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## The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible

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One of the most exciting new developments on college and university campuses in recent times, and also one of the most significant and potentially creative developments on the religious scene, is surely the emergence and flourishing of liberal-arts departments of religion. Perhaps what is happening can be summed up most pithily by saying that the transition has been from the teaching of religion to the study of religion. Where professors used to instruct, they now inquire. They once attempted to impart what they themselves knew, and what they hoped (of late, with decreasing expectation) to make interesting; now, on the contrary, they inquire, into something that both for them and for their students is incontrovertibly interesting, but is something that they do not quite understand.

Part of the excitement and potential significance derives from the fact that, for the first time in many long years, with the setting up of religion departments a number of very bright, very concerned young men and women find themselves enabled to throw themselves with vigor and thoroughness into a serious wrestling with religious issues, intellectually, with no prior commitment as to where they will come out in the end. At one time the Church offered the only full-time employment for an intellectual with religious interests, or a religious person with primarily intellectual interests. This worked well, classically, so long as the concept

*God* signified, intellectually and emotionally, reality and truth; later, when a commitment to truth began to be felt and seen as different (or perhaps different) from a Christian commitment, fewer and fewer took up (or could take up) the challenge. Now that appointments in religion departments are available, highly promising, highly intelligent, highly serious young people are once again able to devote themselves unreservedly to the task of searching for understanding, knowledge, and integrity in the religio-intellectual field.

The transition from the seminary to the liberal arts department, as the locus of inquiry, has been marked conspicuously by a change, then, in emphasis and form and mood; yet less conspicuously than some would like by a change in content. The traditional seminary divisions of the subject matter or "disciplines," still characterize the religion department more thoroughly than many wish. The salient upsurge of the study of Asian religious life is an obvious exception. One may be allowed to wonder, however, whether both student and faculty eagerness in "History of Religion"—usually signifying the history of religious groups other than one's own—is altogether related to the novel content, or whether it is in substantial part a function rather of the new mood and method, orientation and attitude, that are brought to bear in these new studies and are felt to be missing from the old. Does the popularity of the study of Asia religiously stem, at least in part, from the fact that those who study it are able to approach it with to-day's interest, to-day's questions, to-day's moods and methods? The study of Christian data still seems bound within questions, moods, methods of an earlier era.

Let us take the field of Bible as an illustration. If I were chairman of a religion department, I would certainly wish to have in the curriculum a course on the Bible, and on the faculty a person competent to teach it. What kind of course and what kind of teacher, however, would I be looking for?

The courses actually available, and the training of those actually available to teach them, are on the whole calculated to turn a fundamentalist into a liberal. Often they can do this with great skill, but it is hardly any more a relevant task. The more advanced or sophisticated *Biblicists* have moved beyond this, to the point where they are competent historians of the religious life of the ancient Near East or of the first-century Eastern Mediterranean world. This is fine, for that small group who happen to be interested in the religious history of those particular sectors of the total religious history of humankind; but these people seem on the whole little equipped to answer a question as to why one should be especially interested in those particular times and places, rather than in, let us say, classical India or medieval China or modern America.

The sort of course and the sort of teacher for whom I would be looking in the field of Bible would be different. Let me attempt to delineate what, as I see it, might fruitfully be attempted.

The course that I envisage would be concerned with the Bible as scripture. It would begin with some consideration of scripture as a generic phenomenon. The questions to which it would address itself would be questions such as these: What is involved in taking a certain body of literature, separating it off from all others, and giving it a sacred status? What is involved psychologically; what, sociologically; and what, historically? How and where did it first come about? How did the Christian Church happen to take up this practice? What attitudes, magical or otherwise, towards writing are involved? And—once this is done—what consequences follow? One would wish a brief but perhaps striking comparativist introduction: the concept and role of scripture in other major communities—Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and the like. Salient differences, as well as striking similarities, could be touched briefly. (For example, the thesis could be considered that in the Islamic system the Qur’ān fulfills a function comparable to the role played in the Christian pattern rather by the person of Jesus Christ while a closer counterpart to Christian scriptures are the Islamic Ḥadīth “Traditions.”) The role of formalized and sacralized oral tradition in some societies, as distinct from both written scripture on the one hand and ordinary colloquial discourse on the other, might also be broached. The religious significance of the introduction of writing into human history would be touched upon, perhaps. The basic issue would be: scripture as a religious form.

All this, however, would be introductory only. The bulk of the course would be historical: an investigation into the history of the Bible over the past twenty centuries. Before one considers this with any specificity, the prime point is to recognize that in this fashion the Bible would be treated as a living force in the life of the Church. My own field is Islamics; and in that field I devote a fair amount of time and energy to trying to make vivid to my students the fact that the Qur’ān, if it is to be understood in anything remotely approaching its religious significance, must be seen as not merely a seventh-century Arabian document (which has tended to be the way in which Western Orientalists, as distinct from religionists, have treated it) but also as an eighth-, and a twelfth-, and a seventeenth-, and a twentieth-century document, and one intimately intertwined in the life not only of Arabia but also of East Africa and Indonesia. For the Qur’ān has played a role—formative, dominating, liberating, spectacular—in the lives of millions of people, philosophers and peasants, politicians and merchants and housewives, saints and sinners, in Baghdad and Cordoba and Agra, in the Soviet Union since the

Communist revolution, and so on. That role is worth discerning and pondering. The attempt to understand the Qur'an is to understand how it has fired the imagination, and inspired the poetry, and formulated the inhibitions, and guided the ecstasies, and teased the intellects, and ordered the family relations and the legal chicaneries, and nurtured the piety, of hundreds of millions of people in widely diverse climes and over a series of radically divergent centuries.

To study the Qur'an, then, is to study much more than its text; and much more of social conditions than those that *preceded* (or accompanied) its first appearance in history and contributed to its formation. The important history for an understanding of this scripture (as scripture) is not only of its background but also, and perhaps especially, of its almost incredible ongoing career since. What produced the Qur'an is an interesting and legitimate question, but a secondary one. Less minor than it, less antiquarian, religiously much more significant, is the marvelous question, What has the Qur'an produced? Indeed, any interest that the former question may have is derivative from the power of some at least tacit answer to the latter. It is because of what the Qur'an has been doing, mightily and continuingly, in human lives for all these centuries *after* it was launched, that anyone takes the trouble to notice its launching at all. For religious life, the story of formative centuries is logically subordinate to that of subsequent ages. (It is possible to overlook this fact only from within faith; that is, only when the significance for the later period is taken as given.)

The Qur'an is significant not primarily because of what historically went into it but because of what historically has come out of it; what it has done to human lives, and what people have done to it and with it and through it. The Qur'an is significant because it has shown itself capable of serving a community as a form through which its members have been able (have been enabled) to deal with the problems of their lives, to confront creatively a series of varied contexts. To understand the Qur'an is to understand both that, and how, this has been happening.

One may go further and ask: What is it about being human, that one can take such a book (one that outsiders often do not even find interesting) and, having made it a scripture for oneself, can go out into the world and in terms of it build a community and a civilization, produce literature and art and law and commercial structures, and in terms of it continue to find meaning and courage in life when the civilization wanes, and nobility in death when life wanes?

He or she is a feeble and sorry historian who underestimates—under-perceives—the power of symbols in human life, or the power of a scripture to function symbolically and as an organized battery of symbols.

To return to the Christian Bible. It has not played in Western or Christian life the central role that the Qur'an has played in Islamic life; yet the query, what significance *has* it had, is clearly no mean question.

The first point, then, is to see the Bible not merely as a set of ancient documents or even as a first- and second-century product but as a third-century and twelfth-century and nineteenth-century and contemporary agent. Since I myself am an historian, I suppose that my evident predilection is to treat this historically, and to feel that in no other way can its significance be understood. As already suggested, however, I feel that its role (and indeed the role of anything else) in history can be illuminated, and even must be illuminated, by light thrown on human history by psychological, sociological, and comparativist perspectives. The dominant point in this case is to understand the potential and the actual roles of such a scripture in the life of the imagination, its role as an organizer of ideas, images, and emotions, as an activating symbol.

The analytic mode that for some time has dominated Western intellectual life, particularly academic life, tends to take anything that exists and to break it down into parts. Historians too have become victims of this, even at times to the point of failing to recognize that the first business of any historian is to be astonished that any given thing in the historical stream does exist and to try to understand how it came together and what its coming together subsequently meant. If something has been important, we must analyse not only it but also its importance; its history, almost, is the history of its importance. The analysis of a thing is interesting and can be highly significant, but only subsidiarily; strictly, the history of that thing *begins* once its parts are synthesized. The historian's task is to study the process of synthesis, plus the subsequent process of that synthesis as it moves through later history.

There has developed a tendency, one might almost say, to "orient history backwards," as though the task of the historian vis-à-vis any phenomenon in the course of the human story were to observe it and bit by bit to analyse its component parts and causes and antecedents, and to trace them farther and farther back into more and more remote antiquity. Does the historian need reminding that time's arrow is pointed the other way? That the history of a thing is rather its ongoing life, its ramifying results, its development and growth and change, eventually perhaps its disappearance or disintegration (forwards) into parts or its transmutation into something else? By all means let us, with regard to anything, know how it became; but let us study further how and what it went on becoming. The study of history must be in large part the study of creativity.

The first imperative for the student of the Bible, accordingly, in the modern world, is not to take the Bible for granted and then to see what

it says or what constituent elements went into it, or anything of that kind; but rather to explain how it came about as a *scripture*, how it came to be that the various elements that comprise it were put together, and how it came about that Christians continued, century after century, to find reason to go on prizing and sacralizing it and responding to it—and with what results.

One minor illustration. Marcion used to be regarded as a “heretic,” and he has been studied as a person who wished to “leave out” the Old Testament from the Bible. This pre-supposes a two-Testament Bible, instead of being astounded by it. It is possible to take Marcion, rather, as an illustration of the fact that we cannot take for granted that the Christian Bible should be in two parts (let alone exist at all), that it should subsume the Jewish Bible by a device that simultaneously incorporates and supersedes it, and so on. Involved here is the subtle question of the relation between two religious systems or communities. One could touch briefly here on the somewhat comparable, somewhat different, Islamic handling of both Christian and Jewish positions, as things once valid but now superseded, and on the general issue of how a religious *Weltanschauung* can cope with another community that is historically prior to it in time, but may prove incapable of coping with one that arises subsequently. It would be going too far afield to explore this issue at any length, but any treatment of the Christian Bible that failed to deal with it at least seriously, if briefly, could hardly be considered adequate. The fact that the Jewish Bible is called (and not merely called; rather, is perceived as) the “Old Testament” in Christendom (and still in the Harvard Ph.D. program!) has had profound consequences both in Christian history and Jewish history (through Christian-Jewish relations).

(A comparativist aside. The history of the Jewish Bible, despite the similarity of text, would constitute a different course—or a separate sector of the Bible as scripture. The fact that the same material has functioned, of course differently, in the lives of two different communities over the centuries could itself be educative, and exciting. How differently, it would be the business of such a study to unfold. That the story of the Exodus served—mightily—as a symbol [activating, salvific?] of liberation for Jews in a way perhaps comparable to that of the Resurrection for Christians could be explored. And so on. But here I leave all this aside.)

The fact having been considered, then, that the Christian Church decided (consciously or unconsciously) to have a scripture, and constructively determined that it should have this particular one, the story just begins. The history of scriptural interpretation has been a traditional study (it is even a sub-rubric, or optional extra, in the general examinations of some present Bible doctorates); but this is only a small part of

the issue that is now raised. The interpretation (“hermeneutics”) of the Bible, and even a study of that interpretation, *presupposes* that a Bible exists and even presupposes that it is (or has been thought) worth interpreting—presupposes without comment the very things that are most fascinating and have been most decisive.

The question is not merely, given a scripture, how did the Church exegete it at various stages; but also, what roles did that scripture play, what difference did the fact that the Church had one, make in the life of the Catacombists, in the intellectualizing of the Fathers, in the reactions of Christians at Rome in the time of the barbarian devastations, and so on. What was the significance of a Bible in the Dark Ages, for scholastic theology and for Gothic cathedrals and the religious orders? In the life of the imagination in medieval times, did the vignettes of incidents from the life of Jesus impinge on the consciousness of Europe through biblical passages, directly, or through stained-glass windows? Later, how did the Bible function in shaping the mystical imagination and the poetry of St. John of the Cross?

For a study of the Bible and its role in the religious life of humankind, the Reformation obviously signifies a massive new development. (Most Biblical studies for the past hundred years in our seminaries and academic institutions have been studies from within that transition, rather than studies about it. They have assumed that the Bible has the status and the importance that the Reformation gave to it, rather than scrutinizing and interpreting to us that status and importance. It is from this assumption, for instance, that current Biblical scholarship and its doctoral programs arise and therein fail to see, even to-day, that for the subsequent West, it is the Bible that has made ancient Palestine significant, not vice versa.) What the new post-Reformation role for the Bible did to people, to their imaginations, to their perception of the world, to their sexual life, to their domination of a new continent in America, are such matters that, if one does not understand them, surely one does not understand the Bible.

Along with the Reformation as—of course—a major factor of historical change in the role of the Bible in Christendom, and along with a wide range of other large and small factors operative at about the same time, another clearly major factor was the invention and widespread use of printing. Our envisaged course would examine what happened to the role of the Bible in personal and social life when it was not only translated into the vernaculars but was also multiplied mechanically by type-print. (The relation of printing to scripture is not straightforward, however. In Christendom, the Bible was virtually the first thing to be printed, and was foremost in Western humanity’s response to the medium; in the Islamic world, on the other hand, when printing was introduced it was agreed that secular books

might be printed but the Qur'ān deliberately was not.)

Closely linked with the question of printing, whose historical impact on the Bible has, of course, been complex, the spread of literacy has also been of major impingement. We may take one colorful example of this matter from life on this American continent, where among some of us tales from the pioneering days of homesteaders are part of the living lore with which we grew up. In some families the time is not altogether remote when the Bible was perhaps the *only book* in a given home. It was treasured and revered in a way to which the fact that it was the only book in the home is surely hardly irrelevant. Clearly that situation is radically different from a modern home where the number of books is overwhelming. Our culture has gone through an intermediate phase in which a good library was a matter of pride and dignity, even of prestige; a library which certainly included the Bible, probably as an outstanding item. Nowadays, in contrast, the number of books pouring off our presses is inundatingly vast; a collection of books is a burden for which the apartment-dweller hardly knows how to find space; and in this situation the role of a scripture—no matter what its content might be, nor what one's faith—can hardly be the same as it was in that pioneering homestead context.

One need not agree with McLuhan that the age of the printed book, the Gutenberg era, is over, to recognize that with the astronomic number of new books being published every year the age of a very special book, treated differently from all others psychologically, metaphysically, sociologically, is changed.

The more standardly recognized change in the West's and the Church's understanding of the Bible over the past century has been that effected by the rise of historical criticism. Again, most recent Biblical study has been produced from within that movement. The undergraduate course that we are envisaging here would, rather, look at that movement from the outside: would describe it, analyse it, assess it. The movement, effectively, is over. It can no longer dominate, nor even serve, our understanding of the Bible. Rather, almost vice-versa, it becomes instead part of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century history of Christian handling of scripture. Clearly a great motif in any modern study of the Bible as scripture would be an inquiry into what happened to it as scripture with the rise, struggle, triumph, of historical criticism, and what happened to the local congregation, to the individual Christian, to personal piety, to the Sunday service.

One of the questions that an historical study of the development of the Bible in religious life would profitably tackle, I have long felt, is its role in the bifurcation in Western cultural and intellectual life between myth and history. We are beginning now to apprehend the historical as



one form of human consciousness, and to see that form arising historically, recently. Now that we are beginning also, and still more recently, to have a deep and potentially authentic, although still incipient, understanding of the role of myth in human life and society, we can apprehend much more significantly what was happening when the Bible functioned mythically. We have not yet had much serious study of the historical process by which this function has become disintegrated in modern times. To carry it out would require rigorous scholarship and brilliant sensitivity; but it would be enormously rewarding.

With the relatively recent rise in Western consciousness, culminating in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of the new sense of history, and the (consequent?) careful and rigorous distinction between history and myth, something major happened. One might put the matter this way. Previously—certainly all through the Middle Ages, the early Reformation stage, and among pious Christians right up until the twentieth century—the Biblical stories functioned simultaneously as both myth and history. When a sharp discrimination between these two was pressed in Western intellectual life, what happened by and large was that the West opted for history and rejected myth. This was true even of the Church, which when it had to choose decided to treat the Bible historically. (An heroic choice? And a fateful one. It speaks well for the integrity and courage of the Church's leaders that they chose relentlessly to pursue what they thought to be truth, in this dilemma; but it speaks for their lack of creative discernment, that they, like their contemporaries, thought that historiography had to do with truth but myth did not.)

Might one almost make symbolic of this development, the moment (eighteenth century) when Bishop Ussher's date 4004 B.C. was bestowed on the first chapter of Genesis? Later, the Church agonized over the fact that that date for creation was wrong. We may recognize now that the problem was not that particular date, but any date at all, the giving of a date; the notion that one is dealing here with historical time, rather than mythical time. (More exactly: this *became* a problem. For there was an earlier time when it was not so, a time before Europe had discovered that myths do not have dates.) If instead Bishop Ussher had used, and editions of the Bible had put in the margins or at the top of the page, the phrase *in illo tempore*, would our history over the past while have been different?

Probably not, because only now are we beginning to apprehend intellectually or self-consciously what kind of realm it is, what dimension of our life, to which that phrase, or "once upon a time," refers. When a medieval peasant went to church and saw in a stained-glass window or heard in a sermon an incident from the life of Jesus, he or she did not apprehend that incident as something that happened historically in *our*

modern sense of history. Rather, their apprehension was a complex one, in which the counterpart factors to what we today would regard as the mythical were, I should guess, at least as substantial as those counterpart to our modern sense of literal chronological history. Through the sacraments and much else, but also because he or she lived before the separation between myth and history, Christ was a present reality in their life—in a way that has ceased to be the case for most moderns, at the end of a process of demythologization the course of which a modern student of the Bible ought to be able to trace for us. The impetus to demythologize, and the price that our culture has paid for this and for its inability to remythologize, are matters that it is the business of a religion department to study and to elucidate. (Bultmann is to be studied in relation not to the first century so much as to the twentieth; just as Wellhausen was once interesting for an interpretation of the second and first millennia B.C., but now for the nineteenth century A.D.)

Myth and history can be re-integrated by the modern intellect, perhaps, by pondering the role of myth in human history. The course that we propose would be no less rigorously historical than the most austere of historiographies; but it would be the history of myth that would be illuminated, or better, the historical functioning of myth, the history of humanity with myth (and more recently—aberrantly?—without it). An historical study of the Bible, to be done well, would inherently have to be an attempt (typical, some would contend, of a religion department's task in general) to understand human history as the drama of our living our life in history while being conscious of living it in a context transcending history. The mythical, far from contrasting any longer with the historical, can nowadays be seen as what had made human history human. Even those who do not see this, must recognize that the mythical has in substantial part made human history what it has in fact been. Certainly the history of the West is in significant degree a history of the role of the Bible. Our task, important and exhilarating, is to elucidate this.

Most illuminating of all to elucidate, would be how the Bible has served, and for many still serves, spiritually: What is the meaning of the (historical) fact that through it persons and groups have found commitment, liberation, transcendence? In it over the centuries have come into focus for its readers human destiny and all our ultimate concerns. At certain historical moments it has given both shape and power to humankind's drive—or call—to social justice; at other moments, to their capacity—or gift—to endure tyranny and terror. It is a scripture in that it deals, has dealt, so far as the actual lives of persons and groups is concerned, only secondarily with finite things and primarily with infinite; here has been given form the human sense of living—in terror, fascina-

tion, mystery, and grace—in relation to what is more than mundane, in oneself and beyond. Through the Bible people have found not merely ancient history but present salvation, not merely Jesus but Christ, not merely literature but God, millions attest. Those who do not use or understand these terms must wrestle with the fact that multitudes of persons have through the Bible been involved with that to which they give such names. To study the Bible must be to strive to understand it as a channel, which it has observably been, between humankind and transcendence. The Bible has not itself transformed lives, but has introduced persons and societies to that which transforms, its committed readers affirm, the historical observer reports, and the department of religion must note and interpret.

The final sector of our course would deal with the question, What does the Church, what do moderns, do with the Bible now? Now that we know and understand that the material that constitutes the Bible is what the historical critics tell us, what next? Now that we have some sophisticated awareness of the role of scriptures in various kinds of culture, of the role of symbols in various kinds of psychology and society, of the role of myth in human consciousness, what next? Now that we have seen what the Bible has been in human life in the past, what shall it be now? This part of the course could be descriptive and analytic, a study of the process of what has recently been and is now happening. It could also, in the case of some scholars and teachers of a possibly creative quality, be constructive.

The role of the Bible in contemporary Christian life—in personal piety, in liturgy, in theological normativeness, in much else—would be an inquiry continuous with a study of the dynamic role of the Bible in the life of the Church, and of Western society, over the past many centuries, as well as instructive in itself.

What the Bible has been, has done, what role it has played in human life; and what it is doing in modern life, what role it is playing; and in a few cases where imaginative extrapolation is allowed, what it may become, what role it may or might or should yet play in our lives—these are significant questions, which a religion department might surely tackle, both legitimately and rewardingly. The relation of the Bible to Palestine, one is almost tempted to say, we might leave to the orientalist departments. From religion departments we look for some study, I would hope historical, of the relation of the Bible to us.

If I were chairman of such a department, I would very deeply desire to have a course among the departmental offerings on the History of the Bible as Scripture. Yet where could I find a scholar with doctoral training equipping him or her in this field?