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“JESUS, MY HOMEBOY”

Teaching Bruce Barton’s Jesus in Twenty-First Century Texas

ERIN A. SMITH

For many years, I have been teaching a lower-level, core curriculum humanities course called “American Studies for the Twenty-First Century” at the University of Texas at Dallas. I have three goals for the course: 1) to teach students how to be critical readers of American literary, historical, and visual texts; 2) to introduce students to the most exciting “classic” and recent scholarship in American Studies; and 3) to prepare students to be good citizens. I make no apologies for how old fashioned and naïve goal number three sounds. The course is organized thematically to explore issues and questions in five major areas: 1) gender and sexuality; 2) religion/politics/commerce; 3) race and ethnicity; 4) class, labor, and consumption; and 5) globalization. Each section is anchored by one or two major literary texts with a number of secondary readings to place the primary texts in their historical context. More contemporary readings invite students to think about how these themes continue to structure American social and political life. Students respond to these readings through both formal and informal writing assignments. My hope is to equip students with a “usable past,” a history of the debates that still shape contemporary society and politics, so that they can be better informed, more thoughtful citizens.

The section “religion/politics/commerce” is anchored by Bruce Barton’s best-selling life of Jesus, *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925). I chose this text, because it raises questions about what religion scholar Leigh Eric Schmidt calls “the interplay of commerce, Christianity, and consumption” (13), an interplay as relevant today as it was in Barton’s era. Does God want us to be prosperous? Does He reward good people with wealth (or punish bad/lazy ones with poverty)? What’s the relationship between Christianity and profit-seeking? Is “Christian business” an oxymoron? Are faith and consumerism opposed? What if buyers are purchasing Christian commodities? Is consumerism itself a religion, and—if so—in what ways? Is there Biblical warrant for certain kinds of social and economic policies? Should it matter?

Barton thought that running a business could be a Christian calling, and he cast Jesus as a role model for business executives and managers. One controversy over the book in the 1920s was whether Barton sanctified business (by raising it to a form of Christian service) or merely used Christianity to justify corporate profit seeking. Although scads of businessmen wrote to Barton to thank him for this Jesus they could relate to, one critic, for example, called Barton’s transformation of Jesus into a super salesman yet another

metaphoric crucifixion (see Smith 149). *The Man Nobody Knows* is historically distant enough to escape bitter, entrenched contemporary political positions, but close enough to invite us to think in new ways about ourselves in relation to religious faith, business, and politics.

Barton was the president of New York advertising agency Batton, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn and a long-time activist in the Republican party, who went on to represent the “silk stocking” district of Manhattan in Congress from 1937–40. His day job profoundly shaped his account of Jesus’ life. Barton’s Jesus is manly, charming, attractive, and he is “the founder of modern business” (Barton, 2000, 75). Barton offers readers a new and improved Jesus, one fully engaged with the modern consumer marketplace (surely He would be appearing in magazines and newspapers!) and one who was a master communicator (Jesus’ parables are his “advertisements”). Barton’s book was controversial, in part, because he made no mention of Jesus’ divinity, writing about Him as if he were Abraham Lincoln or some other great man. Barton’s Jesus is profoundly *human*, a man just like many of Barton’s readers, and His example could/should inspire them to live lives of Christian service.

We begin this section of the course with readings intended to place Barton in his historical context. Gail Bederman’s “‘The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough’: The Men and Religion Forward Movement and the Masculinization of Middle-Class Protestantism” explains why the preponderance of women in the pews (two-thirds) came to be seen by many as a “crisis” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although the ratio had been unchanged since the colonial period. This concern fostered attempts to both “masculinize” Christianity and find those missing men and bring them back to church as part of the 1911–1912 Men and Religion Forward Movement. In Bederman’s telling, this had everything to do with economic change. White, middle-class men were no longer working in family businesses as their own bosses. Instead, as office workers, they were part of vast, faceless bureaucracies that accorded them little autonomy. The rise of the consumer economy had marginalized the production work that was the backbone of the nineteenth-century economy and the self-made men who came with it. Students engage Warren Susman’s idea that economies require certain modal types of subjects—hard-working, thrifty men for a producer society of scarcity and self-indulgent consumers for a consumer capitalist society of abundance. Susman argues that a transition from (hard-working, thrifty) “character” to (self-indulgent) “personality” occurred in the late nineteenth century. Students come to see Barton’s role in this transition, giving old-fashioned, self-denying Jesus a makeover to create a new, improved Jesus better fitted to modern consumer society.

The connections between Barton’s work in advertising and his new version of Jesus become clearer when the class reads a chapter from Roland Marchand’s *Advertising the American Dream* about how 1920s ad men imagined themselves and the consumers they appealed to. Like a staggering

number of advertising men of this generation, Barton was the son of a minister, and (like them) he considered himself not only a hard-headed businessman charged with increasing sales for his clients, but also as an evangelist for a modern, consumerist lifestyle. He was in the business of education and uplift, refining consumers' tastes and teaching them how to purchase and display products to insure personal and professional success.

I have taught Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* as part of this course three times. In each, I had the same goals: 1) to enable students to see the book as participating in cultural and intellectual debates of the 1920s; and 2) to encourage students to see how these same questions about religion and commerce echo into the present day. Nonetheless, these classes were quite different, because students brought different experiences, knowledge, and expectations to the reading and discussion. What follows is an account of how I taught the same material to three different classes, attempting to respond to their experiences and social locations in ways that challenged them to think better about religion, politics, and consumerism.

Teaching *The Man Nobody Knows* made me anxious. I had gotten some good help from a panel/roundtable on teaching religion in the American Studies classroom sponsored by the Religion and American Culture caucus of the American Studies Association. As a consequence, I had prepared students by distinguishing between matters of personal belief/commitment and discussing religion in sociological, anthropological, or historical ways. In addition, I had reminded them that it was possible to show respect for one another while expressing honest disagreement with one another's ideas. However, Texas is a profoundly—and sometimes narrowly—religious place (When I signed the lease on my first Texas apartment, the office staff told me where the nearest grocery stores and dry cleaners were, but also asked me which Baptist church I would be attending). Would lower-level non-humanities majors be capable of talking about religion in scholarly ways? What kind of trouble might I land in teaching a book that represents Jesus as “the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem” and “the founder of modern business”? UT-Dallas is what my students call a “brown place,” with many children of immigrants from Asia, India, the Middle East, and Latin America. No doubt Muslim and Hindu students from immigrant families would approach the text quite differently than those students who grew up in Christian churches and felt this book was “theirs.” Many students are trained out of thinking in critical ways about religion or religious texts. How would students respond to Barton's interest in Jesus as human and his neglect of Jesus as divine? Might I get some proselytizing in class?

The first time I taught *The Man Nobody Knows*—to a small honors section—I was astonished. Nobody in the room had any investment in Jesus whatsoever. Nobody. A few Muslim students reported themselves delighted to have learned so much about Jesus. I had to act the part of historian of the New Testament, and warn them about Barton's historical and theological inaccuracies that made the book controversial in its own time. For example, one critic claimed Barton wrote about ancient Palestine as

though it were 1920s Ohio or New England (he does). The rest of the students had secular upbringings, but because they were good students, they were willing to imagine themselves as devout 1920s Christians who were encountering a best-selling life of Jesus that said nothing at all about Jesus' divinity and called into question the authenticity of His miracles. Yes, they could see how they might be angry or upset, or find this a controversial book, they assured me. So much for my anxieties about managing explosive religious passions in the classroom.

Since debates and controversies from the 1920s about *The Man Nobody Knows* were clearly not going to come up on their own, the next time I taught this class, I was more deliberate about bringing them in. Students read the mostly negative reviews of the book, which called it to task for its sanctification of business, its consumer-friendly Jesus, its silence on Jesus' divinity, and its errors of theology. I also brought in material from my own research, excerpts from letters readers wrote to Barton expressing their gratitude for the accessibility and clarity of Barton's account, the *human* Jesus who was so easy to identify with, and His manly mettle that gave Him such appeal to boys and men (see Smith for an overview of these letters). Many of these ordinary readers acknowledged the errors of history or theology in the book that infuriated scholars, but maintained that the book did good work anyway—inspiring ordinary people to live lives of service and moral courage according to Jesus' example.

This batch of students (a 40-person non-honors section) did not see *The Man Nobody Knows* as a historical document at all, although they had done the same historical reading. They *loved* the book, because it was short, not at all scholarly, and because it was written in an engaging, colloquial way. It didn't seem dated to them. The promiscuous mingling of Christianity and commerce seemed familiar. Several students connected the book to the "prosperity gospel" of our own day—the idea that God blesses those who live moral, Christian lives with material wealth. Many talked about the consumer attractions at a nearby mega-church (coffee bar, state-of-the-art gym, bowling alley, theater, etc.) designed to attract new members. "It's like Six Flags over Jesus," one helpfully summarized, invoking an amusement park to explain the immense scale of consumer entertainments. One of them glossed the text as: "Jesus, my homeboy."

Because these students, unlike the previous class, were passionately engaged with this book as relevant for contemporary readers, I spent more time placing Barton's work in the 1920s context during class discussion. *The Man Nobody Knows* came out the same year as the Scopes "monkey" trial in Tennessee, where William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow faced off over the literal vs. metaphoric truth of the Bible. The newspapers were filled with coverage of the trial, and denominations were bitterly split between Fundamentalists and liberals. In part, Barton (a liberal) offered a way out of the controversy by suggesting that—whatever our theology—Jesus' example could inspire us to live better lives. These students, who resisted reading *The Man Nobody Knows* as a historical document,

were in good company, however. One of my editions has a blurb on the back from James L. S. Collins, President and CEO of Chick-Fil-A (a self-proclaimed Christian company), who reports rereading the book every year. He estimates he has given away hundreds of copies and recommended the book to thousands more (Barton, 1998, back cover). For Collins, *The Man Nobody Knows* is how-to book for running a Christian business, not a cultural document from the 1920s.

The third time I taught *The Man Nobody Knows*, I assumed that I was ready for any student reaction. I was wrong. Many students in the third class, a small, honors seminar, were active in Christian campus organizations such as the Fellowship of Christian University Students (FOCUS) and InterVarsity, and the discussion took a different turn. The “coolness” of his Jesus aside, Barton simply got it wrong, they insisted. These students were dubious about Barton’s interpretations of scripture. Is the moral to the story about Jesus turning water into wine *really* that He was such a fun guy that He didn’t want the party to end prematurely? They (correctly) pointed out that there’s not much suffering or self-sacrifice in Barton’s Jesus. Indeed, Barton argues that Jesus’ message was that:

God is supremely better than anybody had ever dared to believe. Not a petulant Creator, who had lost control of his creation, and, in wrath, was determined to destroy it all. Not a stern Judge dispensing impersonal justice. Not a vain King who must be flattered and bribed into concessions of mercy. Not a rigid Accountant, checking up the sins against the penances and striking a cold hard balance. Not any of these ... nothing like these ... but a great Companion, a wonderful Friend, a kindly indulgent, joy-loving Father. (Barton, 2000, 42)

Like Barton’s critics, these students were sure that Barton’s interpretations of scripture were wrong and that he trafficked in bad theology. Conceding that they were probably right, I redirected their attention to the appreciative letters ordinary lay people wrote to Barton, which argued that—theological failings aside—the book made them better, more engaged Christians. How and why might ordinary readers seek different things from this book than scholars and theologians did? How might a theologically bankrupt and aesthetically flawed book be useful in a pragmatic way, making readers less anxious and more likely to live lives of generosity and service to others? I worked hard to value the “lived religion” of ordinary people (present in the fan letters) as distinct from the theology or church history that has traditionally preoccupied religion scholars.

This unit of the course concludes with two related essays about gender, religion, and commerce in the mid- to late-twentieth century. One is a chapter from Susan Faludi’s *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Male* on the Promise Keepers, whose mid-1990s march on Washington put the nexus of masculinity and Christianity on the front page of newspapers again as a recent example of “virile Christianity.” Faludi points out a gulf between the leaders of the movement and what its ordinary members

desired, identifies a “crisis” of masculinity related to men’s declining occupational fortunes, and points out the imbrication of consumerism with religious practice, as in the Men-and-Religion-Forward days of the early twentieth century. Students were able to compare what these movements offered to men whose jobs no longer offered them the skill, autonomy, and family wage that traditionally came with “men’s work,” and what these movements to “masculinize” Christianity promised men in its place.

The second reading is Colleen McDannell’s chapter on “Christian kitsch” from *Material Christianity*, an exploration of the debate over the decoration of US Catholic churches in the 1950s and 1960s, when the colorful, realistic statues of saints beloved by ordinary members were slowly replaced by more abstract “hieratic” (masculine) art that would reputedly focus members’ attention more effectively on God. This debate was profoundly shaped by both gender (the colorful statues were “effeminate” and too close to the sensory pleasures of the body, Catholic leaders argued) and by social class (they were lower-class “kitsch”). Controversy spilled over into the remaking of popular images of Jesus, which were rendered more masculine, as well.

To facilitate the discussion of religious art and kitsch, I brought in my collection of Holy Bears, scripture-bearing stuffed bears made by a small, Christian company in Texas. “Kitsch, or not?” I asked to open discussion, after students had tossed my six or seven bears around the classroom. The consensus?: “kitsch.” This exercise involved defining critical terms and explicating McDannell’s argument about how material Christianity is intimately enmeshed with gender and class hierarchies. Were these cheap commodities a way to make the Word of God appealing to young people or a commodification/corruption of scripture? What’s the relationship between evangelism and profit, since the purchase of a Holy Bear presumably contributed to both? Particularly for the third group of students—those who (like Barton’s critics) thought updating eternal Truth for new audiences was a sacrilege—this was a useful exercise. A few outed themselves as having treasured religious kitsch of their own—a Precious Moments illustrated Bible from a beloved aunt, cheap jewelry they were awarded for learning to recite the books of the Bible in order, for example. McDannell summarizes the ways ordinary people’s use of religious objects muddies distinctions between sacred and secular: “If we immediately assume that whenever money is exchanged religion is debased, then we will miss the subtle ways that people create and maintain spiritual ideals *through* the exchange of goods and the construction of spaces” (6).

As teachers, we can never know in advance what kinds of experiences and critical frameworks students bring to class. For this reason, I keep rediscovering that the “same” course is never really the same, and this is what keeps me coming back to the classroom again and again, ready to see with new eyes and re-invent material to reach differently situated students. As the above account makes clear, I only sometimes succeed. Although my students are mostly science/engineering majors who are often dubious about the usefulness of humanities courses, this course seems relevant to

most of them. The combination of historical texts providing critical frameworks to think about race, gender/sexuality, class, religion, and commerce with more contemporary materials allows many to see a connection between the cultural conversations of the past and the controversies of our own day. Barton's Jesus in all His iterations—history lesson, home-boy, sacrilege—invites students to think about our relationships to faith, to consumerism, and to politics in new ways. Teaching *The Man Nobody Knows* has fueled my own scholarship on popular religious reading, powerfully illustrating that meaning arises not from the text alone, but from a complex interaction of text, material book, and socially situated readers. This interaction makes both reading and teaching for a living compelling work.

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