



## Sceptical Inquiry, Reading Skills and Terrorism

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### Introduction

This article is a response to Alan Maley's thought-provoking paper in Issue #17 of the *IATEFL Global Issues SIG Newsletter*. Maley mentions religious fundamentalism and terrorism on the one hand, and Edward Said's faith in 'patient and sceptical inquiry' on the other. To practise such a spirit of enquiry is in effect to challenge a person or statement seen as an authority. Said would agree that this is one of 'the rational interpretative skills that are the legacy of humanist education'; nevertheless, it is not always and everywhere culturally acceptable.

### Challenging the ELT "Expert"

Although I am mainly concerned with the application of sceptical inquiry to reading texts, I shall begin with an example of personal challenge.

In 1960, as a young English teacher in Bangkok where I was ludicrously labeled an 'expert', I tried several times to teach my students to contradict me in English. Having drawn a bird on the blackboard, I would announce "That isn't a bird" and get them to chorus, "Yes, it is!" Or I would draw a white ball and say, "That's a black ball" to get them to retort, "No, it isn't! It's white." But this was just listen-and-repeat stuff. When I tried to get *real* contradictions out of the class, they were struck dumb. Until now, they had simply been obeying their teacher in an artificial exercise; their culture forbade them to challenge in real life any teacher, let alone one who was a visiting foreign "expert".

At about the same time, I was teaching the comparatives to a different Thai class. Several of my students started producing erroneous sentences such as *John's running faster than Tom's* and *He's older than I'm*. The best advice I could think of at the time was to give my students a hasty rule of thumb: "After THAN, there are no contractions." More than a decade later, I was reading a very influential paper by a famous applied linguist who made the following claim about learner interlanguage (IL):

*Most learners of English quickly learn the English rule of contraction which forms things like the concert's from the concert is, but these learners may overgeneralise this to produce sentences like 'Max is happier than Sam's'. The learner who produces contractions correctly in all environments must have learned this without 'explanation or instruction' since this constraint was discovered only recently.* (Selinker, 1972).

When I came to this example, I paid particular attention because of that long-ago teaching experience in Bangkok. I read the passage again and realized that it was nonsense. After all, what Selinker was saying was that:

- (a) the applied linguist had only just discovered this rule, so
- (b) no teacher could have discovered it; but
- (c) any *learner* could have done so.

Now came proof that a reluctance to challenge is not limited to oriental cultures: there was no outcry from teachers of English anywhere – even from me. Were my international colleagues so respectful of a paper published in a respected international journal that they actually believed such poppycock? Did they feel insecure? Or were they only, like me, too lazy to object publicly?

### Challenging the political text

In political matters, treating a text with too much respect or being too lazy to object can lead to dangerous situations. Take Gobineau and Chamberlain, for instance, two very learned 19th century figures little-known in the English speaking world. Count Gobineau wrote a massive treatise in which he stated that, of the three main races (white, yellow and black), the white was superior – especially the Aryans, of whom the Teutons were the purest and best. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an Englishman who had become a German citizen, was an enthusiastic follower. He too wrote a huge and influential work in his adopted language, further arguing that the Teuton was the only hope for the world and that the importance of a nation was directly proportional to the amount of genuinely Teutonic blood in its population. Recognising the importance of the Christian heritage, however, Chamberlain concluded that Jesus could not have been a Jew: he must have been an Aryan.

Was Chamberlain's nonsense laughed out of court? No. By the outbreak of World War II, it was in its 24<sup>th</sup> edition and had sold more than a quarter of a million copies. In fact, in his book *Mein Kampf*, Hitler expressed his regret that Chamberlain's observations had not been heeded during the Second Reich. Shirer (1959:103) considers Gobineau and Chamberlain important 'for their effect on the German mind, which they helped to direct toward the coming of the Third Reich' and consequently the

terrorism of the Holocaust. We can well understand how it was largely fear that led to the massive sales of *Mein Kampf* – as Shirer puts it, ‘few family households felt secure without a copy on the table’ (p. 81). But how was it that the views of those two 19<sup>th</sup> century men, writing for literate populations much earlier, were left unchallenged? Was it fear of a different kind that was involved? Fear of appearing to lack solidarity and patriotism, perhaps? Timidity in the face of a perceived authority? If so, can we say that fear or timidity may impair one’s reading comprehension skills?

### Challenging Religious Texts

In George Gershwin’s *Porty and Bess*, a character called Sportin’ Life sings about certain stories in the Bible such as the one about Jonah, who lived in a whale. Then comes the chorus:

*The things that you’re liable  
To read in your Bible  
They ain’t necessarily so.*

But texts of a religious nature have often been assumed to be perfectly true and consequently left unchallenged, relied upon unthinkingly. This applies to many adherents of the Abrahamic religions. The word *Islam* means something like ‘the peace that comes from submission to God in all things’. The Arabic text revealed to the prophet Mohammed, being of divine origin, has for at least a millennium been regarded by Moslems as unchallengeable. To surrender to God entails surrendering oneself to the text of the Qur’an. It is learnt by heart and generally regarded as literally true; and often these two features are transferred into the reading of other important texts, such as those I used in my English lessons in the Middle East. While any attempt to change or challenge the text of the Qur’an may be seen in some quarters as punishable by death (as Salman Rushdie will confirm), such a punishment may be seen elsewhere as an act of terrorism in itself.

Turning back to 16<sup>th</sup> century Christianity, we find William Tyndale translating the Holy Bible into English, his aim being simply to make the scriptures comprehensible to all without the need for intermediary interpretation. Here, too, the text was regarded as inviolable, so in 1536 he was strangled and burned at the stake as a heretic. Just 3 years later, it was possible to print the ‘Great Bible’ legally in English.

The challenges made to religion by scientific advances are well known. As Feynman (2001:254) puts it

*The spirit of uncertainty in science is an attitude towards the metaphysical questions that is quite different from the certainty and faith that is demanded in religion.*

In Europe, the Polish astronomer Kopernik concluded that Aristotle was wrong in supposing that the sun moved round the earth, and Galileo later came to the same conclusion. But his work was banned by the Catholic Church authorities, because it ran counter to the texts used in the universities they administered. These authorities might nowadays be called “fundamentalist”: they already knew the facts, so anyone contradicting them must be wrong and therefore actually or potentially evil. Though the Church did not execute Galileo, its terrorist Inquisition forced him to lie to the world by making a public recantation.

### Christianity and Judaism

In 1925, when the first volume of *Mein Kampf* appeared, a teacher called John Scopes was tried in Tennessee for teaching the theory of evolution put forward by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace. It was a time of resurgent Christian (non-Catholic) fundamentalism in the southern United States, and the fundamentalist view was that the Holy Bible was accurate: the world was created in six days by God, probably in 4004 BC. Rocks known to be millions of years old were produced in Scopes’ defence, but to no avail. He was found guilty of questioning the Bible and thereby sowing sinful thoughts in the minds of his students. True, the verdict was later reversed, but only on a technicality. The fundamentalist conviction that the account of Creation in the Book of Genesis is *literally* true persists to this day in parts of the US, and Creationism is making a comeback even in British schools.

It is a belief in the literal truth of further Old Testament texts that has contributed to the current terrorism in the Middle East. In the *Torah*, (the first 5 books of the Bible), it is written that God promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that their offspring would possess the land of Canaan (*Joshua*, Chapter 1). By no means all Jews, whether Israeli or not, would subscribe to a literal interpretation of that text; but it is in the pursuit of that ‘promised land’ that Palestine is slowly being ethnically cleansed. This particular form of terrorism began long ago in the 1940s when Palestine was under British mandate. I am old enough to remember newsreel and newspaper accounts of the Irgun Gang’s killing of 91 people in the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946 and the Deir Yassin massacre of 1948, in which they wiped out a

village of 254 Palestinians. That gang was led by Menachem Begin, who became Prime Minister of Israel in 1977. In 1983, he handed the premiership to Yitzhak Shamir, who had led the Stern Gang in such terrorist acts as the assassination of the UN mediator, Count Bernadotte; and as I write, Ariel Sharon, another (former?) terrorist is allowing the slow ethnic cleansing to continue.

### Questioning the Labels

If they are to be skilful readers, our students have to learn to detect prejudice and bias in written texts. It is especially important to recognize and respond to the ways in which people and peoples are labeled. You may have noticed that in the previous paragraph I used the old British labels: in Hebrew, the groups are not known as 'gangs', and the participants would be called 'freedom fighters' rather than 'terrorists'. Similarly, Ariel Sharon, who planned the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and was responsible for the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, today labels as 'terrorists' Palestinians who regard themselves as 'freedom fighters'. Lind (2003:35) points out that the administration of George W. Bush was underpinned by the President's fundamentalist 'Bible Belt Christian Zionism' whose aims include the establishment of a Greater Israel – an act which would entail the forceful expulsion of Palestinians, whether Christian or Moslem. I would label such an act as 'ethnic cleansing', unlike Christian evangelists in the US south and elsewhere who use *Joshua*, Chapter 1 as justification. If at this point you are experiencing a twinge of uneasiness, you are not alone. I am wondering if you are now labeling me as 'antisemitic', and my unease is probably similar to the phenomenon responsible for the popularity of Gobineau and Chamberlain: a fear of being seen as socially and political unacceptable.

### Finding Coded Messages

Perhaps the strangest reading strategy to employ when studying ancient texts like the Bible is to search for coded messages. A large advertisement in my daily newspaper (*The Guardian*, London) a few years ago was headed: *The Last Piece of the Jigsaw?* Being interested in puzzles, I read thorough its many column inches of small print. Among this verbiage I detected two major points. The first was a detailed political prediction concerning the USA, the UK and the UN, based on a reading of three verses from the Book of Revelation in the Holy Bible:

11. *And the beast that was but is not, it is also an 8<sup>th</sup> King but springs from the 7 and it goes off into destruction.*

12. *And the 10 horns that you saw are 10 kings, who have not yet received a kingdom. But they do receive authority as kings one hour with the beast.*

13. *These have one thought, and so they give their power and authority to the beast.*

(Revelation 17)

The prediction was explained as follows: "We believe that these 3 verses of Revelation contain the whole rise to power of the UN when the correct symbolism is employed: The Beast is the UN, the 8<sup>th</sup> King of the world. The 7 previous kings over God's people are in order, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medo Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Anglo Americans..." and so on. There was a great deal more, but none of it meant anything to me. The second prediction was in Isaiah Chapter 30: it was about the fall of the Twin Towers on 9/11. I immediately took out my old Bible and read that chapter but, finding no mention of two towers, I stopped reading. (If you think your reading comprehension might be better than mine you can, according to the ad, write to the Lord's Witnesses, PO Box 1 AL, London W1 1 AL for further information.) The Lord's Witnesses were confident that the book of Revelation must contain literal truth in some form or other. My own view is that they had extracted coded messages that did not exist – not a reading skill that I would want to encourage among my students, despite the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*.

### Conclusion

In my own culture, intelligent reading does not stop at the mere extraction of meanings; the meanings have to be considered and judged by the reader, and then either accepted, rejected or "put on hold". Umberto Eco (1983) puts it succinctly when his sleuthing monk tells the novice Adso, "Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to enquiry." I think teaching should be subversive in that it fosters such inquiry, but experience in various countries has left me with certain questions in my mind. When I encouraged students to disbelieve a statement by Squealer in *Animal Farm*, or to find fault with an author's argument, did they transfer these skills to texts within their own cultures? If they did, was I guilty of cultural imperialism? Of subversion, even? And if they didn't, what prevented them? Fear? I just wonder whether failure to evaluate reading matter

(especially religious texts) by exercising 'rational interpretative skills' and 'patient and skeptical enquiry' might lead to the adoption of fundamentalist attitudes, which in turn can find expression in terrorist activities.

What I have been stressing is the acute danger of unthinking literalism in the process of reading, whether of sacred or secular texts. To regard any scientific text as unchallengeable is incompatible with modern thinking; to regard a *religious* text as unchallengeable is in my view one step on the way to fundamentalism; and fundamentalists tend to further their ends by means other than scientific debate or friendly persuasion.

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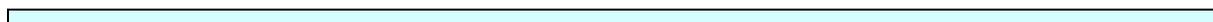
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