A Response to Stephen L. Young, “Let’s Take the Text Seriously”: the Protectionist Doxa in Mainstream New Testament Studies

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Abstract

This response to Stephen Young’s excellent paper vindicates his general argument against protectionism, connects his analyses to some aspects of contemporary Qur’anic and Early Islamic studies, and highlights some of the problems with the distinction between dominant protectionism and dominated protectionism.

Keywords


I have read Stephen Young’s insightful and thought-provoking paper with the highest interest, and I thank the editors of Method and Theory in the Study of Religion for giving me the opportunity to write a response. Readers fond of polemics and verbal contests, however, will be disappointed, since I agree with almost everything Young has written and do not have much to add to his arguments. I see my task, therefore, as highlighting some particularly salient points in his essay and as pointing out the few places where I would phrase his arguments and analyses in a slightly different way. I will also briefly connect Young’s reflections to my main field of study (Qur’anic and Early Islamic studies), where similar problems are even more widespread (about this phenomenon, see Hughes 2012).

Let us begin with Young’s main thesis, namely the presence of a protectionist doxa in NT studies. It is certainly no news that research in NT studies can
be distorted by confessional or theological prejudices (see, e.g. Bermejo Rubio 2014: 1-8, especially p. 5). I do not feel competent to judge how much exactly the protectionist *doxa* is currently prevalent in the field (is it, for example, similar in the English-speaking academic world and in Continental Europe; are there subfields inside NT studies where protectionism is clearly more widespread?), but the examples discussed in Young's essay are telling, and show that apologetic tendencies are still strong (I would not see some of them as the outcome of deliberate apologetic agendas, but rather as an example of the well-known phenomenon of academic inertia, where scholars continue to use uncritically concepts or distinctions which are strongly marked by their confessional origins).

Young's characterization (the failure to distinguish between descriptive reduction and explanatory reduction, which is in turn rejected by making insider or emic claims normative for scholarly analysis) and critique of protectionism is particularly convincing. There is indeed a lot to tell about rhetorical slogans like “taking the text seriously” or “reading it sympathetically.” Here, protectionist authors use a kind of linguistic sleight of hand, by equating “taking the text seriously,” on the one hand, and “reading it sympathetically,” or “taking the author on his/her own terms,” on the other. Since no historian or exegete would deny that we should take or read a text seriously, the intended conclusion is that we should read it sympathetically and “not make it tell something it does not tell.”

This argument appears confused. “To tell” is ambiguous enough to refer to several different things—what a text does explicitly say, what it (willfully or not) implies but does not assert, and what is untold (for various reasons) but is presupposed, and should therefore be taken into account in the interpretation. Besides, this argument confuses what a text claims to be doing and what it really does (and such a confusion is typically protectionist). With this kind of approach, taking a text of propaganda for what it is becomes virtually impossible. I feel a little bit ashamed in conforming to the Godwin’s law after only a few paragraphs, but if, for example, Victor Klemperer had based his analysis of *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (the language of the Nazi propaganda and regime, which twisted and subverted the German language) on the principle of “reading it sympathetically,” then he would not have read it seriously, nor fairly (Klemperer 1947). My point is obviously not to equate Nazi literature with the texts usually discussed in religious studies, but simply to highlight the absurd logical consequences of the claim associating “taking the text seriously” and “reading it sympathetically.” Doing good scholarship has to do with integrity, intellectual honestly, open-mindedness, knowledge of the evidence and its limits, critical spirit, mastery of the disciplinary tools, and so on, and this is
something else than the presence or absence of sympathy in the mind of the scholar, something which is, in a way, absolutely irrelevant to this issue. Many protectionist arguments are, in fact, *ad hominem* arguments in disguise, criti-
cizing the supposed intentions of the scholars more than their reasons and evidence, whereas scrutiny should focus on reasons and evidence, which should ideally be discussed and assessed for what they are, regardless the personal inclinations of the author or the reader.

We might here restate Lincoln's theses on method, especially *Thesis 4*: “The same and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act ought to be posed of religious discourse” (Lincoln 1996: 225). Moreover, the point is not only to ask the same questions but also to answer them with the same meth-
ods, the same criteria, and the same requirements, as those used for any other kind of question, without any sort of “exceptionalism” (another typical protectionist move). To paraphrase a judicious formula by Chase Robinson, the his-
tory and the texts made by people from any religion are comparable to those made by people from another one, or with no religious bent at all, and the historian (*qua* historian) should treat them as such. In this regard, to refer to one example discussed in the paper, insulating Paul's rhetoric from the wider ethnic sensitivities and ideologies of the Ancient Mediterranean world is in
deed hardly warranted. Similar insulating moves were widespread in Qur'anic
studies, but it has now become commonplace to speak of the Qur'ān as a text from Late Antiquity (Neuwirth 2010), with a Biblical subtext (Reynolds 2010). The Qur'ān is now studied as a text in close dialogue with Late Antique living
Jewish and Christian traditions: this is a huge step forward from the time when,
in Qur'anic studies, pre-Islamic Arabia was considered as a cultural void, and historians relied mainly on the classical Muslim commentaries in their exegesis of the Qur'ān (as if NT scholars wrote a historical commentary on the Gospel of
Matthew using as their main and even only evidence the writings of Origen).
However, for example in the way some questions are still not asked, or very seldom (e.g., the profile of the author(s) of the Qur'ān, its possible multiple

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1 And at times not in disguise at all: see Jeremias referring to Reimarus’ *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger* as a “hate-filled pamphlet” (Bermejo Rubio 2014: 5).

2 See (again) Lincoln, *Thesis 3*: “to practice history of religion in a fashion consistent with the discipline's claim of title is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human and material dimensions of those discourses, practices and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.”

3 Namely: the study of early Islam should be “committed to the idea that the history made by Muslims is comparable to that made by non-Muslims” (Robinson 2005: 103).

4 There is a good rule of thumb here, which I systematically recall to my students: “when I read your essays, I should have absolutely no clue which could make me guess what is your religious affiliation, if you have one.”
authorship, the circulation of the knowledge of the texts used in the composition of the text, and so on), there is still a deep protectionism in the field of Qur’anic studies (Dye 2019). Such a protectionism can be noticed, for example, in the vocabulary used in mainstream Qur’anic studies. Indeed, speaking, as do many scholars, of the “collection of the Qurʾān” (translating Arabic jamʿ al-Qurʾān) is a resolute protectionist move. It is an unjustified concession to the (Sunni) Muslim dogma, which supposes that the work which led to the Qurʾanic codex was nothing more than the gathering of preexistent texts, the scribes simply putting the pieces of the jigsaw in the right order: to give an element of comparison, it is as if scholars of the Gospels used Papias’ testimony as the main evidence for discussing the genesis of the Gospels, instead of looking at internal evidence in the texts of the Gospels themselves (see Dye 2019: 754-55). A similar problem arises when historians refer to the revelation of a surah in Mecca or Medina. Maybe it is only a way of speaking, but this is questionable, since (among other problems) it occults everything which can amount to a process of composition. When you uncritically describe things in a way which makes unnatural, and even unconceivable, to ask such basic questions, you are engaged in protectionism (here the phenomena mentioned in Lincoln 1996, Thesis 6, are certainly at stake). I confess I generally contrast favorably Biblical and NT studies with Qurʾanic studies, considering that the formers are far less protectionist than the latter. I still think this contrast makes sense, since the conservative approach of a scholar like Heinrich Ewald (1803-1875) has, through the influence of his pupil Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930), remained central in Qurʾanic studies (see Dye 2019, especially p. 748-760), whereas it has been much more marginalized in Biblical and NT studies. However, Young’s paper shows that things are not so clear-cut.

Discussing some postcolonial and feminist approaches, Young introduces a distinction between dominant protectionism and dominated protectionism. I understand his concern about a strategy which might use the consideration for dominated groups, and therefore the sympathy for the discourse of dominated protectionism, as a tool for allowing other forms of protectionism. In this regard, it certainly makes sense to insist on the differences between these two kinds of protectionism (the issue of the underrepresentation of certain categories of people in the academic world might also be at stake here). I also agree about the considerable relevance of approaches which “disrupt traditionally dominant voices or larger apparatuses of domination,” and about the necessity not to mistake a fraction of a group (generally

5 My remarks pertain to Qurʾanic studies in the Western world. On protectionism and the academic study of the Qurʾān in the Islamic world, see Daneshgar 2019.
the dominant one) for the whole group (see about this, once again, Lincoln 1996, Thesis 8).

There are, however, at least two problems here. First, the rhetoric of dominants/dominated could be appropriated by any kind of group—for example, the conservative Evangelical scholars would certainly describe themselves as a dominated group, unduly marginalized in the academic institution and even the whole society, and so could use this kind of rhetoric for underpinning their own protectionism. Second, the way the disruption of—real or supposed—traditionally dominant voices is done is far from being always satisfactory, as Young, following Ortner (2006: 47-53), remarks. When it amounts to a bare rhetoric of suspicion, which invalidates any kind of approach which appears related, one way or the other, to the discourse of the dominant classes (colonialist, male, white, etc.), it simply throws the baby with the bathwater, and is second to none in ad hominem arguments and trials of intent.6 In short, this kind of dominated protectionism appears as a questionable answer to a real problem. Incidentally, in the field of Islamic studies, the postcolonial rhetoric of dominants/dominated has not brought more critical spirit, but rather a more insular, phenomenological, emic and apologetical approach—in other words, more protectionism (Hughes 2012).

The problem is therefore less to distinguish two kinds of protectionism (any kind of protectionism being, to my mind, highly questionable) than to address, in a resolute non-protectionist way, the legitimate concerns which give rise to dominated protectionism.7 We should therefore warmly thank Stephen Young for offering a forceful defense of a non-protectionist approach in religious studies.

6 The way Chaudhry 2017 describes “White Supremacist Islamic Studies” is a very good sample of this kind of approach, and I had expected that Chaudhry’s paper would have been the subject of a deeper criticism—however, such a task falls arguably outside Young’s main field of specialization, and also outside the scope of my own response.

7 To quote Suzanne Marchand (2009: xx): “We do not need more uncritical histories of oriental scholarship (…) that deny that orientalism had a politics [GD: I would rather say it had, and has, several]. We need, instead, a synthetic and critical history, one that assesses oriental scholarship’s contributions to imperialism, racism, and modern anti-Semitism, but one that also shows how modern orientalism has furnished at least some of the tools necessary for constructing the post-imperialist worldviews we cultivate today. That is what this book seeks to offer. It is a critical history of the practice of oriental scholarship, one that treats the politics of the field, but does so without presuming that those politics were primordially and perpetually defined by imperialist relationships.”
References


