



# Canons and scriptures: issues for contemporary Bible-users

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*This article interacts with responses of contemporary learners studying in a university adult education context to a new taught upper-level undergraduate course, 'Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults'. The module provided opportunity for students to think both about the place of scriptures in contemporary British society, but also more generally about which resources prove influential and authoritative for them personally, and how society handles the question of what should be seen as valuable and worthy of study. The article reflects on the students' sometimes negative reactions to the term 'scripture' and the particular value of the concept of 'canon', and draws some conclusions for the way the Bible is considered in the contemporary West.*

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During the academic year 2014–2015 I taught for the first time a module called ‘Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults’. Taught over eight weeks (one three-hour session each week) within a general BA humanities and arts programme, this was an upper-level undergraduate optional course designed to slot into the ‘religion and philosophy’ strand within the programme. Its purpose was to enable students to consider how religious texts and communities work, and to do this by exploring the broader social contexts within which people (be they religious or not) identify, discover and explore what are the most significant ‘authorities’ for them as they find or create meaning to help them deal with daily life.

Students on the programme are usually aged between 30 and 70, and two-thirds tend to be women between 35 and 60. They come from different social and ethnic backgrounds, and may or may not be (or have been) religious, for there can be no religious requirements to study on such a public programme. The BA humanities and arts programme as a whole enables students to be stretched in their thinking about Western culture, and to understand more existentially who *they* are within this culture. Where have they come from (literally, geographically speaking)? Why are they here (specifically, in Leicester, where they study, but also more metaphysically – why *are* they here, and what has shaped them to make them the people they are)? What might they be comfortable and uncomfortable about in the forces and cultures that have shaped them? Have they ever asked searching questions about their own pasts and the cultural influences upon them?

The optional modules I design, because they are to do with religion, inevitably have an existential component to them. But this existential dimension does not always surface and become educationally useful and stimulating in ways which might be expected. When studying any aspect of a religious tradition (eg, a religion’s beliefs and ideas, its scriptures, its social and ritual practices, its impact on politics, its moral outlook) such features can always to some degree be kept at arm’s length and studied as if being observed from the outside, as practices of ‘other people’. It is, of course, arguably easier to do this when the religion in question is not one’s own (if one has a religion at all). It is much harder to study one’s own because the temptation to say as a Christian, for example, ‘what Christians usually do ...’ is so great. Even though we might be aware of substantial denominational differences, and of differences between Christians down the ages, in the company of those of other faiths and none, it is much easier to lump all Christians together and refer to ‘most Christians’, even though we may in fact be speaking largely from our own experience. Existential

elements in the teaching of religion in Higher Education do, though, come to bear in other ways and become very evident, and richly resourceful, among adult learners. Here is how.

Adult learners sit on lots of life experience. In general arts and humanities courses, many students come into a programme declaring that they were 'never very good at poetry at school', 'have never liked Shakespeare' or 'aren't particularly looking forward to having to study all those old paintings'. Some also say, as part of those initial fears and reservations, that they are 'not looking forward to the religion bits'. This is very often because they were brought up religious (Christian or otherwise) but have drifted out, 'moved on', or hated it and want nothing more to do with religion. Others, whether religious or not themselves, are, of course, keen to study religion because it means something to them personally, or because they are simply baffled by what religion seems to be involved in around the world – often with negative results. In other words, there is energy and passion around the topic of religion, and while course participants are *required* to study it to some extent (and some do it willingly, some not) they are usually *emotionally involved* in the subject matter already, whether they are aware of this or not. Though it is indeed theoretically possible to study religion at arm's length (as neutrally, and in as detached a way, as possible), it really is very, very hard to do this.

For a tutor this is great news. In teaching 'Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults', this meant that I had a group of students who *wanted* to be there (it was an option, not a compulsory course), even if the reason why some were there was because they didn't like the others on offer! But it also meant I was working with people with a range of experience *of* or *in* religion, positive and negative, with much to offer each other. As far as the subject matter of this article and this issue of *Holiness* is concerned, I was faced in the room each week with a group of people with all sorts of ideas and experiences which were not 'at arm's length' about the Bible (as a canonical collection of texts, as scripture, as confirmation gift), which caused confusion, excitement, puzzlement, annoyance, anger, all at one and the same time.

Given this context I shall present and explore, on the basis of what this group of students told me at the end of the module about their experience of studying 'Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults', some insights into how the Bible is viewed today by this small cross-section of British citizens, and what their discussions mean for Christian approaches to handling the Bible in British society (and perhaps Western culture more generally).

## ‘Don’t mention “scripture”! (I did once, but I think I got away with it)’

The first and most direct conclusion from my teaching of the module is just how negatively the term ‘scripture’ can sound within the West today. Outside of the context of a worshipping community within which a reference to scripture may be heard as just another name for ‘sacred writings’ or ‘Bible’, with a notion that these writings carry authority for the community, the term can quickly accrue negative overtones. Most of the group were in practice more familiar with the application of the term to the Christian Bible, through their life experience as having been brought up Christian, or thinking of the Bible and scripture as interchangeable through their experience within the British education system. Hence, scripture mostly meant the Christian scriptures rather than religious or sacred writings more generally. Even though the word ‘scripture’ simply means ‘writing’, the authoritative, religious meaning of the term is clearly uppermost. Despite the fact that ‘bible’ (though simply meaning ‘books’) has come to have a more general meaning as ‘authoritative reference book’ (as in ‘gardening bible’ or ‘cooking bible’), ‘scripture’ as a term has retained its religious reference more clearly.

Because of this religion-only world, the term and concept of scripture were viewed in a more limited way than that of ‘canon’ (the meanings and flexibility of which we shall look at shortly). ‘Authoritative’ could be seen as a simply descriptive adjective of how scripture works: it *is* authoritative for a community which recognises a particular set of texts as scripture. Negative associations arise for a number of reasons, however. ‘Scripture’ raises memories of boring educational experiences, either when Religious Education lessons may have been called ‘Scripture’ as a whole, or when the Bible was studied ‘as scripture’ in such classes, that is, without any freedom or creativity to consider the Bible’s contents as *not* religiously authoritative. In other words, over two hundred years’ worth of stimulating, risk-taking study of the Bible (historical-critical, literary, sociological, and so on) had not been reflected in school education. This may, I guess, not be the case now – though nor would the word ‘scripture’ be used quite in the same way, or to the same extent (outside of church schools, perhaps).

A second reason why scripture is not viewed as a positive term is simply if a person does not stand within a religious community, or within the community of the scriptures being studied. In such a scenario ‘scripture’ instantly implies

'not for me'. While 'Bible' may have a more neutral resonance, 'scripture' pertains only to those who accept a set of writings' authority. A Bible may not be being accepted 'as scripture'. Admittedly, it can matter-of-factly be accepted that the Christian Bible has functioned authoritatively in Western culture generally, and in cultures influenced by the West, outside of the Christian community as such. But if the specifics of religious authority are not accepted, then sacred writings are seen to be used as scripture *by someone else*. Furthermore, if students are affected by media coverage of the kind which quotes 'Bible-believing Christians', that notorious, misleading shorthand for a range of conservative Christians who are likely to be fundamentalist yet may be from many different Evangelical or Pentecostal backgrounds, then religious use of the Bible 'as scripture' becomes associated with a particular set of moral positions. It is far from accurate, of course, to say that it is only the more liberal (politically and ethically speaking) who engage in university-level study. But it is inevitable, through the practice of such study, that openness to a range of viewpoints, and the acceptance that blunt, straightforward, over-simplified statements of meaning are rarely possible in the task of interpreting texts, becomes common practice. With respect to the Bible, then, the task of interpretation is recognised in the academy as a complex matter, and the religious community as only one set of readers, even if that community may be the group of people who attach most significance to their reading. As a reading context, then, the academy opens up a larger, more flexible reading space within which religious readings of biblical texts are only one form and could (even if not always wholly accurately) be deemed restrictive from the perspective of those looking in from the outside.

This second reason is accentuated by virtue of the reservations that many contemporary students of all ages have with the term 'religion' itself. 'Religion', as opposed to 'spirituality', is associated with constraint, restrictiveness, oppression. Despite (or perhaps because of!) having done a module earlier on in their BA programmes on 'Religion in the Modern World', in which current uses of the term were explored, and the global significance of the phenomenon recognised, in the wake of the process of secularisation which has particularly affected the West, reservations about the whole concept of religion remained within the student group. Hence, the association of 'scripture' with 'religion' puts together two terms that, for some, imply boundaries of the wrong kind.

## Of the making of many canons

It is, though, a *canon* of texts that functions as scripture, 'canon' here meaning 'list' and hence, by extension, list of authoritative texts. In the recent teaching experience I am exploring it became clear, however, that 'canon' proves to be a provocative, illuminating, more creative concept for current students to work with. In contrast to 'scripture', which for some implies constraint, 'canon' is a less emotive word, leaving an educator much more space to work both with canon as a concept and with different kinds of canon. The so-called 'Western canon' of literature in English, the rock music album canon, and many lists of 'classics' (of pieces of music, of films, of works of arts and literature) are able to function as reminders and case studies for exploration of why it is that some materials become authoritative resources within culture and not others.<sup>1</sup> The reasons why 'canons' of sacred writings exist at all suddenly become easier to understand. Freed from the assumed constraints of the concept of 'scripture', the Bible becomes one canon among others, as – to use terms offered by the students I taught – 'lists of important works', 'authorised bodies of material', 'the things that have influenced you', 'the rules that you live by' all began to take shape as the group examined what had *actually* influenced them (including sometimes the Christian Bible and other sacred writings), and what they 'knew to be important', whether or not they had read, watched or listened to the resources they listed. Especially intriguing was one person who spoke positively about materials identified as canonical as 'your boundaries'.

It could, of course, be argued that the Bible was thereby being relativised in the midst of this educational exploration. By being seen as one canon among many, the Bible's value was being played down. Though true to some extent, it is not the whole picture by any means. The Bible *has* to be seen, in any case, as one canon among many if we are to respect what Western cultural life is actually like. Though it remains the primary textual authority for the Christian Church, existing in multiple canons (eg, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and many Orthodox forms) to function as such, it does not have the same status for all Western citizens. How could it? (Hence the reservations about 'scripture'.)

That said, it is ironical that it is through consideration of the concept of canon, and the existence of, and feverish discussion about, the content of canons of all kinds, that students who may be sceptical or unsure about the concept of scripture come to understand what scripture is and how it works. Scripture is, after all, the book of a community. In the case of Christianity, the collection of books which make up the Bible is accepted as authoritative by churches, even

if in different ways. If some Christians, though not all, then attach other beliefs to the collection, ranging from inspiration through to inerrancy, then so be it.<sup>2</sup> Functionally speaking, however, the Bible is an agreed canon of texts whose worth has been established through use, continued interaction with which it is believed will be ever useful and necessary. Thus understood, the difference between 'scripture' and 'canon' as concepts is not, in fact, as great as may be supposed. Canons imply and create boundaries and indicate to their users the results of long debate about what it is (and is not!) worth spending time on. When seen in this light, the difference from how scriptures work seems more a matter of degree than kind. The background to different current perceptions of the two terms, as evidenced in the student group with which I worked, is, however, revealing nevertheless.

## Canons and classics

As already hinted, one other feature of the educational exploration I was engaged in was distinguishing and relating the concepts of 'canon' and 'classic'. 'Classic' is probably one of the most sloppily used words in Western culture today. Pieces of music, sporting events, cars, journeys, buildings, websites and many other products and practices, in addition to works of art and literature, are now labelled 'classics'. Sometimes the ascription is hasty as, by definition, a 'classic' can only become so through proving its worth over time. A classic bears repeated revisiting because, to speak of how a literary classic works, it keeps on generating new meaning: it stimulates fresh thought, and not just the same thought, again and again the more it is read. The Bible is thus a religious classic because it functions in this way. It may not be a literary or aesthetic classic (though many would make a literary claim for the language of the King James Version of the English Bible), but it keeps on having religious value, even if not all its parts may be able to be considered equally valuable.

The distinction and relationship between these two concepts 'canon' and 'classic' proved helpful because via the concept of 'classic' students were able to ask themselves what works (for example, of art, music, TV series or literature) they repeatedly view, listen to or read, and why it is that they do this. Via the concept of 'canon' they were able to compile a personal list of such resources. Admittedly, I made the pedagogical mistake of beginning to speak of their 'personal canons' as, although technically possible, talking in this way does underplay the public, communal dimension which should come into play in

any discussion of both classics and canons. But talk of personal canons (which we all possess in some form) does at least highlight the existential dimension of the list of resources which have shaped us.

Both canons and classics are, though, public phenomena. They have to be disputed, argued for, agreed upon, revisited and argued about again. Even the Western Bible, though its content is not likely to change – it has not done so, after all, since the sixteenth century for both major Western Christian traditions – whether it should be added to in any way is sometimes discussed. It is also worthwhile reviewing the canonisation process, noting why, for example, some New Testament books were disputed and not others. The important point here is that books became canonical through use, and the collection as a whole may be regarded as a ‘classic’ even if individual books may not. Getting at the concept of ‘scripture’ via the route of canons and classics brought to life the process of the production of scripture, and the function of the collection for the community of faith, for the students with whom I worked.

## So what?

What, though, is the value of this discussion, both for those who are not religious, and display reserve about the concept of scripture, and those who are? I suggest four things. First, it seems clear that while sacred writings known as scripture are undoubtedly given a lofty place in the lives of religious believers – whatever the detail of individual denominations’ approaches to the Christian Bible, it is still the primary text for most – this is not a practice different in kind from what goes on for all people in some way. Not all are ‘textual’ people. (Not all people can read, or choose to read much.) There is always the danger of the literate assuming that all people work in textually based ways. But all have touchstones, rely on authoritative voices, or deem particular stories or traditions as decisive. That is how cultures and groups work.<sup>3</sup> So even for those students who were cautious about, or hostile to, the concepts of scripture and religion, the recognition that they, too, had ‘classics’ and ‘canons’ in the background of their life experience enabled them to see that while they did not have a religious practice, they were in significant respects nevertheless operating in similar ways to those who were.

Second, the exploration of how classics and canons come about and function brings scripture to life even for those who already see scripture as decisive. Reading the Bible is, as we know, a very challenging exercise. It is a shock to



discover that we, in practice, have our own 'canons within the canon' (bits that we prefer to other parts), and that these may be highly personal and distort our reading of the Bible as a whole. It may be a surprise that the denominational tradition within which we are located, or the particular lectionary or reading programme we follow, have emphases of their own, which steer our reading and understanding of the Bible in particular ways. Approaching the question of how scripture works through exploration of the concepts of canon and classic can remind us of how and why particular texts resonate, become worthy of rereading, and why a community of reading (the role of a wider public beyond our own reading habits) is important. The Church is more than just an authority standing over the task of reading. It is a collection of concrete (and increasingly virtual) communities within which reading happens, meanings are discussed (argued about!), interpretations drawn out and actions undertaken. The educational experience which my taught module became was able to draw that out for the religious people present in the group.

Third, the discussion of canons and classics reminds us that because it is always disputable what it is *worth* spending time on (reading, watching, viewing, listening to), that is, what should be regarded as a classic, and what should appear in any list of classics/canon, then the Bible itself keeps on having to fight for its place within any discussion of 'the classics of Western culture'. It is admittedly not only religious people or English literature scholars who would argue for the inclusion of the Bible in any version of a Western literary canon. At least parts of the Bible will be valued by many. The Bible's 'Greatest Hits' (some psalms, a bit of Ecclesiastes, extracts from Isaiah, Matthew 2, 5—7, Luke 2, 15, sections of a Passion narrative, John 1, 1 Corinthians 13) would be on many people's shelves. But it is going to be more and more necessary to *defend* the Bible's place in Western culture given that it has to be accepted that it contains dangerous material too.

That leads to a fourth and final observation. In the same way that the Bible has to fight its corner because it takes its place within a wide range of cultural material, so its readers – even its Christian readers – have to accept that however little or much they read biblical texts, they do so while consuming a rich range of other 'texts' (and here I mean 'texts' in the widest possible sense: journalism, Web pages, images, TV, film, visual art, advertisements, music). The Bible is always being read 'alongside', and judgements are being made all the time about what value is to be given to competing texts. Sometimes Christian readers will be (re-)reading 'classic novels', and also reading newspapers. Sometimes they will be spending much more time listening to (and repeating,

by singing along to) music lyrics than reading the Bible. The lyrics become part of them. We live in a cacophonous world of multiple voices which compete to be heard.

It would be nice to think, of course, that in this complex, sometimes overwhelming, experience of processing information, encountering media and consuming the arts that the Bible remains in the background as the primary text, and that interpretation of its contents, and the belief system to which it relates, shapes and steers all other reading. Would that it were so simple! But then, would things be so exciting? At this point, exactly as happened in 'Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults', our examining of the contemporary processes of reading and meaning-making open up into a much broader set of questions, not least 'Just how significant are the arts, the media and popular culture for Christian faith today?' But that must be left for another time.

## Notes

1. For one scholar's version of the 'Western Canon', see Bloom 1994, pp. 531–567. The proposed canon (Appendixes A–D in the book) is also available as a separate publication. For a version of the 'Album Canon', see Shuker 2013, p. 242.
2. At this point, the range of criteria which in practice came into play in establishing the canonicity of biblical works, some being stronger than others, should be noted. In the case of the New Testament, for example, apostolic authorship, apostolic association, episcopal support, actual communal use, presence in an emerging mini-collection (gospels or letters) all functioned as reasons why texts became authoritative and pressed for inclusion.
3. Note, for example, the many studies about stories, myths and metaphors that people 'live by': Lakoff and Johnson 2003, Midgley 2003 and McAdams 2013.

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