

THE BIBLE IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

By LEONARD JOHNSTON

THE USE of the bible in religious lessons would appear to be a fairly obvious procedure; and it may seem that in what follows I am mainly concerned with dissuading people from this. This is not actually my purpose; but it is true that I think it is sometimes used without sufficient thought for what is involved in it, as if the bible were some sort of 'magical' book, which should work because it is 'the word of God'.

The Word of God and the community

Perhaps we could start with this phrase, 'the word of God'. This is obviously a figure of speech; it is no more literally true than 'the right hand of God'. What we are really trying to convey is the idea that God is in contact with men, that he does not leave men without evidence of him,¹ that he is involved with his work of creation. This involvement is of course total — 'outside of him nothing exists' — but one particular group of people showed themselves particularly aware of his activity; it was in fact the determining factor in their existence. This common experience moulded them into a people, and they are therefore known as 'the people of God', the nation of Israel. Their feeling for their national experience is then recorded, in spoken words first and then in writing; and at this point the phrase 'the word of God' begins to have meaning.

This is the Old Testament. The formation of the New Testament follows essentially the same pattern; except that here we find the 'Word' used in its primary sense — God's Word is a Person. That Word became flesh, and in the humanity of Jesus 'the fulness of godhead dwells in bodily form'.² His actions, his words, his death and his resurrection are expressions of God in our world; and through this activity a community is formed: 'To as many as received him, he gave power to become sons of God'.³ This community then reflects on its experience,

¹ Acts 14, 17.

² Col 2, 9.

³ Jn 1, 13.

and records it; and this is the New Testament. The book (or the collection of writings) is the distillation and crystallization of the community's experience of the Word made flesh.

According to Leo XIII, the scriptures are the word of God because God moved the author to write, assisted his faculties and enlightened his mind, in such a way that what he wrote was all and only what God wanted. To those familiar with this sort of treatment, it should perhaps be pointed out that the present approach is not meant to be opposed to that; rather it is to bring out a different aspect — the social dimension. The two are not in opposition. It will already have occurred to many readers, for example, that generalizations like 'the nation, the society, the community' need much more qualification in practice. When did it ever happen that any group of people — fifty or a hundred, not to mention several thousands — perceived any phenomenon in exactly the same way? If we think of an unmistakable and apparently unambiguous physical event like rainfall: for some it will be 'a bit of a shower', for others 'a veritable torrent'; for some it will mean unmitigated disaster, for others a blessed relief. We do not therefore deny the role, in this process of interpretation, of specially gifted individuals — inspired prophets, perhaps. But such prophetic figures arise within the community, 'speak the language' of the society (in a more than merely literal sense), and must eventually win acceptance by the people as a whole, if their witness is to be anything more than a private, eccentric phenomenon.

The Word in the Bible and the Word today

Moreover, the action of God — God's self-communication — is not restricted to any particular time or place. This was the lesson which the first christians, from a jewish milieu, had with some difficulty to assimilate: 'I have now come to realize that God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him'.⁴ God is not more concerned with the israelites than he is with the egyptians, or the chinese or the indians; and he did not stop being concerned in the first century A.D. God is present and active now, today, in our lives, in our situation, in our history. And again (as we said above of the formation of the bible), what is important is not simply God's activity with us, but our appreciation of that activity. It may remind one of Paul Tillich's

⁴ Acts 10, 34.

description of revelation: if religion is about our ultimate concern, then revelation is any experience which reveals to us the true nature of our ultimate concern. This is of course of particular importance to a christian, since the mind of a christian — that by which he interprets his situation and the events in his life — has been refashioned after the mind of God: 'The depths of a man can only be known by his own spirit, and in the same way the depths of God can only be known by the Spirit of God. Now instead of the spirit of the world, we have received the Spirit that comes from God'.⁵

We would therefore appear to be faced with something of a problem here: the bible is traditionally a completely unique example of 'the word of God', and yet God's self-communication cannot be limited, either geographically or historically, to this relatively minute portion of human experience which is contained within the bible. But we are dealing here with a particular example of that paradox within which the whole of christianity stands — the paradox of Incarnation and Transcendence. Yes, the Word became flesh; but 'the flesh has nothing to offer; what if you should see the Son of man ascend where he was before?'.⁶ The Word has become flesh, with all that this implies for the human condition; but it is the Resurrection which is the climax of the redemptive process. And it is resurrection, not apotheosis — it is neither the divinization of a human being nor yet the abandonment of the human situation in favour of another, non-human, state. The christian believes in the resurrection of the body, with both continuity and discontinuity: 'What is sown is not what is going to come . . . what is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable; what is sown is contemptible, but what is raised is glorious; what is sown is weak, what is raised is powerful; when it is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised it embodies the Spirit'.⁷ Jesus was truly divine from the moment of the Incarnation; he was no less truly human even after the Ascension; but by the Resurrection he transcended the merely human and was completely open to the power of the Spirit of God. The human destiny, similarly, is not to shuffle off this mortal coil, but to transcend what in us is not free to follow the Spirit. Christianity is not humanism; but the difference is not one of time (as if all our hopes were pinned to a 'hereafter' to which this life was a mere preparation); it is not one of space (as if one could speak of a 'heaven' completely distinct from a life on earth); it is not one of

⁵ 1 Cor 2, 11.

⁶ Jn 6, 62 ff.

⁷ 1 Cor 15, 37-44.

quantity (as if one could speak of a 'supernatural' which would be a topping-up and addition to the natural); it is a total difference of quality, which is, however, expressed within the human situation. So the experience recorded in the bible is not essentially different from our normal human experience; but the bible also communicates that experience in such a way as to convey an insight into the transcendent quality of it. It is rather like the function of any great artist in any field of art; Van Gogh, for example, did not paint a corn-field which he alone had seen, nor on the other hand did he simply represent accurately a scene familiar to us all to provide a sort of 'memento' of it; but he so painted this familiar scene as to open our eyes to qualities which we had not previously been aware of, to open us up to 'the shock of recognition'.

In religious education, then, it is not a choice between God's communication contained in the bible and his communication with us in our lives today; it is not a question of biblical themes or life-themes. It is not either-or; it is both-and; because the function of the bible is to illuminate our own experience, to help us to hear what God is saying to us now. Religion is not a separate and specialized portion of human experience, and religious education is not about special materials and techniques; it is about 'meaning', it is about the meaning and value implicit in all human experience. Most teachers have probably heard of the integrated scheme of work on communications, in which the history lesson dealt with the history of transport, the geography lesson dealt with air-routes of the world, the english lesson with myth — and the religious education lesson with angels. This is the sort of incomprehension to which religious teachers themselves have probably contributed. It is no worse than the scheme for which the specialist was responsible, where some of the children were asked to study Australia, as a major wool-producing country — and all for the sake of the Good Shepherd in the religious education class! This is a purely 'extrinsic' treatment of the theme. The great themes of the bible are the great themes of human life.

The Word and the Spirit

But there still remains the other 'pole' of revelation; God is communicating with us continually, but if we have not ears to hear, it is to no avail. Therefore another important task for religious education is to develop the capacity to hear. This may be called 'training the conscience', but it means sensitivity and alertness to the movement of the Spirit in us. It means stressing the importance of sincerity and fidelity. One may illustrate something of what is involved by our attitude to miracles. The word miracle is connected with the latin *miror*, to wonder.

It does not mean that God's presence and activity are to be seen only in the miraculous event; but the miraculous event more clearly brings to our attention — it makes us wonder — the power and presence of God in all events. To submit to the thrill and excitement of a miracle, and not to be alive to God's action elsewhere, is not religious, it is superstitious. We may remember our Lord's rebuff of the man who came to him seeking a cure for his son: 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe'. Jesus rejected the role of 'wonder-worker', of magician, and his reproof was a means of directing the man's attention to what was really important. One of the tasks of religious education, too, may be to direct people away from the emotional self-indulgence of concern with 'religion', to the much more demanding concern with the sacred within the secular. Training conscience, then, involves developing the capacity for judgment — including the delicate area of the relationship between personal judgment and one's responsibility to the community of the Body of Christ in which the Spirit is also present. And since there is obviously so much ambiguity involved here, it means also stressing the importance of prayer.

The Word made flesh: history, literature and socialization

But to return now at last to the bible and the role of the bible in religious education: it is possible to identify three particular needs in biblical teaching.

There is first of all a need to communicate some of the facts about biblical life, such as would be appropriate in the junior school: some idea about the geographical setting; a simple outline of the history; the development of the people of Israel and its relationship with other nations; some idea about social conditions, nomadic, tribal and urban. Secondly, the teacher needs to help the pupil to an appreciation of the different forms of literature which are found in the bible, of the way the bible came into being, and the relationship between the literature and the life of the community. This would best be done when similar studies are being pursued in english literature. And finally, the teacher will be helping the pupil to cultivate the ability to use the bible as a source for 'the word of God' (which is not at all synonymous with a source for doctrine and moral teaching).

From one point of view, the last is the only properly religious use of the bible. The other two are useful mainly as a prerequisite for a proper understanding of the text. If the teacher is not careful here, and if these are the only religious lessons available to the pupils, they may be left with the impression that religion is indented with ancient history and

ancient literature. Even this, however, should not be dismissed too easily. An important aspect of education is the process of 'socialization': we are not simply teaching facts and giving a selection of useful information; we are teaching what society expects us to teach, we are teaching those things which will help the child to take his place in our society and to move within it with some confidence. One of the things we are doing when we teach english is helping the child to communicate with other english-speaking people; when we are teaching history we are helping the child to share that past experience on which our present is based. Any english child can be expected to 'react' to words like 'Armada', 'Dunkirk' and to dates like '1066 A.D.'. But a christian child is also a member of the christian society; can he not equally be expected to 'react' to terms like 'exodus', 'covenant', or 'promise'?

But these last two examples bring us back to a point already referred to; for 'covenant' and 'promise' are also terms which are familiar outside the christian situation; and this reminds us that the idea of 'socialization' is not as simple as it might at first appear. For we all belong to various, overlapping 'societies'; and ultimately we all belong to the one society of the human race. 'Socialization' is one of the aims of education, but ultimately this means 'humanization'. We teach geography; but this is much more than the child's immediate locality; it will deal also with the relationships between different countries, it will deal with the whole world; nowadays particularly it may also situate our planet in the whole universe. We teach english language and english history, but we would not think it out of place to teach other languages and the history of other countries. Now the christian, too, is a member of other societies than the christian community; for this is in fact co-terminous and co-extensive with the whole human race. This is not the same as the obvious truism that, for example, an american truck-driver, an irish farmer and a french musician are all also members of the human race. That is of course true; but the reverse is not true — not all members of the human race can be american truck-drivers, irish farmers or french musicians. But with christianity the reverse *is* true; all christians are human beings, and any member of the human race can be a christian. And it was to all mankind that God spoke, not just to the israelites. Our Lord was born of jewish stock; but he is the man for all men. It is not surprising, then, if terms like 'covenant' and 'promise' are also terms which have meaning also in a purely human context. It is not 'either-or'; it is 'both-and'.

But there is here enormous room for confusion, especially in the teaching situation. Let us say that the teacher is dealing with the fairly

complex subject of 'sacrifice' in the Old Testament. He may be dealing with this subject because it is part of the culture and sociology of the people of Israel, and to this extent he may deal with it as a university professor of Old Testament Studies might deal with it, which in turn is not very different from the way in which his classical colleague might deal with greek sacrificial customs; with the exception that the religious education teacher might justify it on the grounds that a christian is 'spiritually a semite': on the grounds that a christian has been 'grafted onto' this israelite stock,⁸ so that all its customs are of interest to us. For Jesus himself was a jew and his mind was formed by these traditions. Or again the teacher may deal with Old Testament sacrifices at a rather deeper and more universal human level: asking what sacrifice means in human life, asking what urge or instinct or need the israelites were responding to in this way. Or again, the teacher may deal with it in what may be a more recognizably religious way, trying to show the relationship between these sacrifices and Christ's sacrifice which we often call 'fulfilment': the two do in fact mutually illuminate each other. Now each of these methods of dealing with the subject is valid, but each of them is different. People are sometimes disappointed by a book or an article or a lecture on a biblical topic, because, they feel, it has almost nothing to do with 'religion'. Others feel equally uneasy when they read a patristic homily on a biblical text, or a rather pious treatment of it, because so little attention is paid to the literal meaning, to the historical situation or the literary form. But it must be recognized that both the scientific and the devotional use of the bible is legitimate; what is important is that the teacher should be aware of the distinction and be clear on what he is doing. The difficulty is that Israel is essentially a religious people — they *are* the people of God; so that all of its institutions are more or less directly religious. The choice of the example of 'sacrifice' merely serves to bring out this point. We would not have the same difficulty if we were dealing with, say, the history of France. Here too we would obviously have to deal with religion: with the repercussions of the French Revolution on the situation of the Church in France, with Lammenais and the ultramontane controversy. But we would also be dealing with other things as well, with the effect of the revolution on relations with America and England, with Lammenais and Lacordaire also as literary figures; so that in a history lesson there would be little danger of confusion about the teacher's purpose. But

⁸ Rom 11, 17.

in dealing with Israel's predominantly religious institutions in what is in any case a religious lesson can lead to great confusion in the pupil's mind.

The Word of God and revelation

Finally, the teacher is helping the pupils to come to an appreciation of the bible as 'the word of God'. We have already noted that this means more than simply using the bible as a source for doctrinal statements or moral prescriptions. For one thing, relatively little of the bible consists of this sort of statement. What would one make of this sort of passage, for example: 'Asa slept with his ancestors and was buried in the Citadel of David his ancestor'?⁹ This is indeed a statement, but it has little discernible theological content. On the other hand, 'Let everything that breathes praise Yahweh',¹⁰ is certainly theological, but it is a prayer, a wish, an ejaculation, rather than a statement. And much more of the bible consists of that sort of sentiment than of directly theological statements such as 'In the beginning, God made heaven and earth'. Of course one could presumably reduce everything in the bible to a direct theological statement of one kind or another. But this would be a much briefer document than the bible, and one would be left wondering what the point of the rest is, and why we had a bible at all in the first place.

There may be some confusion here about the meaning of the concept of revelation. According to Vatican II, revelation is essentially concerned with God himself, and our call to fellowship with him. God is not concerned simply with communicating facts — an extrinsic and intellectual relationship. He communicates himself. Or, to put it another way, he enters into communication with us. And as with any human communication, especially communication between friends, the content of the communication — what is actually said — is normally much less important than the fact of entering into communication. (What information of any deep significance is conveyed by the statement, 'good morning', or by a handshake or a kiss?) Revelation means primarily that in it God enters into a relationship with us.

In the judaean-christian tradition, the bible — the Old Testament specifically — is a privileged medium of revelation. What this means is often summed up in the phrase 'salvation history'. But this term too

⁹ 1 Kg 15, 24.

¹⁰ Ps 150, 6.

turns out, on closer scrutiny, to have a surprising range of connotations. Here I would just like to offer one way of looking at it.

We begin, again, with God who acts, God who is involved in the human situation. But this is a historical situation; and the difficulty about history is that it is over as soon as it has happened. To take an example from israelite history: God, they believed, was involved in the exodus; but the exodus was a historical event and therefore could only be effective for the relatively small group of people who happened to be present at that time. A common human response to this predicament was to 'remember' the original action, to make it a living reality either verbally or by action — by myth and ritual. Israel adopted and adapted this mentality; and what we have in the bible is Israel's 'myth' of the great deeds of God. Israel's response to God's saving action is recorded — in a variety of literary forms, not just in narrative — for later generations.

In a way, one might even say, without going into the field of myth and comparative religion, that it is the same as with any study of literature and any study of history. A study of literature is not merely the study of grammatical and linguistic forms. Nor does a study of history mean merely noting the facts; it is an invitation to enter into the psychological experience of the participants. So in the bible, the community's awareness and insight into the action of God is recorded for us, so that we can share that awareness and insight, so that we can make the same response as was asked of the original participants. Christ's death was a historical event, and as such occurred 'once and for all'; but Paul's preaching of the Good News 'is the power of God to salvation for all who have faith'.¹¹ Indeed, from one point of view we are in a more favourable position than that of the original observers: 'Many who saw it, did not believe'. But in the scriptures we have not simply an eye-witness record, but a vision of faith: 'These things are written so that you might believe, and believing, have life in his name'.¹²

Conclusion

May I end by repeating the hope with which I began — that I have not turned teachers away from the bible. I am addressing myself primarily not to teachers of the bible, but to teachers of religion who for one reason or another feel called on to use the bible in their teaching; and I feel that I have been trying to deal with confusions and uneasiness

¹¹ Rom 1, 16.

¹² Jn 20, 31.

which are in their minds anyway. I have not tried to suggest ways of solving these difficulties, because it does not seem to me to be the sort of situation that calls for solutions, or at least any other solution than to know what the confusions are. A teacher of religious education is not expected to be a biblical specialist, *au fait* with all the latest scholarship in all the branches of biblical studies — linguistic, historical, archaeological, literary and theological. The role of the teacher can be expressed in many ways; but one of them is helping young people 'to become fully mature with the fulness of Christ himself'.¹³ All that we ask is that the teachers have some awareness of how the bible can contribute to this end.

To sum up, then, what I have been trying to say:

- (a) the bible is not a sort of 'magical' book; nor is the revelation it communicates to us completely separate from the revelation which comes to us within our own experience.
- (b) The holy Spirit who speaks to us in the bible is the same Spirit who speaks to us in our own conscience and in our own community, the Body of Christ.
- (c) The biblical revelation, as an expression of 'the word in the flesh', needs some understanding of the historical and literary factors involved; but even more it demands — and contributes to — some understanding of what we mean by 'the word of God'.

¹³ Eph 4, 23.