

Ipswich Unitarians

WORD OF GOD OR FOUNDATION OF CIVILIZATION? THE RELEVANCE OF THE BIBLE IN A SECULAR AGE

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There has been some correspondence recently in a local newspaper on the subject of the Bible. Someone wrote a letter condemning the Bible as “irrelevant”, while simultaneously declaring that he had never read it and had no intention of doing so! This letter provoked a number of responses, all from Christians, testifying to the value of the Bible in their own lives. And they also asked, quite reasonably, how the original letter-writer could pass judgement on a book that he had never read. And this, perhaps, is the most important point. By condemning the Bible without having read it, that letter-writer not only displayed a quite remarkable degree of bigotry, prejudice and closed-mindedness, he also deprived himself of access to the principal foundation document of our civilization.

And this is not so much about faith as it is about rootedness, about connection to all that has gone before us in terms of literature, art, ethics, and all manner of areas that make up the patchwork of our culture. Of course, for anyone with a Christian faith, or with a faith that is somehow derived from Christianity, the Bible’s central role is undisputed. This is not to say, of course, that the Bible must be seen through “fundamentalist” eyes; that it must be accepted as an inerrant, unquestionable authority; the “word of God” in a literalistic and simplistic sense. Quite the contrary in fact, for to see the Bible in that light is not only erroneous, it is to miss the point entirely.

“Fundamentalism” is a surprisingly modern phenomenon, dating only from the early 20th century. And although earlier generations of Christians didn’t see the Bible as we do – that is, in the light of modern scholarship and biblical criticism – neither did they see it in the rigid, shallow, and two-dimensional terms that “fundamentalism” does today. Medieval Christianity, for instance, saw the Bible as having meaning at several different levels and its truth as being shrouded in mystical and allegorical imagery. To read it literally was only to scratch the surface, at best. This, of course, was very much an issue during the Reformation, wherein lie our own roots as a denomination.

The Reformers said that the Bible should be de-mystified; liberated from the monopoly exercised over it by a priestly caste and given to Christians in their own languages so they could read and understand it for themselves. As the great 17th-century Puritan poet, John Milton, put it: “Every believer is entitled to interpret the scriptures; and by that I mean interpret them for himself.” And although Milton said that, “each passage of scripture has only a single sense,” this wasn’t necessarily the literal sense. He noted the need to realise, “a distinction between literal and figurative language.” (‘Christian Doctrine’, chapter XXX)

So, the “fundamentalism” of the 20th and 21st centuries, although it was one - somewhat delayed - consequence of the Reformation, was by no means the only or the necessary one. Another, and more healthy, one was the realisation, from the late 18th century onwards, that the Bible is actually many books, many documents by many authors, not one. It was the realisation that the Bible had been written and composed over time, not all at once, and so reflected a wide range of historical, cultural and theological origins and understandings. It was the realisation that the actual literary sources of the Bible contain errors, alternative versions, and even forgeries and interpolations. It was simply no longer possible to say of the Bible that it is, in a simple and straightforward sense, “the word of God.”

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But does this diminish its importance, its “relevance”, to use that word? Of course not! If anything, it greatly increases it, because the Bible connects us, not so much to some remote supernatural power, as to human beings like ourselves – wrestling with the same perennial questions and responding to the same spiritual stimuli in nature and in the human heart.

Before addressing the spiritual issues involved, though, we should consider the cultural importance of the Bible. Over many, many centuries the stories, concepts and imagery of the Bible have pervaded, moulded and, indeed, become, our language, our art, our literature, our ethics, our music, our poetry – even our politics and systems of government. It is a measure of how completely the Bible has suffused our culture that most people are now unaware of it. Which is why someone can dismiss it as “irrelevant” and yet, in all probability, draw on it many times a day – even now – without realising it. The way we behave and the way we think we should behave, the words and phrases we use and those we read and hear, are frequently derived from the Bible, albeit unconsciously.

This is a matter of history, of course, rather than of faith, but what it means is that to reject the Bible out of hand, never to read it or acquaint yourself with it, is to sever yourself from the roots of your own culture and society. And, sadly, this is becoming all too common. We are in danger of becoming de-cultured (if that is a word!), alienated from our own past, our own heritage; rootless and thus, as Paul put it, “ready to be tossed about by the waves and whirled around by every fresh gust of teaching, dupes of cunning rogues and their deceitful schemes.” (Ephesians 4: 14).

You simply cannot understand or appreciate virtually the entire heritage of western art without having some knowledge of the Bible. You cannot truly appreciate the heritage of western literature without some knowledge of the Bible. I’ve just been reading Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’, one of the greatest and most influential works of literature in the English language, and yet, without some knowledge of the Bible you cannot possibly understand it or fully appreciate it - or the many allusions to it in English literature from the 17th to the 21st centuries. And what is true of Milton is true of Chaucer and Shakespeare, Dickens and the Brontes, and virtually every writer in the English language up to and including the 20th century.

So, if the Bible is so important for understanding our culture and our history, does it remain “relevant” for our religious life? Sadly, many don’t think so. Even in the quest for so-called “spirituality”, many will look almost anywhere *but* in the Bible. In doing so, many do, indeed, become the “dupes of cunning rogues and their deceitful schemes.” Others, though, simply overlook a spiritual resource on their own doorstep and try instead to appropriate those of faiths and cultures that they do not and cannot really understand. As the prophet Muhammad once told one of his followers, who he found reading a Jewish holy book: “You are too casual with that book. If you want to gain any value from it, you will have to become a Jew. To be a perfect Jew is better than to be an incomplete Muslim; dallying with the Jewish book is half-hearted and will give you no benefit one way or the other.” (‘The Way of the Sufi’, ed. Idris Shah, p. 73)

Just as our culture is inextricably related to the Bible, so too are its spiritual reference points – and *our* spiritual reference points as children of western civilization. And, more specifically, as the product of Reformed Protestant Christianity, the roots of the Unitarian tradition are not only in the Bible, but also in a way of understanding it that is both rational and appreciative of its spiritual insights, its fund of myth, symbol and story. There has been a profound sense that in its

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pages we find encounters of the human spirit with the Divine, mediated through the words of people like ourselves.

Is the Bible the “word of God”? Well, no, it isn’t; at least, not in the sense that is often claimed. And in fact, it doesn’t really claim to be the “word of God” either! But in the myths and the wisdom of the ancient Hebrews; in the poetry of the Psalms and the challenge of the Prophets; in the teachings of Jesus and the timeless story of his life, death and resurrection; in the accounts of the early church communities and their growing vision of a universal Kingdom where all humanity is made free and equal, we have the words of men and women in whom the Divine spoke - as it still speaks - in frail, flawed human vessels like ourselves. And that, in my view, makes the Bible very relevant indeed, and deserving of more attention than we usually give it!
