

## **What Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* Can Teach Us about the Relevance of Biblical Studies**

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### **Introduction:**

#### **From the Trenches of Undergraduate Teaching**

I teach Biblical and Religious Studies at *King's University College*, a liberal arts college in London, Ontario, Canada. It's a Catholic college that is part of the huge provincial (public) *Western University* next door. Unlike in many US Catholic universities, we do not have a mandatory theology requirement for our students. We therefore have to compete as it were with other possible (and perhaps more attractive!) choices to make the students interested enough to actually register for an elective course on religion. Let me admit it clearly here: Nowadays, that is really a tough job because religion is becoming more and more a difficult item "to sell"! That's what the registrar's office has been telling our department for many years now.

It is an integral part of our job then to devise ways and means to make studying religion, in my particular case, studying the Bible (my primary field) relevant, significant, and interesting enough so that students might be motivated to take our courses. In my efforts to do so, I've found that Asian North American (let me use this more inclusive term as I am in Canada!) author Amy Tan's works could actually offer a valuable aid to help us instructors and our students understand how critical biblical studies could be imagined and approached so as to make it more relevant to undergraduate students here in the West (at least in our part of the West) who, I find, identify themselves more and more as "Spiritual but not Religious," religious "Dones" (we're "done" with religion!), or religious "Nones" (no particular religious affiliation).<sup>1</sup>

This essay will outline the main contours of how I think Amy Tan's novels, particularly *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (henceforward, TBD),<sup>2</sup> could help in the struggles we face in—what I'm increasingly calling—"the trenches of undergraduate teaching" of religious studies. A critical correlation with themes in TBD and biblical-religious studies can show that studying religion (in particular, studying the Bible) is actually a very relevant activity to engage in as part of one's undergraduate education. This could also be applicable in other contexts (such as church settings) in which we're trying to make a case for the relevance of biblical (and/or religious) studies in general to an audience that feels that religion in general or the Bible in particular is no

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Amy Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (New York: Ballantine, 2001). Cf. also Lan Dong, *Reading Amy Tan* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 47-54. Other Amy Tan novels are also worth consulting because similar themes are dealt with in them, particularly, Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: Penguin, 1989); and Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (New York: Ballantine, 1991).

longer a relevant matter to expend one's time and energy upon. This piece is meant, therefore, as a specifically Asian North American contribution to this urgent discussion.

### **The Context:**

#### **The Bible and Western Culture**

By virtue of their location in and/or being raised in a Western[ized] society and civilization, most of my students, without really being conscious of it, are present in a civilization that has had the Bible (as well as Christianity) as an integral cultural part thereof.<sup>3</sup> This is something that is increasingly being forgotten, neglected, or even actively repudiated nowadays. Of course, the biblical heritage is not the only relevant factor for Western civilization; we in the West are also heirs to so many other influences (the Enlightenment, Greco-Roman cultures, today's globalized world, to name a few). We can therefore say that our present identities are actually hybrid.<sup>4</sup> However, since I am in the religious studies teaching "business," I try to impress on my students that neglecting that biblical part of our common Western heritage makes us run the risk of a kind of "rootlessness" (in the sense that philosophers Hannah Arendt<sup>5</sup> and Simone Weil<sup>6</sup> have pointed out) that could result in very unfortunate outcomes, such as the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or even, arguably, the rise of populism at the present time.

Love it or hate it, for better or for worse, Christianity and its heart—the Bible have been an integral part of Western civilizations, hence, an important part of what we may rightly call "our tradition."<sup>7</sup> At this point, it would do us well to remember that an essential, crucial part of the human developmental growth process is having a right, healthy, and (ideally speaking) affectionate-yet-critical relationship with our traditions. Only then will we know where we came from, hence, also who we are (our sense of identity) and, going forward, where we should or really desire to move toward. The dynamics of living in a secular age<sup>8</sup> in which Christianity and the Bible are increasingly being neglected and forgotten and the effort to reconnect with these essential parts of the Western tradition in a mature and critical manner can be said to be wonderfully illustrated in Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

#### **The Bonesetter's Daughter**

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. Dee Dyas and Esther Hughes, *The Bible in Western Culture: The Student's Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Cullen Schippe and Chuck Stetson, eds., *The Bible and Its Influence* (New York and Front Royal, VA: BLP Publishing, 2006); Mary Ann Veavis and Michael J. Gilmour, eds., *Dictionary of the Bible and Western Culture* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Many of the things I suggest in this article are described in more detail in my previous works: Julius-Kei Kato, *How Immigrant Christians Living in Mixed Cultures Interpret Their Religion: Asian-American Diasporic Hybridity and Its Implications for Hermeneutics* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012); Julius-Kei Kato, "Interpretation," in *Asian American Religious Cultures* Volume 1, ed. Jonathan H.X. Lee, Fumitaka Matsuoka, Edmund Yee, Ronald Nakasone (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 63-75; Julius-Kei Kato, *Religious Language and Asian American Hybridity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind* (New York: Routledge, 1952, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. this excellent and comprehensive treatment of the notion of tradition: Paul Valliere, "Tradition," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* Vol. 13, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 2005), 9267-9281.

<sup>8</sup> The many descriptions of a "secular age" in Taylor's important work are presupposed in this essay. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007).

Chinese American novelist Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) tells us the story of Ruth, a Chinese American woman living in San Francisco, who feels the urgency of coming to terms, *now as a grown-up*, with her mother, Chinese immigrant LuLing, who in turn is showing signs of cognitive and emotional deterioration because of age. For Ruth, Luling is of course the very embodiment of their family's Chinese heritage, an aspect of her Chinese American hybrid identity which Ruth has constantly struggled with in the course of her life. In her childhood and youth, Ruth was wont to rebel against her mother and the Chinese ways and traditions that Luling represented and tried to hand on ("tradition") to her daughter. Why? As often happens in the case of young, naïve, and immature Asian North Americans with hybrid identities, the ways of the "old world(s)" in Asia do not seem relevant anymore in a North American context in which they are presently located and which they would like to be, more securely, a part of.

Fast forward to the now grown-up Ruth who struggles with multiple issues such as her job and relationships, and seeks to understand who she really is in the midst of all that. As she sees her mother's condition worsen, Ruth acutely feels the urgency of grappling with her mother's legacy and their family tradition, of which LuLing is the living symbol. The stories and experiences of the past, back in the old country (China) are deeply embedded in the mind, heart, and memory of LuLing, indeed in her very being. But with the onset of early Alzheimer's disease, all that is in danger of being lost without being properly "handed on" (again, "tradition"!) to Ruth. Fortunately, Ruth comes upon a stack of papers LuLing wrote years earlier stashed in a drawer at home. Ruth immediately realizes that this autobiographical text could be a firm connection with her mother's life story as LuLing's mental condition deteriorates. Moreover, the text is the key to understanding the person who raised Ruth, with all the historical and cultural forces that forged her into the mother and the embodiment of the tradition that she became.

There is, however, one big obstacle to this tradition being properly received by Ruth: the manuscript is written in Chinese, a language Ruth is no longer competent in. Because she realizes how important this task is, Ruth takes pains to find a translator. When she does, she is now able, as it were, to go inside her mother's mind and heart *through the text* and recover to some extent the stories and experiences which form a crucial part of the tradition that she, as LuLing's daughter, has to receive and possibly hand on to future generations.

### **Correlations between *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and Biblical Studies**

There are a number of striking correlations between TBD and the situation of our undergraduate students (as well as all potential students of the Bible). As mentioned above, although the Bible has been an integral part of the Western civilization and culture in which our students are immersed, many of them are glaringly unaware of that.<sup>9</sup> The time that they will spend in an undergraduate college or university program presents an excellent opportunity to put them in a similar frame of mind to TBD's protagonist Ruth. Just as Ruth shifted from hostility/rebellion toward her Chinese heritage to a renewed appreciation of how important a critical appropriation of tradition is, it would be good if our students could move beyond the apathy and even hostility that surround "religion," "Christianity," and "the Bible" in many areas of contemporary North American society now to a frame of mind in which they could begin to appreciate the importance of digging deeper into the Western tradition, as if (like Ruth) on a

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. this work on how the modern "secularized" West is actually founded on many Christian principles: Don Cupitt, *The Meaning of the West: An Apologia for Secular Christianity* (London: SCM, 2008).

search for their cultural and religious roots. If they do so, they will sooner or later encounter the biblical tradition. To put the matter bluntly, in order for today's students to understand Western society and culture in a more profound way (thus understanding their identities better), it is imperative that they discover in a deeper way the sources of the tradition, of which the Bible is a valuable part. The biblical stories, characters, tropes, themes, plots, directives, etc., all function like the stack of papers Ruth discovers at home which enables her to delve deeper into her own Chinese roots.

As Ruth faced the barriers of language, history, and culture between her mother's China and her Asian North American world in her quest to read and understand her mother's text written in Chinese, students of biblical studies also have to grapple with numerous barriers that have to be overcome in order to properly and responsibly have a deep encounter with the tradition that is contained in the Bible in this vastly different contemporary world in which we live. Contrary to many popular notions, the message of the Bible is often not self-evident. It is not easy to read and understand a text that is separated from us by a gulf of two thousand years (some parts, even more than that). And then, notwithstanding many theological beliefs about the Bible, anthropologically speaking, it is first and foremost a human construct, rooted in specific historical and cultural milieus. Moreover, the texts therein have been written in languages that are unintelligible to the vast number of potential students of biblical studies, hence, the need for competent, responsible, and critical scholarship (similar to Ruth's need of a translator) to mediate between the text and contemporary readers.<sup>10</sup>

### **Relating with the Bible as Its Grown-Up Child**

I guess what I most want to do here is to suggest an analogy from Asian North American experience and literature to help us and our students see why there is much value in reading and studying the Bible. TBD is a story about a grown-up, Asian North American daughter learning how to relate with her ageing Asian mother *as a grown-up*. The act of relating with someone, I'd like to point out, boils down to the quality of conversation that these two people have. The nature, style and quality of conversation between parents and their children are never static. Modes of conversation evolve as both parents and children advance in years and in their relationships with each other. Hence, it is more accurate to describe the parent-child conversation as dynamic, continually changing, and in flux. For instance, when the child is young and immature, the conversation might be more like a one-way street in which the parents can and often have to impose what they think is best on the child. We can see these dynamics in TBD as LuLing tried to impose "Chinese ways" on the young Ruth who often rebelled against those efforts because she wanted to be "more American."

At a later stage in life, the conversation between parent and child (when the former is ageing and the latter is already a more mature, grown-up individual) has to be a very different affair. Through the years, the parent-child conversation should develop more and more into a real dialogue, finally maturing in a form of conversation *between two grown-ups* in which each party respects (better even, loves) the other and engages the other in a mutual and respectful exchange

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<sup>10</sup> I am aware of the theological issues that have not been dealt with in this article. I myself have been trained as a theologian but I will not enter the area of theology here for lack of space. Hopefully, I might be able to write on the theological problems inherent in this theme on another occasion.

of ideas and experiences.<sup>11</sup> That happens of course in an ideal world. The reality is not always so idyllic.

In TBD, we see the grown-up Ruth reevaluating the quality of conversation she has had and presently has with her ageing mother and does the grown-up thing to do, namely, look once again at her mother and the tradition LuLing embodies more carefully, more critically, with openness and even affection, and see how that tradition is relevant for herself. Note that this is not reverting, in a childish sense, to being the “good girl” who docilely obeys everything – the daughter that LuLing wished Ruth could have been growing up. No, Ruth’s grown-up revalorizing of her tradition is more like a critical appropriation in which, on the one hand, she now more fully recognizes that the tradition is truly important but, on the other hand, knows better which aspects of it to resist and which aspects of it to receive, adapt to vastly changed circumstances, and also perhaps hand on to the next generation as “the tradition.”

That, I contend, could be an image, an allegory, a metaphor for what should happen when a student embarks on the critical task of reading and studying the biblical text here in the West. I’m suggesting that as people located in the West, our students could and should relate with the biblical tradition as if relating with family. It is a truism of course (one that is nonetheless very true!) that we do not choose family; we’re just born into it. This could be applied to the legacy of Christianity and its heart—the Bible vis-a-vis Western civilization. Christianity—the biblical tradition (not because it is impeccably good but because of historical circumstances which we cannot alter) is (a sort of) “parent” of Western civilization. With institutional Christianity in rapid decline in the West, we (like Ruth in the face of a deteriorating LuLing) should feel more a sense of urgency about how to grapple with the legacy of Christianity and of the Bible to and in us: What do we have to know, remember, retrieve, valorize, and hand on as tradition to the next generation? How do we evaluate this legacy? What do we cherish and treasure? What do we resist and reject? Seeking to answer these questions, I think, is a more mature and responsible way to do biblical studies, one that I have and continue to suggest to my students.

In this continuing effort, Amy Tan’s work could be very insightful and helpful. Correlating Amy Tan’s novels with biblical studies as done here in North America could be a way of bringing Asian North American voices out of its “ghetto” (to which it has been confined many times by mainline biblical scholarship) to the forefront of the discipline and educational practice and we can see with pride how our Asian North American experiences can suggest something valuable to our ongoing endeavors to advance biblical and religious studies.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I have found many insightful points on the dynamics of the parent-child conversation when the child is already a grown-up in this work: Dr. Frank Pittman, PhD, *Grow Up! How Taking Responsibility Can Make You a Happy Adult* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), chapter 5 “How to Be a Grown-up Even Around Your Own Parents.”

<sup>12</sup> Cf. this important recent work on Asian North American biblical hermeneutics: Uriah Kim & Seung Ai Yang, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Hermeneutics* (London: T&T Clark, 2019).