about it in Sunday school. Students suggest some of the following "readings" of Joshua: "Do not be afraid," "Follow the Law," "Listen to God (Achan's sin)," "Continually inquire of God (Gibeonite's deception)," "Witness the display of the miraculous power of

God (walls of Jericho, sun standing still)," "Maintain faith in adversity," and "Choose to serve the Lord." Aside from these readings, Joshua also brings the following class themes to the forefront, thus foregrounding the course: "Remembering the Exodus," "Justification of the conquest," "Violence of the conquest," "Marking of difference after crossing the Jordan (construction of altar, circumcision, celebration of Passover)," "Command to not associate with other nations that remain among them," "Danger of foreign women," and "Fear of transculturation." This reading and discussion has tended to unsettle some students. One of my best students, in fact, stated that the Joshua made her very uncomfortable and were she not a Christian she would reject the text as a prime example of blind fanaticism.

Jonathan Boyarin rightly cautions, however, that "without denying that ancient Judaism is a major source of Christian European self-understandings, we would do well not to make a beeline to the Pentateuch for the premodern origins of Western European colonial discourse" (526). I therefore also preface the course with the cantos from Homer's *Odyssey* that describe the Cyclops and Kirkes. These episodes present clear examples of ancient Greek descriptions of the Other, and there is at least one connection to scripture and course themes that some students find startling. While the Greeks are described as urban, intelligent merchants and farmers who eat bread and drink wine, the Cyclops are described as dumb, cave-dwelling nomadic herders who eat human flesh and drink milk. The association of "bread" and "wine" as markers of civilization and its juxtaposition to cannibalism is startling to some students, but it prepares the students for the continual comparison between communion and cannibalism that is so frequently made in New World texts.

During the course students read and discuss the canon of Colonial Spanish American Literature. It is not necessary to go through the entire course to give an idea of how I continue to integrate scripture into the class; a few brief examples from the first authors that students read will suffice. Imbedded in the "robust doctrine of creation" of Calvinism and Calvin's core is a very heavy emphasis on the Cultural Mandate (Genesis 1:28), and this is an issue that students confront directly with the first "Spanish" author that they read: *Cristo ferens* Columbus. His description of nature and his claim to have found the earthly paradise located at the nipple of the breast-shaped earth bring students to a discussion of creation and prelapsarian nature, but more importantly he leads them to a discussion of both the Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate. His justifications for undertaking the voyage to convert the Great Khan and his suggestions regarding the ease of making disciples of the

indigenous peoples beg this question. More interesting for the students, however, is the classroom discussion that arises regarding Columbus's intended uses for natural wonders he encounters in the New World, e.g., field for cultivating, trees for building ships, deep ports for harbors, etc.

With Cortés and Díaz del Castillo students move to the other two motifs that run through early encounter literature, i.e., sodomy and human sacrifice/cannibalism. Once they have been keyed into understanding what "that abominable sin against nature" is, students wonder why sodomy is so often mentioned in these texts. Rereading the account from Genesis 9 and 10 (God's covenant with Noah, the Sons of Noah, the Table of Nations) gives students much to consider. While they originally read the text as another discussion of nudity, the curse of Ham (father of Canaan), takes on new light when students realize that a common discussion in the early 16th century turned around deciding whose descendents the inhabitants of the New World were. If they were indeed sons of Ham, it was witnessed in their practice and acceptance of sodomy. It also conveniently gave justification for the conquest of the New Canaan. It is not surprising that voices opposed to conquest of the New World proposed that the indigenous people were descendents of Japheth.

Cortés also prompts a discussion of human sacrifice as found in the Old Testament. While Micah 6:7 ("Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul") and the sacrifice of Isaac are very familiar to students and they readily apply "spiritualized" readings, the sacrifice of Jephthah is more difficult. They all lead to good discussions of Christ's sacrifice and the meaning of communion in our tradition, especially when coupled with the references in Homer to wine and bread as markers of civilization. Díaz del Castillo offers more material for the discussions relevant to sacrifice, but *La historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España* also offers a good chance to look at transculturation in the Old Testament, reviving the discussion of the role of foreign women. Ruth is presented as an example of "good" transculturation and makes an interesting comparison to Malinche as viewed in the eyes of Díaz del Castillo. His comparison of her to Joseph also relates to scripture and the themes of forgiveness and reconciliation. Finally, Cabeza de Vaca alludes to scripture regularly. Besides furthering the discussions of transculturation and the Great Commission, he transparently compares himself to both Moses and Christ. Of particular interest, however, are his references to Pentecost and Paul's universalistic claim that we are all one in Christ. Cabeza de Vaca's facile erasure of considerable human difference,

however, makes students think more carefully about the weight of Paul's assertion.

This cursory listing of Colonial authors and scriptural references might suggest that the colonial texts serve merely as glosses on the biblical texts. While clearly a danger, that is neither the intent nor the outcome as far as I can gather from student comments and evaluations. Instead, the scriptural references require students to continually pause and reflect not only on their understanding of the biblical passage but also on the assumptions and assertions of the colonial authors. Rather than merely rejecting the discourse of these authors as hollow rhetoric reflecting an outdated, unenlightened, and misguided society from the past, students begin to consider the colonial authors more carefully precisely because of the ties to scriptural texts. As one student wrote in his course evaluations, "It made me look at the Bible, themes in it, and the way Christians have viewed and acted on these themes in history in ways I had not considered previously."

NOTES

1 See article by David Smith included in this volume.

2 According to Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), the first task in reading a biblical passage is to exegete it and read it carefully, starting first with the "then and there" before moving to the second task of interpreting it and asking questions about the "here and now." While I have some qualms with their claim that "a text cannot mean what it never meant" and their requirement to "find out what the original author intended," I agree with their assertions that a biblical passage should be carefully read in context and a serious attempt should be made to understand what the text meant to its original audience.

3 See Tzvetan Todorov, The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1987): 105.

4 See Hanke, *La lucha española por la justicia en la conquista de América* (Madrid, 1959) 65.

5 See Regina Schwartz, *TheCurse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997): 158.