

My Non-Woke Personal Library and Its Saving Virtues: An Essay Series for Readers

By Geoffrey Clarfield

Part 1

Introduction

I have written this extended essay for those of you who want to broaden your minds, escape the straight jacket of a “woke” education/indoctrination, and discover the wealth of books and ideas that have formed our Western civilization. These books, which form what has come to be called the “Western Canon,” have come under assault by far too many schools and universities as well as the media and our own governments.



Each of the books that form the Canon belong to it for a reason. They have stood the test of time because they are quite simply the greatest works of Western philosophy and

literature, spanning more than two millennia. Reading them is liberating, for they often disagree with each other profoundly, leaving you to become a discerning reader as they challenge you to decide for yourself what you think is right or wrong, true or false, as you weigh the arguments made by the best thinkers and writers our civilization has ever

produced.

You will experience the pleasure of spending time with great thinkers and writers, enjoying the beauty of their prose as you entertain their stimulating ideas. What I offer you is a feast for the mind and a balm for the soul.

Because we live in the West, it is important to start with the books and ideas that have formed our own unique civilization. I see it, also, as a gateway to exploring a world of different ideas.

I am an anthropologist and have spent much of my life studying other cultures and will share many books with you that set me on that path, as well. But the Western Canon is the place to start because, as citizens, it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our own liberal democracies: what makes them thrive, what threatens them, and how they stack up against other forms of government.

This is especially important now because the future of our democracies, even the future of Western civilization itself, is under threat. To a large extent, this is because this generation of readers have been subjected to an ongoing and accelerating movement to limit their reading choices, and all too often have been told what to think instead of being challenged to think for themselves, deliberately dumbing down their choices and their understanding of the world, which is no small matter.

The main proponents of this assault on the "Western Canon" comes from universities, colleges, public schools, media, and government, none of which can any longer be trusted to provide an education that presents students with a broad range of ideas that spurs critical thinking. So if you are between the ages of 18-50, and chafing at an impoverished education, this essay is for you. I hope you find it rewarding.

There is such an ocean of books and articles out there, that

no one can read them all. So what I offer you here is a guide to the books that I think are most worthwhile, as I take you through my personal library. Some are books that should be read and need to be read seriously; some may depend on your interests or professional needs; some must be read cautiously and, unfortunately, a growing number are pernicious and should not be read at all. I will give you my reasons, and let you be the judge.

My “Non Woke” Library

My library is not large in comparison to even a small branch of any of the public libraries in Toronto, a city of millions. My library has no more than a thousand books and is constantly changing. But somehow, over the years, it remains “my” library and in many ways, it is a reflection of who I am, who I was and who I may yet become.

Today, it takes up several walls in the basement of our house in the country, in between the upscale cottages of the lake down the road, and the farms and farmhouses further inland. In truth our house lies, in an area once logged, but now returning to indigenous forest inhabited by bears, wolves, deer, moose, beavers, and numerous species of migrating birds.

When I go for my daily walks on the rural roads nearby, I stop thinking about my library, but it does not stop thinking about me. For when I return, I am often possessed by a thought or an insight that must have emerged from my subconscious during my outdoor rambles, based on earlier readings. These thoughts enter my computer, sometimes as a song lyric, sometimes as a story or an essay, such as this one.

I often go downstairs and just look at the books on my shelves. I commune with them. In doing so I am constantly reminded of what I call “the great purge,” a year during my early sixties when I went through every shelf and decided what stays and what goes. I gave away forty boxes of books and

magazines to public and private libraries, thinking at the time that having access to the Toronto Public Library and the University of Toronto library (where, as an alumnus, I have library rights for a small annual fee), I would have no problem accessing any books and articles that I might need for my writing projects, but did not want to keep.

I also rationalized that the Internet, in theory, would give me access to any book or article that may interest me, or that I may need for research or inspiration. I was wrong, but more on that later.

During a typical visit to my library, I usually start at the beginning of my shelves and go to the end. Often, I am interrupted by a thought, an idea for an essay or story, and more rarely, a melody. I marvel at what I call the “big hits” of my library and so I will share some of them with you.

The Bible

The first is the Bible, beginning with the Old Testament. I was raised in the Conservative Jewish tradition – a modern variant stream of Jewish faith and practice—which brought me into the world of Bible stories and taught me the essential Jewish rituals for the year’s special holidays, and for the weekly, family Sabbath evening meal over which my late father would preside.

He taught us the ritual to bless the wine and bread (my Mom taught my sister how to bless the candles), ushering in an evening given over to good food, family, and friends, always accompanied with lively discussion of the world, and what all this means from a Jewish point of view. For being Jewish is not just a set of ritual practices and theological beliefs, but a way of looking at the world. I learned that the Jewish festivals of Channukah and Passover are Fall and Spring celebrations of political freedom, and that they resonate with the history of the democracies of the West.

There was rarely agreement around our table, but the friendly spirit of these discussions presided over by my father, gave me a feeling for the essence of Talmudic debate, which is really a form of discursive study. Jewish culture encourages even the liveliest debate, never confusing it with an angry confrontation or argument.

That experience was ennobling, and I carry it with me to this day. I knew early on that I would bring up my children as Jewish, for as I still believe being Jewish is a way of looking and feeling about the world. And, because the writings of the Torah (the five books of Moses), and the Prophets and Writings that complete the Jewish Old Testament are still relevant to life today.

In addition to several English translations of the Bible, there is a Hebrew Bible on my shelf which, with some help, I can read and understand in the original, thanks to the tireless efforts of my after-school tutors at my local Synagogue, all traumatized survivors of the Holocaust or the pogroms of Eastern Europe.

Yes, they all spoke with thick accents, their body language was not North American, they had a tendency to speak loudly, with some role model-worthy exceptions, such as the late great Jewish philosopher, Emil Fackenheim, whom I came to work with as an undergraduate.

He had mastered the art of Yiddish gentleness, so beautifully exemplified in the Zen-like stories of the persecuted masters of the Hassidic movement, made famous in their retelling by authors like Martin Buber, some of whom I am told figure among my ancestors. My teachers are all gone now, but I thank them dearly for opening the ancient language of King Solomon and King David to me so I could hear them speak in their own tongue.

As I read the weekly portion of the Old Testament when I was

obliged to go to Synagogue in my youth, I vowed that one day I would read the whole thing from start to finish. I finally did read the whole Bible, not only the Old Testament, but the Apocrypha and the New Testament as well, when I was a young undergraduate.

At that time I was taking a course on Biblical archaeology, in which the skeptical spirit of a modern Herodotus or Thucydides was engaged to help us children of the enlightenment try to figure out what in the Biblical text can –and cannot– be corroborated through archaeology, historiography, linguistics, comparative studies, ethnology and cross-cultural studies.

Then, and only then, did I start to have an inkling that the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, is central not only to being Jewish. It is a pillar of the creation of a modern Jewish state. It was also, and still is, a central element in the growth of the English-speaking democracies and had a formative effect on the writing of the US Constitution.

Further along my Bible shelf are books about the Mesopotamians and other dwellers of the “Fertile Crescent,” Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, the ancient Egyptians, Canaanites and Phoenicians, all of whom, as fellow speakers of the Semitic and Hamitic branches of the Afro-Asiatic language and culture group, shared so much with the ancient Israelites.

The Hittites, like Uriah, who we also meet in the Bible, are assimilated into this matrix, but they originally spoke an Indo-European tongue. Next to them, are those still marvelous studies of “parallels” to the Old Testament, found in writings in Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Canaanitic, Aramaic and Egyptian. All with their sacred tales (like those of a great flood), their codes of law, hymns, proverbs and turns of speech that were taken up and modified by the creators of the Old Testament or co-invented by them.

During my purge of my library to my subsequent regret, I gave away boxes of *Biblical Archaeology Magazine* and other publications like it, where well-trained Bible-focused scholars and archaeologists, report on their latest findings to better understand the world view of the peoples of the Bible, and its enduring heritage for today's Jews, Christians, and those secularists, (as well as the growing number of young "Cultural Christians") who understand the centrality of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Inspired by these books and publications, I have visited every major archaeological site in the land of Israel, which has infused my reading of the Bible with an intimate feeling for its landscapes, colors, weather, and even smells. My favorite writer on Biblical heritage is William Robertson Smith, a Scottish polymath who lived and wrote during the late 1880s.

He was a Biblical and Arabic scholar who wrote a tome called *The Religion of the Semites*, where through historical scholarship and the use of ethnographic examples, he tries to deduce the essence and development of ancient monotheism. Apart from being the editor of the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and one founder of British social anthropology, his theories on the development of the ancient Jewish belief system (monotheism) are still worth consideration. For there is no progress in this kind of intellectual exploration, just the accumulation of more and more evidence from which to evaluate theories, both old and new.

Near the end of my Bible shelves are books about the Psalms of David and biographies of King David. I declare him to be the greatest songwriter of all time. He was a shepherd who was meant to be a rock star but was forced instead to rule a nation: an essay for another day. At the end of this series of shelves can be found books with titles like, *The Bible and Civilization* and the *Gift of the Jews*: studies that point out

that much of what was once called the “legacy of Israel,” lives on in the modern State of Israel and in the Biblically inspired English speaking democracies which –when under the right leadership– are usually staunch supporters of the Jewish State in its noble fight against the forces of Jihad.

When I lived and worked in rural Africa for many years, first as an anthropologist, and later as an aid worker I carried with me my own copy of the Old Testament. It was compiled and edited by Rabbi Gunther Plaut, a German Jewish refugee, who escaped Hitler’s Germany in 1939 and became the Rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple, one of the oldest Jewish congregations in Toronto, established in the early 19th century by English Jewish immigrants to Canada.

Plaut was committed to the Jewish world view and despite his congregations’ membership in the wider Reformed movement across Canada and the United States (with its ambivalence towards Zionism), he was an outspoken supporter of Israel until his dying day.

His version of the Old Testament includes the original Hebrew Text, an English translation, and commentaries from both Jewish and non-Jewish contributors. When I can, I look up the *Parsha*, (portion) of the week, the weekly reading of the Torah, which is part of the annual cycle of readings that ends each fall, on the holiday of *Simchat Torah*. Plaut argued that from a modern point of view, the Old Testament is a record of man’s search for God. I agree.

A Short Note on Christianity

I will give you what no eye has seen, and what no ear has heard, and what no hand has touched, and what has not occurred to the human mind.

From The Gospel of Thomas

I am not immune to the attraction of Christianity. For, I was

first exposed to Christianity through its glorious religious music, as I was a classically trained boy soprano. As an undergraduate music major, I studied the tradition of Western classical music: a more than one thousand-year-old history of music that was designed to elevate the soul and inspire those who hear it to contemplate the hope of reward in the hereafter.

I have listened to Catholic nuns sing Gregorian Chant in their nunnery on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and heard the magnificent Russian Orthodox mass sung just down the hill, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, beside the Garden of Gethsemane. While listening to Anglican Vespers in Winchester Cathedral, I contemplated the top of a round table displayed on the wall of the church that was reputed to belong to King Arthur and his knights. And I have heard Handel's Messiah at a Toronto concert hall during the Christmas season.

Indeed, the Christian faith is supported by an array of aesthetic devices that support its belief system, not only through music, but through the lofty architecture of cathedrals and pilgrim's sites, and in stained glass, sculpture, and painting, as well as both religious and secular poetry. All these arts attempt to evoke the Christian ethos and its message of a loving God; its hope for justice in this world, and if not, in the next; in an ordered society amid universal peace.

Much of what is still admirable about Christianity was drawn from its Jewish roots. After all, Jesus and all the early apostles and leaders of the Jerusalem Church during the rise of Christianity were devout Jews who followed all and every aspect of Jewish law and belief. These include but are not limited to the following:

1. A world where time is linear, not cyclical as among the Babylonian and Egyptians.
2. God is a unity that cannot be manipulated. This moves

against the near universal tendency to engage in witchcraft and sorcery.

3. The paradigm of the Exodus, showing that the majority can be and often are wrong and unjust. So great leaders must often emerge from the shadows to lead a migration away from injustice, in pursuit of liberation. The Exodus provides the fundamental political lesson of freedom, both collective and individual.
4. The ten commandments, an ideal which has been honored by Christians throughout the ages, knowing that these commandments are just, whether observed in practice or in the breach thereof.
5. Observing the Sabbath, an observance that was previously absent in the Greco Roman and ancient world.
6. That God is one, and so nature must be one. Thus there is a direct line between religion and modern science.
7. That there is a spiritual aspect to being human, which means that ethics cannot be deduced from Science.

To better understand the common history of both Judaism and Christianity, and especially where they differ, I have read and thought about the following books on my shelf:

Asimov's Guide to the Bible: The New Testament, by Isaac Asimov; *Why Christianity Happened*, by James G. Crossley; *Pagans and Christians*, by Robin Lane Fox; *The Immortality Key*, by Brian C. Muraresku; *Cities of God* by Rodney Stark; *The Lost Books of the Bible*, by Solomon J. Schepps; *The Jesus Papyrus*, by Carston Peter Thiede and Mathew D'Ancona; *The Lost Gospel*, by Herbert Krosney, *The Secrets of Judas*, by James M. Robinson; *The Jesus Family Tomb*, by Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino; *Jesus the Healer*, by Stevan L. Davies; *Jesus the Magician*, by Morton Smith; *A History of Eastern Christianity*, by Aziz Atiya; *Lost to the West*, by Lars Brownworth; *The World of Late Antiquity*, by Peter Brown; *Hellenism in Byzantium*, by Anthony Kaldellis; *Vicars of Christ*, by Peter De Rosa; *Justinian's Flea*. by William Rosen;

and *The Devil and the Jews*, by Joshua Trachtenberg. There are many others, such as various editions of the Gospel of Thomas with and without commentary, but these are the ones that have taught me most.

Theologically, Christianity parts ways with Judaism in the mystical belief in a divine savior, Jesus, who can give absolution from sin and eternal life after death, if you believe in him. Christians call this justification by faith. If these had been the only differences between Christianity and Judaism, then for the last two thousand years there would have been little to no friction between these two faiths, but that was not to be because of the account of the Crucifixion.

Anyone who reads the New Testament encounters three different accounts of the Crucifixion. Modern historians are more or less of one voice that these accounts were highlighted by non-Jewish converts to Christianity, who were drawn from the Pagan cults of the Greco-Roman religions of the early first millennium. Eventually, these converts were set by the Church hierarchy against those who preferred the traditions of their Jewish forefathers or followed in the footsteps of the very Hebraic Jerusalem church, led by Jesus' brother, James.

As Christianity became increasingly Hellenized the crucifixion narrative became a meme as justification for turning on the "Jews." Thus, it was with the rise of the formal Church that the demonization of Jews, both living and deceased, began, even though all the first Christians during Jesus' lifetime and shortly after his death thought of themselves as Jews.

The history of this mythological demonization of the ancient Jews, of Judaism and of the surviving remnants of the Jewish people today which we now call anti-Semitism, a pseudo-scientific 19th century word for Jew hatred has led to the repeated torture and massacre of Jews: during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Pogroms of both Western and Eastern Europe and the Holocaust.

Today, anti-Semitism gives support to the ongoing Jihad against the Jews of Israel and the diaspora, for Islam also suffers from what theologians call supersessionism: the claim that Christianity and Islam both make, that their faiths supersede Judaism and therefore Jews should not behave as equals of the Christians and Muslims. Should they ever presume to do so, they are to be violently and legally struck down by their superiors in faith and number.

In 18th century Germany a number of educated Christian men, influenced by the ideas of the French enlightenment, began to question their inherited theological and social animus against Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish people. Through exposure to the thought and personality of Moses Mendelsohn, the grandfather of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, this unique European intellectual minority began to accept Judaism as an equal revelation to that of Christianity.

During the 19th century Jews were slowly allowed by their host countries to leave European ghettos, no longer legally penalized as second-class citizens and were to be judged by the secularizing laws of modernizing Europe.

Tragically, this enlightened view of a world where Judaism and Christianity were seen as spiritual equals was not widely accepted. Even though some Westerners in the 19th and 20th centuries no longer put all their faith in Christianity and the church, they retained medieval, conspiratorial attitudes towards Jews. Old prejudices die hard.

At the same time, one must remember that Christian Europe provided the context for the survival of ancient philosophy, the rise of modern science, the emergence of democracy in the Anglosphere and, through the efforts of a small but influential group of Christian Philo Semites, the rebirth of the Jewish state based on the Mandate for Palestine, which is still valid according to international law.

After the Holocaust and the subsequent rise of Israel, a growing minority of scholars and theologians have faced the fact that Christianity and the Christian Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches were unable or unwilling to protect the Jewish people from Stalin and Hitler. They are now more prone to accept Jews, Judaism, and Israel as equal moral partners in the development of modernity and the balancing of faith with reason.

Many years ago, when still an undergraduate, I happened to see an interview of a University of Toronto professor, a Catholic theologian (Gregory Baum), on National TV (CBC in Canada). His secular liberal interviewer was harsh and skeptical, suggesting that modern men and women do not need or crave organized religion.

As this was shortly after Vatican Two, the professor turned the tables on the journalist with the following quip: "Great religions and institutions like the law, periodically renew themselves in the light of changing circumstances without giving up their essential nature, which is more than I can say for the CBC!" The journalist was left speechless and quickly went on to the next question.

Since the 1800s, Western scholars have begun to examine the history of Christianity and its texts from the point of view of objective historical scholarship. This has given birth to the search for the "historical Jesus" and entire libraries of books and articles have been written on this topic. New books and articles appear every day.

However, what is now thought of as the New Testament is a much-reduced collection of early Gospels and Christian writings. Numerous others were banned and destroyed by the early Church fathers. In 1948, in a village in Egypt, scholars unearthed many of these banned writings.

The most enigmatic is called the Gospel of Thomas. It is a

short poetic text, which has a Buddhist or Zen feel to it. It is supposed to report the sayings of Jesus. It has been dated variously, either early or late depending on the belief, ideology, or evidence of its scholars.

What is unique about these sayings of Jesus is that this ancient Gospel contains no crucifixion, no miracles, and says nothing about the "Jews." This suggests that the accounts of the Crucifixion in the New Testament may have been later additions, not part of the essence of early Christianity.

Two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson took scissors to his copy of the New Testament and cut out all the miracles. His manuscript is remarkably close to this newfound Gospel.

After the Civil War, a copy of "Jefferson's Bible" was often given to incoming Congressmen and Senators when they came to take up their seats in the government in Washington DC. It is almost identical to the Gospel of Thomas that was found in 1948. One day this book may be explored by young Christians at their Sunday schools. Let us hope so.

(Please come back next week for Part 2 of *My Non-Woke Personal Library and Its Saving Virtues* by Geoffrey Clarfield).

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Thanks for reading. For more from this author, read [What Did Jesus Really Say? : Or, Thomas Jefferson's Gospel and the Gospel of Thomas](#)