Blogs On Teaching, Writing, and Research
From The Anxious Bench

Philip Jenkins

WRITING AND PUBLISHING HISTORY

December 20, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I was hugely grateful for Tommy Kidd's recent column on publishing in history. His post took so many themes that are quite familiar to academics and professional scholars, and then unpacked them for non-specialists in an extraordinarily valuable way. That was a real contribution.

Like Tommy, I also lay claim to being a prolific publisher. (If he carries on as he is, he will undoubtedly surpass me before too long, the whippersnapper). I'm sometimes asked if I have any advice for writing generally. I don't have any cosmic secrets to offer, but the following thoughts might be of some use. If they work for you, that's wonderful. If not, then that's fine also. Use what works for you.

Incidentally, much of what follows also applies strongly to writing dissertations!

In no particular order:

*Nobody ever wrote a book. People write chapters, which are brought together to form a book.

These often begin as articles or individual studies. In most cases, authors begin with an overall vision of a larger project, but not always – they just write individual studies, and only gradually see possible connections. What they are doing, in fact, is groping their way to seeing the overall grand theme, around which to frame the book. In some instances, authors put six or so of those discrete components together, create links between them, and then make the chapters speak to each other. As the process develops, those links themselves merge to define the main thrust or argument of the work, with the individual chapters providing a supportive framework. And the author has a book.

But even if the author begins with a grand scheme or design, such as a biography, s/he still has to divide it up into workable, manageable units, and the point about links is just as valid.

Think of building a bridge. You absolutely have to start by building the pillars of the bridge. Once they are solid, then you reach out to link between those pillars, and that is how the bridge emerges. Once the whole thing is complete, all the attention goes to the bridge span, not the pillars, but you need both. The bridge is the book, the pillars are chapters. No sane person ever began by building a bridge span, and then as an afterthought paid attention to the pillars or supports that might hold it up.

Think centrally throughout about constructing those individual components, rather than setting off to write THE BOOK as a whole.

*"What is this book about?" "This book is about 240 pages."

That may sound like a joke, but it actually makes an important point. Especially when starting off their careers, people feel the need to cram everything they know into a book. It's far better to say what you have to say in a limited space, and then save the remaining material for your next book, or the one after that. *Decide what you have to say, say it, stop, and move on.*

Of course, it doesn't always have to be 240 pages – 140 or 340 can both be fine, as appropriate. I'm not necessarily recommending writing short books, rather that you define a limit, and don't go far over it! This forces you to make tough (and essential) decisions about what can or cannot be included in the particular text.

Each of my last dozen or so books has grown out of an idea in a short section or paragraph in one of the previous books. I can almost map it like a flow chart.

*On a related point, think carefully about the units making up the book, assign each a length, and stick to it.

Does that sound obvious? I learned the lesson the hard way. I remember many years ago writing a book on the History of Wales, which had about fifteen chapters, and which needed to be some 400 pages in all. Do the math. In other words, each chapter needed to be about 25 pages, no more than 8,000 words in all. I had one chapter on industrialization, with a major section on coal. By definition, that coal section could not have been vastly more than 4,000 or 6,000 words. And then I found myself some 15,000 words into the coal industry section, with no end in sight!

The moral: first determine the overall length of the book, then do a chapter list, figure out what your chapters and sections are, and what materials fit into each chapter. You might for instance determine that each chapter should be 25 pages, and in that space you will address five or six specific topics or subheadings. Without too much access to higher mathematics, you then know that each of those topics must be covered in about four or five pages – which really is not much. So lo and behold, you then know how much space you can devote to each topic!

If you then find yourself writing page 75 of that 25 page chapter, the time has come (duh!) to stop and rethink. Might you in fact be writing another, second, book?

That process, of shaping the chapter outline, is by far the most important stage in the design and construction of a book.

*Again this sounds obvious, but think carefully about the audience you are aiming at, and never forget that target audience. While I try to be strictly respectable in academic terms, for instance in fully citing my sources, I also try to aim for a large non-specialist, non-academic audience. Most basically, that means choosing an appropriate level of vocabulary. It also means thinking very hard about what the average intelligent non-specialist reader might be expected to know, and what will need explanation.

In this process, I have found it immensely useful to do various kinds of journalism and popular writing, op-eds and magazine articles, or blogs like the Anxious Bench. Such work contributes greatly to fluency and speed, and to writing at a level that works for a general audience.

* I offer a caveat there. The most valuable commodity you possess is time, so decide how to use it most efficiently. If you aim to write a major project, such as a book, be very careful about assessing the possible gains and losses from other projects that might arise along the way, such as writing book reviews, columns, or (yes!) blogging. As I suggested, these might be extremely valuable in helping you learn to write well, or drawing attention to your work. They might also be lucrative. But if they take too much from your main time, or if they become an end in themselves, learn to say no.

*Following on from the issue of audience, it's also vital to think carefully about presses, and how they are going to market what you write. Why, after all, are you writing something in the first place? Presumably, to reach the largest possible number of people. Often, high prestige academic presses do a rather poor job in marketing and publicity so that work is effectively wasted. Look carefully at what presses have done in the past, and make your judgment accordingly.

As a general rule, when trying to place a book, always begin with publishers at the top of the tree, even if that means aiming unrealistically high.

*Finally, you can make what you like of this point. I am a great fan of the painter Richard Diebenkorn. When he died in 1993, the following document was found in his papers. I think it is quite brilliant as a guide to the creative process, applying as thoroughly to books as to visual arts. But don't press me on the exact meaning of any specific statement!

NOTES TO MYSELF ON BEGINNING A PAINTING

1. Attempt what is not certain. Certainty may or may not come later. It may then be a valuable delusion.
2. The pretty, initial position which falls short of completeness is not to be valued — except as a stimulus for further moves.
3. *Do* search. But in order to find other than what is searched for.
4. Use and respond to the initial fresh qualities but consider them absolutely expendable.
5. Don't "discover" a subject — of any kind.
6. Somehow don't be bored — but if you must, use it in action. Use its destructive potential.
7. Mistakes can't be erased but they move you from your present position.
8. Keep thinking about Polyanna.
9. Tolerate chaos.
10. Be careful only in a perverse way.

ON FEEDING THE TROLLS

October 25, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
30 Comments

Today's blog is about blogging.

If you blog on religious topics, you know that there are a couple of issues that are guaranteed to set at least some commenters off into paroxysms of rage. On a site like this, Islam and Mormonism are two prime detonators. I'm open to very wide ranging discussions on anything I write. But what do you do about comments that are so far beyond the pale that you can only see them on a clear day?

In the past few months, I have had several such waves of responses. I wrote some posts that referred to the Qur'an in what I hope were sober and scholarly terms, only to evoke responses that sounded as if I was praising the 9/11 attacks. And here's the point. What do you do with comments that are utterly over the edge?

A specific case in point. I recently dealt with a comment that condemned me for referring to Islam as a "religion" (The horror! The horror!) rather than a fanatical cult of Satanic violence dedicated to global conquest. Do understand, the reference was not to some particular parts of Islam, or to some adherents, but the whole religion and all its supposedly mindless followers. Even worse, for this commenter, Islam was at its heart a cult devoted to ritual human sacrifice. Why did I feel the need to defend such an evil faith? Was I a dupe, or an active conspirator? Pick one.

So what do you do with something like this? How do you argue with dingbat assertions? ("Well, Dwayne, firstly, I can't agree that there is any evidence that Muslims commit human sacrifice…" or similarly, "Um, I really don't know of evidence that Mormons keep virgins imprisoned beneath their temples.") Detailing objections to these rants takes a vast deal of time, and it is futile because it just provokes more and worse. Unless your available time is unlimited, at some point you have to give up, leaving the commenter with the last triumphant word.

So do you leave the comment in place and unanswered? Or what else can you do?

Put another way, what would you do if a commenter started claiming that Jews committed the ritual murder of children, or presented some of the classic hideous stereotypes of African-Americans? You certainly can't argue against these despicable positions point by point. So do you just leave the comments out there?

My own position is that, at some point, some comments go beyond the realm of controversy and become outright hate speech. At that point, I will simply delete them, and mark the commenter so that s/he can no longer post on the site. Call it censorship if you wish.

When I have done this in past years, commenters have protested that my actions are "cowardly": this from people who never give their real names in posts, and hide behind the mask of anonymity. No, I am not going to debate people who believe that the Jews caused 9/11, or that Muslims are a human sacrifice cult. Nor am I going to leave their nonsense in place on any website with which I am associated.

I actually have quite a bit of experience studying internet subcultures, and spent a fair amount of time in the 1990s exploring the wilds of internet discussion boards. Even then, one of the persistent nightmares of the Internet was the troll, the commenter who repeatedly makes absurd and outrageous statements in order to disrupt an ongoing conversation. Usually, their goal is to invite and inspire angry ripostes, to generate furious exchanges. The more you respond, the more extreme and often obscene the conversation becomes. Arguably, such exchanges contribute to the malice

and even instability of the rogue posters. Such behavior is only made possible because trolls operate anonymously, usually deploying multiple pseudonyms and web accounts. They would never have the nerve to publish such garbage under their own identifiable names.

The only possible and acceptable response to such provocations is simple: "Please Do Not Feed the Trolls." Do not answer them, do not engage with them, and if their comments pass beyond the bounds of sanity, do not permit those remarks to remain in place. And those are the principles by which I propose to operate. Civility has to mean something.

One other question: just why, apart from force of habit, do we allow pseudonymous comments about blog posts? If we were setting up the system afresh today, we certainly would not initiate such a practice. Anonymous/pseudonymous postings may well be necessary in repressive societies like Iran. But in the West? Why? Many newspaper sites have already made the decision to end anonymous comments and posts.

I'd particularly be interested in hearing from my fellow bloggers about this proposition.

By the way, do feel free to comment on this post, but you must include your full real name in the body of your comment. I am done dealing with anonymity.

In my opinion, so should all Patheos sites.

PROPOSING BOOKS

December 30, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Tommy Kidd and I have both recently posted about writing and publishing – chiefly in history, but what we said also applies to plenty of other humanities disciplines.

Assume you have an idea for a book, but don't know exactly how to get it into print. Tommy mentioned submitting a proposal to the publisher, to give them a clear idea of what he was proposing, and whether it was something they might actually want. That's actually a crucial stage in turning an idea into a real book, and I thought it might be useful to spell out just what such a document should include.

The best way to learn to write such proposals is to see other people's, particularly those that have been successful, Also, individual university presses give clear advice about what they want to see: Oxford University Press has a useful model. Particular authors differ on how they might structure proposals, but let me offer a model that has worked well for me through the years.

What should be in a proposal? Try this:

-An executive summary, so the press can get a quick idea of what's involved.

-A narrative of the book and its argument, what it's about and why it matters, and its proposed length.

-Why you're uniquely qualified to write it and what you'd bring to it.

-Why it's particularly suitable, desirable, relevant, timely or necessary right now – eg why related stories are in public debate.

-When the book would be ready.

-The intended audience, and the level of writing.

-Maybe a list of courses in which it might be adopted as a textbook?

-Selling points and takeaways from the book, maybe subdivided by different fields. What will a reader get from the book?

-A list of rival books on similar issues and themes, and why yours is better/more important/better researched.

-List of chapters – the chapter outline I discussed earlier.

-About the author – a biographical sketch.

-Then attach a full vita.

-Maybe attach a bibliography.

Good luck!

Finding a Subject

August 22, 2014 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[1 Comment](#)

[Beth Barr](#), [Tommy Kidd](#) and [myself](#) have all been posting on the subject of writing and publishing, particularly of academic books.

All of us trod lightly on one of the most important aspects of all, namely how someone goes about choosing a topic in the first place. In some cases, it's easy. You might for instance find a key event that has not been covered in the recent past, or a significant historical figure who is long overdue for a biography. Sometimes, such choices are easy. In Britain at least, publishers' wisdom holds that there is room every five years or so for a new biography of Napoleon.

Some topics are so obvious that they are almost too attractive. British humorist Alan Coren once asked a publisher what were the surefire topics to sell books, and he was told: golf, cats, and Hitler. Hence the book he published, *[Golfing for Cats](#)*, with a swastika on the cover.

But let's treat the topic a bit more seriously….

By the way, much of what I have to say here applies to research topics more generally, including graduate papers and dissertations. Think of this as my offering for the new academic year that starts horrifyingly soon!

The starting point is always that of audience or readership, of defining who you want to speak to in your writing, and what that audience can reasonably be assumed to want. That means knowing something about what readers might reasonably be expected to know about, and even more significant, to care about.

This all gets to the issue of whether a topic can be defined as "important," which is a highly flexible and subjective matter. If you can argue that a topic is important to wider affairs, that people would be interested in it, and yet it really has not been covered recently (or ever) – then you have a winner!

When I pick up a book (in History, for example), several points will make me decide whether or not to read it. What does the book tell us that was not previously known? How does the book fit into the existing literature, yet advances beyond previous knowledge? What earlier or established position is it arguing against?

Crudely, here are a series of criteria that are helpful in deciding whether a particular topic is worth pursuing:

*Is the central idea of the project important? How can you make a case for that – important to what or whom?

*Does it have some contemporary relevance? Or at least, can we make a case that it is? I groan a little there, having seen so many books over the past few years which strain desperately at "relevance." Often they adapt the subtitle of "The [fill in the blank] that Saved [or Made, or Transformed] America." Some of those are really beyond parody. And also remember that issues that are red-hot topics today might not remain so for very long. If you write about them, then your book is going to look very dated indeed when it comes out in three or five years.

*Is it exciting or dramatic? Does it offer lively personalities or interesting incidents?

*Is it obscure, in the good sense of not being well known even to a well-informed general reader? Even the best known historical incidents might well fall into this category, in the sense that you might have something new and startling to say about some otherwise unknown event linked to Gettysburg or D-Day. Put another way, what makes it surprising?

*Is it counter-intuitive? Does it run counter to what a well-informed general readership believes to be the case? Does it contradict "what everybody knows" about the story, or does it revolutionize conventional wisdom?

*Is it based on novel or surprising sources?

*Can I use a counter-factual argument? Might I argue that things would have gone radically differently if matters had developed otherwise at this particular point?

It also helps to write a personal inventory of what you personally bring to a particular project. What skills or background or expertise do you have that makes you more capable of writing this than anyone else?

As an indispensable first step, you have to know the general field you are working in. Then, when you read those other people writing about the subject, do you find yourself saying "Hold on, everyone seems to make that point, but it's just not right. I mean, from my own observation, I know X"?

Do you have some specific knowledge of a particular area/culture/topic that other writers don't, that you can use as the basis for a case-study?

Finally, remember that you are going to be living with these issues, these sources, these debates, for several years. Are you interested in them sufficiently to make that investment?

The Hierarchy of Presses

June 13, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
10 Comments

A learned friend once made an excellent point, which sounds like a joke but is not. The good news, he said, is that we live today in the golden age of book publishing. The bad news, though, is that we live in the golden age of book publishing.

What he meant was that today, more than ever before, it is very easy to get a work published. The down side of that, though, is that it is extremely important to choose suitable publishers if you want to have your book noticed and valued, rather than ignored and disparaged. If you have any hope of an academic career – and that is a more difficult issue than ever – you should tread carefully . Where you publish a book is incredibly important for the value that will be set on it.

This point about the status and hierarchy of publishers is well known to scholars, but it can be a minefield for non-professionals, and that includes many budding academics. To illustrate that point, many years ago I was talking with a colleague about a junior, untenured faculty member. The younger person had one book with an excellent mainstream academic publisher, of the sort that would normally be expected to qualify him for tenure more or less instantly. However, he had also published another book with a press regarded as a disreputable vanity operation. My view was that we should pay due attention to the major book, and glide over the other as a sign of poor decision-making. My friend, though, was militant. No, she said, no-one who publishes with such a vanity press belongs in academe, period. Having something like that on your resumé discredits both you, and the department, and the younger person should assuredly not be tenured, anywhere, any time. Nor, she added, should our department ever consider hiring anyone who had published with that

sort of operation. If you are dumb enough to publish with a vanity firm like that, you have to take the consequences.

You have heard of "publish or perish"? Well, you can publish, and how you do so can actively encourage your perishing.

Through the years, I have heard similar virulent hostility to publishing in what we might call less than reputable publishers, especially vanity and pay-to-publish presses, or privately printed stuff. Also sensitive is anything from what we might call advocacy presses, which represent fringe positions. Apart from the tenure issue, such publishing will harm one's prospects in other ways. Many (most?) journals will not review such books, and I know scholars who, as a matter of principle, will not cite anything from such sources in their own writings. Libraries will not buy them or stock them, and won't include them in standing orders as they do with books from mainstream presses. You actively have to go out of your way to find those books. That's less of a problem in the age of Amazon, but still….

And that's all important. After all, why does anyone write a book in the first place? Surely they want it to be read at least by some audience or readership. Otherwise, they might just as well stand on a bridge and throw the manuscript pages one by one into the passing river.

Before you dismiss that as a manifestation of individual prejudice, imagine the situation of going through the tenure process in a major university. At some point, your dossier goes through the hands of deans or committees who know nothing of your discipline. They can recognize first class publishers easily enough, but you might need to convince them that a particular press is credible. That task becomes harder when smaller institutions move towards a more strictly research-oriented profile, and want more distinguished outlets they can record in their statistics and quantitative measures. And that is happening across the country, and transforming what used to be teaching-focused colleges.

Some years ago at my then-university of Penn State, a new administration in my college asked the simple question: so what are the best presses in your field, and more significant, what criteria do you use to answer that question? Are there objective measurements we can use? The follow up was that faculty were rewarded much more highly for publishing in those outlets than others. (They did the same with academic journals, but that is a different story).

So how do you tell what are good presses, and what is toxic? On the plus side, first, of course, there are the obvious big-time trade presses, although most academics won't be involved in those, at least in the early stages of their career. To some extent, the prime publishers in the academic world are just as obvious. There are the really major presses, like Harvard, Chicago, Cambridge and the rest, and lots of highly respectable middling concerns. Basically, think of a major North American university. If it has a university press, that should be just fine.

Some presses might be wonderful in a particular sub-field, where they develop a powerful tradition through the years. Just to take some examples I happen to know, SUNY Press is superb in Asian Studies, as is the University of Hawaii Press. Kansas is great for military history. Penn State Press has a distinguished line in art history. Illinois publishes excellent stuff in Mormon Studies (as of course does BYU).

Presently, I am working on the study of the Bible and early Christianity, and I am frequently citing European publishers that are very well known in those disciplines, but not outside. These include, for instance, Brill of Leiden; Peeters of Louvain; Mohr Siebeck of Tübingen; and the originally Scottish publisher T. and T. Clark (now part of Continuum). None of those would necessarily be known to non-specialists, but it would take about thirty seconds to explain why they are such prestigious and indeed excellent outlets. We could cite reputational studies of publishers, but the best measurement is the terrific range of scholars that put out their work through such firms.

To some extent, that question of publishing hierarchy helps us define the scholarly mainstream on a particular issue. If you are trying to present a view about some controversial question, and that topic is explored in plenty of books from such major mainstream publishers, then you are probably dealing with a serious and worthwhile debate. (I didn't say that the view was true or correct, but rather that it was part of serious discourse). Very different is the situation if all the books that can be cited on the topic are from self-published or vanity presses, or from devoted activists and pressure groups. If that is the best you can do, then you are likely in the world of crankery.

It's wearying when advocates of a far-out cause try to explain why their works are entirely produced by fly-by-night presses: "Because these ideas are too dangerous to be accepted by mainstream publishers! They are afraid of threatening academic and political orthodoxy!" Sure, and that explains why mainstream publishers are so nervous about publishing anything controversial, right? There's always the danger that a controversial book would get into the news and sell millions of copies, making tons of money. We couldn't have that happening. That's why Dan Brown could never find a publisher for *The Da Vinci Code*. Oh wait….

The lesson of all this, I suppose, is that anyone thinking of publishing a book should think hard about the desired audience they want to reach, and which presses are likely to carry weight in particular settings. Often, that means not just jumping at the first tempting offer you receive to put your words into print. When you're an established scholar, you can publish where you please.

At this point, you might well be thinking that matters are not so simple, that there are lots of gray areas between the obviously great presses, and the self-evidently terrible. And you would be dead right. I'll have more to say on these topics.

More on Publishing and Presses

June 17, 2016 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[0 Comments](#)

I recently posted about [the prestige of different publishers](#), and the vast difference that makes in the academic world. If you are an academic and you publish with a famous university press, that is wonderful for your career. If you go with a vanity press, that can sink your career. That division of presses also matters in defining whether a particular issue is part of mainstream debate, or way off on the disreputable fringe.

The problem in all this, though, is that some presses are very strong and reputable within particular fields, but that fact need not be known to university authorities. I can imagine a junior professor trying to argue to a department head or dean that a title with such a firm should be counted as equal in prestige to a leading university press, and struggling to make the case. Please understand, that would not be a fair situation, but I could see it happening.

Let me take a specific example. I am currently using a book that came out from Inter-Varsity Press some fifteen years ago. It is a really excellent piece of work, scholarly and well written, and IVP is a very strong and well known publisher from the evangelical point of view. Hence my surprise, recently, when I tried unsuccessfully to find a copy in the very large and wide-ranging library at Penn State University. They had other works by this author, but not that particular title. Like many major university libraries, Penn State has standing orders with certain mainstream publishers, and acquires pretty much everything they put out. That principle does not extend to well known evangelical presses like IVP, Eerdmans, Baker, Thomas Nelson, and so on. The more library budgets shrink, the harder they cut back on any presses they don't see as absolutely core and necessary.

In itself, that decision is not disastrous for me, because if I want a copy of the book in question I can get it through inter-library loan. But the underlying attitude demands attention. These libraries are assuming that the presses in question are not fully respectable houses for academic work, they are partisan or denominational, and therefore they do not demand the same credibility as even minor university presses.

Unfortunately, the same attitude can extend to the university authorities who make decisions about tenure and promotion. That comment does not of course apply to Christian-based colleges, but it certainly can in secular institutions, especially those that define themselves as research universities. I have heard remarks from secular minded colleagues (not at Baylor!) that demonstrate serious hostility not just to religious presses, but even to presses based at religious universities. There is a lot of anti-religious sentiment out there.

That attitude is beyond absurd when you consider just how many absolutely top class authors publish in those religious outlets. In the realms of Biblical studies, theology, or Christian history (among others), these presses put out some of the most important work out there, and they also, incidentally tend to sell far more books than university presses. In terms of the prestige of the publisher, I personally would have not a second's hesitation about publishing with such firms. On the other hand, I am not up for tenure or promotion at a secular university, and never will be again. If I was, I would want to be sure that my superiors were entirely on board with my choice of presses.

In case you think that comment is a whine about secular institutions discriminating against religious presses, let me take an example from a completely different part of the forest. Some years ago, I had a colleague who was thinking of submitting a manuscript to [Prometheus Books,](#) an atheist/secularist label that produces some excellent titles, and attracts visible, well known authors. I don't agree with everything they put out (no surprise there), but I recognize that these are really worthwhile contributions to debate, and I often have cause to cite Prometheus titles in my own work. This is (again) a credible, respectable press that puts out good work. But as with IVP or Eerdmans, junior scholars might potentially raise hackles by publishing there instead of at better-known university presses. That is *not* a comment on the nature of any of those presses, for which I have nothing but

praise, but on the character of possible academic prejudices in these matters. In the Prometheus case, the hostility would not be to the ideology involved, but to what they see as its *perceived* status in the academic pecking order.

At a conference, I once met a doctoral student in Buddhism, whose mentor was a well known scholar in that discipline. The student's dissertation seemed excellent, but when I asked him what he planned to do with it, he said that his mentor was putting him in touch with a popular-market oriented Buddhist/New Agey press. Now that's a professional dilemma for me. Should I tell him outright that by taking that route, he was ensuring that the resulting book would never do him any good in the tenure and promotion process, and might do active harm? That in a a sense, he would be wasting his years of arduous dissertation work? Should I tell him that his mentor was, in this instance, a raving idiot? I tried to say as much as I could, as subtly as I could, but I have no idea if the message went through. As I did not know the mentor personally, I could not speak to him directly.

The mentor, of course, meant no harm. He knew that he himself could quite properly publish in that outlet, so why should his pupil not do so also, and make a bit of money in the process? But here is the takeaway: in these matters, very different standards apply for junior and senior scholars, for beginners and veterans.

One other gray area is worth mentioning. Everyone knows about "pay to publish" vanity presses, which are the kiss of death for anyone seeking a respectable career in writing and publishing. But what about subventions?

Let me explain that word. Assume that I have written an academic book, which has got rave reviews from first class scholars, and been accepted by a prime university press. Unfortunately, the book will be expensive to produce, especially if it has illustrations. *Color* illustrations can push the price up through the roof. The press asks if I can secure support to help finance production, and my university kindly agrees to kick in a couple of thousand dollars, and that is a subvention. Some publishers now openly demand such subsidies as a condition of publication. Just to take a typical example of how the system works, you can see the policy on these matters at the University of Iowa. It is sane and reasonable, and acknowledges the grim realities of the publishing world. It might also be the only way that junior faculty can actually publish and get tenure.

So everyone is happy. But, um, if I was pushing the definition, what is the difference between that practice and "paying to publish"? I have known colleagues who are deeply unhappy about such practices, which are almost obligatory in some areas, such as art history. That opposition has declined in the past few years, but debate still continues.

Anyway, my basic point remains. If you want an academic career, pay due attention to publishing decisions, and always seek out the best advice you can.

Writing and Publishing in Academe

August 31, 2018 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

In my teenage years, I used to loathe "Back to School" signs in stores. I know it's going to happen, like I know we all have to die someday, but do you have to remind us? Anyway, by late August, that fact has become an undeniable reality (back to school, I mean, not death) and we have to cope by turning our minds back to the process of education. In this instance, I am offering something that I believe to be useful, and which has been road-tested over the years.

You will have noted that my Anxious Bench colleague Beth Barr has been publishing valuable thoughts on graduate school, and the graduate student experience. We live in an age when the academic profession is in growing crisis, and we really need to think very hard about what we are doing by putting people through graduate school. These are discussions we have to have.

My own post is mainly intended for new graduate students, but if it might also be of use to faculty teaching such courses, that would be wonderful. Over the years, I have written a lot of books and taught lots of courses in various disciplines. That has given me a lot of experience about writing and research, which I have distilled into several blogposts. I am collecting these here because I hope they might be useful for people teaching or taking courses, chiefly in humanities disciplines like History, where writing is of the essence. These materials are aimed at anyone interested in writing books or articles, but every word applies equally to dissertations.

Primarily, I did one major blogpost on the whole process of conceiving and writing a scholarly book. I put a lot of what I have learned through the years into that piece, "Writing and Publishing History," and I will reproduce it in full below.

I also blogged on how to choose a topic, either for a book or a research paper or dissertation. How do you find something that can plausibly be portrayed as new, interesting and/or important?

Once you do get a dissertation written, you need to think about how to place it for publication, how to write a proposal for a publisher. How do you get them to think that your particular topic (and credentials) should persuade them to offer you a contract?

When you do get to that stage, you want to be *really* careful about choosing a publisher. They vary a lot in quality and visibility, and wise choices are critical.

Actually, I use these various pieces cited here in most of the syllabuses I use, and I have found them of real value. But I am claiming no kind of infallibility here. If you disagree with what I suggest, or want to offer rival suggestions pr additions, do please feel free to comment, and argue or expand on this.

WRITING AND PUBLISHING HISTORY

I'm sometimes asked if I have any advice for writing generally. I don't have any cosmic secrets to offer, but the following thoughts might be of some use. If they work for you, that's wonderful. If not, then that's fine also. Use what works for you.

Everything that follows also applies strongly to writing dissertations!

In no particular order:

Nobody ever wrote a book. People write chapters, which are brought together to form a book.

These often begin as articles or individual studies. In most cases, authors begin with an overall vision of a larger project, but not always – they just write individual studies, and only gradually see possible connections. What they are doing, in fact, is groping their way to seeing the overall grand theme, around which to frame the book. In some instances, authors put six or so of those discrete components together, create links between them, and then make the chapters speak to each other. As the process develops, those links themselves merge to define the main thrust or argument of the work, with the individual chapters providing a supportive framework. And the author has a book.

But even if the author begins with a grand scheme or design, such as a biography, s/he still has to divide it up into workable, manageable units, and the point about links is just as valid.

Think of building a bridge. You absolutely have to start by building the pillars of the bridge. Once they are solid, then you reach out to link between those pillars, and that is how the bridge emerges. Once the whole thing is complete, all the attention goes to the bridge span, not the pillars, but you need both. The bridge is the book, the pillars are chapters. No sane person ever began by building a bridge span, and then as an afterthought paid attention to the pillars or supports that might hold it up.

Think centrally throughout about constructing those individual components, rather than setting off to write THE BOOK as a whole.

"What is this book about?" "This book is about 240 pages."

That may sound like a joke, but it actually makes an important point. Especially when starting off their careers, people feel the need to cram everything they know into a book. It's far better to say what you have to say in a limited space, and then save the remaining material for your next book, or the one after that. *Decide what you have to say, say it, stop, and move on.*

Of course, it doesn't always have to be 240 pages – 140 or 340 can both be fine, as appropriate. I'm not necessarily recommending writing short books, rather that you define a limit, and don't go far over it! This forces you to make tough (and essential) decisions about what can or cannot be included in the particular text.

Each of my last dozen or so books has grown out of an idea in a short section or paragraph in one of the previous books. I can almost map it like a flow chart.

On a related point, think carefully about the units making up the book, assign each a length, and stick to it.

Does that sound obvious? I learned the lesson the hard way. I remember many years ago writing a book on the History of Wales, which had about fifteen chapters, and which needed to be some 400 pages in all. Do the math. In other words, each chapter needed to be about 25 pages, no more than 8,000 words in all. I had one chapter on industrialization, with a major section on coal. By definition, that coal section could not have been vastly more than 4,000 or 6,000 words. And then I found myself some 15,000 words into the coal industry section, with no end in sight!

The moral: first determine the overall length of the book, then do a chapter list, figure out what your chapters and sections are, and what materials fit into each chapter. You might for instance determine that each chapter should be 25 pages, and in that space you will address five or six specific topics or subheadings. Without too much access to higher mathematics, you then know that each of those topics must be covered in about four or five pages – which really is not much. So lo and behold, you then know how much space you can devote to each topic!

If you then find yourself writing page 75 of that 25 page chapter, the time has come (duh!) to stop and rethink. Might you in fact be writing another, second, book?

That process, of shaping the chapter outline, is by far the most important stage in the design and construction of a book.

Again this sounds obvious, but think carefully about the audience you are aiming at, and never forget that target audience.

While I try to be strictly respectable in academic terms, for instance in fully citing my sources, I also try to aim for a large non-specialist, non-academic audience. Most basically, that means choosing an appropriate level of vocabulary. It also means thinking very hard about what the average intelligent non-specialist reader might be expected to know, and what will need explanation.

In this process, I have found it immensely useful to do various kinds of journalism and popular writing, op-eds and magazine articles, or blogs like the Anxious Bench. Such work contributes greatly to fluency and speed, and to writing at a level that works for a general audience.

* I offer a caveat there. The most valuable commodity you possess is time, so decide how to use it most efficiently.

If you aim to write a major project, such as a book, be very careful about assessing the possible gains and losses from other projects that might arise along the way, such as writing book reviews, columns, or (yes!) blogging. As I suggested, these might be extremely valuable in helping you learn to write well, or drawing attention to your work. They might also be lucrative. But if they take too much from your main time, or if they become an end in themselves, learn to say no.

Following on from the issue of audience, it's also vital to think carefully about presses, and how they are going to market what you write. Why, after all, are you writing something in the first place? Presumably, to reach the largest possible number of people. Often, high prestige academic presses do a rather poor job in marketing and publicity so that work is effectively wasted. Look carefully at what presses have done in the past, and make your judgment accordingly.

As a general rule, when trying to place a book, always begin with publishers at the top of the tree, even if that means aiming unrealistically high.

*Finally, you can make what you like of this point. I am a great fan of the painter Richard Diebenkorn. When he died in 1993, the following document was found in his papers. I think it is quite brilliant as a guide to the creative process, applying as thoroughly to books as to visual arts. But don't press me on the exact meaning of any specific statement!

NOTES TO MYSELF ON BEGINNING A PAINTING

1. Attempt what is not certain. Certainty may or may not come later. It may then be a valuable delusion.
2. The pretty, initial position which falls short of completeness is not to be valued — except as a stimulus for further moves.
3. *Do* search. But in order to find other than what is searched for.
4. Use and respond to the initial fresh qualities but consider them absolutely expendable.
5. Don't "discover" a subject — of any kind.
6. Somehow don't be bored — but if you must, use it in action. Use its destructive potential.
7. Mistakes can't be erased but they move you from your present position.
8. Keep thinking about Polyanna.
9. Tolerate chaos.
10. Be careful only in a perverse way.

Writing My Christian History Sequence

January 24, 2020 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

This post is about the process of writing, and about gradually finding out what exactly you have been researching and writing through the years. The answer can surprise, even or especially me, as the author.

In my time, I have written a lot of books, around thirty to date. The topics are not randomly selected, as they fall into four or so distinct categories. But for the purposes of this blog, I will trace one of those long arcs or strands, which runs from the Old Testament to the making of the Bible, through early Christianity, thence to the medieval Church, and then to the present day. The sequence, or cycle, or whatever I might call it, presently involves six books that are intimately connected, and four that are a little further off, but not by much.

The six definites can be listed as follows, presenting them in the order of the historical eras they cover, rather than their dates of publication:

Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011). This book traces the making of Israel and its Bible, and how it developed the history reflected in some of the conquest texts.

Crucible of Faith: The Ancient Revolution That Made Our Modern Religious World (New York: Basic Books, 2017). This carries the story of the Jewish world from the fourth century BC through the first century AD, and the rise of Christianity. Again, there is a major emphasis on the making of the Bible and its canon, and on alternative and non-canonical scriptures and traditions.

Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). This studies the myths surrounding alternative and apocryphal gospels, but also explores some of the roads not taken in early Christianity, notably Gnosticism, however broadly we define it.

The Many Faces of Christ: The Thousand-Year Story of the Survival and Influence of the Lost Gospels (New York: Basic Books, 2015). Continues the story of those alternative traditions of Christianity, and their texts, from Antiquity through the era of the Reformation.

Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, And Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe For The Next 1,500 Years (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010). On the formation of Christian doctrine and orthodoxy, mainly in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, and the spread of rival Christian traditions across Asia and Africa.

The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia–and How It Died (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008). The subtitle explains my goals pretty well, the "thousand years" in question running from about the fourth century through the fourteenth.

I then take that listing, that "cycle," through my more recent books on modern Christian history and present Christian reality, especially:

The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014). The continuities from the earlier books are all the stronger because of the substantial emphasis on the crisis of Christian communities in the Middle East. This also pursues the intimate relationship between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, a theme that so often surfaces in earlier volumes. Finally, it addresses the coming of a reborn global church, especially in Africa.

The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002: third edition, 2011).

The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

*God's Continent: Christianity, Islam and Europe's Religious Crisis (*New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

So now we are ten.

Putting those ten books together, you find a whole and rather lengthy cycle of over three thousand pages – over a million words. I should probably also include an eleventh title, which is my *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). This does after all mainly concern marginal and heterodox Christian groups, and the whole "cult war" idea involves defining the ideological frontiers of the Christian faith against views regarded as heretical or deviant. Those frontiers, of course, shift quite a bit over time.

Taken as a whole, that cycle describes the origins, rise, and crises of the Christian tradition, with certain obvious emphases, and some *very* long continuities. Those include

*the vast geographical spread of those Jewish/Christian worlds, with the very early manifestation of Christian globalization and transnationalism;

*the near-endless diversity of Christian traditions, especially outside the West;

*the central role of Scripture, and its shifting interpretations;

*the critical importance of alternative and non-canonical scriptures;

*the extreme endurance of some controversially non-orthodox interpretations of faith, in some cases spanning centuries or even millennia, and the persistence of such ideas in geographically remote regions;

*the endless fascination with supernatural figures, and above all with angels, commonly as sources of revealed truth;

*the shared inheritances that bind Christianity, Judaism and Islam;

*the role of secular empires in spreading and supporting religious traditions, and especially the fate of religions as those political empires decline and crumble;

*the recurrent role of war and conquest in shaping religious change;

*the enduring significance of apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs as a means of comprehending those political changes;

*the recurring significance of prophetic and charismatic beliefs and activism in shaping faith;

*and generally, the key role of those various political factors in the shaping of orthodoxy and doctrine.

Some locales also surface repeatedly throughout the "cycle," especially Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria and Iraq. There are lots more common themes, but that will do for now; and (I think) they all fit together remarkably well, and consistently.

That that is quite a substantial series or cycle, on topics of some interest to a range of scholars. But what should also strike you is the publication dates on that major series of mine – specifically, how

they follow each other with a total lack of chronological sequence, or of apparent logic. 2011 leads to 2017, which jumps straight to 2001, and so on. Broadly, the books span a twenty year period of research and writing, but in terms of the sequence in which I was doing the actual work, they are absolutely all over the place. If I had taken a scheme like this to a publisher as a series proposal in 2000, they would have screamed.

Only in 2020, in fact, can I sit down and contemplate the whole thing, and come up with a grand essay title such as "Writing My Christian History Sequence (2001-2020)." I am happy to hand in this report of what I have been doing for the past couple of decades. Even if I scarcely realized what I was up to at the time. You might think of this as a search for retcon, for retroactive continuity, but I think there is more to it than that.

And the project remains a work in progress. This coming year, I have a new book forthcoming on demography and religious change, titled *Fertility and Faith: The Demographic Revolution and the Transformation of World Religions*. Among other things, that takes the story of Christianity worldwide from the recent past into the near future. I think of it as a kind of *Next Christendom Strikes Back*.

The useful thing about all this is that this then helps me look at the series as a whole, think more about those themes, and to wonder what the next volumes in the series might logically be. Hmm…

Amazon, Wikipedia, and Scholarly Research

April 16, 2021 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

This post offers suggestions for beginning a research project of any kind, and particularly in the kind of historical and/or religious history topics that I work on. Based on my own experience, I think these tactics or approaches are very useful indeed, and many conversations through the years suggest they are not widely known. If these remarks seem obvious to you, no problem. If they are of use, that would be great.

Suppose I am undertaking a project on (say) Christianity in Africa or India, and I want to get a rough and ready sense of the literature and the kind of work that is being done right now. One obvious way to get very current information is simply to go to Amazon.com, which will be strictly up to date. It offers an excellent snapshot of the publishing world on the topic in question. *But*, and this may not be so apparent, amazon.com offers information about work available in the US. If you go as well to amazon.co.uk, that will give you books available in Britain and from British publishers, which traditionally have very different interests and emphases. On Africa or India, for instance, or any global topic, there will be vastly more titles than we find in the US. Indeed, the US references that you do manage to find will be reprinting or joint-publishing works that were originally British. To that extent, the British Empire is still very much alive and flourishing, but has moved its main emphasis into publishing. You will also find a great many books on any random topic – say, witchcraft, or abolitionism, or women's history, or the Cold War – than are not easily available in the

US, or indeed are unknown here. Pretty soon, you have an excellent and up to date working bibliography that you can begin to dig your way through, via inter-library loan. If you are working on a British (or imperial) history topic, then starting with the British site is a no-brainer. Ditto for literary study.

The same is also true of German or French titles, available through amazon.de or amazon.fr, but of course, that assumes some knowledge of those languages. Even so, that gives you a sense of what is being published around the world. And there are plenty of other national affiliates – .es for Spain, .mx for Mexico, .nl for Netherlands, .in for India, and so on. Each brings you to a totally different set of publishers, and publishing interests and obsessions. You might be surprised just how different the Canadian site (amazon.ca) is from the familiar US resource. It's almost like it's a whole different country, although they are said to speak a closely related language.

The same comments apply to Wikipedia, which is a much more complex beast than we often assume. I confess to being a fan of Wikipedia, and often use it to get my early bearings on a topic. Now, if you use statements or references at that site without verification, then you are an idiot. Mis-statements and outright errors abound, and often citations just do not say what they are alleged to. But at least you get some idea of the broad outline of a topic, and can follow up specific references. To that extent, and used with care, it is an invaluable resource. As Ronald Reagan almost said, trust, but verify, verify, verify.

But Wikipedia too has that international dimension, and different national entries are NOT just translations of the English. Recently, for instance, I was doing research on the idea of the "noonday demon," a phrase that tracks back to Psalm 91. Regular Wikipedia has a short, sharp, piece on the topic, which is not of great use. But now turn to the German Wikipedia.de for its entry on the Mittagsdämon and you are in a different world. The entry is vastly longer, more detailed and better researched, with a solid range of sources and references that you would rarely find in English. I could give a great many similar examples. Also, those national Wikipedias have many, many entries on individuals or topics that simply do not feature in the English version.

The best thing I can tell you is: choose your topic, then try it out and see.

Think of this as my vaccine against scholarly isolationism.

Christians, Liable to Leak: Or, Why Indexing Matters

September 27, 2021 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Indexes have been much in my mind of late. If you ever write or publish a book, you will understand just how important they are. Historically, they enjoy a significance that is barely unimaginable to modern people of the Google Age.

In the current *London Review of Books*, Anthony Grafton has an excellent review of a new book on indexing by Dennis Duncan. The book is entitled, inevitably, *Index, A History of the*. Duncan traces

the history from its earliest times in ancient Alexandria through the emergence of the modern index in the later Middle Ages. It was at that point, for instance, that scholars had the wonderful idea of organizing material according to the alphabet, rather than by some hierarchical system that placed God first, then angels, and so on down. That step was crucial to the organization of information, and to all subsequent scholarly research. To take another point, a true index only became possible with the invention of printing, so that references and names actually did stand in a particular, fixed, and predictable place on a page, the same in every copy of the book. With manuscripts, the exact location shifted with each new copy made by every new scribe. I keep thinking back here to [Alan Jacobs's sage observations](#) about how the technology of book production contributed to shaping faith, and in this case, developing information.

If all this seems trivial or mechanical, then just imagine trying to find information from books of 500 pages without some such apparatus. Most people today never think of such a prospect: type a phrase into Google, and you are away. But horrible as this may be to imagine, there was a time before Google, however increasingly hard that might be to imagine. And moreover, indexes are changing again, and maybe in ways just as fundamental as that shift to the alphabetic. If you are intending to produce a book, let me offer some sage advice about what you might expect.

First, expect the process of book production to be largely or entirely outsourced, very likely to a firm in Southern India. If you are expecting me to complain about this as a betrayal of home-grown American labor and enterprise, you will be disappointed. Those Indian firms, based mainly in southern cities like Chennai (formerly Madras), do an excellent job, and are generally very professional indeed to work with. (The time differences do make real-time personal chats with Tamil Nadu a bit difficult). I am getting an excellent sense of the commercial geography of Chennai, not to mention picking up local in-jokes. I have repeatedly had drummed into me the fact that the locals really do call it Madras, rather than the officially correct and nationalist "Chennai" that they think has been imposed on them.

Second, expect a totally different set up in terms of reviewing and editing your material. Coming as I do from the early Dark Ages, I am used to a sequence of someone copy-editing a manuscript, then I comment on that, then it goes to page proofs, and I comment on that, and then there are final page proofs, and woe betide you if you change anything at that stage. Today, not a bit of it. You will receive copy editing and page proofs at the same time, much to your puzzlement.

All this is different from my long experience, but I can see some good in it. Where I am having real trouble is in the approach to indexing of some producers, by no means all. Some publishers hire professional indexers, who carefully follow all the traditional rules. For instance, an entry should never have more than eight or ten references, and if it does, you had better break it up into lesser subject headings. If you are indexing a book concerning Ronald Reagan, you might have

Reagan, Ronald: *early years of; foreign policy of; historical reputation of; presidency of; rhetoric of;*

and so on. Compiling such an index is actually a useful scholarly venture in its own right, as it forces you to identify themes and emphases that you had not thought of too much when actually writing the book itself.

But technology does strike. In a recent project, I had completed a manuscript, when the editors asked me to highlight a hundred or so key words in the text. I duly did so, with some puzzlement, and to my mixed horror and admiration, I realized that I was in fact compiling a sort of index. Computers seek out the keywords, and construct them in index format with page references. How does that work? Very well in some areas. I look at my index proofs, and see, for instance, all eight references that occur in the MS to "Thailand", or all nine to Australia. But "Soviet Union" is disastrous, as the phrase occurs on virtually every page, and the entry as I was offered it reads:

Soviet Union: *2, 3, 4-6, 8, 9-11….*

And again, so on, to a couple of hundred entries, that make the index entry quite useless. Obviously, I just pulled that whole entry. Also, quite impossible in that machine-driven format are all those elegant subheadings. If I was applying this technique to a book featuring Ronald Reagan prominently, there would be a couple of hundred page references to that name with no finer distinctions, which would of course be a waste of time and energy.

One of my subject terms was "United States of America," although through the text, I naturally refer to what "the U.S." does. The index duly picked up the one full citation of United States of America, and ignored each and every one of the remaining couple of hundred references to "U.S."

An index, properly constructed, can be a lovesome thing. And that provides me the opportunity to rave about one of the great books of the previous century, and one that still has the capacity to make me laugh hard. In 1930, D.B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee published a magnificent collection of epically Bad Verse, called *[The Stuffed Owl](.)*. Shockingly for the time, the collection included not just out of the way amateur poetic enthusiasts, but canonical figures like Byron and Wordsworth, Poe and Emerson, in a way that made you realize just how dreadful some of their effusions actually could be.

piece is the subject index, which is legendary. I take the following selection more or less at random, each entry duly referring to a poem in the text:

Carrot, sluggish, 22

Charles II, his magnetic effect upon the coast line, 31; the Faculty gets to work on, 32

Cheese, Cheshire, by whom digestible, 61

Christians, liable to leak, 4

Cow, attention drawn to, by Tradition, 8

Creation, one vast Exchange, 72; staggers at atheist's nod, 174

Eggs, mention of, wrapped in elegant obscurity, 62

Eliza, takes the children to see a battle, 106; gets it in the neck, ibid.

Englishman, his heart a rich rough gem that leaps and strikes and glows and yearns, 200-1; sun never sets on his might, 201; thinks well of himself, ibid.

Italy, not recommended to tourists, 125; examples of what goes on there, 204, 219, 221

Mothers, brave men weep at the mention of their, 232

Sheep, British, unhappy in exile, 81; urged by Colin to keep their wool on, ibid. See also Bleaters.

And who can forget

Woman, useful as a protection against lions, 118

With such an index, why bother looking at the text? But one way or another, and even if you proceed back to front, do read the book.

Google's Revolution in Historical Research

August 18, 2022 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[2 Comments](#)

I research and publish a lot in history. The more I do, the more struck I am – astounded would be a better word – at the revolution wrought by Google and other search engines. Literally, they allow you to find things that a hundred well-trained and -funded research assistants could never have dug up just a couple of decades ago. Having said that, there is a certain art in using this resource. Excuse me if I am stating the obvious in what follows!

I have a book coming out later this year, entitled *He Will Save You from the Deadly Pestilence: The Many Lives of Psalm 91* (Oxford University Press). It is about the reception of that psalm through history, and I was looking for many examples to illustrate that impact in diverse cultures and eras. I was wildly successful in finding such quotes and allusions. In saying that, I am not vaunting my own brilliance, but rather the astonishing capacities that Google has made possible for anyone willing to take the trouble.

One of the Psalm's most quoted lines – phenomenally so – is its verse 13, which promises that

Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.

In the Vulgate Latin, that reads as follows:

Super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis, et conculcabis leonem et draconem.

(The Vulgate counts it as Psalm 90, but that is another story). That line is vastly used in political theory through the millennia, where pious kings or popes are meant to trample evil forces, whether those are pagans or rival kings; and it is fundamental to the tradition of exorcism. It is very

frequently represented in the visual arts. That single line almost deserves a book-length study in its own right.

So at one stage of writing the book, I went to Google and entered *Super aspidem et basiliscum.* That phrase is wonderful for this purpose, because the words are highly distinctive, and wherever they are quoted, you know you are dealing with our psalm, and nothing else. Actually, even the brief *Super aspidem* works pretty well. The range of references I turned out was amazing. Some could just have been found by other kinds of very wide reading and research, but others, absolutely and totally not.

Here is an example. The Google results run into many dozens of pages. Work through them gradually, and eventually you come to a quote from a seventeenth century book recording Jesuit missions in South America. Intense further research online, lasting possibly as long as thirty seconds, allows you to download the full text of the book itself, in a 1900 Spanish edition. The story concerns Jesuit [Antonio Ruiz de Montoya](), who in the 1630s led what he termed the "spiritual conquest" of the Upper Amazon, of "Paraguay, Paraná, Uruguay, and Tape." He often used the language of demons to describe the pagan societies with which he had to contend, where shamans gave special veneration to snakes. His fellow-Jesuit biographer reported the means by which Ruiz de Montoya defeated demons and possessions. Of course, 91 featured regularly, and centrally. In one possession story, the victim takes the form of a writhing snake, terrifying the spectators, but not the Jesuit Father. In order to humiliate the demon, he places his foot upon the victim's neck, duly and inevitably reciting the *super aspidem* verse, which is why it appears in the book, and that is what Google is picking up.

It is a great story, which shows the use of the Psalm in the Catholic Reformation, and the mind-set of the missionaries confronting pagan cultures in the New World. It adds beautifully to my argument, and to my arsenal of examples. But here is the point. If I had been doing this book 25 years ago, say, in the era of BG, Before Google, there is literally no way I could have found it, not if I was a multi-millionaire antiquarian of Bruce Wayne proportions commanding legions of research assistants. Where would I tell them to start, unless I already suspected that something like that reference existed, which I did not. Tracking down the actual book would have been very tough indeed.

That is one example of the results from following up that one verse, and I could give you dozens more that I have incorporated in my book, from many parts of the world, and from multiple eras. To take just one region, I ended up with way more Latin American examples than I could ever have dreamed of at the outset. [In another blogpost last year](), I described how using a similar search term had turned up just a wonderful example of the use of that same psalm 91 as an amulet by a German soldier fighting in the French Wars of Religion. The source that Google led me to, and gave me full text, was from a hard-to-get French tract from 1573. Nobody else, to the best of my knowledge, has ever recognized or cited that story, which among other things tells us so much about vernacular uses of the esoteric and occult in the Renaissance. Am I really the first person to pick it up in 450 years? Seriously?

On a closely related theme, you can search a phrase like *Super aspidem* on Google Images, which will take you to many objects of sculpture or painting related to Psalm 91 that you would never have encountered otherwise, and add them to your discussion.

Taken together, my resulting book makes me look like a researcher of phenomenal breadth and acuity, with access to all the world's most arcane libraries. But so, potentially, is anyone using Google. Now, you have to use it properly, and with a sense of what it can and can't do. There are several key points here:

*You have to recognize what might be a distinctive search phrase that will immediately link to your topic. *Super aspidem et basiliscum* is perfect for that purpose. Something more generic, like, say, "She opened the window" is not, even in quotation marks. If you are researching a person with a distinctive or unusual name, that is very good news. Bad news for anyone working on John Brown.

*Searching for a single key word like "serpent" is not going to work, unless it is very rare – you will be rapidly overwhelmed.

*When you do find results, you have to burrow through them patiently and systematically. If there are forty pages of results, trawl through them all. That is actually not as hard as it sounds, as you will probably recognize many references on the first few pages as well-known and standard.

*Above all, you have to know what you are looking for, on the basis of all your preparatory reading. Knowing the questions to ask is vital.

*Depending on the kind of material in question, foreign language skills come in handy.

*Finally, and essentially, you need to assess what you are finding critically, to evaluate its significance and relevance, and to know how to integrate it into your argument.

*Deciding what sources not to include can be just as important as deciding what to incorporate.

*That all requires skills of writing and interpretation, or what we call "being a historian."

But oh my, the payoff is worth it. It's like cheating. Increasingly too, *not* using these methods looks like dereliction of scholarly duty.

Google is my co-pilot.

I Want to Believe

May 4, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
18 Comments

Last year, Simcha Jacobovici and Barrie Wilson published an impressively dreadful book called *The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus's Marriage to Mary the Magdalene. The Lost Gospel* made much of an ancient novel called *Joseph and Aseneth*, claiming (on no vaguely convincing grounds) that the characters in it were coded or disguised references to Jesus and the Magdalene, and that on the basis of the text, you could reconstruct the "true" history of Jesus and his time. Most scholars ignored the work, and the few who deigned to comment on it treated it as a joke or a

publicity stunt. ([You can see my parody of the underlying ideas here](#)). By the way, Barrie Wilson himself is a respected academic with a lengthy track record, and it is odd to see him involved in this project.

I have no wish to waste any more time on the book itself, but the whole phenomenon does raise some important points about the nature of fringe and controversial scholarship, and its relationship to the mainstream, or the scholarly consensus. Even as I write the words, I know that "mainstream" and "consensus" are both words to raise hackles, and many lay readers have a natural preference for those they see as courageous entrepreneurs, as scholarly heretics. The problem, though, is that most non-specialists simply do not understand the assumptions from which scholars work. In my next few columns, I want to suggest just why that scholarly consensus matters, whether we are dealing with alternative scriptures, bizarre historical claims, or pseudo-archaeology. I'll also try to explain how we can tell the difference between real scholarship and fringe speculations.

To begin with the book itself. Nothing really marks *Lost Gospel* from the herd of similar books that appear on a regular basis. It takes a well-known ancient source, while claiming that in fact the text in question is somehow forgotten or little known to scholars. Also, allegedly, it is "really" about Jesus. There is no reason to believe this, or that *Joseph and Aseneth* is using coded or allegorical language. If you look hard enough at any source, including the Cleveland Yellow Pages, you can find Biblical stories retold there if you really want to find them. (My own parody discussed *The Bourne Identity* as a coded Jesus text). No Christian source in antiquity cited *Joseph and Aseneth* in this way.

Nor, crucially, have any of the many, many, modern scholars who have discussed it, and that is a vital fact. At any given moment, there are tens of thousands of trained and credentialed scholars working on the Bible, New Testament and Early Christianity, and they stand on the shoulders of generations of equally determined and learned predecessors. All these fields are thoroughly explored and picked over, and any new source is leapt upon avidly as people seek new areas to explore.

For a scholar approaching any thing like *Lost Gospel*, the primary questions concern sources. Is the source credible, and does it have any chance of presenting information that can plausibly be linked to the period in question? That does not necessarily mean that a source about Jesus must have been written in the first century, but can we see any suggestion it preserves older material, so that we can establish a credible chain? In other words, a hypothetical thirteenth century document might contain a fifth century text, which preserved the words of some very early historian writing not long after Jesus's time. Such a find would be wonderful, and might even revolutionize scholarship. Nothing like that appears in *Lost Gospel*. If there were the vaguest trace of a smidgeon of a hint of a suspicion that *Joseph and Aseneth* might have anything like the importance that *Lost Gospel* claims, someone would have suggested it long ago.

But if scholars mocked (or ignored) *Lost Gospel*, the media took it seriously enough to report widely on its supposedly exciting findings. Moreover, many ordinary readers loved the book. Although I certainly don't claim this source offers in any way a representative sample of opinion, it's interesting to look at the quite numerous reviews that Amazon readers have supplied for *The Lost Gospel*. Overwhelmingly, the lay reviewers were favorable, giving the book four stars on a five point scale, and that despite its panning by scholars. What did people like about it?

Reading those comments, the overwhelming impression is that such ordinary readers (and media people) have not the slightest idea of what historical sources are, of how we determine their relative value, and above all, how scholars approach and interpret them. Rather, they come from the position of "Is the underlying idea plausible?," and also, very commonly "Do I like that idea?" In the case of *Lost Gospel*, the commonest theme was that the book presented thoughts that people wanted to believe, above all about sexuality, the role of women, and the fact that Jesus should have been married. "Finally, a gospel that presents a positive view of marriage and sexuality. That's missing from the pages of the New Testament with its denial of family values."

By the way, if I criticize that approach, that is not because I regard the thought of a married Jesus as horrendous or blasphemous, and [have written on this topic](#). I just think that any discussion of the topic has to be rooted in sources that are believable and authoritative.

Also, reviewers repeatedly praised the book for its innovative qualities – it was "groundbreaking," had "a new perspective." "This is one of those books where they present new, bold ideas based on historical evidence and make it interesting for the reader." New, of its nature, must be good. Those who want to believe also find the book "carefully documented," and "well-researched," although as I have said, scholars who paid any attention to the book scorned its use of evidence. Some praised the book for its willingness to defy the religious/academic consensus: "It will be severely criticized by those who have something to lose."

Well, read the comments yourself, but I think I am summarizing the main themes accurately. I also think that similar comments can be made about other fringe works that achieve widespread popularity.

Many non-specialists work from the assumption that for whatever reason, academics try to conceal explosive or startling discoveries, which must therefore be brought to light by adventurers willing to scorn consensus and mainstream, in the relentless search for inconvenient truths.

In my next columns, I'll explain why this approach is so radically wrong.

Outliers and Iconoclasts

May 8, 2015 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[2 Comments](#)

I have been writing about mainstream and fringe scholarship, and defending the sometimes unpopular idea of mainstream orthodoxy, or the scholarly consensus.

Blogging on any religious topic invites wacky comments and responses. As one example of many, I had a commenter not long ago who asserted that most of what Christians believed about their origins was utterly wrong. Way back in the third century BC, he said, the cult of the Egyptian god Serapis prefigured most features of Christianity, including the name: even at that very early date, his followers were allegedly called "Christians." Christianity, in fact, was a myth built on that older Egyptian religion. That whole Serapis/Christ nonsense is widespread around the Internet, with quite

a few Youtube contributions. Just Google "Christos Ptolemy Serapis" and see how many rabbit holes you vanish into. In some manifestations, not all, it gets into weird Afrocentric and anti-Jewish mythologies.

I challenged the original poster by asking how many real books or sources he could cite to support this idea, not counting self-published stuff, and answer came there none. These days, you can find that information quite easily from Amazon, besides library catalogues and journal databases. My argument was simple. An idea or theory does not deserve to be taken seriously unless and until it acquires at least some coverage by accredited experts in the field. That might take the form of published books with major presses, whether trade or academic, or in reputable academic journals.

Scholarship is what scholars do, and if they don't do it, it's not scholarship.

I am stealing that phrase from the maxim that "Science is what scientists do," which courts have used to separate junk science from the real McCoy. As a trial judge declared in the important 1982 case of *McLean v Arkansas*, "Their [scientists'] work is published and subject to review and testing by their peers. The journals for publication are both numerous and varied." If something claiming to be science appears in none of these outlets, then, that tells you it is an impostor. Exactly the same principles apply to social science disciplines such as history, although there, books from major presses count as much or more as do journal articles.

Federal courts have also wrestled for years to decide what does or does not constitute legitimate scientific evidence. The current measure is the so-called [Daubert Standard](), which includes these criteria:

1.*Empirical testing: whether the theory or technique is falsifiable, refutable, and/or testable*

2.*Whether it has been subjected to peer review and publication.*

3.*The known or potential error rate.*

4.*The existence and maintenance of standards and controls concerning its operation.*

5.*The degree to which the theory and technique is generally accepted by a relevant scientific community.*

Some of those items apply more than others to the topics I am discussing, but here again we see the stress on scholarly consensus and general acceptance. The "mainstream" matters!

You can easily think of many examples of popular theories that are utterly at odds with any kind of scholarly consensus, both within the general area of religion and outside. I might mention the works of [Graham Hancock]() in this regard, and his theories about ancient lost civilizations that dominated the planet long before what virtually all academic historians would regard as vaguely plausible dates. As with the Serapis stuff, you would look long and hard for a mainstream academic book or article that would cite Hancock's ideas even to refute him, never mind viewing him as a credible source.

At this point, you might be objecting that this represents an "argument from authority," which *in certain circumstances* can lead to a kind of logical fallacy. But in most instances, basing yourself in

scholarly authority and consensus is emphatically not a fallacy. Whenever I hear that objection, the other person is commonly deploying what I call the "argument from lack of authority," namely that something is likely to be true precisely because it breaches the consensus. If someone presents a wildly unorthodox idea (Serapis was the first Christ; the Sphinx is twelve thousand years old), they scorn scholarly assaults. Did not the scholars of the day mock at iconoclastic pioneers like Copernicus and Galileo, who would be triumphantly vindicated?

From this perspective in fact, what gives a work credibility is its distance from consensus thought, which proves that the writer in question is daring, innovative, bold, iconoclastic… the standard repertoire of descriptors. Even better, the more harshly scholars condemn a fringe idea, the more it seems to validate it in the public mind. Who today respects such boring words as "orthodoxy" or consensus? Isn't it much better to be a heretic, an iconoclast?

So you don't believe that Christ was invented to conceal the Serapis cult? Well, that shows you are struggling to maintain the academic/religious conspiracy of silence, not willing to risk your career to defend what you secretly know to be true!

Once again, though, we might turn to the decision in *McLean v Arkansas*, which properly scoffed at claims that science suppresses dissidence. As the judge concluded, "Perhaps some members of the scientific community are resistant to new ideas. It is, however, inconceivable that such a loose knit group of independent thinkers in all the varied fields of science could, or would, so effectively censor new scientific thought." Again, ditto for history and the social sciences.

Don't get me wrong. Of course there are pressures to conform, and individual "outlier" studies might be silenced. But that suppression can never be total, particularly when prestigious academic journals can be found in multiple countries and diverse academic cultures.

What I am *not* saying is that "If professors say it, it must be true, because they have doctorates." God forbid. Rather, the image of a stuffy ivory tower world rejecting any ideas that are vaguely bold or creative is utterly at odds with reality. As I will show in my next post, academic ideas do change, frequently, to respond to new evidence and insights, but they do so following well-understood principles and (dare I say) garbage filters.

Have I ever said this before? Scholarship is what scholars do, and if they don't do it, it's not scholarship.

The Monte Verde Principle

May 15, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
3 Comments

I have been discussing fringe or marginal theories that run contrary to the scholarly consensus in a given field, and why we need to be very careful about rejecting that mainstream opinion. Just because an idea seems bold or iconoclastic does not make it right. You may at this point be thinking that I am advocating unquestioning obedience to academic orthodoxies, but of course I am not.

Rather, I will describe how orthodoxies are challenged over time, and how they change to accommodate new insights.

I enjoy the magazine *Ancient American*, although I do not necessarily agree with a word printed in any given copy. The magazine is dedicated to presenting "alternative" theories of pre-Columbian history, often emphasizing supposed evidence of early American settlement by Celts, Vikings, Hebrews, and many other peoples ("Phoenicians Sailed Lake Michigan," "Egyptians in the Grand Canyon"). Few of those claims would stand for a moment in an academic journal.

The masthead proclaims that "The purpose of *Ancient American Magazine* is to describe the prehistory of the American Continent, regardless of presently fashionable beliefs— to provide a public forum for certified experts and nonprofessionals alike to freely express their views without fear nor favor." Note the suggestion here. We tell the truth, which might not be recognized right now, but history will vindicate us. If other people don't recognize what we say, it is because of fear (of ruining professional reputations?) or favor (vested interest in supporting an academic status quo). Such words neatly represent the credo of many others who espouse alternative theories in other fields, including the study of the Bible and alternative gospels. The suggestion is that the authors are courageous iconoclasts who stand outside the ivory tower, proclaiming truth to the cowards and time servers within.

There is a huge amount wrong with this belief. If a real archaeologist ever found a genuine, confirmed, medieval Norse inscription on the North American mainland, you would see sixty-year old professors turning cartwheels in college corridors. The fact that they don't believe, for instance, in the Kensington runestone is not that they are afraid to admit the inconvenient truth, but that the stone shrieks "nineteenth century forgery" from every angle.

Over time, though, outlying ideas do arise, and some progress to the center, and actually become mainstream in their time: stones that were rejected become the cornerstone. In the language of Thomas Kuhn, science creates paradigms, or orthodoxies, and over time, enough rival evidence accumulates to challenge and eventually overthrow the old paradigm, becoming a new paradigm in its place. We are in fact in the midst of such a paradigm revolution right now, and one that indicates how and why scholars come to accept ideas that once upon a time seemed ludicrous and fanciful.

When and how did human beings reach the Americas? Over the past century, the standard view was the Clovis theory, named for a discovery site in New Mexico. The theory imagined big game hunters crossing the Bering Strait land-bridge around 13,000 years ago, carrying with them their distinctive stone tools. They then spread gradually across both North and South America. This theory seemed credible, but like all good scientific hypotheses, it was falsifiable. By that, I mean it could be subjected to testing and verification, so that if conflicting evidence arose, the theory would have to be amended to accommodate the new findings. If evidence proved to challenge the theory overwhelmingly, it would have to be replaced.

In the case of Clovis First, the main challenges were chronological, in the sense that any evidence of human occupation dating significantly before 13,000 years ago could not be fitted into the theory. And such evidence did increasingly come to light, first at one or two sites, then at dozens, or hundreds. Initially, Clovis First believers could fight back, saying that the various alleged finds had been wrongly dated, or improperly excavated, but by the 1990s, such counterclaims were wearing

thin indeed. Significantly, the insurgent scholars presented their evidence in the appropriate journals and scholarly conferences, where their ideas were debated, often fiercely. Throughout, both sides used the most precise and rigorous methodologies, knowing that they would be skewered ruthlessly if they were ever caught out in a slip.

And then there was Monte Verde. In 1975, archaeologists found a site in Southern Chile that was wrong in every respect. Not only was it far too early for the Clovis First model – around 15,000 years old – but it was way to the south of the supposed point of human entry. And instead of nomadic big game hunters, the settlement actually looked more like a village.

So what did archaeologists do? According to the standard mythology, they should have struggled ruthlessly to suppress the dangerous findings. They didn't. Some Clovis true-believers protested heartily, causing unpleasant confrontations, and a few people indeed tried to silence colleagues. But how could you achieve anything like that when the academic world is so diverse? A series of detailed scientific examinations and re-investigations proved that Monte Verde really was what it claimed to be. That is only part of the story, but these days, most scholars accept that human occupation of the Americas dates back more like 18 or 20,000 years, and claims about pre-Clovis sites are being treated very seriously indeed.

If the Clovis First orthodoxy is not actually dead, it is about as weakened as an ice age hunter who has just been trampled by a singularly ill-tempered mammoth.

Our rapidly changing knowledge of this whole topic can easily be followed online. Texas A&M is home to the Center for the Study of the First Americans, with some valuable resources. The Center also publishes the journal PaleoAmerica, and the first issue is currently online full text, no charge.

Put another way, scientists certainly did accept a paradigm, but when competing evidence arose, it was tested and verified, and the old model was effectively falsified. Such a change happens by focusing intensely on one clear exception to the rule, and then expanding to other contentious areas. And as everyone agrees, any such alleged exception has to be treated with the most rigorous and hyper-critical care.

That is what separates real science and archaeology from pseudo-science and pseudo-archaeology. Challenging consensus wisdom is done by recognized scientific methods, and not by producing an endless swarm of obviously spurious junk examples.

You know the best way to challenge an orthodoxy? Produce one, just one, really convincing and verifiable example that forces mainstream scholars to change their minds, and all else follows from that. If you can't produce a single exception to challenge the rule, your cause is not worth much. Call it the Monte Verde Principle.

And exactly the same principles apply to attempted challenges to "mainstream" thought in the scholarly study of the Bible, or of religious matters generally. So where is your Monte Verde?

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Stop Press! The latest *New Republic* has a great piece on pseudo-archaeology in modern India, splendidly titled "Those Mythological Men and Their Sacred, Supersonic Flying Temples: What tales of ancient Vedic aircraft tell us about India's place in the modern world."

Teaching Religion: A Year in the Life

August 25, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
6 Comments

For many years, I taught an introductory Religious Studies course on World Religions. On several occasions, I taught this in an Honors class format, which allowed me to get into some major themes in some detail. In the next few posts, I have some comments and questions about the whole enterprise of teaching Religious Studies at college level. I begin with a simple request for information, which actually does raise some serious issues. Can anyone point me to good books that examine the lived religious experience of a particular community over an extended period of time?

There are countless texts for survey classes, but most suffer from what I call the Curse of Scripture. They tell you a great deal about religion X through its holy writings, which are usually presented as if they have the same authoritative role as the Bible in Protestant Christianity. That reflects the Protestant origins of earlier scholars in this field, who assumed that "real" religion is scriptural, literate, and cerebral, and that ritual or ceremonial religion is at best secondary, at worst a contamination of true faith. The problem is that even a thorough understanding of scriptures prepares you very badly to comprehend the lived realities of any faith. To some extent you can compensate for that by teaching the history of a faith tradition, but that still falls short of current realities.

Read the Vedas and Upanishads all you like, and they are towering works of genius and inspiration, but they tell you very little about what ordinary Hindu people really do from day to day, or what it actually means to be a Hindu. Worse, the scriptural obsession forces you to give very short shrift to religions where texts and writings just do not play that significant a role in religious life, especially in East Asian faiths.

Religion is what people do, not what they read.

Some texts do try and get past this barrier, and one I really liked was Michael Molloy's *Experiencing the World Religions,* which is now in an impressive sixth edition (2013). But by far the best and most useful teaching tool I found was studies of particular communities, ideally through something like "A Year in the Life." Two examples were extraordinarily useful: John K. Nelson, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* (1996) and Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen* (1998). Nelson describes the Suwa shrine in Nagasaki, while Gallagher's book covers a year in the life of her Episcopal parish in Santa Barbara.

Both books are ethnographies, or participant observations. However different the settings, both books traced the long arc of the ritual and liturgical life, the fasts, feats and holy days, the cycles of the year. Above all, they told us what people actually do and did at any particular moment. What are

places of worship really like, in terms of how we experience them through the various senses? Also, how much of religious life actually goes on outside the formal building, in the setting of the home or family? That is an obvious question, for instance, when dealing with Judaism, but to varying degrees it is true of all faith-traditions. Within the congregation, what do people fight about? What are the hot button issues right now?

But what else exists by way of books, preferably works that are reasonably current and contemporary? If I want to teach about Islam, I can get people to read about the Quran and Islamic history, but what do people in a typical mosque actually do throughout a year or so? What is life like from day to day? Critically, what are their interests and concerns right now, as opposed to what we find in books written a century ago?

So please: can people point me to other such books on lived religion – any religion – ideally but not necessarily on roughly the "Year in the Life" format? Is there even such a thing about a Catholic or Orthodox parish, or a Baptist church? Any such study in an African or Asian context would be a pearl beyond price.

Or am I right in saying that such long-term lived religion studies are as rare as I think? If so, that is a depressing comment on the ways in which we study and teach religion.

Teaching Religion: Building Blocks of Faith

September 4, 2017 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[0 Comments](#)

Recently, I discussed [teaching courses in Religious Studies](#), and specifically in World Religions. I always began such a course with what I called the building blocks of religion, and why we find the same themes across the spectrum of faiths – why certain numbers, colors, and so on enjoy special status across continents and civilizations. As the class proceeded, we would use these different themes and headings as a means of organizing and understanding material.

In the next couple of posts, I will be offering the materials I use to introduce these ideas. If these are of any use to you in teaching, or in thinking about religion, please take them as a professional gift for the coming academic year. If they are too obvious to be mentioned, then just ignore.

Do note that what I present here was meant to be introductory and general rather than academic in tone and format. One consequence of that is that I am not here touching on the substantial literature on these topics, prominent among which is Ann Taves's outstanding 2009 book from Princeton, *[Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things](#)*. This would demand far more consideration than I have space for here, and her efforts at definition and evaluation are critical. I just make the point that I am not appropriating her "building blocks" framework or terminology, which I was using independently fifteen years before her book appeared. Not that I am bitter (!). Seriously, we are using quite different approaches, and throughout, we identify very different "blocks."

So: a standard repertoire of religious patterns and practices appears in the great majority of human societies, past and present. Whether in major world faiths or "primal" religions, people tend to do the same things as part of religious behavior, regardless of the scriptures or teachings specific to that particular culture. These are the building blocks, elements that are found in all the major world religions, though often they are dismissed as folk religion or superstition. To take an obvious example, the idea of making pilgrimage to the tombs or shrines of holy men and women is well known in the context of Christianity and Buddhism, but also appears in aspects of Islam and Judaism, in which the practice is sometimes condemned as superstitious. Similar "religious" elements also appear in secular or even anti-religious societies, though usually stripped of any obviously spiritual component.

Even the best Religious Studies textbooks iuse approaches that I believe are misleading, or perhaps unbalanced. (Check out that recent post on finding books about "lived religion" rather than scriptural religion). In order to make the complex material comprehensible to a student audience, textbook writers usually present the various religious traditions as discrete units, paying insufficient attention to common themes and patterns. In addition, they commonly place too much emphasis on texts and scriptures, rather than the actual lived experience of the religions in question. Consciously or otherwise, this approach lends support to the rather dated idea of "high" and "low" religion. In this view, those people following the approved scriptural norms are the correct practitioners of the religion, while out there in the wilds, ordinary people are pursuing strange customs that derive from folk-custom, and may represent survivals of older religions. Obviously, I am oversimplifying, but the textbooks do reflect a strong prejudice towards the textual.

As we look around the world, though, we see that certain themes occur in virtually all societies with any notion of religion (which is basically all of them), and even those that are not obviously religious use the same notions in secularized form. This commonality is not all a result of influences from one people to another, since the same basic themes appear even in newly contacted societies never before in touch with the great societies of either West or East. These building blocks emerge powerfully in primal faiths, but they remain as undercurrents in the great religions.

In discussing these vestigial presences, these underlying survivals, I use the linguistic concept of "interference," the term for how one's original speech affects speaking patterns when a person tries and use a new language.

These kinds of interference exercise a powerful influence on religious practice, to the extent that major religions face significant problems when they try to exclude them altogether. Periodically through history, in all great religions, reformers seek to purge what they see as such fringe beliefs and practices, and demand a return to the sources of the religion, to the strict letter of the Bible, the Quran or the Vedas. Time and again, though, the underlying practices return, either within the mainstream religion itself, or else through the vehicle of new religious movements.

The concept of underlying common themes in religion is not new. This is the core idea we find in Jung's theory of archetypes, the images of the collective unconscious that appear worldwide in dreams, myths and fairy stories. More recently, theories about the structure and workings of the brain suggest that certain kinds of religious behavior are hard-wired into the human mind, that religious states are an aspect of evolutionary biology. Books and media articles have explored ideas like "The Biology of Religious Experience," even "The 'God' Part of the Brain." These biologically

determinist ideas – "NeuroTheology" – are controversial because they reduce human spirituality to the interplay of neurons.

My approach differd from these varieties of "universalism." While acknowledging biological approaches to behavior, I believe that many of the common religious themes arise from fairly obvious facts of human existence, and do not require any elaborate knowledge of biology or biochemistry. Arguably, one of the best ways to trace the "roots of religion" is to observe small children, with their obsessive ritualism and powerful sense of taboo, their rich awareness of places possessed of good or evil powers.

So what are these common facts that apply to human beings in virtually all times and places? Students will usually come up with their own list of "universals", so we can then explore the religious themes that arise from them. This is a clear means of introducing the reader to the basic structures or substructures of religion. In each case, I point to the themes common to all of us as human beings, and indicate how they give rise to religious beliefs or practices, illustrated from various societies and cultures past and present. We might use a contemporary example – such as people arguing with computers or and trying to bargain with stubborn ATM machines – before moving on to some more formal and overtly "religious" expression.

Throughout, we can use examples from primal religions, but also stress how these same ideas run through the "higher" faiths. To take an example, after discussing building blocks like breath and speech, I note how they are transformed in the "great" religions, how for instance breath becomes sacralized as spirit, and then Spirit – as *prana*, *ruach*, *pneuma*, and so on.

From a Christian perspective, such an approach helps us distinguish between generic religiosity and religious behavior and the authentic core of faith.

I'll expand on these ideas and look at these possible "universals" in religious behavior.

I was delighted to see the discussion of many of these themes in Reza Aslan's excellent book *God: A Human History*, which comes out from Random House this coming November. I recently had the opportunity to preview this.

Teaching Religion: Universal Ideas?

September 8, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

In my last post, I tried to identify some of the universals in human nature that supply the foundation for much religious behavior, whether we are looking at the great world faiths, or traditional primal religions. Let me here offer some of the specific examples, of what I call the "building blocks" of faith, and of faiths. What features do all human beings have in common, which taken together provide the components of a kind of default religion? There are more such universals that we might

immediately think. Together, they provide a useful structure for thinking about and teaching religion and religious behavior.

As I said in that earlier post, I am not trying to use any kind of reductionist approach, to suggest that religion is entirely a matter of neurons. Having said that, human nature does entail certain features and characteristics that predispose all human beings to religious concepts and behaviors, and in that sense, they do offer the building blocks of faith and faiths.

1.Natural Religion?

Certain forms of popular religiosity seem – to use an unfashionable word – "natural," integral to human nature.

Even in an advanced post-industrial nation like the US, we can find a very large range of popular practices and behaviors that resemble those of primal religions, as well as of the underlying strata of other world religions. Though unexamined, popular religiosity has much in it that is broadly "primal". In fact, such examples are so abundant as to raise serious questions about the definition of the term "religious". Is a belief in Santa Claus religious? Is UFO belief religious? If you can "desecrate" a US flag, does that mean that it is a religious object? Just what – if anything – is the difference between "superstition" and "real" religion? Who decides?

Lots of seemingly "primal" examples can be cited here, including the ubiquitous practice of throwing coins in fountains or other convenient bodies of water. We might think of the practices of visitors to monuments and memorials, such as the Vietnam Memorial, which is obviously seen as a point of contact between living and dead. People reflect this belief by leaving all manner of goods and objects for the dead.

Another good example of non-specific religiosity is the kind of popular shrine that appears at the site of a great tragedy, at which people leave flowers, teddy bears and so on. Or we might take the folklore surrounding such sites, the means by which urban legends develop: September 11 produced a very rich crop of such outpourings – including beliefs about omens, psychic linkages, and so on. Regardless of their formal religious affiliation or belief, people share common non-rational ideas about phenomena like violent death. Though these responses are commonly listed under headings like "superstition", they are in fact very close indeed to what in other societies would be formal religious activities and myth-making.

2.Being Ourselves

We can then try to explain what we have in common as human beings that explains these very broad cross-cultural similarities.

Most basic to human consciousness is the sense of self: we exist, we are. This self-consciousness encourages a belief in an absolute reality of self external to the body. That does not mean that all societies have a belief in personal immortality, but the notion of a soul or souls separate from the vehicle of flesh and blood is very common.

If there is a soul, must it be linked to the body at all times, or may it travel freely through other realms, waking or sleeping?

In addition, we are born and we die. This core identity that we possess must have come from somewhere, some other realm, and it must continue somewhere in some form. Intellectually, we know that we will die, but it is literally impossible for us to imagine our own non-existence. Even when we imagine our deaths, we do so in a form that supposes we are consciously watching the proceedings, observing the mourners leaving the graveside. If we imagine the grave, we see ourselves in some kind of extended sleep. We *know* that our identity must continue somewhere, in some form, giving rise to widespread ideas of an afterlife, perhaps in the form of reincarnation, of varieties of heaven and hell.

If other people die and yet they somehow continue their existence, then we living people have to find some form of interacting with those beings, who might be far more powerful and dangerous than they ever were in life. That might mean comforting or controlling those beings, to ensure that they make their proper journeys to whatever their final destinations might be. In various ways, they need our help, and they in turn can help us.

Finally, humans are children for a very long portion of their existence. Compared to other mammalian species, we spend a large proportion of our lives in a state of utter physical and psychological dependency on a larger and all-powerful figure or figures. Observers have long suggested that this fact contributes mightily to our willingness to hypothesize the existence of gods, angels, or superior figures, sources of wisdom and guidance. In earlier societies – though less in the modern world – the collective assemblage of ancestors and precursors serve this function.

3.Body, Breath and Blood

Some of the "universals" arise from the nature of the human body.

From earliest times, people learned to associate the fact of life with our physical characteristics. Most obviously, we bleed, and when we bleed, we lose strength and vigor. We know that our continuing identity is dependent on the survival of crucial parts of this organism, which we identify with the basic forces of life. When we identify blood as the source of life and strength, we have prepared the way for many cultural associations and activities, including the symbolism as red as a color of force and power. Very early in human societies too, the connection between blood and lunar cycles offered clear evidence of the linkage between the body and the universe, macrocosm and microcosm. Survival of our families or communities depends on dealing with the powerful forces of sexuality, in which we transmit the life force no less than life itself.

In addition to blood, the obvious connection between breathing and life demonstrated the significance of air and spirit. Human forces were linked to the natural world, and sickness was connected with those outside powers. All humans fall sick, and we know that spiritual forces can effect cures. Throughout modern history, the story of new religious movements in the West is commonly the story of the quest for spiritual healing, a gift seemingly refused by the mainstream faiths. Potentially "spiritual" concepts are also built in to the facts of our existence. We all eat to live: that is, we survive by eating other things that have been living, plants or animals. The death of others gives us life. This exchange demands reciprocity and exchange, perhaps through sacrifice, but

at least through gratitude to higher powers. Once again, new religious movements have often been in the vanguard of struggles for new attitudes to food and eating, expressing a "natural" concern excluded from mainstream religion.

We perhaps see "universal" roots of religious or superstitious activities such as sacrifice, blood taboos, exorcism, theories of possession, and spiritual healing.

4.Altered States

We can experience altered states, which we commonly identify with supernatural or spiritual realities.

As recent work on neurochemistry has reminded us, we are programmed to feel awe and exaltation, and these feelings suggest the presence of the special, dreadful and numinous, qualities that are located in particular persons, events, and places. We believe that some people are intrinsically closer to the higher realms. We visit holy places to seek the powers there, to draw from the merits of holy people. Likewise, we seem to know dread as well as awe, and possess a powerful sense of the evil inherent in places, to be shunned or tabooed. In insanity and personality disorders, we see other forms of "alteration", which all too plausibly indicate the presence of new and hostile spirits who have displaced the true owner of the body in question.

Just as fundamental is the universal fact of dreaming, which tells us of other states of consciousness and reality beyond the everyday world. Our souls travel. In dreams, the boundaries of reality collapse: animals can speak, the dead walk. We see here confirmation of higher and lower realms. In terms of primal religions, these facts sustain the belief in the Otherworld, the Dreamtime, in shamanism. Depending on the society, there are many ways of knowing altered states of consciousness, including fever, trance, drunkenness, or extreme stimulation. In such states, people believe they see visions and defy time, defy the borders between life and death.

This all helps explain the origin of such fundamental aspects of religious thought as holiness, prophecy, and visionary experience.

On a more everyday level, humans are very good at techniques that promote a sense of community, solidarity, elevation and exaltation. These methods include music, dance, or shared physical movements; and multiple means of appealing the senses of hearing and sight, sound and smell. I have written about this elsewhere in the context of Christian liturgy.

When people try to convey the truths they learn in these other states, they do it by the standard means that humans try to make sense of the incomprehensible: they tell stories, they make myths and legends, they perform and re-enact. As Andrew Greeley remarked, religion was "experience, symbol, story (most symbols were inherently narrative) and community before it became creed, rite and institution."

5.Making Sense of the World

In our relations with the outside world, we naturally think and behave in ways that seem magical and even primitive.

We might cite the trivial example of arguing or pleading with a computer ("Please, please, don't wipe that data"), but time and again, we see examples of human beings projecting our own realities. We think magically and analogically. We tend to believe in rational order: that there is a proper order of things, which if disturbed must be set right.

We also look for significance, and (despite all evidences to the contrary) we find it. We believe in correspondence, in special arrangements of order, which often depend on numbers. Numerical correspondences again reflect the human body, for instance the widespread beliefs concerning the numbers five and ten. We look for order, and often we find it in the natural world, the skies. Though our climate and geography varies, humans everywhere share some absolutely common external realities, in the form of sun, moon and stars.

We believe in reciprocity, hence the bargaining that so often marks our irrational processes. We assume that other beings and things must operate and think and act in ways comprehensible to us – in religious terms, we observe the principles of anthropomorphism and animism. These processes are powerfully obvious from our treatment of animals. We observe and interact with animals, try to think ourselves into their powers and attributes, and know that they must somehow interact with the Otherworld in various ways.

Similarly, we believe in rational agency. We believe that things happen to us through the action of others, conscious or otherwise. In many societies, this idea of cause and effect gives rise to notions of witchcraft and all the attendant cures and protections.

6.Looking High and Low

Finally we can look at how these "primal" themes were transformed by the impact of literacy, and observe the shift to scripture- and clergy-based religions. The Old Testament offers a lot of striking examples of this kind of transformation, as a highly text-bound book seeks to convey the experiences of an oral and primal religion, often with some jarring inconsistencies resulting from the interface. We can draw parallels with other major religions, especially Buddhism.

What happens to natural religion in this new world of Texts, Tombs and Temples?

In summary, I have been talking about the building blocks of religion, those universal human experiences that underlie religious behavior. Let me here present these in a simple table, of a kind that I have personally found useful in teaching.

1. We ARE. We exist. We are conscious of a distinct identity. *(soul)*
2. We are born. This identity we possess must have come from somewhere.
3. We are children. We spend a large proportion of our lives as children in a state of utter physical and psychological dependency on a larger figure or figures. *(gods; God)*
4. We die. We know we will die, but we cannot imagine our own non-existence. We know that this identity must continue somewhere, in some form. *(afterlife; reincarnation)*
5. We get sick in mind or body. We need to know the cause of these conditions, and to seek help and healing. *(exorcism; possession)*

6. We bleed. We know that our continuing identity is dependent on the survival of crucial parts of this organism, which we identify with the basic forces of life.
7. We dream. We know that there are other states of consciousness and reality other than the everyday world. *(otherworld; dreamtime)*
8. We experience other altered states of consciousness. This might arise from fever, trance, drunkenness, or extreme stimulation. *(trance; vision)*
9. We tell stories. We use narrative to make sense of the world around us *(myth-making)*
10. We project our own realities. We assume that other beings and things must operate and think and act in ways comprehensible to us. *(anthropomorphism; animism)*
11. We believe in rational agency. We believe that things that happen to us occur through the action of others, conscious or otherwise. *(witchcraft)*
12. We think magically and analogically. *(magic)*
13. We believe in rational order. There is a proper order of things, which if disturbed must be set right. We believe in reciprocity. *(sacrifice)*
14. We eat. We survive by eating other things that have been living. The death of others gives us life. This exchange demands reciprocity and exchange.
15. We reproduce. Survival of our families or communities depends on dealing with the powerful forces of sexuality, in which we transmit the life force no less than life itself. *(fertility)*.
16. We feel awe. We recognize the presence of the special, dreadful and holy, qualities that are located in particular persons, events, and especially places. *(numinous; holiness)*

Reading this, I think back to a somewhat similar list I offered not long back, of the residual ideas and practices that remain when formal religion disappears. Those basic themes persist – what I called "default religious practice."

Living with the Gods

November 3, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

This is by way of a rave recommendation. If you have any taste for podcasts, or radio, there is a spectacular new series available on the history and symbolism of religion. Free!

Some years ago, Neil MacGregor did a wildly successful series called A History of the World in 100 Objects. (I had the pleasure of being the expert commentator on one of these objects). The list of MacGregor's original 100 objects that appears on the Wikipedia page I linked to here is a fascinating compilation in its own right. Some of the choices were inspired. A single medieval Korean roof tile supplied the basis for a detailed and informative discussion of kingdoms and urban civilization in Korea at that time, together with its technology.

That show in turn sparked a range of imitators and knockoffs. The Smithsonian offers 101 Objects That Made America, there is A History of New York in 101 Objects, and Lord knows, any number of others as well. MacGregor himself went on to make an excellent similar series about the history of Germany, drawing from landscapes and art as well as "objects" per se. By the end of the series,

you had a knowledge of German history that was really quite detailed, and all absorbed in an easy and attractive way. If you follow the link there, you can download all those programs as well.

MacGregor now has a follow-up called Living with the Gods, on BBC, and you can access the episodes here:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09c1mhy/episodes/downloads

This is like the 100 Objects series, but with a much more specific focus on religion and spirituality. There will be thirty programs in all.

Each episode takes a theme in the history of religious thought, usually focused on one or two objects or events. Some themes so far include Living with the Dead, Water of Life and Death, Here Comes the Sun, Fire and State, and so on. Each also draws on a range of academics and experts. To quote a news report, "Neil MacGregor traces '40,000 years of believing and belonging.' The 30-part programme, broadcast daily over six weeks, will feature objects drawn from the British Museum archive to explore how religion has shaped society."

There's also a related podcast in which MacGregor talks about the series.

I have a special interest in all this, as I have blogged repeatedly on the subject of the common themes and foundations of religion, and of all religions, what I call the building blocks. MacGregor takes these basic themes (fire, water, etc) and takes them across faiths. He is scrupulously fair to all the religions and traditions he discusses

Just as an intellectual exercise, it would be interesting to do a series like that specifically on Christianity, but with the caveat that there should be a strict quota on the number of texts allowed, rather than material objects. You could discuss objects like an early papyrus gospel fragment, but with a focus on the object and the world that created it, rather than the particular words on the papyrus. That would have the advantage of making people think about Christian history less as a sequence of authors and books, rather than religious practices. Hmm, there's a challenge…

Having grown up with talk radio, I find such audio programs and podcasts a very attractive means of learning. I suspect, though, that there is probably no way you could get a college class to sit and listen to such non-visual things.

Teaching Christian History: The Missing 75 Percent

February 19, 2021 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Through the years, I have often taught courses on Christian history, and I have always tried to give fair coverage to different churches and denominations, and to different parts of the world. Have I succeeded in that? Probably not, despite sincere efforts. But a quick numerical exercise suggests just how far I fell, and fall, short. And I suspect I am not the only one.

I am presently working on a particular Bible text, namely Psalm 91, and how it was read in different eras and societies. But the more I explore the story, the more aware I am that I am often offering a Protestant reading that is very unrepresentative of the larger world. Historically, Protestants know one version, which is derived from the Hebrew, and they called it Psalm 91. Until quite recent times, Catholics have used the Vulgate Latin, which differs substantially – even fundamentally – on many points of word choice and meaning in that psalm. Catholics even called it something different, counting it as Psalm 90, not 91. The same was true of Orthodox Christians, who relied on the Septuagint Greek, and translations from that. Protestants were significantly more likely than Catholics actually to have read their Bibles personally, but all Christians had heard the texts in their churches, and encountered them through sermons or liturgy.

In itself, that example is trivial – who cares if it's 90 or 91? – but it points to a much larger issue. When we talk about Christian history, or how "Christians" thought about something, including the Bible, which particular lot of Christians are we talking about? What are the numbers?

When we tell the story of modern Christianity – say, post-1500 or so – we naturally pay great attention to the history of the Reformation, and then to the subsequent history of Protestant nations and cultures. Partly, that is because so many of the historians were based in Germany, Britain, the US, and other great Protestant-dominated nations, and that decides what books and resources are available. But of course Catholics remained very strong as a component of the Christian world, and their presence grew substantially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the expansion of Catholic empires overseas.

A reasonable estimate suggests that in 1900, there were some 560 million Christians around the world, accepting broad and nominal definitions for "Christian." Protestants and Anglicans combined represented around a quarter of the world's Christian population, Catholics a half, and Orthodox just over twenty percent. Add a few percent for miscellaneous Oriental "Others." In the case of the present psalm, then, some three quarters of the world's Christians knew it in versions very different form that familiar Protestant translation.

That's in 1900. But take that picture back a bit in time to a point when our figures are still more shadowy. What we can say is that the 1900 statistics I mentioned above are measuring a world built by the Industrial Revolution, after the explosive growth of populations that had transformed mainly Protestant nations like Britain, Germany, and the US. Each of these societies had grown enormously in absolute terms over the previous century, but also in their relative position in a demographic league table. As late as 1800, the Protestant English were painfully aware how badly they were outnumbered by the Catholic French, a situation that changed utterly during the nineteenth century.

So what would the Protestant share of the world's Christian population have been in 1700 or 1750, say? Fifteen percent? Less? Certainly well below a quarter.

Think through the implications of that. So when I teach a Christian history course, I suppose I should ideally ensure that at least half the attention always goes to Catholics, and that Protestants and Orthodox should be jogging together for a distant second place. And when we talk about the history of the Bible in the Early Modern period, it does help to remember that the dominant translation throughout that era in terms of potential consumers was always the Vulgate, as well as church-approved translations of it like the Douay-Rheims, which relied so heavily on those Latin

words and structures. That actually remained true well into the twentieth century. Not until *1943* did a Papal Encyclical allow vernacular Bible translations that were not based directly on the Vulgate. I say again, that's 1943.

Here is another example. If we teach about Medieval Christianity, then we would certainly cover topics like monasticism, religious orders, and celibacy. But viewed globally, all those themes were quite as central to the Christian experience in 1750 (or 1850) as they had been in 1350, and they still affected a very large share of the Christian world. There were still a great many monks, nuns, and friars, and clerical celibacy was a commonplace reality, although Catholics and Orthodox practiced it differently.

If we tell the story of Christian missions in Africa and Asia and start only with Protestant ventures in India, we are missing the vast Catholic activity through the previous two centuries. Ask the Jesuits about what they were up to between 1550 and 1750 or so: been there, evangelized that.

If you are teaching a course on "modern Christianity," say over the last 500 years or so, you pretty much have to give a lot of attention to the Virgin Mary and the devotions she has attracted, with all the reputed visions and miracles. Actually, that is true of any period of Christian history, including the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Is that a provocative comment? It certainly demands a "(Discuss)" following it. Looking at Global South churches today, maybe the great age of Marian devotion is yet to come.

In a United States where the three largest states include Texas, California, and Florida, will the nation's substantial and growing Latin presence reshape how we narrate the nation's Christian foundations? By 2050, a quarter of Americans will claim Latin roots. Will they be curious about just where names like San Francisco and Los Angeles actually come from? Some might think back to the memorable year of 1776, and the foundation of *Misión San Francisco de Asís*. (Yes, I know, Mark Noll does a terrific job on covering North America's various faith traditions, but he is Mark Noll, and cannot be cloned).

Feasibly, will I be offering such fully balanced teaching? Probably not, not least because the available books on Orthodoxy are so much harder to come by. But those numbers do provide a kind of reality check. Or if we are going to teach the history of European Protestants alone, (or worse, even just English-speaking Protestants), let's not claim that we are teaching a real history of Christianity. There's such a thing as truth in advertising.