

## Response: Why We Write Such Good Gospels

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If it is not inappropriate to begin with two introductory remarks, I would like to say, first, that we are very grateful both to the editors of the *Bible and Critical Theory* and to the authors of these provocative responses for their attention and care to our *Insurrectionist Manifesto* project. Secondly, in agreeing to write a response on behalf of my collaborative co-authors I agreed to write both briefly and also along those lines where I felt I might be useful (rather than to try to imagine the very different tack that Clayton Crockett, Jeffrey Robbins, or Noelle Vahanian could no doubt take). I'll point out not only that in this case the biblical scholar of the group will lead the way, but also that all the problems with what I say here are my own rather than theirs.

This thought, in fact, leads me to my first point, our choice to take up the authorial personae of those who write new gospels, which is the issue around which I'd like to focus a response. I think the issue of authorial persona is an important one for contemporary biblical scholarship as an academic field of production. The issue is really about how we articulate our work amidst the many departments, new disciplines, and emerging public spheres vying for attention, funding, investment, and in some cases domination and control. But this issue is also about something which we might refer to as the performative 'politics' of this book, a vexed and paradoxical quality of the project with which each of the respondents, in their own ways and in the most productive sense, struggled.

As readers of this journal will of course recall, Friedrich Nietzsche cheekily entitled one of those brash later essays of his 'Why I write such good books' (*Ecce Homo*), and his entire career seems in hindsight entirely obsessed with writing new gospels, of doing the Gospel writers one better, of unearthing lost versions of early Christianity or of forgotten 'prequels,' and so on. But there was a great deal more at stake for us than this kind of obvious type of comparison to those late essays of Nietzsche might suggest, at least since the comparison suggests that we should be read as operating from some readymade or immediately recognizable sense of self-assertion. For me, this possible mistaken reading of our taking up personae of those who write new gospels is intimately related also to how our 'insurrection' is always as much an experiment with paradoxes of acquiescence-- or with a reconfigured passivity—as with usual associations of confident political agency that usually adhere to the word 'manifesto'.

For me, the paradoxical truth behind the mistaken identity is the reason we still feel the allure of a rhetoric of gospel production. It is, perhaps (or at least for me) why the project is still Christian, even if only heretically so or by way of a recuperation of that movement's aleatory and heterodox roots. I for one was taken from the very start—seized might be a better term—with the notion of a collaborative project echoing the production of gospels, and in fact of precisely the four Gospels we have in the New Testament. We did discuss the issue at length on several occasions together, and we enumerated many more points of comparative intrigue than were actually spelled out in the book or, in fact, that I will touch on

even here. (E.g., I think, in the end, like the Gospels, the four of us may disagree about ‘resurrection’, a realization which was, for me as a biblical scholar, one of the essential reasons I wanted us to articulate our ‘insurrection’ on the model of the secretly divergent Gospels! I also wanted to write in a Gospels model because I wanted to write under the auspices of a retroactive influence of Paulinism. I also wanted to write a single Gospel—the chapter on ‘sky’—with multiple and entirely contradictory endings, not for the sake of incoherence but for the sake of what I have often found in the two endings of Mark, a kind of intensification of dialectical contradiction which forces new creation.)

Interestingly for us, the respondents in this journal seem to be quite unflappable and generous in their reading of us on this point. Is it because readers of this journal are more accustomed to biblical scholarship, with biblical scholarship’s articulation of the all-too-human characteristics of the Gospels? Perhaps... our reception is certainly not the same on this point in some other venues, and none of us underestimates the historical function of biblical scholarship to reconfigure our sense of affective immediacy vis-a-vis scriptural canons of many sorts. Our hope was to participate in what is historically biblical scholarship’s consistent creativity in the tinkering together of oddly new news on which to stand, about which to speak, and—sometimes—in the name of which to fight.

It may be that ‘unflappable and generous’ doesn’t quite cover our experience at reading the respondents’ interventions. We felt, more than this, that the respondents showed the most remarkable sorts of generosity in incorporating our project into their own ongoing work, and in allowing their own work to extend and develop our discussions in other fields. Lisa Isherwood, for example, kindly compares the aspect of rewritten Bible to her own, and also to Catherine Keller’s, intriguing rewiring of scriptural traditions. Colby Dickinson runs the project through his own work on Giorgio Agamben and challenges it to keep pace with his own efforts to reconceptualise theology, or rather to resituate the theological in good Benjaminian fashion within a sphere that is a distinctly, if transfigured, a profane politics. Christopher Rowland appends to the insurrectionist cause a kind of strikingly potent new archive of other biblical interpreters who have blazed new trails in that oddly activist leisure (Dickinson refers to us as Foucaultian monastics at one point) which is our archivist insurrection. William Blake, the mighty Leveller Gerrard Winstanley, and Rowland’s own counter-memory of apocalyptic and heterodox Christianities are placed into the mix in ways that broaden the scope and significance of the project, and for which we are very grateful. Concetta Principe extends some of her own work on biblical traditions and critical theory (e.g., *Secular Messiahs and the Return of Paul’s ‘Real’: a Lacanian Approach*) into some of her ongoing work on poetics. The result, for a start, is that her fascinating Paul articulates itself through an encounter with Lawrence of Arabia, just the type of compellingly queer comparative constellation which emerges once we realize that the archive is, we might say, without a given beginning or end.

As Isherwood and others make clear, the hermeneutical twist which funds a simultaneous reevaluation of the ancient texts and their contemporary readers (or, we should say, of the ancient texts and their contemporary collaborative re-writers), concerns the fantasmatic or illusory nature of some inherited biblical images of sovereignty and its accompanying right of control for the author/maker. Isherwood reflects especially on the creation narrative of Genesis and related

fantasies of fiat creations from nothing, but we could borrow her point in solidarity to describe also our decision to situate our reflections as four ‘new Gospels.’

In our case, too, the death of old fantasies of sovereignty and (exclusive, always excluding) right makes possible a kind of redistribution of the capital associated with the role of a Gospel author. Again, is this not one of the reasons all of us are attracted, I would say, to a particular iteration of the Gospel form? And, if we love this form, should we not affirm it, expand it, exercise this game of news-ing, above all when such gaming seems to wriggle out of its pre-determined and predictable functions, when it re-forms the forms?

I think we should answer this singular call, so to speak, perhaps more seriously and explicitly than has happened thus far in the labour of biblical studies and critical theory. For example, it has always seemed to me that a banner over the rambunctious hurly burly of what we often describe (at least since Gershom Scholem and Jacob Taubes) as ‘messianic experience’ is a tag we should always link to the injunction to ‘go and do likewise’. Or, in a more academic voice, as someone who has followed the ‘turn to religion’ in critical theory and continental philosophy very closely, it seems to me that the entire interdisciplinary field which has emerged (to such great fanfare and sometimes great consternation) has a good deal to do with a very simple turn toward the invitational, the performative, and in that sense to a democratizing redistribution of what otherwise is often presented as off limits, as the sacred (text) our own profane lives ought not to touch. We might say that the new regime, a new interdisciplinary field in this case, is one in which the experiences under discussion are experiences on offer. One recalls the way Giorgio Agamben told the seminar participants of what was eventually published as *The Time that Remains* that his lectures would make no sense to them unless they were processing their own ‘messianic experiences’ alongside.

Go and do likewise: it is a watchword for us, most of all when we are trying to articulate an experience or concept somewhat rarified, difficult, or ‘singular’, a solidarity we are only beginning to dare to name. Colby Dickinson picks up on this aspect of the book, linking it to a desire to draw a distinction between the ‘strength’ of onto-theology and the ‘weakness’ of insurrection. That is a good way to put it. For us, the move to write as Gospel authors was not to identify with an imagined strength, power, or canonical control of the New Testament Gospels, but rather to explore comparatively some spaces which, say, biblical scholarship has long since made clear but which this same field tends not to distribute as an invitation to ‘go and do likewise’. Why? Or, perhaps we should ask, why this de-politicization, this prohibition against shared intoxications, mild or strong as they might be? Why this austere prohibition of the game of news-ing or, indeed, of the desire to foreclose the entire panoply of *repetition* which, we always tried to be clear in the book, is about the serial return of the new? In these things, our respondents frankly knocked us off our feet in doing more than we had even hoped they might. ‘Monsters of energy’ Keith Ansell-Pearson might call them.

One sees the point, anyway. The issue is not at all simply about ‘religion’ or the ‘biblical archive’, of course, much less a desire to be a determined and manageable repetition of a simple ‘Christian moment’ or some such. On the contrary.... nevertheless, more than an incidental characteristic of a mode of academic writing, this turn toward the invitational, the experience on offer, is the driving force precisely behind our gesture toward a repetition of Gospel production as a way of redistributing the capital of academic writing as well. We wanted to

think about how our academic work—philosophical, theological, historical, cultural—might best articulate itself through a collapse of distinction between, say, high theory and the performatives gestures of the evangelistic type. We want other biblical scholars to explore the possibilities, concertedly and collaboratively, as well. Or, to inflect the authorial persona only slightly differently, we say, biblical scholars of the world unite! We have nothing to lose but the flat-footed managerialisms in our national research assessment exercises!



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