

THE HERMENEUTIC OF THE SACRED AND THE TASK OF BIBLICAL STUDIES IN A SECULARISED WORLD

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Abstract

The relevance of Biblical Studies is dependent upon the degree to which it can give meaning to the student's life. Positivist education has, by narrowing people's view of life to the tangible, stripped it of spiritual value of meaning. Therefore, while focussing on biblical documents, Biblical Studies has to restore to people an awareness of the sacred, and enable them to interpret religious symbols signifying meaning in the universe. It is proposed that Eliade's 'hermeneutic of the sacred' may provide a framework within which Biblical Studies may be taught in a relevant manner.

In Europe a new 'genitive theology' is in the making. Believers experience their lives as 'life in exile', because their industrialised and thoroughly secularised environment views religious people in general, and Christians in particular, as 'artefacts' and 'foreigners'. Hence the theology of exile, using Israelite exilic theology as a paradigm for interpreting and alleviating believers' feelings of alienation and for assigning meaning to these experiences.

In a society like ours, in which more and more emphasis is being put on the acquisition of technical skills, 'market orientated' education and 'job training', in which materialism is becoming a dominant value, and in which secularism is rapidly gaining ground, a subject like Biblical Studies is also increasingly looked upon as a relic from the past, and as a foreigner. And we have to take cognizance of this fact in our planning and in our practical education.

1. Analyzing the problem

In spite of the so-called 'Christian nationalist' nature of our education system, our practical education can hardly be called 'Christian'. From their first school year onwards our children are introduced to the so-called 'scientific world-view', that is, a

world-view according to which the real world consists of tangible things only, and where everything relates to everything else in a neat system of cause and effect. At the same time parents, Sunday school teachers, ministers and teachers of religious education tell them of the supernatural world, of God, of evil powers, sin, repentance, salvation, and so forth. On the one hand they are indoctrinated with a thoroughly positivistic view of the world and of truth. On the other hand they are told about a world which has no place in positivistic values. A quotation from Russell's *Unpopular Essays* will illustrate the point:

The Ages of Faith ... were the time when the clergy had things all their own way. Daily life was full of miracles, wrought by saints and wizardry perpetrated by devils and necromancers. Many thousands of witches were burnt at the stake. Men's sins were punished by pestilence and famine, by earthquake, flood, and fire. And yet, strange to say, they were even more sinful than they are nowadays ...

During the last 400 years, during which the growth of science has gradually shown men how to acquire knowledge of the ways of nature and mastery over natural forces, the clergy have fought a losing battle against science, in astronomy and physiology, in biology and psychology and sociology (Russell 1976:84).

Children are thus confronted with two incompatible world-views.

This problem is resolved in either of two ways, and often in both ways at the same time:

* Firstly, reality is deistically torn apart and compartmentalised into a mundane and supermundane world, that is, into a world where observation, referential meaning and rational argument rule, and an invisible world in which one 'simply' has to believe.

* Secondly, 'religion' is presented as a strictly private and purely 'spiritual' affair. There is, in our educational system and its cosmological or epistemological basis, no way in which the one view can be related to the other. As a matter of fact, instead of viewing religiosity as a structural element of human consciousness, positivism explicitly declares religious views of the world as a certain phase in the development of humankind, which is to be replaced by a 'scientific' view.¹

This state of affairs causes children to acquire a 'scientific' as well as a 'religious' view on reality, the one superimposed over the other. The 'religious' world-view is in fact suppressed by the 'scientific'. Different situations and environments 'activate' the one or the other. The 'scientific' view is used to explain tangible things in a rational manner (e g in chemistry, physics, geography, etc) and the 'religious' view (introduced in lectures on 'religious education') to resort to in cases of personal trouble of the 'heart'. Seeing that most energy and money is spent in the acquisition of the positivistic, secularist view, and seeing that it is by employing this view that

¹ A notion that may just be reaffirmed by the fact that we 'open' our day or week with 'Scripture reading and prayer', and then start with our 'classes'.

one gets good marks and a good job, it is demonstrably the more potent and therefore the more relevant of the two views.² The silent suggestion of our educational policies that 'religiosity' - in spite of our daily Scripture reading and prayer - neither assists us in acquiring 'knowledge' nor 'pays', reaffirms positivism and its world-view in the minds of our children and forces them to live in a dual world.

The dualism imposed on children by our educational system finally leads to people's inability to relate Christian values to ordinary life situations. That is why one often hears that the 'church must stick to its terrain, namely the spiritual, and not interfere' in the fields of politics, economics, medicine, art, literature, and so on. And then the people speaking like that are confessing Christians.

This imposed dualism is perhaps also the reason why courses in Biblical Studies often tend to develop in either of two directions. In some instances the tendency is to emphasize private religious experience. In these cases the course is set to become irrelevant with regard to everyday (communal) life situations and predestined to reinforce the dualistic view of reality referred to earlier.

In other instances, syllabi of Biblical Studies and lectures on the subject, in order to be acceptable on campuses, often tend to yield to the plausibility structures created by the reality of the 'scientific' world-view and to play the campus game of 'science', thereby becoming practically indistinguishable from subjects like literary theory, sociology and history.

Biblical Studies - like theology in general - thus often tend to either reinforce the view of the 'split' universe, or to evade the issue by complying with positivistic 'standards' of science, instead of addressing the reductionism implicit in our whole educational system through the positive revival of the view of a unified universe in which the notion of the sacred has a meaningful role to play.

In this regard Lesslie Newbigin (1986:22) puts his finger on the issue when he writes:

As people who are part of modern Western culture, with its confidence in the validity of scientific methods, how can we move from the place where we explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific world-view, to the place where we explain our modern scientific world-view from the point of view of the gospel?

This, to my mind, is the question to be answered by theologians in general and by bibliologists in particular, and the issue to be addressed by our courses in Biblical Studies.

² The official closure of departments of fine arts, music, etc., at institutions for tertiary education, and the constant call and allocation of funds for the teaching of 'relevant' courses further underline the potency of the 'scientific' view. That such measures actually contradict the ideal of 'Christian' education is seldomly, if ever, grasped.

2. What would not be helpful

The preceding analysis of our societal values, pointing to secularism and 'science' as the causes of our dilemma, may, within the South African (Christian nationalist) tradition, seem to suggest a return to 'fundamental dogmas', and therefore to a fundamentalist (or any other orthodox) approach, because it seems to underscore the basic fundamentalist stand with regard to 'science'. But such a 'return' will, for the following reasons, not really be helpful.

Firstly, in spite of strenuous efforts orthodoxy³, and especially fundamentalism, could not hold its ground over against secularism. The world came to be secularised in spite of fundamentalism. This seems to suggest that fundamentalism does not really present a viable alternative to a dualistic world-view and to secularism. Fundamentalism, rather than taking scientific findings seriously, tried to turn the Bible into a scientific answer book, thereby often contributing towards the ridiculing of the Bible and its message.

Secondly, precisely because of its attitude towards 'modern science', fundamentalism has contributed remarkably towards dualism, in that it forced people to switch constantly between two world-views. As Gilkey (1964:91) remarked: when prospecting oil in Texas, even the most devoted fundamentalist consults geologists instead of biblical scholars. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to relate the fundamentalist world-view to the modern scientific view of the universe.

Thirdly, fundamentalism is based on an epistemological basis similar - if not identical - to the positivist model of the (earlier) natural sciences, namely on naive realism, which is the corner-stone of positivism (Deist 1988). On this basis fundamentalism cannot really provide an alternative to the reductionist view of the world inherent in positivism. It is forever 'doomed' to remain an apologetic undertaking.

Fourthly, fundamentalism tend to simply take a stand over against 'science', without really entering into a meaningful dialogue with 'the scientific world-view'. Because it is a basically dogmatic movement, it tends to simply posit propositions by which it stands or falls. This attitude cannot really lead to the 'evangelization' of the modern world-view.

But neither will 'scientism' or 'liberalism' cure our ailment. Simply adopting a positivist view of the world, thereby banning religious talk to a past 'stage' in human development⁴, or viewing theology as 'misplaced poetics', like Ayer (1974 [1936]:55)

³ The term is here used in its technical sense, and not as referring to theological conservatism in general.

⁴ In this regard Priestly remarks: 'August Comte ... is perhaps the best example of those over-rational immense systemisers who in private seem half-mad and almost entirely at the mercy of unconscious urges which they deny in public ... His famous three stages of development in human thinking ... have never at any time been completely accepted by serious thinkers, but ever since his death in 1857 they might be said to have been haunting the suburbs of modern thought, inspiring the more aggressive

did, will aggravate rather than solve our problem, because, as Mircea Eliade (1969:Preface) has pointed out: ‘... the sacred is an element in the structure of consciousness, not a stage in the history of consciousness’, and if we wilfully suppress that element of our consciousness, J B Priestly’s ‘prophecy’ is fulfilled, when he says: ‘... whatever is built too high, unbalanced or one-sided in consciousness, will be compensated for in the unconscious, which will produce the opposite in an inferior form ...’ (Priestly 1962:80). To simply ignore or suppress consciousness of the sacred (and therefore of the existence of the supernatural world) will inevitably lead to other, inferior, forms of religion, such as the worship of power, violence, despotism, devil worship and the like (cf Du Plessis 1988:10).

To take a classical ‘liberal’ stance is a better option, although not the answer to our problem. Classical liberal theology, like that of Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* and Bultmann’s hermeneutic of *Entmythologisierung*, implicitly holding on to the commitment explicitly stated in biblical stories, took both modern and biblical views seriously, endeavoured to get to the meaning of biblical narratives, and somehow tried to relate those meanings to the moral behaviour of humankind. This is a major advance in comparison with the fundamentalist and ‘scientific’ options, each ignoring a different aspect of the communication between the Bible and modern people.

However, the problem with the liberal option is that the biblical view of the world, and consequently also its proclamation, are not only interpreted in terms of the plausibility structures prescribed by the positivist view of the world, but also judged by these prescriptions. In a sense the liberal option, by making the positivist view of the world the touchstone of interpretation, ascribes a fair amount of credibility to its plausibility structures: merely terming a particular narrative a ‘myth’ is already to interpret it in terms of what ‘really is possible’, thereby offering a sort of excuse for the ‘mistaken’ biblical view. Such tags thus implicitly foster scepticism with regard to the Bible’s own plausibility structure, thereby diminishing the impact of the biblical message itself. One is reminded here of the principle: ‘the scale creates the phenomenon’: using the ‘scale’ of our world-view will inevitably create a phenomenon that cannot surpass or question the scale itself. And one is reminded of Einstein’s insight that it is our theories which enable us to observe objects.⁵ If our theories exclude the possibility of the existence of a particular phenomenon (e.g. a supernatural world), we will not be able to observe that phenomenon, even if it presents itself to our senses.

3. What may be helpful

Perhaps Eliade’s general ‘hermeneutic of the sacred’ may, *mutatis mutandis*, suggest a way out of our dilemma for Biblical Studies. What I can offer here, are mere

rationalists and those camp-followers of science whose claims are more sweeping than those of scientists themselves. (And it is easy to see why they should be, for scientists of distinction are themselves imaginative and intuitive, far closer to artists than their followers are).

⁵ ‘Erst die Theorie entscheidet darüber, was man beobachten kann’ (Heisenberg 1969:111).

outlines of suggestions regarding the interpretation of the Bible that may be helpful in creating an opening for the biblical message to really question our own world-view.

In the preface to his *The quest. History and meaning in religion* Eliade makes the following illuminating remarks:

... it is difficult to imagine how the human mind could function without the conviction that there is something irreducibly real in the world, and it is impossible to imagine how consciousness could arise without conferring meaning on man's drives and experiences. The awareness of a real and meaningful world is intimately related to the discovery of the sacred. Through the experience of the sacred, the human mind grasped the difference between that which reveals itself as real, powerful, rich, and meaningful, and that which does not - i e, the chaotic and dangerous flux of things, their fortuitous, meaningless appearances and disappearances.

Three important concepts are introduced and interconnected here, namely 'the sacred', 'realness', and 'meaning'. Positivism's doctrines about reality ridiculed the sacred by denying 'realness' to a (side of the) world inaccessible to the senses, thereby stripping human existence of its meaning. Thus, if we want to help cure our world, which has become meaningless to so many people that believers view themselves as 'exiles' in our world, we will have to start taking the reality of the sacred seriously. And is this not what the basic message of the Bible is all about, namely that everything belongs to God, that everything reminds one of God, and that everything one does is done 'before God'?⁶

To really get to grips with the meaning of life we will thus have to start off by encouraging people to share the commitment to the sacred voluntarily. Without this basic commitment - which runs contrary to the positivist reductionist view of the world - our students will not be in a position to grasp the message conveyed by the biblical view on humankind, nature, history, etc.

Secondly, the way in which we approach biblical interpretation of reality will have to be 'from within' and not 'from without', that is, we will have to understand and explicate biblical views from the standpoint of its own view of the world, and not in terms of our (positivist) world-view and ideals of 'science', which can easily distort the views held by biblical authors beyond recognition. For instance, if agricultural festivals and accompanying rites of Old Testament times are not understood in terms of ancient people's idea of the sacredness of nature, and from their consequent logical urge to participate in the rhythm of nature, such festivals and rites will be interpreted as superstition, and not as an expression of true religion.

⁶ An interesting question arises here, namely whether or not the Old Testament 'writing' prophets were the first to start the process of secularization by hitting out against 'nature worship' and by declaring those who took the sacredness of nature seriously, 'fools'. We cannot go into the question here, but it is perhaps only a membrane that divides 'nature worship' from the experience of the 'sacredness' of nature, the latter of which the prophets seem to have acknowledged.

Developments in ethnology, sociology and psychology have supplied us with very useful tools in understanding the close relationship between a people's culture and its religious language, rites, customs and beliefs, but these developments have also created the grave danger of reducing these religious beliefs and practices to their seeming societal 'causes'. In this regard Eliade (1969:4) sounded a timely, but often unheeded, warning:

Like it or not, the scholar has not finished his work when he has reconstructed the history of a religious form or brought out its sociological, economic and political contexts. In addition, he must understand its meaning - that is, identify, and elucidate the situations and positions that have induced or made possible its appearance or its triumph at a particular moment.

Describing the moment in which a particular religious notion or belief functioned meaningfully is not the same as understanding its meaning within a complete religious system. That is why a mere description of a religious idea or a mere 'literary' analysis of a biblical story or poem (that is, pointing out the literary construction and linguistic interrelationships of the constituent parts of a text) is by far not enough. The meaning of such a story or poem lies in the total religious system (or symbolic universe) in which the text originated, referred and functioned, a system that, in its turn, is closely linked up with the total cultural setting of the particular believing community. It is through the encounter with this total view, this total system of assigning meaning to life situations, that the reader can experience *Verfremdung*, and through which his or her own way of existence can be fundamentally questioned. Again, a quotation from Eliade (1969:4-6) may be helpful:

Obviously such 'encounters' will become culturally creative only when the scholar has passed beyond the stage of pure erudition - in other words, when, after having collected, described, and classified his documents, he has also made an effort to understand them on their own plane of reference ... Works of art, like 'religious data', have a mode of being that is peculiar to themselves; they exist on their own plane of reference, in their own particular universe. The fact that this universe is not the physical universe of immediate experience does not imply their nonreality ... [It] seems to us that a religious datum reveals its deeper meaning when it is considered on its plane of reference, and not when it is reduced to one of the secondary aspects of its contexts ... Admitting the historicity of religious experiences does not imply that they are reducible to non-religious forms of behavior.⁷

⁷ This argument reminds of Heisenberg's (1969:283-286) argument: 'Mit der Forderung, äusserste Klarheit in allen Begriffen anzustreben, kann ich mich natürlich einverstanden erklären; aber das Verbot, über allgemeineren Fragen nachzudenken, weil es dort keine in diesem Sinne klaren Begriffe gebe, will mir nicht einleuchten; denn bei einem solchen Verbot könnte man auch the Quantentheorie nicht verstehen ... Die Quantentheorie ist ein wunderbares Beispiel dafür, dass man einen Sachverhalt in völliger Klarheit verstanden haben kann und gleichzeitig doch weiss, dass man nur in Bildern und Gleichnissen von ihm reden kann ... Wir wissen, dass es sich bei der Religion um eine Sprache der

But then the attitude of the biblical researcher towards his/her texts also has to change. Instead of studying these texts in an 'objective' way - as we have been taught to do by positivism - he or she must get involved with the significations provided by these texts. Eliade's (1969:62) diagnosis of the reasons why we so often lack this kind of involvement may be true of our teaching of Biblical Studies as well:

Obviously the historian of religions [read: Bible students] himself will feel the consequences of his own hermeneutical work. If these consequences are not always evident, it is because the majority of historians of religions defend themselves against the messages with which their documents are filled ...[They] fall back on their personal religious faith, or they take refuge in a materialism or behaviourism impervious to every spiritual shock.

If we, as well as our students, will not protect ourselves from the influence of the significations of the biblical documents on our consciousness, but remain open to the 'spiritual shocks' of our documents by studying them from within their own 'centre' and on their own 'plane of reference', the result will be inevitable: our consciousness (indoctrinated as it is by positivist values) will be changed (Eliade 1969:62).

Biblical Studies will thus have to use the tools of sociology, ethnology, psychology, literary science and other relevant disciplines, in order to elucidate the different contexts of particular religious symbols, views and customs. But it must proceed beyond that point, carefully avoiding the (positivist) reduction of such views and customs to (mere) functions of these contexts, by interpreting them 'on their own plane of reference', that is, within the total system of religious beliefs and within their own presuppositions, which include the particular view of the world. Only then will the meaning of such views become apparent, and will our own (positivist) world-view and our own (merely mundane) interpretation of life situations be challenged - that is, if we remain open to such challenges and 'spiritual shocks'.

A third item from Eliade's hermeneutic of the sacred which may be useful in understanding and teaching biblical perspectives to students is the insight that religious beliefs and practices reveal the relevant believers' mode of being in the world (Eliade 1969:10). In order to understand this 'mode' one has to get to the 'centre' of the relevant religion. But here one has to be very careful not to assign such a 'centre' to the religious system 'from without', by either interpreting it in terms of a foreign world-view, or by picking some or other phenomenon or belief in that system as the 'logical origin' of 'original form' of the whole system. By doing this, anthropologists have for a long time misunderstood certain religious systems as 'totemism'. For the same reason biblical scholars have mistaken Canaanite religion for a mere 'fertility cult', while the 'fertility rituals' have only been epiphenomena of their conception of the sacredness of life. Questions to be answered in regard of the Bible would thus be of the following nature: 'What was the hermeneutical centre of Yahwism, and how did it relate to the centre of Baalism? What was the

und Gleichnisse handeln muss, die nicht genau das darstellen können, was gemeint ist ...[Es] bleibt doch die Aufgabe gestellt, diesen Sinn [der Gleichnisse - FED] zu verstehen, da er offenbar einen entscheidenden Teil unserer Wirklichkeit bedeutet ...'

hermeneutical centre of post-exilic Judaism, and what shift in this centre made Christianity unacceptable to first century Jews? What was the hermeneutical centre of Johannine and Pauline Christianity? What was the hermeneutical centre of religious movements such as gnosticism and apocalypticism? How do these centres relate to the centre of our own understanding of Christianity?' Such questions are important, because their answers (if given 'from within') will not only make clearer the relationships and differences among different movements, but will first and foremost assist us in understanding the way in which particular systems of belief (including our own) ascribed meaning to life, and how their (and our) symbols, rituals, customs and practices sustain(ed) those views of the world.

These are but a few preliminary remarks regarding the problem addressed in this article, intended to stimulate further thought on the issue, but hopefully enough to indicate that there are indeed other options open to us if we want to make our subject more relevant to ourselves and to our students, by assisting them to find new meaning in life through their confrontation with a radically different view on reality than the one they have been brought up in.

4. Consequences for Biblical Studies

In conclusion I would like to point out a few consequences of the 'hermeneutic of the sacred' for the designing of syllabi for Biblical Studies, and for teaching the subject.

Firstly, such an approach will preclude purely 'informative' syllabi, in which 'introduction science', history, exegetical methods, etc, take up the paramount position.

Secondly, Biblical Studies will have as its first aim to help students discover the total religious system in which a particular author or community lived, and give prominence to such items of knowledge that will assist students in understanding such religious systems from within, rather than from a distance.

Thirdly, Biblical Studies will concentrate much more on the hermeneutics of religious symbols and language than on particular techniques of interpretation.

Fourthly, Biblical Studies will ask of its students (and its teachers) a particular commitment and involvement, which need not be of any dogmatic nature, but which will ask of them at least to grant the texts the right to present their interpretations of the world within their own plausibility structures, and to be taken seriously on that level.

Fifthly, Biblical Studies will make much more of the different religious interpretations of the world offered by the different biblical authors and the different movements, whose interpretations have been preserved in the texts of the Bible, in order to offer the student different options within the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Sixthly, Biblical Studies will, rather than aiming at the acquisition of a particular amount of readily available 'knowledge' and technical skills, aim at presenting

students with a way of finding meaning in life, and of making sense of reality by helping them make real and honest contact with their consciousness of the sacred that has been suppressed by their lifelong indoctrination with positivist values.

Hopefully we may, in this way, succeed in restoring for believers a meaningful, unified view of reality and in assisting them to regain respect for God, nature, fellow human beings and for themselves.

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