Education for Peace: Naming and Shaming Violence in Sacred Texts

Dr Jane Fernandez-Goldborough
Avondale College
jane.fernandez@avondale.edu.au

Abstract

Terrorism has impacted on the ways in which we think about ourselves in relation to the Other. It has forced us to measure and evaluate many of our assumptions and exposed many of our underlying prejudices. As teachers, we have a responsibility to revision our pedagogical frameworks and investigate appropriate means of counteracting prejudice and violence in the light of the changing needs of our times. One of the significant challenges we are faced with today is the growing phenomena of sacralised violence. This paper is interested in our revisiting, exposing and counteracting the embedded violence in sacred texts.

1. Introduction

Classroom practice sees the common use of literature and stories as a way of mapping cultures and unpacking notions of identity. We look to stories, to pictures, to text, in a whole consortium of mediums, to tell us about ourselves. But what do our stories tell us about ourselves, and about those we call Others? How are we implicated in the stories we write and share with regard to questions of culture, race and identity? How do our stories advance stereotypes and prejudices? What kind of violence do our stories conceal?

If many of our stories appear to be cyclic, they appear to conform to an unconscious and seemingly subscribed framework of human survival. Judging from our myths, something of Jung's Collective Unconscious appears to provide for us a pool of archetypes through which we filter and manage our deepest fears and desires. Given our common predispositions, our inherited and intuitive universal understanding of symbols and images and universal themes, the crucial question involves why we have not found an antidote for the rivalries that consume us.

What role can teachers play in unpacking and interrogating prejudice? Can we not reach across cultural and religious divides to find ways to celebrate difference? How can we identify and celebrate the hybrid identities that we have achieved as markers of the twenty-first century? My interest lies in our key role as teachers mediating between the real world and the worlds we confront in our classrooms. In this regard, the socio-cultural debates and dialogues which have come under recent scrutiny over these last several decades are a vital resource in enabling us to prepare our students for the challenges of the twenty-first century, of which the most paramount is the threat/reality of violence and global conflict. Arguably, this violence is fuelled through different forms of prejudice.

At the heart of all prejudice be it racism, religious fundamentalism or gender is a fear of difference. It is this fear of the Other and its related violence that my paper is interested in. The force and brutality of Nazi racism have baffled us for several decades and since then, "researchers have tried to explore and explain ethnic prejudice"[1]. Recent scholars such as Guillaumin, while challenging established ideas of race, ascertain that racism keeps race alive even as race itself has become a contestable concept[2]. Race is constructed, engineered and disseminated through a system of fantasy and difference, a system bred through dualism and "epidermal" prejudices. For instance as Nasar Meer points out, "a white/black dualistic conception of race has, for a long time, provided the predominant paradigm for the study of ethnic minorities in Britain"[3]. But Britain is not unique in this regard. Since Edward Said's *Orientalism*, scholars have raised in varying degrees the ways in which the East and people of colour are commodified through labels such as "inferior", "savage", "irrational"[4]. Recent spates of terrorist attacks have deepened the stratum of prejudices and stereotypes aimed at people of eastern and more specifically Middle-eastern or South Asian appearance. Despite the heavy traffic of people movement across the globe, these labels persist through a politics of Othering managed primarily through a system of binary absolutes.

My question involves the extent to which these binary absolutes filter into the language and the psychology of our classrooms. Do we compartmentalize the East or West, the holy and unholy, or civilized and uncivilized? What indeed are the "ethical" dilemmas of "explicit presentations of cultural differences in the classroom which may lead to "othering" or essentializing the cultures

studied"[5]. How do our stories feed these categories, creating false pictures of human society as divided into bi-polar categories of good and evil, burdened by an incurable Manichean mania for opposites? If we looked at language, our language itself carries a burden: a diet of binary assumptions that we are schooled into from an early age.

2. Literature Review

One of the central paradigms of language methodology is its dependence on a contrastive framework. Citing G.H. Mead (1967), Crossley asserts that language acquisition is "central to self-hood", i.e. a "temporal, reflective process, in which the individual ('I') turns back upon and reflectively objectifies their self as 'Me'". "By means of language, the child is able to think and simultaneously gain access to their own thoughts". A further development of this process is "the ability of the child to 'take the role' or 'the attitude' of 'the other' for the development of self-hood. If, as children, we are to achieve full self-hood, [Mead] maintains, then we must come to recognize that our experience of the world is one amongst many and we must learn to see ourselves from the point of view of the other"[6].

Indeed we are socialized through language, through synonymic and more pertinently antonymic patterns of language. We learn from a very young age, of what is through what it is not. We make associations through contrasts, teaching our children to construct basic families out of likeness rather than difference, such as categories of human, animals, birds, mammals, reptiles, black, white etc. While such a method has its place, dependence on such generalised contrastive models of teaching without attention to the use of qualifiers and discriminators can encourage the perception that all things exist in binary associations. Patterns of understanding then emerge via a model of contrasts that is over-dependent on meaning through its corollary *Other*. Such a view of the world is sustained by the need to hold a lens on someone else to tell us who we are. The focus then is to assume power for ourselves through a relationship with what/who we regard as our opposites.

As psychoanalysts argue, the problem with such a position is that the Other can never be reconciled to the subject. The Other must, by necessity, remain sealed in difference so that we can remain secure in our plenitude of being. Consequently, we can shirk the responsibility for order and meaning from our shoulders, so that it lies not with us, but with those whose difference must be cast as fixed and non-negotiable to convey the meanings to which we are accustomed. It means that we cannot know ourselves except as we define ourselves through the Other. This fixation then on the Other feeds our sense of self and our fantasies of the self. If this fixation on the Other makes us feel good about ourselves, it also means that we have a scapegoat who becomes the reason for our peace and our conflict. Accordingly, Zizek argues that all conflict "is always a war of fantasies"[7].

At the most generalised global level, this fantasy finds a home in what Huntington proposes as the impending "clash of civilizations". "What is evident from Huntington's language is the way he uses figurative language to accentuate the distance between "our" world – normal, acceptable, familiar, logical – and, as an especially striking example, the world of Islam, with its bloody borders, bulging contours, and so on"[8]. The rhetoric of commentators regarding global conflict and terrorism further extends the trajectories of these imaginary divides, which in turn, betray the resident anxieties, fantasies of difference and *Otherness*. What do we as teachers do against this back-drop of politics and violence? How do we demythologize in our classrooms the great cultural divides of Us/Other, civilized/uncivilized that are resurrected in the political arena?

Education has generally been regarded as "universal(ly) liberalizing" in that it is the single most important medium for counteracting prejudice. Research has consistently proven that "higher educated individuals turn out to be less prejudiced against ethnic minorities than lower educated minorities"[9]. But this apparently "liberalizing effect of education", Hello et al argues, is significantly dependent on and complicated by varying "national contexts"[10]. Influences such as the strength of "democratic traditions" and the "religious heterogeneity" of countries impact on the effectiveness of the "transmission of tolerant values through the educational system"[11]. Clearly, while the value of education in minimizing prejudice cannot be underestimated, the fact still remains that the way in which we market our stories/beliefs often advance the very prejudices and violent formations that we wish to dispel.

This is particularly significant in the case of religious education and socialization. A trail of research beginning from Allport and Ross's (1967) study to Altemeyer's (1996) study prove that prejudice is no stranger to religiously inclined individuals[12]. Prejudice "measured by the Manitoba Ethnocentricism Scale demonstrate that religion provides no real immunity to racism and in fact consistently advances sexually-related prejudices [13]. Further, "responses to the Christian Orthodoxy scale (Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982)" demonstrate how while "one's creed per se" may not condone prejudice, the self-righteous attitude that "one's beliefs are fundamentally … inerrant" advances and complicates "bigotry"[14]. Further, Altemeyer argues that religious conditioning

encourages a container model of belonging, "Us versus Them". The resulting "religious ethnocentricism" predisposes religious fundamentalists to "make in-group versus out-group discriminations – and create(s) a template for later discriminations against various 'Thems'"[15].

3. Analysis of Findings

Given that religion is a vital human need, how do we moderate claims that religion is tied to violence. Arguably, on the macro-level, religion is fundamentally important in the vital role it plays in teaching the values of love, unity and peace. Yet, we cannot ignore the gap between "explicit" (conscious) religious attitudes and "implicit" (unconscious) religious attitudes[16]. My interest is in how "implicit" attitudes can be challenged through the classroom. One significant trajectory involving the formation of "implicit" attitudes involves the way in which sacred texts/stories are taught. If on the macro-level, religion teaches love, peace and unity, on the micro-level, nesting ironically, in many of our sacred stories is a sub-text of violence, a code of prejudice, a theological basis for sacrifice, death and murder.

In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Girard tells us that human beings "kill and continue to kill, strange as it may seem, in order not to know they are killing[17]. The theological rationale for suicide-generated killing suppresses and reveals at the same time the need by the performers to believe that their act is a "necessity imposed from without, a divine decree [18]. Indeed, the sacred texts of almost all major religions carry in some form or other stories of sacralised, genocidal and apocalyptic violence, aimed at the destruction of the 'unholy'. Similarly, Oliver McTernan argues that "[i]n each faith tradition one can find sufficient ambiguity in its founding texts and stories to justify killing for the glory of God[19].

Bekkenkamp and Sherwood's *Sanctified Aggression:Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence* deal with the "links between the violence … in biblical texts and postbiblical" violence, among other things, the "contribution of biblical paradigms" to more recently, the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the "contemporary stereotyping" of minority groups [20]. Timothy Longman's assessment of Rwanda is that "Christians could kill without obvious qualms of conscience, even in the church, because Christianity as they had always known it had been a religion defined by struggles for power, and ethnicity had always been at the base of those struggles"[21]. Whatever the motivations for violence, the Rwandan massacre demonstrates that people who belong to a Christ-centred faith modeled on love and peace are not immune to staging genocidal violence. Why? The answer is that the pacifist positions preached by major religions are contradicted by significant examples of sacralised violence embedded in sacred texts. In the Christian context, the pedagogical frameworks of biblical interpretation are anchored in either glossing over the Old Testament accounts of genocidal violence or defending it as God's prerogative. If we are committed to peace, religious leaders must address the willful denial of ritualized violence that haunts the pages of our sacred texts.

To make my point, I turn to an example of this. Embedded in our literary and religious traditions are fantasies of *Othering*. A notable example is the story of Samson in the *Book of Judge*s, a story that has become more significant in the light of the terrorist activities of September 11. Traditional readings of Samson regard Samson as an indisputable hero, who despite the lawlessness of his own life, is redeemed in one stroke through his scandalous last act, his destruction of the Philistines, at the cost of his life. The thrust of the Samson narrative uncritically privileges the Israelite voice and casts the Israelite world-view against the Philistine whose constitution is cast categorically and irrefutably as the irreducible Other. Further, this "beloved-enemy" opposition is given weight through imputing the violence to God. For our purpose, the vilification of the Philistines and the sanctifying of the Israelite hero indict the text's "sacred authority" in that its prejudice is marked by its conforming to the Us/Them model. Among other things, the text establishes a link between racial prejudice and religious prejudice which merge here in the loathing of the Other.

As teachers we should ask what the risks are of failing to deconstruct this portrait of Samson as biblical hero? In *Let my soul die with the Philistines*, Galpaz-Feller argues that the Judges story is constructed to "redirect the motive for Samson's death from the personal realm towards the national realm" so that Samson's suicide is "conceived as an act of heroism, sacrifice and redemption"[22]. Of particular interest is the way the Judges portrait of Samson has been re-framed in the light of September 11 and global terrorism. For example, Shadia Drury draws attention to the "uncanny resemblance between Samson's attack on the temple of the Philistines as described in the Bible (Judges 16:26-31) and the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001". Drury argues that: "[While] Atta's crime [is] more technically sophisticated and executed on a larger scale than Samson's, […] morally speaking the two crimes [are] identical. In both cases innocent victims were buried alive in the rubble – innocent people met a gruesome death that they could not have anticipated or deserved". On this basis, Drury argues that even though "[i]t is difficult not to conclude that Samson was as much of a terrorist as Atta […] we regard Atta as a criminal, and the incarnation of evil,

but we go along with the Bible in portraying Samson as a hero". Drury's question finally marks the quandary we find ourselves in: "[i]s there any difference between [Samson and Atta] that would justify such radically different assessments?"[23].

How should we moderate our reading of the Judges story in the light of current events? Indeed, even traditionalists agree that until his final feat at the temple of Dagon, Samson is not an ideal hero. He is for all intents and purposes abrasive, lawless, self-indulgent and reckless. Robert Alter describes him as "a hero … whose formidable brawn will not be matched by brain, or even by a saving modicum of common sense"[24]. Accordingly, questions of Samson's "heroism" must be moderated against the claims of his "human foibles"[25]. The Philistines are treated as stock characters, the irreducible enemies of Israel and God, against whom, Israelite heroes stand as models of "faith" and witness of God's redemptive power. The dispensability of the Philistines to any larger purpose is demonstrated by the fact that the Bible writers privilege the Israelite point-of-view by limiting lyrical subjectivity to the Israelites. The Philistines are objectified through the Biblical narrative and serve as the *Other*, the enemy whom God uses to punish the Israelites, to teach them the error of their ways. The denial of humanity to the Philistines through the caricature of the villain archetype is raised powerfully in the Bible through repetition and through the language that vilifies the Philistines as "unholy" and deserving of their destruction in the temple of Dagon. Such readings carry prejudices that are still evident in the politics of the Middle-East.

To return to our critique of Othering, I cite Susan Ackerman's question "What if Judges had been written by a Philistine?" Ackerman points out that the Philistines are mentioned just five times and fairly incidentally, in the first twelve chapters of Judges and are entirely absent from the book's concluding episodes (Judges 17-21). It is only in Judges 13-16, in the "saga of Samson" that the Philistines become paramount to the Bible's purpose. The Philistines are cited as the aggressors to whom the Israelites have been given over for forty years, for their "having done evil in the sight of Yahweh" [26]. Ackerman argues that if the text had been written from the Philistine perspective, Delilah would be celebrated as hero. It becomes then a matter of perspective. The casting of Samson as hero is based on patriarchal as well as national prejudices. Yet, the story of Samson is often presented to children in the light of Samson's unbridled passion for God and faith in his election as God's champion and defender of the Israelite nation. If we searched for traces of the Samson narrative in postbiblical times, we would recognize in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* an attempt by Milton to moderate this bias against the Philistine Other. Despite the availability of intertextual resources to modern students, the reluctance to pit sacred stories against literary revisionings suggest an underlying avoidance on the part of religious teachers in interrogating the embedded violence in sacred texts. The intertextual relationships between the two texts would help critics recognize that "cultural" and "literary" readings help contextualize problem texts and re-situate these texts so as to expose, name and shame violence. My purpose in aligning this example of the Samson story in Judges to Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is to demonstrate how, through such comparisons, the Bible story can be extricated for students from its Orientalist frame. The contrastive pedagogy here becomes useful only as it is applied as a means of qualifying biases, not as a study of binary differences but rather as a study of the construction of imagined differences, i.e. Samson's imagined superiority set against the imagined inferiority of the Philistines.

Milton's achievement can be valued against the need to expose the suppressed violence in the Biblical rendering of the story. As Derek Wood and others demonstrate, the value of Milton's text is the distance it provides us for critiquing the Judges account of sacralised violence and I sum this briefly. Milton appropriates the content of the Judges story but deviates on two very significant counts, the treatment of Delilah/Dalila and the Giant of Gath [27]. In other words, Milton gives to the Philistines the voice/s they are not allowed in the Bible. Seeking out the dialogic relationship between the two texts help expose the embedded prejudices of the sacred text. As Mary Nyquist argues, Samson's status as hero is possible only if we accept the biblical "orientalising of the Philistines" as "unclean/unholy"[28].

4. Conclusion

How do teachers deal with embedded sacralized violence in the light of the reluctance by religious fundamentalists to read biblical texts as cultural and literary constructs. As McTernan argues, "strictly literal explanation of sacred texts" are obsessed upon by "religious extremists" who regard anything to the contrary as "open to error" and "damnation"[29]. They reject the basis of biblical exegesis stemming from the late 19th century which acknowledge sacred texts as "culturally conditioned" and hence necessarily subject to "rigorous scrutiny"[30]. For these fundamentalists, the authority of the sacred texts is uncompromisingly divine, even going as far as to claim that "God dictated his message verbatim" and as such these readers/scholars remain indifferent to "inherent textual inconsistencies, contradiction and the anthropological, astronomical or historical errors found in the Scriptures"[31].

In the light of this discussion, I wish to close on two points. Firstly, a point about religious education in schools and Universities. Biblical/Religious Studies is often isolated from other disciplines. Where it is situated within Arts and Humanities Faculties, its relationship to other disciplines is treated superficially, to say the least. My point is that given the Us/Them schema that underlies religious affiliations, we would be wise to home Biblical/Religious Studies as a trans-disciplinary subject in a tans-disciplinary setting, seeking out interdisciplinary relationships, and in dialogue with literary, historical and anthropological studies.

Secondly, I suggest a practical step that teachers can take to help students overcome the "avoidance hermeneutics" which uphold sacralised violence. I suggest borrowing an element from Girard's theory of scapegoating in which Girard establishes the difference between mythological or texts of persecution (texts written from the persecutor's point-of-view) and revelatory texts(texts written from the victim's point-of-view) to trace a route out of conditioned violence. I suggest that we introduce what I call "revelatory" writing practice into the curriculum.

I propose the following model:

Revelatory Writing Practice Model

a) **Mythologiz**e: introduce a text/s of persecution which sacralizes violence (text written from the persecutor's perspective).
b) **De-mythologize**: help students locate its bias.
c) **Intertextualize**: investigate traces of the text in other narratives or texts (literary/historical/anthropological/. religious) as a basis for comparative study
d) **De-sacralize**: help students locate what Robert North calls the "built-in unawareness"(the blind spots that overlook/excuse sacralised violence)[32].
e) **Compose Revelatory Text**: encourage students to rewrite the text from the point of view of the victim.
f) **Complicate Revelatory Text**: complicate 'persecutor / victim' roles. i.e. ask students to consider how persecutors can also be victims and how 'victims' can/do act like their oppressors.

5. References

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