

The undergrads in my Bible class taught me a few lessons

Teaching online made me realize my goal is to teach them to think, not to teach them to think like me.

by [Arthur E. Farnsley II](#) in the [February 24, 2021](#) issue



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I've taught religious studies at Indiana University for many years. My classes are about human activities—literature and ethics and rituals—and not about the truth or falsity of beliefs.

But I know many of my students are not in my classes simply to satisfy their intellectual curiosity. Research shows that undergraduates, even at a state university, take religion courses to forward their own spiritual journeys.

My class called Bible and Culture attracts students who read the Bible regularly and consider it a guide for their lives. They want my class to open the Bible up to them, but I have intentionally taught it in a form of belief suspension, striving for

objectivity, looking through a glass darkly. For the most part, my students have played along.

On March 30, 2020, that changed. My two sections of Bible and Culture were meeting remotely for the first time. There were 14 students in each class, and I already knew them personally by the time we resorted to online classes. Prior to the pandemic, we were dispassionately discussing the Bible's role in culture. They read John Riches's *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction*. They also read from *The Bible in American Life*, which I edited with Philip Goff and Peter Thuesen.

In our overview chapter for that book, Goff, Thuesen, and I looked at questions from the General Social Survey that asked people why they read the Bible on their own. Our research showed that the main reason was for comfort. In class, I imagined that comfort might be a useful frame for our conversation in our new pandemic circumstances.

I also made the fateful decision to teach asynchronously (a new word for a lot of us), to run my class as a series of posts and discussion through comments, much like my students did regularly on social media. Their lives were already terribly disrupted; they did not need to be with me in a Zoom session twice a week.

As we began this virtual experiment, my syllabus, written the previous December, called for a discussion of kosher food—but somehow that rang hollow. I felt we needed to focus on the ways Americans used the Bible to make sense of their lives in this time of crisis. This would help us to engage the comfort angle.

For our first discussion, I provided an example of someone using the Bible to understand the pandemic. I wanted students to see a biblical perspective on the question, "What does the crisis mean to us?"

The example was written by a conservative pastor asking whether the coronavirus was one of the seven plagues from the book of Revelation. I mused in my lecture notes, "So why do people ask this question? Because they have a faith commitment, a prior belief, that God has revealed Godself in the Bible and our job as humans is to understand it correctly."

Then came my analysis: "But I do think it points out a pretty big division in Christianity. In one slice, following Jesus is mostly about following his examples on earth. In another slice, it's about believing Jesus was God on earth and cultivating

the right relationship to him, including sharing his love with others. These are NOT mutually exclusive. People who focus on the example (helping others) still want a good relationship. People who have a good relationship still want to follow the example. But the emphasis is often on one or the other.”

With the world on fire, I was asking students to engage in an academic discussion about which kind of people think each of these things. I wanted my students to take a step back, to see the Bible-believing, fundamentalist subculture in context. The *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* were not publishing stories about whether the pandemic was one of the plagues in Revelation, but plenty of other people were writing and reading such stories, so we should analyze those efforts.

But my head was snapped back by my students’ responses. Most were no longer interested in discussing who believes what as an item of sociological interest. They wanted to discuss the pressing question: Is this pandemic, in fact, one of the plagues from the book of Revelation? I was prodding my students to think in some detached fashion about who inhabits the Bible-believing subculture. They were telling me, directly, it was them.

My second prompt offered a link to an article about a rise in Bible searches on apps like YouVersion. I emphasized the comfort angle again, but I also asked what the crisis might do to the widely held notion that everything happens for a reason. I told them that I, like Kate Bowler, sincerely doubt everything happens for a reason.

Most of my students forcefully disagreed. If I said such a thing out loud in class, they might have disagreed quietly in their hearts. But in virtual class, they disagreed publicly in writing. They said the crisis was God drawing us back to Him. Even amidst sorrow, we were receiving moral instruction. It all meant something, even if that meaning was beyond our comprehension. The pandemic was, in fact, happening for a reason—because there must be a reason.

I should have seen it coming. According to a poll by the University of Chicago and the Associated Press, two-thirds of American Christians believed the pandemic was God trying to tell us something. Why would my students be different just because I was different? Our online class provided an opportunity for them to tell me what they really believed from a distance, to say things they would not have said to my somewhat intimidating face.

I then assigned them each to find something online about the Bible and the pandemic and to post it in our class discussion group with brief analysis, then comments.

But my posts on plagues had opened Pandora's box. I received a litany of blog posts about the pandemic as God's judgment, the virus as God's plan, the crisis as a daily reminder of how much we need God's guidance. Without realizing it, I had sidelined the academic project and given my students permission to be who they really are, to say what they really think.

I was thrilled to see my students so engaged, but I had to wonder, *What do I do now* ? I believe in my students' right to free expression, especially in a college classroom, where any topic is fair game if handled with empathy and respect. If I ask them to find a reading, share it, and interpret it, they can use their judgment. I can push back with critical questions, and I do, but my pedagogical goal is to make them think, not to make them think like me.

The teaching methods I had honed over decades allowed me to believe that my rational objectivity was good for my students: I was providing them a critical frame. There is great value in that frame, but obviously my students needed something else in this highly anxious time. They were finding comfort in the Bible.

So for the next six weeks, I let the online discussion run free. Most of my students expressed very conservative religious views about the Bible's role in a culture under crisis. More liberal students pushed back—which I encouraged—but the weight of the class shifted. In a life-or-death context, from the security of their own homes, the conservative students doubled down on their commitment to the Bible as an essential guide to their young lives.

I was forced to acknowledge the truth of the situation: I teach Bible and Culture very social-scientifically to students who, I know, are biblically conservative and are taking this course to strengthen their faith. They may keep their spiritual selves quiet, but they never leave those beliefs or instincts at the door.

Face to face in the classroom, my conservative religious students were silently bound by the comments of their more liberal classmates and by the assumption that I agreed with the liberals. I also realized that my in-person classes are slanted toward students who are quick-witted, good on their feet, ready to mix it up—students like me. But now I could see there were always plenty of clever,

thoughtful students who were thinking things they never shared with me or the class.

Online, my students were now engaged and emboldened, unlimited by the perceived constraints of a university liberal arts class. Students who never spoke in class found their voice. In this new context—anxious and asynchronous—they shared their faith.

Many of my students inhabit a highly religious subculture in their personal lives, but they also know that in the university, the values of equality and diversity trump everything. They do not believe they can say something doctrinal out loud, that they can suggest they know the truth and others might be wrong. My job is certainly to try to get them to see a broader picture, to ask critical questions about context, but they are afraid my job is to judge them for their faith.

Those of us who teach religion in secular schools walk a fine line. It can never be our goal to promote religious doctrine. It must be our goal to raise contextual questions that cause our students to think more deeply about things they may see as normative, even natural: gender roles, sexuality, political and economic structures—even religion.

But we also need to take a hard look at our efforts to encourage our students to suspend their beliefs in the interest of objectivity. We must seek ways to meet them where they are, to teach critical thinking and tools of analysis to students whose faith commitments and beliefs are different from our own.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Suspension of belief?”