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Biblical Studies as a Secular Discipline

The Role of Faith and Theology

Ronald A. Simkins, Creighton University

An Essay

Introduction

[1] Recently on the popular website, *The Bible and Interpretation* (<http://www.bibleinterp.com>), a number of essays and opinion pieces have been published on secularism and its role in the academic discipline of biblical studies. Some have argued that the discipline needs to be more secular (see Avalos 2010a, 2010b), others that faith and theology are essential to the discipline (see West; Bulkeley). This recent exchange only punctuates a long-running debate within biblical studies. Unlike the fields of religious studies and theology, the role of faith and theology remains unsettled in biblical studies. Religious studies, for example, has been defined as a secular discipline that examines religious beliefs and practices from an external, objective position. It is a widely accepted academic discipline at most universities, and the religious studies professor is like the historian, sociologist, anthropologist, or psychologist who studies religious subjects. Theologians, in contrast, tend to be adherents of the faith they study. Theology is generally thought to be a religious academic discipline – “faith seeking understanding,” as first articulated by Anselm (though see below) – and is largely relegated to religiously affiliated universities and seminaries. The secular status of biblical studies within the academy and university, however, is not clearly defined. It functions within both religious studies and theology, and so the discipline’s relationship to secularism and faith remains disputed.

[2] This is not surprising because the meaning and significance of secularism and secularization are themselves unsettled, and the so-called “secularization thesis” is under assault (see most recently, Bruce; Warner). Secularization has been the master model of sociological inquiry for understanding the development of modern society. Beginning with the seminal sociological work of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber (among others), and culminating in the work of Peter Berger, Brian Wilson, and Thomas Luckmann (among others) in the 1960s and 70s, the secularization thesis argued that religion would continue to fade in importance and eventually cease to be a significant factor in modern social life. As Berger commented in 1968 to a New York Times reporter, “By the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture” (quoted in Stark: 250). His prediction could not have been further from the truth.

[3] During the last decades of the twentieth-century and the first decade of the twenty-first, the world has experienced a “veritable explosion of religious faith,” as Berger himself acknowledges in a recently published essay with the conspicuous title, “Secularization Falsified” (2008). Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity and Mormonism are growing in the United States, Latin America, and in every other part of the world in which they have a foothold. Islam is changing the face of Europe. Religious fundamentalisms are on the rise across the globe, not to mention the emergence of many new religious movements. And belief in God remains high. Secularization has certainly changed the look of contemporary religions, but it has not eradicated religion. One recent study has argued that secularization, combined with the effects of globalization, has created the fertile soil for fundamentalism to flourish. Indeed, this is what we are witnessing today (Roy).

[4] The focus of this essay is not the debate over secularization that is taking place in the social sciences, especially in the sociology of religion. In that context, the debate has taken on the form of a Kuhnian paradigm clash, in which different theoretical perspectives – generally termed neo- or post-secularization – compete over their relevance rather than the data themselves (Chaves: 749-50). We will need for the social scientists to work this out, though they might benefit from the work of Charles Taylor, John Milbank, C. John Sommerville, and others like them who are reframing the understanding of secularization from historical, philosophical, and theological perspectives. My point of referencing this debate here is simply to note that the disputes over the place of secularization in biblical studies reflect the debates about secularism itself. Nevertheless, secularization is the lens through which the academic discipline of biblical studies sees its relationship to modernity (or post-modernity), religious traditions, and religious bodies (church and synagogue). And as such, what biblical scholars think of secularization is of great importance to the discipline.

[5] Let me begin by saying a few words about the title of this essay, for it is a compact formulation of my thesis: I will argue that academic biblical studies (the discipline employed in the professional academy and in the university, in contrast to that which primarily serves the church or synagogue) is and should be a secular discipline, and this claim means no more, and no less, than that biblical studies is and should be a critical discipline. Limited as it is, this thesis might find the support of most biblical scholars. However, my subtitle highlights the primary point of contention: Does faith and theology have a role to play in secular biblical studies? I will argue, yes, for I identify myself as both a Protestant scholar and

a member of a Catholic Theology faculty. It would be naïve to think that I could separate my professional self (and distinguish multiple professional roles) from my personal self so that one does not influence or engage another. I stand firmly within the Christian tradition and my faith undoubtedly influences my academic scholarship, yet this is not incompatible with a secular biblical studies. Secularization is largely the result of the Protestant reformation, whereas the Catholic tradition actively resisted secularization through most of the twentieth century. My embrace of secularization may be a product of my Protestant heritage, a way by which I define myself over against my predominantly Catholic colleagues. Yet, my embrace of secularization neither rejects my Protestant heritage nor is it incompatible with the theology practiced by my Catholic colleagues. Instead, from them I have gained a profound appreciation of theology and for the role it might play in relation to biblical studies. Biblical studies as a secular discipline is not antithetical to either faith or theology.

[6] Finally, I offer in this essay a reflection that was initiated by numerous biblical scholars who have in various ways, recently and independent called for a secular biblical studies. The most recent and public call was by Ron Hendel who, in the popular *Biblical Archaeology Review*, accused the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the national academy of biblical scholars, of dropping its historical stance on critical investigation and instead fostering the “views of creationists, snake-handlers and faith-healers” as biblical scholarship. At base, Hendel was objecting to the role that faith was allowed to play in several forms of biblical scholarship that he recently encountered in association with the SBL. Hendel’s comments hit a nerve. Not only did the national organization send a formal response to all SBL members, it hosted a discussion forum on its website which attracted, in a period of three weeks, 95 substantive responses, totally 38 single-space pages. Hendel’s comments were neither new nor original. In 2006, Michael Fox published a similar essay in the SBL’s *Forum*, though he did not attack the national organization. Fox’s critique was aimed at faith-based academic scholarship, which he claims, “is a different realm of intellectual activity that can legitimately draw on Bible scholarship for its own purposes but cannot contribute to it” (15). The year before, Jacques Berlinerblau published his witty and sometimes flamboyant, *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*. The subtitle is a little misleading, for the book primarily argues for a secular hermeneutic in biblical studies. Ten years earlier, in 1995, Philip Davies’ *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* argued for the separation of two distinct disciplines, a confessional one and a non-confessional one. One can in fact trace this trajectory throughout most of the history of the SBL, in which scholars question the role of secularism, faith, and theology in or in relation to biblical studies. Then there is the outrageous 2007 book by Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies*, in which he proposes a radical revision of the discipline. It is out of step with most biblical scholars, marching to its own beat. Finally, all of these scholars (except Hendel) and others have contributed essays to the recent 2010 volume, *Secularism and Biblical Studies*, edited by Roland Boer.

[7] With the exception of Avalos, all of these scholars seem to be advocating for the same thing: a secular or critical biblical scholarship. And with this conclusion I heartily agree. But I disagree in varying degrees on their formulation of what constitutes a secular or critical biblical scholarship, and on this I will comment throughout this essay.

Secularization and Fundamentalism

[8] The relationship between secularization and fundamentalism is an area of study that interests me from recent scholarship that I have read. As I indicated earlier, one recent study has argued that secularization provides the conditions for fundamentalism. If this is true, and the author makes a convincing case, then I am interested in the role that biblical studies might have in this relationship. To illustrate the relationship between secularization and fundamentalism, I turn to a biblical case on the issue of eating meat. It is, of course, precarious to impose a modern framework on the biblical texts. Misinterpretation through anachronism and ethnocentrism is a real danger. My purpose in using this case, however, is primarily heuristic, and my hope is that this case will highlight the dynamics of secularization and its relationship with fundamentalism.

[9] In the world of biblical Israel, eating meat was linked to sacrifice (at least for domestic animals; it seems that eating clean, wild animals such as gazelle and deer was unproblematic as long as the blood was not eaten). God permitted the Israelites to eat the meat of clean animals, but the blood and the fat, including some of the organs, belonged to God. Thus, the eating of a lamb required the slaughter of the animal so that its blood was drained, and its fat and organs removed and burned on an altar to God. The person bringing the lamb for sacrifice would then be able to cook the rest of the animal (minus, perhaps, the priest's portion) and eat and share it with others. For much of the biblical period, such sacrifice took place near the home, outside the village, or at a nearby *bamah* (high place). Eating meat was a religious, sacred activity.

[10] The Deuteronomic reform changed the religious and the dietary landscape. Perhaps in response to a century of domination by the Assyrians, the reformers argued that all cultic activity, including sacrifices and festivals, should take place in Jerusalem at the temple and not at local shrines. Although cultic centralization undoubtedly had political and economic consequences, and perhaps motivations, it also had the consequence of purifying religious practices through regulation and standardization. Through centralization, the reformers transformed Passover, for example, from a celebration that takes place in thousands of different homes and probably in many different ways into a pilgrimage festival that is celebrated in Jerusalem under royal and priestly oversight. But what about eating meat? Sacrifice could only take place in Jerusalem. The festivals did not pose too many problems. Passover only occurred once a year, and there were only two other major annual festivals for which one needed to go to Jerusalem. This was doable, but to travel to Jerusalem every time one wanted to eat meat was not practical. Thus, the reformers introduced profane, or secular, slaughter for the purposes of eating meat (though using different biblical texts, Davies [2010] also argues that secularization is present in the biblical tradition). The relevant text of Deuteronomy reads as follows:

When the LORD your God enlarges your territory, as he has promised you, and you say, "I am going to eat some meat," because you wish to eat meat, you may eat meat whenever you have the desire. If the place where the LORD your God will choose to put his name is too far from you, and you slaughter as I have commanded you any of your herd or flock that the LORD has given you, then you may eat within your towns whenever you

desire. . . Only be sure that you do not eat the blood; for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the meat. Do not eat it; you shall pour it out on the ground like water (Deuteronomy 12:20-22, 24).

[11] Secular slaughter is distinguished from sacred slaughter in terms of purpose and place. Whereas, sacred slaughter is required for sacrifices to Yahweh and can only take place at the altar of the temple in Jerusalem, secular slaughter is for the purpose of eating meat and may take place anywhere. It is important to note, however, that such secular slaughter is not devoid of religious content. According to the Deuteronomic reformers, the people of Israel are holy to Yahweh, set apart from the other nations to be God's people (Deuteronomy 14:2). Moreover, the people maintain their holiness by observing Yahweh's *mitzvot* (commandments; Deuteronomy 26:16-19), and so secular slaughter still entails the separation of blood. The secular practice of animal slaughter takes place in relation to religious *mitzvot* and enables the purification of sacrifice through its centralized practice in Jerusalem. It is because the people are holy and maintain their holiness through the observance of God's commandments that the reformers can sanction the slaughter of animals for meat by Israelites in a profane context. The reformers recognize multiple or plural forms of animal slaughter: some for sacred purposes and others for profane purposes.

[12] The priests responsible for the so-called Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26), however, could not accept this plurality of animal slaughter. For these priests, the killing of animals outside of the regulation of the priests was not a profane practice but a pagan one. Such slaughter is comparable to sacrificing to goat-demons.

If anyone of the house of Israel slaughters an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or slaughters it outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, to present it as an offering to the LORD before the tabernacle of the LORD, he shall be held guilty of bloodshed; he has shed blood, and he shall be cut off from the people. This is in order that the people of Israel may bring their sacrifices that they offer in the open field, that they may bring them to the LORD, to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and offer them as sacrifices of well-being to the LORD. The priest shall dash the blood against the altar of the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and turn the fat into smoke as a pleasing odor to the LORD, so that they may no longer offer their sacrifices for goat-demons, to whom they prostitute themselves (Leviticus 17:3-7).

We should note that the priests do not reverse the Deuteronomic reformers' centralization of the cult; instead, they extend it to include all animal slaughter. In other words, the Deuteronomic reformers' centralization provided the conditions for the Priestly tradition's own understanding of centralization. The priests also share a similar idea of holiness: the people are holy as Yahweh's exclusive possession. Yet, by pouring the slaughtered animal's blood on the ground rather than bringing it to the tabernacle altar for sacrifice, the Israelites were defiling their holiness and so should be cut off from the people.

[13] The religious response of this priestly legislation to the secular Deuteronomic reform resembles fundamentalism in several ways. The priests reject the distinction between the sacred and the profane. What is profane or secular to the Deuteronomic reformers, is

interpreted as pagan by the priests: by pouring the blood of slaughtered animals on the ground, the Israelites are sacrificing to goat-demons. The priests are also the exclusive regulators of holiness. Even though all the people are holy, the people's holiness can be maintained only through the ways regulated by the priests. Unless the slaughtered animals are presented to them for sacrifice, the Israelites defile their holiness and so should be cut off from the people. Plural expressions of holiness are not possible.

[14] As both the example from Deuteronomy and the persistence of religion in our contemporary context make clear, secularization does not eradicate religion. Although secularization has diminished the public expression of religion, it has also transformed existing religions – I would argue for the good – and engendered new religions. I am not worried about the effects of secularization on religion, except in this one area: secularization, along with globalization, provide fertile ground for the flourishing of fundamentalism. Together, secularization and globalization lead to the deterritorialization and deculturation of religion. Religion is separated from culture and is standardized in a presumed purified form, resulting in a number of significant consequences. First, the dialect of faith and reason is severed. Cultural knowledge and values are no longer connected to religious knowledge and values. Instead, faith and belief are what unite the religious over against the culture, which is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to religion. This result for the religious is, what one scholar has called, “holy ignorance.” Second, the social gap between the believer and the non-believer becomes a barrier. Because the religious reject the cultural knowledge and values, culture itself is no longer a common or shared meeting place. In many contexts, the culture itself is perceived as pagan (see Roy).

[15] What is the role of biblical studies, as a secular discipline, in these social forces? Because religious conversion often takes place where there is a lack of connection between religion and culture, and because fundamentalism most readily accepts its own deculturation, fundamentalisms of various stripes are the fastest growing religions around the world. It seems to me that if biblical studies has any role in these social forces, it is at the juncture of religion and culture. Simply put, does biblical scholarship contribute to the obsolescence of the Bible for culture or to understanding its significance for and contribution to culture?

[16] It is in relation to this question that I can address the contribution of Hector Avalos. Avalos is interested in the relevance, or better, the irrelevance of the Bible. His thesis is twofold. First, he states, “Modern biblical scholarship has demonstrated that the Bible is the product of cultures whose values and beliefs about the origin, nature, and purpose of our world are no longer held to be relevant, even by most Christians and Jews” (2007: 16). By “relevant,” he means valuable, applicable, and/or ethical. Then he states, “despite this admission of irrelevance the profession of academic biblical scholarship paradoxically and self-servingly promotes the illusion of relevance” (2007: 20). The problem for Avalos is that the profession of biblical studies is primarily a “religionist” enterprise that upholds the relevance of an unjust and violent text to ensure its place in universities and in the academy. Biblical studies, for him, needs to be eliminated or changed. He advocates for the latter: biblical studies should have the task of “eliminating completely the influence of the Bible in the modern world” (2007: 341).

[17] Avalos' book is difficult to critique because it is hard to take his claims seriously. Both premises of his thesis are simply inaccurate; it is understandable that biblical scholars have largely ignored his work. What Avalos wants, it seems, is a secular world governed by reason, and the work of "religionist" biblical scholars is an obstacle to that end. But if biblical scholarship disappeared tomorrow, or if biblical scholarship managed to eliminate the influence of the Bible (as if biblical scholars exercise this kind of power), would his end be achieved? Avalos would like for the Bible to be no more important or relevant in the modern world than the Epic of Gilgamesh or any other ancient writing. The Bible would become just another obsolete, dusty old book. Let me suggest that if biblical scholars contribute to the obsolescence of the Bible, they may foster the "holy ignorance" that is characteristic of the growing fundamentalisms: people who are not going to give up on the Bible, yet have not knowledge about it or reasonable sense on how to use it. The task of biblical scholars, instead, is to promote biblical literacy, contextual understandings of the Bible and its role within culture, and responsible use of the Bible in contemporary contexts. Or, to use the language of the Deuteronomic reformers and the Holiness priests, their task is to slaughter animals for eating meat without sacrificing to goat-demons.

Understanding Secularization

[18] I have yet to define what I mean by "secular" and "secularization," and to that I now turn. But let me first be clear about what such definitions do. Our definitions do not *determine* what secular, and secularization, is or should be, but rather articulates how we are going to analyze and understand this social reality. In other words, a particular definition of "secular" and "secularization" will shape and so limit our understanding of the social reality without necessarily exhausting its significance.

[19] Defining secular and secularization is like defining myth. In a common, everyday usage, "myth" simply means "a false tale," and on several levels, a myth is indeed a false tale. It does not correspond to historical or scientific perspectives on reality, for example. But such a definition is reductionistic and fails to capture the complexities of myth, as the expansive volumes on myth and myth interpretation will attest. Moreover, a single definition is rarely, if ever, able to capture the complexities of myth, and so we have multiple definitions or dense definitions that may be unpacked in multiple ways.

[20] Similarly, defining "secular" in opposition to "religious" is a rather provincial way of understanding the secular and secularization. Yes, that which is secular may indeed be non-religious, but this limiting definition distorts the complex dynamics involved with the secular. It masks, for example, the specifically religious framework out of which the secular emerged. This is a historical process that has been traced by many scholars (most recently and thoroughly, see Taylor). Such a narrow definition also presumes a particular understanding of the relationship between religion and the secular: that the secular is indifferent to religion or even opposed to religion. Recently, I was reading a popular essay by a biblical scholar in which she claims, "Even though I was brought up in a secular household in London, religion was everywhere at home," mentioning a storybook about the deities of Mt. Olympus alongside an orthodox icon of the Virgin Mary (Stavrakopoulou). I think her meaning is clear: she grew up with no religious commitments, though she has an appreciation for traditional religious material. But her formulation is peculiar to me. Hers was a secular

household even with religious symbols present. What households then would not be secular? Perhaps a household that is also a religious institution, such as a monastery, but this is not what she means. She is simply following the common, everyday usage of secular to mean “non-religious.” This reductive use of “secular,” however, does not help us to understand its dynamics. Similar observations could be made for “secularization.”

[21] Secular and secularization should simply not be defined in opposition to religion. This I believe accounts in part for the failure of some formulations of the secularization thesis. Historically, the secular supplements religion rather than opposes it. As José Casanova notes, “in the historical process of secularization, the religious and the secular are inextricably bound together and mutually condition each other” (21). Secularization is the process of differentiating that which is common, profane, “of this age,” from that which is holy, or belonging to God. It is a reforming process of religion, and it stands in relation to other processes such as modernization, pluralism, and now globalization. By distinguishing what is profane, secularization made the non-religious world possible, but it also presupposes a religious intellectual framework or a religious dimension to reality.

[22] In this context, of course, I cannot take up the history of secularization and all that is involved in the process. Instead, I will focus on two related characteristics of the secular and secularization that are particularly relevant to the field of biblical studies. First, secularization is characterized by a decline in religious authority. In the secular world, religion enjoys neither a privileged nor a disadvantaged position. “It is only one relativized sphere among other relativized spheres, whose elites jockey to increase or at least maintain their control over human actions, organizational resources, and other societal spheres” (Chaves: 752). In this regard, the United States is clearly a secular society, a designation that is often questioned by European theorists because of the high percentage of Americans who embrace religious beliefs. Religious belief is simply not incompatible with modernity or secularization. The decline of religious authority was illustrated in the biblical examples discussed earlier. The Deuteronomic reforms allowed animal slaughter outside of their jurisdiction, whereas the holiness priests maintained control over all animal slaughter through sacrifice. For the Deuteronomic reformers, the decline of religious authority takes place at the societal level. It is important to recognize, however, that secularization is multidimensional and takes place at different levels of analysis. According to Mark Chaves,

Secularization at the societal level may be understood as the declining capacity of religious elites to exercise authority over other institutional spheres. Secularization at the organizational level may be understood as religious authority’s declining control over the organizational resources within the religious sphere. And secularization at the individual level may be understood as the decrease in the extent to which individual actions are subject to religious control (757).

It is secularization at the individual level that is most relevant to the discipline of biblical studies. A secular biblical studies in this context would simply be a discipline of study in which neither the method nor the results are determined by religious authority. The individual biblical scholar would be unrestrained in her investigations and conclusions.

[23] A second characteristic of secularization on which I would like to focus is pluralism. The association of pluralism and secularization shape what Charles Taylor has called “conditions of belief.” Secularization in this sense is a “move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (2). In the United States, we see this form of secularization expressed in the First Amendment, where the establishment clause prohibits the state from privileging one religion and the free exercise clause restricts the state from hindering any religion. A plurality of options for religion, including the option for no religion, is the law of the land. In the biblical example of animal slaughter, this sense of secularization takes place at the organizational level. By centralizing all cultic activity in Jerusalem, the Deuteronomic reformers were expanding their control over the religious resources. To compensate for this redistribution of power and resources, the reformers moved the common slaughter of animals for the purposes of eating meat outside of cultic practices. They introduced a plurality of animal slaughter, distinguishing between meat eating and sacrifice: the sacrifices belong to Yahweh, whereas the animals for meat belong to the people. The Holiness priests, however, rejected this plurality. All slaughtered animals should be brought to the tabernacle for an offering (*qorban*) to Yahweh. They allow no differentiation of animals and animal slaughter; all animals belong to God.

[24] In terms of a secular biblical studies, all three levels of analysis are relevant for understanding secularization. At the societal level, secularization is evident in the plurality of voices. Biblical studies does not belong to any one religious tradition or to religious traditions as a whole, just as the Bible does not belong to any one group, and so biblical studies should not privilege some voices over others. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and non-religious voices are all welcome to contribute to our understanding of the biblical tradition (in its many facets). This plurality is also evidence in the subject of investigation: the biblical tradition is itself plural (see Beal). There are many bibles, each with their own compilation and history, and the discipline should not privilege one over another.

[25] A secular biblical studies at the organizational level is the most challenging. Religious organizations have embraced a particular Bible and have an investment in particular understandings of the Bible. Although religious organizations rarely employ biblical scholars directly (that is, to do biblical studies), many biblical scholars are employed at seminaries and colleges sponsored by religious organizations, and the expectations to contribute to the religious life of the organization vary considerably. Here it is helpful to distinguish between a biblical scholar’s role as a teacher in a religiously affiliated institution and as a scholar in a secular academic field. Creighton University where I teach, for example, requires all its students to take a course in scripture as part of their core education requirements. Given the important role of the Bible in Western civilization and contemporary society, the requirement could have been made for humanistic reasons. It was not. Rather, an understanding of scripture (note that the focus here is not simply the Bible or biblical studies) was thought to be central to the mission of the college as part of a Catholic and Jesuit university. Thus, even though the Catholic Church and the university do not prescribe a particular understanding of the Bible – I can teach whatever my scholarship informs me – my scripture courses engage the students in reflection on faith. But it is a pluralistic reflection; Creighton respects and encourages the diversity of religious traditions. (I should

note that being a Protestant scholar in the Theology Department is part of this diversity.) Thus, in my teaching I contribute in part to the religious life of the church, and hopefully to the religious life of other religious groups, but in this regard, the university is indifferent about my scholarship (I have full academic freedom in and out of the class). Other religiously affiliated schools are not so free. At my undergraduate alma mater, the professors were expected to teach in accord with what the church denomination considered to be fundamental truths, and if they published material that challenged the church's teaching, they risked losing their jobs. Academic freedom was restricted within narrow religiously defined limits. Whether secular biblical studies is able to exist or flourish at the organizational level will depend on the role and exercise of religious authority. Pluralism at the organizational level is not possible as long as the religious organization maintains control of the academic content. In such contexts, biblical studies is a discipline of the church rather than a secular academic discipline.

[26] At the individual level, pluralism is the flip-side of the decline of religious authority. If the latter is the loss of any external *a priori*, the former is the absence of any internal *a priori*. The secular biblical scholar is never without a question or a doubt, and nothing is beyond the scope of questioning or doubt. This is, in fact, the nature of the critical academic enterprise. Religious authority would claim that there are certain truths, and perhaps there are, but not for the critical biblical scholar. The critical scholar cannot begin here. This would be neither critical nor scholarly. Rather, the critical biblical scholar questions and investigates. For the critical scholar there are only measured truths.

[27] This understanding of secularization is similar in part to Jacques Berlinerblau's initial definition of secularism. For him, "Secularism, at its essence and its absolute best, comprises an unrelenting commitment to judicious and self-correcting critique. . . . Secularism's 'job' consists of criticizing *all* collective representations. Its analytical energies should be inflicted on any type of mass belief or empowered orthodoxy, whether it is religious, political, scientific, aesthetic, and so on" (2005: 7). A secular biblical studies would then be a discipline "animated by a spirit of critique." Its motto would be "criticize and be damned!" (2005: 7). I embrace this understanding of secularism as far as it goes, but then Berlinerblau begins to define secularism over against religion and religious beliefs: "Secularists are wont to think of religious beliefs as illusions, wish fulfillments, infantile projections, phantasmagoria, and so on" (2005: 8). Soon, it becomes apparent that the secularists are atheists, as if only nonbelievers can be animated by a spirit of critique. Berlinerblau has taken a common understanding of secular and made it essential. A secular biblical studies should embody the spirit of critique, as should all scholarship. The role of faith or religious commitment is a different issue entirely.

Role of Faith and Theology in Biblical Studies

[28] All the scholars who have issued a call for a secular or critical biblical studies seem to have a problem with faith. Berlinerblau, who is otherwise the least problematized by religious critics, highlights what he calls the demographic peculiarities of the discipline: "Biblicists continue to be professing (or once-professing) Christians and Jews. They continue to ignore the fact that the relation between their own religious commitments and their scholarly subject matter is wont to generate every imaginable conflict of intellectual

interest” (2010: 20). Perhaps, this is true, but is it really peculiar to biblical studies? Does not a conservative religious biologist have the same conflict of intellectual interest? Moreover, does not a non-believing critic have a similar conflict of intellectual interest when investigating religious texts, theologies, and practices? The fact of the matter is that all scholars have presuppositions that are challenged and critiqued by their research. Religious presuppositions are no more problematic than non-religious ones; they are only peculiar because of the assumption that the secular must entail the absence of religious belief.

[29] The religious commitments to which Berlinerblau refers, of course, are encompassed by what is typically meant by faith and theology. In the academy and university, can faith and theology play a role in a secular biblical studies? A secular biblical studies, of course, does not need faith or theology, but are they excluded? Niels Peter Lemche, in a provocative essay in the collection by Roland Boer, states the relationship in the extreme: “When religion gets in, reason has to leave. . . Religion is definitely anti-intellectual and will always be that in spite of the objections of many religious people” (51). Perhaps, this is Lemche’s experience with religious people, but this understanding is ill-informed with a touch of arrogance; it certainly does not fit the religious experience of many. Most of the other scholars in this debate, however, embrace implicitly or explicitly, the old adage that faith should be left at the door, presumably, of the academy. Hendel describes faith as something that “resides in the heart and in one’s way of living in the world” (28), something that is distinct from reason. Similarly, Fox states that faith is belief when evidence is absent, and therefore has no place in scholarship, which is based on evidence: “Any discipline that deliberately imports extraneous, inviolable axioms into its work belongs to the realm of homiletics, spiritual enlightenment, moral guidance, or whatnot, but not scholarship” (15). And, if faith were no more than what they claim, then I would have to agree with them. Inviolable axioms are incompatible with the scholarly enterprise, to which everything is subject to question and critique. But this understanding of faith is too provincial to be accepted.

[30] The meaning of faith and its relation to reason has a long history in the Western philosophical and theological traditions, which we cannot rehearse here. Suffice it to say, some understandings of faith and reason are compatible with a secular biblical studies and some are not. I am persuaded by Paul Tillich’s formulation in which “faith is the state of being ultimately concerned” (1), and as such, there can be no conflict with reason. Instead, “reason is the precondition of faith; faith is the act in which reason reaches ecstatically beyond itself” (76). Other understandings of faith and its relation to reason are also possible. The important point is that faith is compatible with a secular biblical studies; it functions like all other commitments a scholar might bring to his scholarship, and so must be subject to question and critique. Faith may shape the kind of questions the scholar brings to his subject matter; it may even shape the manner in which the subject matter is treated, but it should not determine the results of the scholarship. Faith need not be left at the door, any more than non-belief or any other presuppositions should be left at the door. It is doubtful, in fact, whether faith or presuppositions can actually be left at the door all; we bring them wherever we go. Nevertheless, all should be subject to question and critique. Faith that demands certain results or is expressed through inviolable propositions is both a distortion of faith and contrary to scholarship.

[31] As with faith, many of the scholars we have been discussing also argue for the separation of theology from a secular biblical studies. Philip Davies is the most articulate in this regard. He argues that professional biblical studies masks two distinct disciplines: one is a humanistic biblical studies, the other is a theologically-oriented, confessional scriptural studies. His humanistic biblical studies is similar to the secular biblical studies that I have been describing here, but his scriptural studies differs from the latter in significant ways. Although scriptural studies resides in the academy and uses the methods of biblical studies, it is theological in its discourse and purpose. Its purpose is to serve the church, and its discourse reflects a theistic view of the world, an assessment of “the Bible” as revelation, and is circumscribed by credal considerations. Most importantly for Davies, however, the confessional discourse of scriptural studies allows no legitimate place for non-confessional discourse – it allows no external critique. To draw on the language of Stephen Jay Gould, biblical studies and scriptural studies are two non-overlapping magisteria. To Davies credit, he acknowledges that scriptural studies can be critical and academic, but it should be “outed” in the academy so as not to be confused with non-confessional, secular biblical studies (1995).

[32] Roland Boer takes a different approach. In his “manifesto,” he argues that the Bible has been “colonized by church, theology and theological programmes” (38). His focus is on the abuse to which the Bible has been subjected by both church and state, especially by the religious and political right, and the assumption that the Bible belongs to the church. He argues for “a strategy for removing biblical studies from its tutelage to theology, to gain some crucial perspective in order to hold the church to account for its abuse of the Bible” (27). Boer’s secular biblical studies would thus eschew theology, or at the least proceed with a “healthy theological suspicion,” and emphasize instead literary, cultural, philosophical, legal, historical, and social scientific studies. Furthermore, secular biblical scholars should seek partners outside of the church and theology in order to develop “a sustained criticism of the abuse of the Bible by church and state” and to recover “the revolutionary readings of the Bible” (38).

[33] I must confess that I find Davies arguments largely persuasive, and I do not doubt that there are those in the academy whose scholarship is rooted in *a priori* religious claims, against which no non-religious critique is possible. Where I disagree with Davies is in his initial dichotomy between a humanistic studies and a theological studies, for theology is also a critical discipline (and Davies acknowledges that this is possible) and need not be confessional (see Ogden). And when it is confessional, it need not be uncritical or immune to external critique. Moreover, I would argue, secular biblical studies and critical theology are not two distinct discourses or non-overlapping magisteria. The barrier that is imposed between these disciplines is largely the result of scholarly tendencies toward reductionism. Boer’s strategy is also reductionistic. The Bible has indeed been abused by the church, but the “revolutionary readings of the Bible,” which Boer wants to recover, have also been produced in theological or religious contexts (see Brett). A theological engagement with biblical studies need not entail that biblical studies is a subdiscipline of, or subservient to theology, as Boer fears.

[34] A critical theological discourse may build upon the discourse of biblical studies without determining the latter’s discourse. Instead of non-overlapping magisteria or one as a subset

of the other, one may think of the disciplines hierarchically, addressing lower- to higher-order questions. At the foundation of biblical studies we would have textual, literary, and historical criticisms. These methods address lower-order questions about the wording of the texts, their composition, style, and genre, their transmission, and the historical contexts in which they were compiled. The middle tier presupposes the knowledge of the foundational level and will employ social-scientific or socio-literary methods, ideological and political criticisms, comparative religion, and other such theoretical approaches. The questions and concerns at this level of analysis are of a higher-order than at the foundational level. Finally, the top tier is critical theology, which can take several forms: it may address the diverse theologies of the biblical texts (a form of historical theology); it may explore how the content of the biblical texts fits into a systematic account of the Christian faith (a form of systematic theology); or it may assess the Bible's continuing role in the life of the Church and society (a form of practical theology). Other configurations are possible, but it is important to recognize that, with this configuration of biblical studies and theology, a critical theology builds on the knowledge of biblical studies; it does not predetermine the results of biblical studies, whether it is confessional or not.

Conclusion

[35] Building on this last point about the relationship between biblical studies and theology, let me conclude with a few comments on the secular university. In his 2006 book, *The Decline of the Secular University*, C. John Sommerville argues that universities have largely been marginalized in our society. He asks us to consider the following:

If universities are offering political leadership, why has there been a drift to the political right in this country? It is a well-documented fact that university faculties currently lean hard the other way. If universities are exercising cultural leadership, why do they seem more attentive to pop culture than to the high culture they were nurtured in? If universities are offering scientific leadership, why do they mainly hire their labs out to government and business, with the goal being patents? If they are offering social leadership, why don't professors dominate the talk shows that try to embody our "public opinion"? Is it true, as we often hear, that universities have become trade schools, offering the credentials that students prefer to a rounded education? Why are they only maintaining booths in the intellectual marketplace rather than providing leadership of any kind? (2006: 3).

Berlinerblau also laments that biblical scholars are rarely public intellectuals and thus exert little influence on social thought or public policy. His diagnosis is that religious biblical studies is simply out of step with the larger secular culture. Perhaps, but the dichotomy of religion and secular has little to do with it; there are relatively few public intellectuals in other disciplines. According to Sommerville, the cause of this marginalization is the very secularization that universities intentionally embraced at the end of the nineteenth century – a secularization that was defined in opposition to religion. In freeing the university from religious authorities, academics have also limited the range of intellectual inquiry. Religious questions and theological inquiry has been excluded needlessly from the secular university. The result has been that universities are often unable to answer the very questions in which

the public is most interested because those questions are too religious in nature. Such questions are often dismissed, ignored, or result in simple moralizing; they are simply beyond the scope of the reductionistic academic enterprise.

[36] Is there any room in the university today to address questions of ultimacy? Have we reduced our academic disciplines to the extent that higher-order questions can no longer be addressed? I do not have space left in this essay to develop these ideas further. Suffice it to say that much of what I have argued here in regard to a secular biblical studies could equally be said in regard to the secular university: the secular and secularization do not necessarily or even primarily preclude religion or faith. Sommerville similarly argues for the reform of universities so that their “goal is not to impose a privileged viewpoint but to understand all viewpoints that are able to win a hearing”; that they “openly acknowledge that humans are the most interesting things in creation” and explore the implications of this view; that they recognize “the human and the personal as religious” and are willing “to consider theological scholarship in exploring that understanding”; and that they are able to examine and debate moral judgments (2006: 143).

[37] A few years ago, Stanley Fish opined that the university needs to take religion seriously: “it is one thing to take religion as an object of study and another to take religion seriously. To take religion seriously would be to regard it not as a phenomenon to be analyzed at arm’s length, but as a candidate for the truth.” Why should the university do so? According to Fish, it is because religion is the characteristic of our times, religion is where the action is, and religion is where the intellectual energy of the academy should be. Recent global events have made clear “that hundreds of millions of people in the world do not observe the distinction between the private and the public or between belief and knowledge, and that it is no longer possible for us to regard such persons as quaintly premodern or as the needy recipients of our saving (an ironic word) wisdom.” A secular university, just as a secular biblical studies, may engage religious questions and foster theological analysis and still remain secular. A secular biblical studies and university has room for both faith and theology. What secularization has done for biblical studies and also for the university is to free academic and intellectual inquiry from religious authority and the *a priori* privileging of one position over another. We can slaughter animals to eat meat without sacrificing to goat demons.

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