WSJ | OPINION

# Everyone's a Critic, and It's Time to Read the Books

## A respect for 'primary' sources would enable well-informed citizens to counter 'idle talk.'

*By Allen Porter - April 29, 2022*


Would you be surprised to learn that Jesus was really a cross-dressing, gender-indeterminate "drag king"? If so, you obviously don't know the variant of critical theory called "queer theory" as expounded by Tat-siong Benny Liew, a religious-studies professor at the College of the Holy Cross (see following article) in Worcester, Mass., who gave this subversive reading of the Gospels in an essay published in a collection of biblical criticism.

It is a cliché among academics that the humanities are in crisis. According to Harvard historian James Hankins, part of the problem is the dominance of "critical" reading over "primary" reading. Primary reading takes a text at face value and simply tries to understand what the author intended to say. Critical reading assumes an author's statements – in the Bible or anything else – can never be taken at face value. Instead, they must be "seen through" to expose the text's real meaning, which is determined in accord with this or that fashionable theory.

Mr. Hankins says primary reading "must be recovered" for higher education in the humanities to be effective. I would go further. Primary reading isn't important only for the humanities, or even for education more generally. The restoration of primary reading could be a crucial weapon in combating the "idle talk" that plagues American society.

Idle talk was philosopher Martin Heidegger's term for inauthentic discourse. It involves adopting and circulating others' opinions about something without ever personally engaging that thing for yourself, whatever

that entails: researching a topic, thinking through an idea, or reading a book. People engaged in idle talk speak in accord with expectations for their particular identity or role, such as parent or lawyer, progressive or Christian. They hold and express the opinions a person in their role is expected to hold. This is an easy way to live: To know what you should do, think, say and feel, you simply need to know the social expectations for your role.

Idle talk can be harmless. Each year my mother forms strong opinions about which films should win Academy Awards without seeing any of them, after reading articles by critics she favors. But idle talk can also be dangerous, especially in the context of a democratic state, which requires a well-informed citizenry.

Consider journalism. The norm nowadays is for one reporter to break a story, followed by dozens or hundreds of journalists recycling that content. They may add a little spin of their own but rarely look into the issue for themselves – even when this would require but a few clicks and a couple of minutes to read a judicial verdict or legislative text. Some journalists scroll Twitter to find the story of the day and rewrite it in their own words.

In political discourse, especially partisan political discourse, other kinds of idle talk tend to compound. An academic may inauthentically produce a politicized paper on some hot topic like transgenderism, a journalist adapts it into popular form while burnishing its patina of factual objectivity, and other journalists recycle the story. Then an inauthentic reader takes his talking points from one of those news articles – or even just its headline – which he circulates in conversations and on social media.

There are millions of people who have formed what they think are the correct opinions about the Covington kids, Kyle Rittenhouse or so many other matters, without ever looking at the evidence. Consider the hundreds of articles written about so-called anti-critical-race-theory legislation or the "Don't Say Gay" bill by journalists who never bothered to read the legislation they were writing about.

The Covid pandemic highlighted the problem, from ostracization for those daring to discuss the trade-offs of lockdowns to the sacralization of masks as a political identity marker completely disconnected from medical or scientific justification. Not to mention the dogmatic discourse that arose over "the science" and the social imperative to "follow" it.

Social media has contributed to the proliferation of idle talk. Authentic discourse requires time, effort and good-faith engagement, but social media tends to encourage the opposite. As journalists opine on every topic, however trivial or traditionally unnewsworthy, the all-knowing chorus of global gossip becomes a roaring mob. Social media amplifies this voice, pushing it into user feeds 24/7. We hear about everything, and we can't hear about anything without also being told what opinion we should have about it – from legislation in Florida to the latest streaming series, from war in Ukraine to one celebrity slapping another on a stage in California. Opinions before facts; know what to think about something before actually looking into it for yourself. And really, why even bother with that?

Primary reading isn't only something the humanities need. Our entire culture needs its value to be recognized and restored.

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The Fenwick Review

Catholicism, Campus Culture

# New Ways in Theology at Holy Cross

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A little over ten years ago, on the occasion of their 50th Reunion, alumni of the College endowed the Class of 1956 Chair of New Testament Studies, a distinguished professorship associated with the Religious Studies department (Notes 1). In the autumn of 2013, the College appointed professor Tat-Siong Benny Liew to fill this position. Professor Tat-siong Benny Liew received bachelor's and master's degrees from Olivet Nazarene University and completed his doctorate at Vanderbilt University (Notes 2). Prior to his appointment at Holy Cross, Professor Liew had been Professor of New Testament at the Pacific School of Theology, and before that taught at Chicago Theological Seminary. According to the Department of Religious Studies webpage, his fields of specialty include "synoptic gospels, gospel of John, cultural and racial interpretations and receptions of the Bible, apocalypticism, and Asian American history and literature" (Notes 3).

Professor Liew's numerous publications reveal an unconventional approach to gender, sexuality, and race in the biblical texts. The 2004 article "Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13," provides a representative example. Professor Liew and his co-author, Theodore Jennings, argue that Matthew 8:5-13, the story of the centurion who goes to Jesus to ask for healing for his servant, ought to be interpreted in terms of a sexual relationship. Matthew's account, runs the argument, does not concern a centurion and his servant, but a centurion and his lover/slave. "The centurion's rhetoric about not being 'worthy' of a house visit by Jesus (8:8) may be the centurion's way of avoiding an anticipated 'usurpation' of his current boylove on the part of his new patron [Jesus]," they assert. Furthermore, "The way Matthew's Jesus seems to affirm the centurion's pederastic relationship with his παῖς, we contend, may also be consistent with Matthew's affirmation of many sexual dissidents in her Gospel" (Notes 4).

In 2009, Professor Liew edited the volume *They Were All Together in One Place?: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism.* A copy of the volume is displayed in a case in the Religious Studies Department. Professor Liew's contributions give shape to this volume: along with serving as the primary editor, he wrote the introduction to the volume and contributed an essay. As such, the volume as a whole sheds particular light on Professor Liew's interpretations of the biblical texts.

> Professor Liew's contribution to this volume, a chapter entitled "Queering Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John's Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds," demonstrates the centrality of sex and gender to his way of thinking about the New Testament. In the chapter, Professor Liew explains that he believes Christ could be considered a "drag king" or cross-dresser. "If one follows the trajectory of the Wisdom/Word or Sophia/Jesus (con)figuration, what we have in John's Jesus is not only a "king of Israel" (1:49; 12:13-15) or "king of the *Ioudaioi*" (18:33, 39; 19:3, 14-15, 19-22), but also a *drag* king (6:15; 18:37; 19:12)," he claims (Notes 5). He later argues that "[Christ] ends up appearing as a drag-kingly bride in his passion" (Notes 6).

Professor Liew continues:

> In addition, we find Jesus disrobing and rerobing in the episode that marks Jesus' focus on the disciples with the coming of his 'hour' (13:3-5, 12). This disrobing, as [Colleen] Conway points out, does not disclose anything about Jesus' anatomy. Instead, it describes Jesus washing his disciples' feet. As more than one commentator has pointed out, foot-washing was generally only done by Jewish women or non-Jewish slaves. 12 John is clear that Jesus is an *Ioudaios* (4:9, 22; 18:33-35; 19:40); what John is less clear about is whether Jesus is a biological male. Like a literary striptease, this episode is suggestive, even seductive; it shows and withholds at the same time (Notes 7).

Professor Liew asserts that Jesus's "excessive" and "deceptive" speech would be considered "feminine" in the culture of the time (Notes 8). In defense of this claim, he states that in Greco-Roman culture:

> Women pollute since their moist and soft nature is also more susceptible to the assaults of wanton desires, erotic or otherwise. In short, women are wet and (thus) wild. I am suggesting that John's constant references to Jesus wanting water (4:7; 19:28), giving water (6:35), and leaking water (19:34) speak to Jesus' gender indeterminacy and hence his cross-dressing and other queer desires… (Notes 9).

He clarifies that he is not suggesting that Christ is actually a woman, but that he is neither male nor female. "I want to suggest that John's crossdressing Jesus shows that a so-called 'core' is but a(n significant) effect of bodily acts," he writes (Notes 10).

Professor Liew's understanding of Jesus in "Queering Desires" suggests an unusual interpretation of the Holy Trinity:

> Suffice it to say that not only does this exchange of desires place the Father's identity in question but also that the Father-Son dyad in John is always already interrupted by and dependent on the participation of a third party. One may, as a result, turn around Jesus' well-known statement in John, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6c): Jesus himself needs others to cum with the Father. Jesus' statement that "I in them [his followers] and you [the Father] in me" turns out to be quite a description. What we find in John is a Jesus who longs to be "had" by the Father…Things do not get less queer as one gets to the other parts of John's Gospel. It is noticeable that throughout the Gospel Jesus and his Father form a "mutual glorification society" (5:41; 8:50, 54; 12:28-29; 13:32; 17:1, 4-5). This constant elevation or stroking is nothing less than an exciting of the penis, or better yet, phallus. Its consistency is then explainable, since "we all know that after … an orgasmic dissemination or circulation, the phallus, like most penises, becomes limp" (Sifuentes-Jáuregui 2002, 159). Fast forwarding to the passion narratives, Conway observes that John's Jesus is a "quintessential man" because he "reveals no weakening to the passions that might undercut his manly deportment" (2003a, 175). If this is so, there is also something quintessentially queer here. During the passion, Jesus is not only beaten (18:22-23; 19:3) and flogged (19:1); his body is also nailed and his side pierced (19:18, 23a, 34, 37; 20:24-28). Oddly, John defines Jesus' masculinity with a body that is being opened to penetration. 24 Even more oddly, Jesus' ability to face his "hour" is repeatedly associated with his acknowledging of and communing with his Father (12:27-28; 14:12, 28; 16:10, 17, 28; 17:1-25; 18:11), who is, as Jesus explicitly states, "with me" (16:32) throughout this process, which Jesus also describes as one of giving birth (16:21-22). What I am suggesting is that, when Jesus' body is being penetrated, his thoughts are on his Father. He is, in other words, imagining his passion experience as a (masochistic?) sexual relation with his own Father (Notes 11).

Professor Liew's editorship of the volume reflects the same method of interpretation. In the introduction to *They Were All Together in One Place?,* he and his fellow editors explain the idea of "minority criticism," admitting that the "dominant criticism" will at times "outright dismiss" minority criticism. One of the stated goals here is "relativizing" the "dominant criticism" which exists. Other chapters in the volume include such titles as "'That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!': The Interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther" and "Incarnate Words: Images of God and Reading Practices."

Readers will note that *They Were All Together in One Place?* and "Mistaken Identities but Model Faith" were published in 2009 and 2004, respectively. Professor Liew's more recent works reflect similar lines of thought. For instance, the 2016 essay, "The Gospel of Bare Life," describes obedience to God as "troubling" and "infantilizing." Professor Liew writes, "If John's Jesus, as well as those who follow John's Jesus, are supposed to be fully subjected to the will of the Father to the point of death (6:35-64; 10:1-18; 15:1-16:4; 21:15-19), then are we not back to a scenario in which a Caesar-like head sits comfortably in a choice seat and watches bare life performing death for his purposes and his enjoyment?" (Notes 12).

Professor Liew is often responsible for teaching "New Testament," the College's primary New Testament class. Its course description lists three texts: The HarperCollins Study Bible; *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings,* by Bart Ehrman; and *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle,* by Harvard Divinity School professor Karen King. In addition to this class, Professor Liew has also taught "Sex, Money, Power, and Sacred Texts" and "Apocalyptic Then and Now," according to the College's student registration website.

Professor Liew's unconventional readings of Scripture has brought a new theological perspective to Holy Cross. The position and prestige which accompany an endowed chair in Religious Studies testify to the esteem in which his work is held by the College's administration and academic community. He continues to be held up as an example and a bold successor to the learned and discerning tradition of our Catholic and Jesuit College of the Holy Cross.

## Notes

1. https://www.holycross.edu/departments/publicaffairs/hcm/2009_01Winter.pdf (page 12)
2. https://web.archive.org/web/20130623015854/https://psr.edu/tat-siong-benny-liew-0
3. https://news.holycross.edu/blog/2013/10/01/holy-cross-hires-13-new-faculty-members-for-2013-14-academic-year/ and https://www.holycross.edu/academics/programs/religious-studies/faculty/tat-siong-benny-liew
4. Theodore Jennings and Tat-siong Benny Liew, "Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading the Centurion, the Chap, and the Christ in Matthew 8:5-13," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 3 (2004): 491.
5. Tat-siong Benny Liew, "Queering Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John's Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds," in *They Were All Together in One Place: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 253-254.
6. Ibid., 257.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 259-260.
9. Ibid., 278.
10. Ibid., 260.
11. Ibid., 265-266.
12. Tat-siong Benny Liew, "The Gospel of Bare Life," in *Psychoanalytic Mediations Between Marxist and Postcolonial Readings of the Bible*, ed. Tat-siong Benny Liew and Erin Runions (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 160-161.

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