



Have you ever used a Bible reference and had a teacher say, “That’s not allowed”? It’s pretty common in classes, but very often teachers don’t explain *why* they reject Bible references in academic coursework. Since this question comes up frequently in composition classes, and particularly in critical thinking classes, I’ve decided to try to explain why sacred texts garner only limited acceptance in academic work, why you need to seriously consider whether to use a sacred text reference, and whether you can use sacred texts as references in this class.

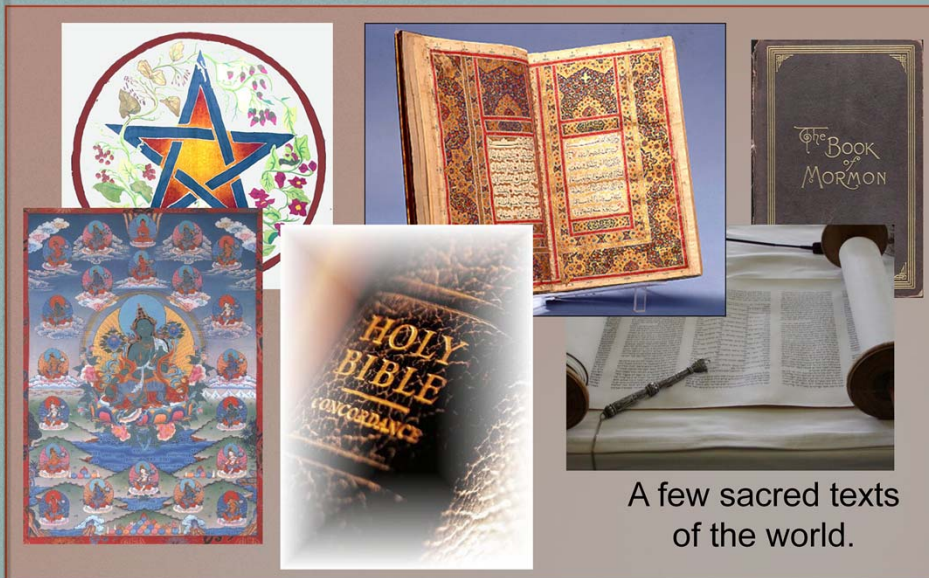


## In this lecture...

- Defining sacred texts
- The issues
- Sacred texts as evidence
- Use in this class

There are some key areas that I'd like to cover, including how sacred texts are defined, what the key issues are relating to their use in academic work, how they stand up as evidence, and the guidelines for using sacred texts in ***this*** class.

## Defining Sacred Texts



A few sacred texts of the world.

People who share strong beliefs, ideas that transform and guide their lives, often record those ideas to pass to future generations. These become their **sacred texts**, and they are held in greatest reverence by those who ascribe to a particular faith, whether it's Buddhism, Wicca, Islam, Mormonism, Judaism, Christianity or any other faith.

Sacred texts share some commonalities. They provide a context for the faith-based organization. They provide its fundamental history, its expectations for behavior of members, and its anticipated reward for the faithful. Sacred texts are **exclusive**. By this I mean that while there are overlapping concepts across the texts, none of the groups would consider another's sacred text as accurately descriptive of its own experience. Nor would the rules of one group's sacred texts conform to the orthodoxy of another faith. Thus, those who believe in a particular set of sacred texts and use the principles within them to organize their thinking are rarely, if ever, willing to accept the sacred texts of a different group, no matter how similar parts of those texts might be.

When dealing with sacred texts as **evidence** the issue of audience acceptance is critical, but there are other issues that must be considered.

## The Issues



Key issues with using sacred texts include speaker/author credibility, composition of audience, and quality of the evidence itself.

It doesn't matter who is sharing a sacred text, whether it's a priest, priestess, shaman, rabbi, pastor, or evangelist, that person is likely to have a relatively high level of personal credibility **within the home group**. However, that credibility is often diminished when communicating with a group that values different philosophies and expectations. This means that the ideal audience for someone who uses many sacred text references is the one that mirrors the membership that reveres the text. The evangelist will be perceived more credibly by Christians than by Wiccans or Jews. And the reverse is also true.

Secondarily, the authorship of the sacred text must be considered. Most sacred texts are accumulations of writings recorded hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Some are born of oral traditions, some are pieced together from what adherents recalled, and some are defined as inspired writings. Under these circumstances it is impossible to determine whether the information has been accurately recorded or even whether it's authentic. That's not an issue for those of faith because they have made whatever intellectual accommodations are necessary to accept their sacred texts as fact. This is not true for those outside the faith. Since each faith is embraced by a finite and relatively small percent of the world's population, every person using sacred texts as "proof" runs up against a vast wall of non-belief.

Lastly, sacred texts are filled with contradictions and open to a wide variety of interpretation. If one looks only at the Christian faith, one can find literally hundreds of sects who use the same scriptures yet interpret the words very differently. Each Christian sect emphasizes certain passages and ideas, while de-emphasizing or even ignoring others. For instance, the Seventh Day Adventist places great value on the day of worship. Protestant Christians believe in the Trinity – that God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are all part of the same being, while Latter Day Saints believe that each of those are separate entities who share a single purpose. Each of those faiths uses the Bible to support its position. While I'm not as familiar with the principles and texts of other faiths as I am with Christianity, I'm confident their sacred texts are as open to varied interpretation, too.

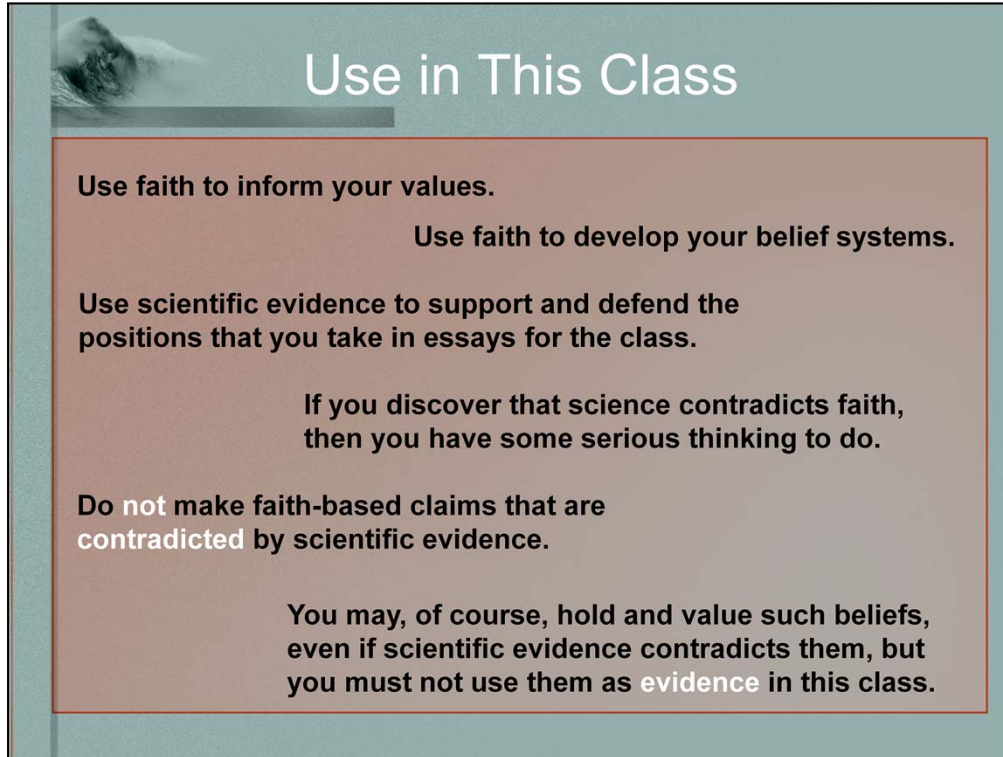


Scientific research is based on creating experiments that can be **replicated by others** so the results can be confirmed or denied by others. Faith-based reasoning is tied to sacred texts which, by their very nature **cannot be proved or disproved** through scientific research methods.

Faith-based texts attempt to answer three key questions: Where did we come from? What is our purpose? Where will we go when we leave this earth? Each faith answers those questions in a unique way, defining not only the spiritual existence of group members but also their values and behaviors, and the answers from one group do not serve other groups.

And this is where the clash between science and faith comes to a head for **academic writing**. When you are providing evidence in an essay, **it must be the kind that can be examined and either confirmed or rejected**. This generally means that it must be of the scientific kind. Faith-based evidence only works when the audience shares a belief in the text being used.

If one is unwilling to accept the tenets of someone else's faith as fact, then it is not legitimate to expect that person to accept the tenets of a different faith, either. So, if you are Buddhist and are unwilling to accept the tenets of Christianity, then you cannot expect the Christian to accept the tenets of Buddhism. And, since the truths of neither faith can be proved scientifically, they cannot be used to prove a rational position. **That** is why sacred texts are not allowed in general academic settings. This does **NOT** mean that faith is unimportant or that it doesn't matter. In fact, it is often one's faith that makes all other efforts possible.



## Use in This Class

- Use faith to inform your values.**
- Use faith to develop your belief systems.**
- Use scientific evidence to support and defend the positions that you take in essays for the class.**
- If you discover that science contradicts faith, then you have some serious thinking to do.**
- Do not make faith-based claims that are contradicted by scientific evidence.**
- You may, of course, hold and value such beliefs, even if scientific evidence contradicts them, but you must not use them as evidence in this class.**

So, how can you use sacred texts in this class? Or can you use them at all?

First, your faith should be the basis of your personal values. You should definitely use it to develop and strengthen belief systems that can guide your personal behavior in everything from how to you treat others to how you vote. Understanding the philosophical underpinnings of your values will give great power to your life. And, that value system will certainly affect the positions you take on many controversial issues.

However, you should choose credible, **fact-based evidence** to support and defend those positions when you write for this class. And, if you discover that the science actually contradicts your personal philosophy, then you must at some point decide whether or not you need to make adjustments to your life philosophy, your faith. **More importantly, if you discover that science contradicts a faith-based opinion when you are writing for the class, you will either need to change your position to conform to science, or you will need to change the arguments in your essay so that they do not conflict with facts.**

**In most instances, you will not be able to use a quote from a sacred text as 'evidence' that proves a point.** Remember, if you would not be willing to accept someone else's sacred text as proof, then you do not have the right to expect anyone else to accept your sacred text as proof.

If you feel it's necessary to use a quote from a sacred text to support a position, please **email me** with the quote you want to use and how you intend to use it. I'll make an assessment of whether it can be used within the specific context. Thanks. ☺