

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

DAVID SPRIGGS

The Bible: Cultural Treasure or Cultural Obstacle?

Why does the Bible seem so remote from the central concerns of our culture for so many people? David Spriggs analyses some of the difficulties we face in encouraging real engagement with the Bible, such as the low priority accorded to religious education, and the decline generally in the reading of texts which do more than merely entertain. However, he argues that there is hope, and gives several examples of recent initiatives to make the Bible more widely accessible.

The Shared Journey

By now I knew they were good pagans! The conversation from the two middle-aged ladies who sat opposite me as we travelled from Coventry to Euston made it clear: pagans because they were 'Oh Goding' throughout our shared journey and good because they were clearly concerned with the well-being of their union members whose case they were talking through with passion and compassion – ready to represent them at some tribunal or other.

Meanwhile I was preparing to explain to some members of the Anglican Synod the opportunity which the film *The Miracle Maker* provided, now that Bible Society had secured its cinema release. As we approached Euston, I was packing up my materials when the lady opposite me hurled an animated question at me. 'Do you know anything about *that* film?'

'Do I know anything about it? I've seen it several times and attended half a dozen presentations. I've listened to Murray Watts tell the amazing story of its creation and production. I've learned about the skills of the Russian puppet animators and their links with the Orthodox iconographic tradition. I've smiled at the irony of those who had been employed making atheistic films for the communist regime, now focusing their energies and skills to rebirth the story of the Son of God for the western world. I've heard the affirmations of actors and producers as well as theologians. I've seen elderly Bible Society supporters, keen youth workers and responsible educationalists all leave the cinemas with a sense of excitement and even wonder. And I myself have made the journey from watching puppets move across a screen to involvement and fresh encounter with this man called Jesus and his disciples, as the distance between myself and the visual narrative dissolved. And I have echoed in my heart the adoration of Thomas.' All this I thought in the brief moment as the question hit me.

'You haven't seen it, have you?' she continued, somewhat more gently. 'Actually, I have', I responded. 'Why do you ask?'

It turned out that she had taken her nine year old daughter to the cinema to see *Toy Story 2*. There *The Miracle Maker* was trailed. That trailer was a masterpiece – the eerie mystery of the baptism, the down to earth humour of Jesus with Peter in the boat, the awesome confession of the centurion at the cross, and those enticing words spoken over, 'The Son of God, who out of love for us all, gave his life'. This lady had been equally impressed by the trailer and had decided that she must take her daughter to see it. Seeing a leaflet in my hand rekindled her tender resolution. She wanted to look at it. Having read it she was even more impressed. Did I have more leaflets so she could take them to school – the whole school must go and she would be the messenger.

'Do you work in the film industry?' – gulp – 'No, I don't, I work for the Bible Society'.

'The Bible Society?' – with the implied comment, 'what on earth have they got to do with it?' So I explained why we were involved and how we believed that the Bible was God's story, that we realized people found the Bible a difficult book to get on with now and so we were trying to find creative, imaginative and engaging ways for people to encounter this story. 'Absolutely right', she commented, 'the trouble with the present generation is they don't know that story.' So our shared journey ended. I wonder what happened next. I, at least, was more convinced than ever that God's story was worth sharing and that new approaches might just give us the chance to overcome some cultural barriers and prejudices so that ordinary people might hear him gladly once again. But why do we need to go to such great lengths?

The Journey Downward

For me that brief encounter encapsulates some of the issue we are looking at in this article – is the Bible a cultural treasure or a cultural obstacle? That lady illustrates the problem and the possibilities. She had a memory that this story was important and its importance was to do with the way we live. Somehow there was the vestigial awareness that the Bible could enrich us.

So, how have we moved from the time when the Bible was a source of great nourishment to intellectuals, artists and ordinary people, to one where the next generation will probably not even need to disregard it – it will have dissolved from their awareness? Many things have changed from the medieval world where the worldview of Bible and society were coterminous. One factor has been the breakup of any agreed interpretation of the Bible for church but also for society. The Reformation, Renaissance and Enlightenment led to pluralistic interpretations and the privatization of religion, both of which undermined the implicit sense of authority which the Bible carried. This erosion of authority has meant that the Bible has become less influential in shaping (or being perceived as shaping) politics, ethics and culture, at the very time when within the churches there have been battles over the nature of its authority within the community of faith. Simultaneously the

'conflict' of science and religion, beginning in the nineteenth century,¹ and the sustained examination of the Bible under the microscopic light of historical critical scholarship, have created an atmosphere of suspicion towards any claims that the Bible is a text through which God, if there is such a reality, can speak. Personally, I suspect that the two world wars have also contributed to the decline of the Bible as an authoritative text.

One of the parallel phenomena is the serious decline in overt commitment to the Christian faith through church attendance. My *Miracle Maker* lady is a good representative of this shift. She clearly had little time for the communities of the church where this book is still held in some kind of regard. Without strong allegiance to the church, the Bible ceases to be a living book for most people and so their experience of it is likely to be secondary, through the culture. But in the end this means that those who shape the culture and contribute to its treasures will themselves be less influenced by it. So the 'places' where the Bible is reflected in the culture become themselves ever more remote. Thus the Bible may become more of an 'obstacle' than a 'treasure'.

For, unless I am mistaken, the Bible is not a spectator with regard to culture and the people who inhabit that culture. The Bible is an active contributor to critiquing and shaping as well as illuminating and embroidering the culture. The culture, which the Bible reflects and generates, is one where the Creator as well as the creative have a say. The Bible indicates that culture includes a divine and spiritual dimension; that human creativity requires repentance otherwise it becomes demonic; that creative people, while indeed reflecting something of their divine origins, need a sustained relationship with those origins which is only possible by God's active grace in Christ. Unless we recognize that culture involves faith, the Gospel, Christian community and that freedom, life, truth and beauty are dependent for their full flowering on God, then even where the Bible is being recognized as a 'cultural treasure', the culture is positioning the 'Bible as scripture' as an obstacle.

But back to my lady. She realized that the chances of getting the next generation to read this book were very low, that it was unlikely her daughter would receive a positive introduction to it through her secular education, and – however vaguely – she mourned this as a deprivation. She was realizing that within her daughter's culture, the Bible had ceased to be represented and therefore wasn't going to count. It had no cultural relevance, even if it were the richest treasure to be had. This matter of felt relevance is vital. This film sparked so much enthusiasm in my companion because she sensed that at last here was a viable opportunity to entice her daughter with the fascination and value of something in this book. And so she

1 The conflict is often perceived to be one over 'evolution'. That the positioning for this is a more complex issue than popularly perceived is indicated, for instance, in an article by Philip Sampson, 'Lines of Dissent', *Third Way* (October 1998), pp 23-26. But the conflict is far broader and deeper than this one agenda item. It incorporates geology, psychology and sociology, and also the

'philosophy' of all these and many other scientific disciplines. Indeed, I suspect that this brings us nearer to the core concern, which is about the sufficiency and independence of rational enquiry. So it also spills over into ethics, linguistics, history and their philosophies too. Aesthetics and all its cultural outworkings are also drawn in.

became a willing messenger not only to her daughter but also to the educational institution. I would love to know what happened!

Almost certainly she was right about her daughter's education doing little to enhance her appreciation of the Bible. For a few years now Bible Society have been working in partnership with Exeter University, looking at the way the Bible is taught in Religious Education. The first report summarizes the views of RE teachers (most of whom were heads of department with considerable experience) about the attitudes of their pupils:

Teachers thought that their secondary pupils would apply the following words to the Bible: boring; old fashioned; out of date; rubbish; uncool; weird; irrelevant. This dismissive response is based on a mixture of ignorance and prejudice [on the part of the pupils not the teachers, is I think the intent]. Graffiti appears (sic) in school Bibles and reflects disrespect and readiness to abuse. It also highlights confusion about the nature of truth, different types of literature and the complexities of ancient texts, resulting in the belief that the Bible is 'easy' (but unworthy of serious attention). Science and religion are still assumed to be enemies by pupils.²

Such reflection does, however, serve to challenge our subject, for it suggests that rather than the Bible being a cultural obstacle it may well be better to consider whether the culture is not the obstacle to an appropriate reading of the Bible. We will return to this perspective in a moment. But first we must pursue the use of the Bible in schools a little further.

Further research has begun to highlight a startling and worrying factor. When children start their formal education they generally have a positive attitude towards the Bible, but three or four years on that has significantly changed. The way the researchers summarize the views then is to say that the Bible has virtually become a 'book of hate'.³ What has caused this transformation is, still being examined. Probable hypotheses are that it is partly the way it is taught and partly the influence of the culture.

The way it is taught is itself a rather complex matter. It includes the place the Bible has in the RE syllabus and the perceived value given to RE within the whole school curriculum. That perceived value would be formed by, amongst other factors,

- the time that is allocated to it (as much as maths and English?) If lessons need to be sacrificed for other activities – school trips, rehearsals for the school concert – will it be English or will it be RE which goes?
- the attitudes of all other teachers to it (often it can be presented by other teachers as less important and even trivial or ridiculous)
- the quality of teachers (how do those teachers perceive themselves, how are those teachers regarded by their peers and by the children?)
- the quality of teaching: while this involves the personal and professional abilities of those teaching, it involves much more – it includes their enthusiasm

2 Terence Copley, 'Echo of Angels', the first report of the *Biblos Project*, School of Education, University of Exeter, Exeter 1998, p 56.

3 See the *Biblos Project* 'Proposal for Phase 3' (28/03/2001).

for their subject and also (which will affect their enthusiasm) the investment of the school in this part of the syllabus. What a difference it could make to the perception of RE and the Bible if RE had specially dedicated rooms and resources (such as would normally be provided for science, IT or even home economics). Why are such resources not normally (ever?) made available? At this point the problem of our culture really kicks into play as we shall see soon.

Of course, the 'hate object' attitude might really be to do with the Bible itself, but until the Bible is being taught on a completely level playing field, we probably will not know – at least, we should be resistant to accepting that the blame lies with the Book. That is too convenient an excuse for our culture.⁴

Culture as Obstacle

So how does the culture shape the way children and adults approach the Bible?

Let us return to the school classroom situation. Even as I was typing the words about having a dedicated and well equipped RE classroom (like the science or technology lab) a little voice at the back of my mind was saying, 'Don't be ridiculous! It's inconceivable and no school would ever do it because it isn't necessary!' I wonder – did you have similar thoughts?

That little voice is the reflection of our culture in the mind of someone who in other contexts would be advocating the vital significance of the Bible for the wellbeing of society as well as church. This indicates how all-pervasively that cultural pressure is at work. For why is it ridiculous? Why is it unnecessary? In some countries people learn science from a textbook with no apparatus to demonstrate its methods and claims, let alone equipment and resources for the students to 'experiment'. We would view such an approach as at best poor and probably totally invalid. Maybe, the way we treat the Bible (and RE) deserves the same verdict. But to us it seems unthinkable to invest the same amount in RE not only because we imagine such lavish resources are not necessary for its effective teaching, but also because the outcomes do not justify it. People would say things like 'you cannot function and flourish in our modern world without a fundamental grasp of science'. What if our culture said equally, 'you cannot function and flourish in our modern world without a fundamental grasp of the Bible?' Yet a good case can be made for that.

However, at this point, I suspect, another argument would appear – the economic one. Science can be shown to contribute to the economic growth of the country, therefore it is appropriate that a large amount of the school budget should be invested in science. Perhaps we would be wise to resist being drawn into the debate, for it involves a particular view of the philosophy and purpose of education (as well as economics) which itself is questionable and which the Bible might serve to critique. There are resources other than money, qualities, insights and values

4 Compare the following statement of H. Dan Beeby: 'When the Bible Society was founded (i.e. 200 years ago), the West, by and large, was still Christendom and the biblical worldview was taken for granted; Christ and the

culture were companions... Today, the situation is reversed. The culture is now the enemy and Scripture has to be recovered from its predatory opposition.' *The Bible in TransMission* (Spring 2001), p 18.

which people need to make life worth the living, and the Bible, together with its contribution to western culture, is a prime custodian of and resource for just these things which science cannot deliver. However, even at the level of 'economic argument', a case could probably be made along the lines that the world view which the Bible promotes leads to the economic benefit of all. Therefore, even at this low (but in practice often determinative level) there are at least arguments to consider, which are rarely heard.

We can gain a further insight into the way our culture influences the perception of the Bible by a different approach. One of the ways in which English, maths and science gain their status is that their use is not restricted to those parts of the syllabus where they are being intentionally taught. So, the child is using their English in every other lesson (including French and German). Maths is part of everyday life, at the shop or in making up teams. Science is applauded as the saviour in many contexts and many of the icons like fast cars and play stations depend on science and technology. Hence subliminally (and depending on how subjects are taught) these subjects are presented as vital, useful, necessary and worthy of esteem. What if the Bible's influence on art, literature, philosophy, law, politics, and even science was constantly being highlighted? Would this not help to change perceptions? If the message was 'nobody can consider themselves educated who is not aware of the immense impact this book has had on every worthwhile feature of modern life', and 'this book is the source of so much that is exciting, valuable and good', perhaps attitudes in the classroom might change – over a couple of generations.

But school is not the only influence on our culture which shapes the way the Bible is perceived, though it is a profound one. The attitude of those secondary school children reminds us of this. Science and religion are still considered enemies – and, we could add, science is considered to be adult, valid, helpful, objective and cohesive, whereas religion (and with it the Bible) is considered to be childish, disproved, useless, fairy stories and a source of endless conflict. Where do such attitudes come from? A great deal of these perspectives is generated through the biased way realities are presented by the media, most powerfully television, cinema and video. Much of this is not deliberate in the sense that people set out to destroy the reputation of the Bible because they are committed atheists, but nevertheless it is often the projection on to the screen of biases which are themselves the results of a liberal mindset founded in the practical atheism of the Enlightenment. Television and cinema are powerful for three overlapping reasons. The first is that people are exposed to them for so many hours of every day – probably even for children the time watching the screen exceeds the hours in the classroom. Secondly, such media use the resources of the arts to imbed their messages not only in our conscious rational minds but much deeper, where they are not susceptible to easily being dislodged by fact and argument. Thirdly, they assail so many of our senses at once, especially our visual and auditory ones, but through memory and imagination they access others too.

The Bible as Obstacle

The more we reflect on our culture, the more it seems that we live in a situation where our culture has itself become an obstacle for people hindering them from

appropriating the treasures of the Bible. From the population's viewpoint, however, the situation may look different. The Bible itself appears to be an obstacle, lodged in our culture, making it difficult for them to find a contemporary spirituality and faith.

Are there indeed ways in which this may be so? At one time the language was part of this. When it was Latin and that was not your natural language there was a cultural problem, but now we have a plethora of translations, surely one suitable for almost every language level for those who read English (and of course many for those who don't.)

A second, more serious way the Bible may be experienced as a cultural obstacle relates to the discrepancies between the two cultures⁵ – its (although there are several reflected in the Bible) and ours (although ours is now also multifaceted). (I suspect, in fact, there are far more cultural differences between us and the beginning of the twentieth century than there are between those living then and the times of the Bible.⁶) There is an enormous cultural divide between biblical and contemporary cultures, relating not only to science and worldviews, but also to cultural norms, to the way we live our ordinary lives and to ethical and moral presuppositions.⁷ There are fundamental differences in the way we proceed towards truth and its recognition. To enter the world of the Bible is to enter a very strange world.

But this need not, in itself, be a problem; it can be a source of treasure. There are many TV programmes which depend upon differences between cultures to invite us in – different times, countries, animals, classes, races, religions, interests and even attitudes. So why does the Bible's difference become an obstacle? I suspect it really relates to the fact that anything to do with the Bible is always perceived as implying 'and this is how you should believe and live'. In other words, programmes are presented for their entertainment, education and fascination, but the Bible primarily (so it is perceived) aims to elicit allegiance and submission. It is assumed that the Bible demands suspension of our worldviews, and critical faculties, not just for the time of the programme but for all time. That is, the obstacle is not so much the culturally alien character of the Bible, but the implied authority-claim it is still felt to carry in an anti-authoritarian society. We shall return to this theme below.

There is also likely to be a theological factor in the perceived alienation between our culture and the Bible. Our society is dominated by certain prevalent stories. The consumerist dream is probably the most rampant, but this is interwoven with the myth of redemptive violence, the seduction of sexuality and the idolatry of

5 See note 4 above.

6 Clearly, this dissonance is not felt in many agrarian communities in the developing world. I was talking recently to a Bible translator working in a remote area of Ethiopia, where the first task was to devise a script because the language had not previously been written down. To assist with the first attempts to translate the first part of the New Testament he had drawn together a group of church workers and government

officials. The excitement at seeing the language work was matched only by the sense of belonging within the biblical world. This translation process was proving to be a way of bridging the tensions between the government and the church, because the biblical world the government officials discovered was not western and alien but theirs!

7 See 'Looking for Omar – A Bible Journey', *The Bible in TransMission* (Spring 2000), pp 4f.

excessive individualism.⁸ Now, none of these sit comfortably with the dominant motifs of the Bible, although all of them are reflected in it. This conflict of underlying narratives, linked with the exclusivity of 'The Lord, he alone is God', creates a major dissonance for anyone who falls into or seeks to enter the Bible's world. This dissonance is all the more difficult to erase because it is, for most of the time, subliminal – it creates an unease which we cannot confront because it is too deep within us to exorcise.

The media, again, have contributed to our problem. For instance, many programmes to do with the Bible present it in a negative and discrediting light. The BBC's 'Son of God' series may appear to have started a different trend, supporting the general veracity of the Gospels through all the armoury from archaeology to modern computer reconstructions of cities. Yet, at least according to New Testament scholar Tom Wright, one of the consultants to the programme, they emasculated Jesus by not dealing with his central passion, that of God and his Kingdom! The best outcome then, is likely to be that the Bible will be regarded as an interesting historical resource, rather than a potent sacred text dealing with fundamental human issues in a divine context.

The Bible as Book

The Bible also erupts like a foreign body in our culture because it is a book, and a very large and in several ways confusing one, which seems in places boring and irrelevant. I suspect here that the problem is more to do with our expectations in reading a book rather than the supposed fact that people are reading less. The evidence from the *Harry Potter* phenomenon through to library statistics is that children (and adults) are reading more. But we probably read more for pleasure (easy to read novels are very popular as is science fiction), entertainment (we like 'coffee table' books with lots of glossy evocative pictures with the minimum of text) and help with practical issues like *Changing Rooms* and *Ground Force* (but please note how important the personalities of the presenters are!) than we do for intellectual engagement and the formation of our world-views. I doubt whether *Das Kapital* is any more popular than the Bible today.

Even for Christians, their preconceptions about books may soon cause them to give up the Book in despair or confusion. Most people expect to begin a book at the beginning and read it through to the end. Our understanding of 'book' is shaped by the narrative novel. The Bible does not fit this model and so the Book becomes an obstacle. On the other hand, for some Christians, the expectations may be formed by the view that it is a doctrinal handbook, where everything we need to understand and believe will be set out in some sensible order⁹ (like a computer handbook!). Again people will be disappointed. As they will if they think it starts

8 For the consumerist one, see Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz, eds., *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*, Paternoster, Carlisle 2000; for a summary of some others, see *The Bible in TransMission* (Spring 1999). See also *Foundations* Vol. 3 No. 4 on 'Developments in science and technology'.

9 The whole persistent debate about the possibility of and appropriate methodology for Old Testament Theology, New Testament Theology and Biblical Theology is scholarly evidence for the resistance of the text to this kind of expectation.

with Jesus, or that it is a guide to science, or a straightforward guide to ethical behaviour in our technological world,¹⁰ or that in any simple sense it is a literary unity, or that it is an easy to use devotional guide with a 'how to' section at the end of each part. None of these expectations constitutes an insurmountable obstacle – as I found when I went to spend a stimulating afternoon with a group of thirty lay people who had agreed to read through the Bible in a year. But equally they had not found the Bible to be as they had expected, and they had lots of interesting and awkward questions to put to me.

The issue of 'authority' connected with the Bible – particularly 'ancient' and 'religious' authority – also provokes a sense of cultural alienation. As far as 'ancient' is concerned we live in a culture which expects knowledge to change rapidly, and is therefore well aware that any claim to 'expertise' is either arrogant, manipulative or self-deluded. As far as religion is concerned people are generally content to let others have their views and are less likely than even a decade ago to regard religious beliefs as dismissable, but equally, with the religion of tolerance reigning, any claims to truth or suggestions of absolute commitment generate a strong sense of discomfort and anachronism. Within this realm of problems, I am persuaded that the obstacle is more to do with the way we present the issues of authority with respect to the Christian faith and the Bible rather than with the Bible itself. With its overall narrative perspective, the Bible can be viewed as an invitation to see if it works rather than to determine whether it is true. It is also very honest in struggling with the issues when it does *not* seem to work. Recently I spent some time with Eddie Gibbs, who shared with me how he had pointed out to one well-known American stream of Christian churches, which now has considerable influence in Britain as well, that their worship songs were superficial, over-individualized, and glossed over the inevitable struggles of being human – and that this was in marked contrast to the song book of the Bible. The Psalter has fifty 'songs of lament'. So, perhaps here the obstacle is with us and not so much with the Bible, which can be represented relatively easily as a cultural treasure.

Treasure Rediscovered

So far, our considerations suggest that our culture is a significant obstacle for the Bible being understood and appreciated, while recognizing that there are ways in which the Bible appears as a cultural obstacle in itself. How can we start to revise these perceptions, so that the Bible is welcomed as a source of treasure to which people of all kinds turn not only to make sense of medieval art, or classical music,

10 The difficulty of making the connection today between ethics and the Bible is illustrated by Robin Gill, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000. Reviewing this in the *Expository Times* (April 2001), p 218, the Editor comments that in the third main section of this work, 'Issues in Christian Ethics', 'all of the writers work either from ethical philosophy or from

sociological analyses. Where the Bible is introduced it is by way of reference to a small and highly selective number of texts.' Gordon Wenham's *Story as Torah – reading the Old Testament ethically*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 2000, is an interesting attempt to release the ethical component of two Old Testament books (Genesis and Judges), but this is a long way from re-establishing the impact of the Bible on our contemporary ethical discourse.

or to discover the origins of frequently used literary phrases, but as a source of inspiration and wisdom for life today?

A natural starting place might be with the churches. Here are the people whose life should project onto the screens of daily life, family relations and community interactions the power and relevance of the Bible for today. Within and through the churches there should be the evidence that the Bible is a source of cultural treasure. And this, not only in the sense of some object at the *Antiques Roadshow*, where we either admire the quality of workmanship from a previous generation, luxuriate in the (fascinating?) personal details which are associated with it, or marvel avariciously at the discovery of its unanticipated value. Rather we might hope to see through the church the daily *application* of this cultural treasure.

The Bible does inspire people to live differently. At a personal level *Songs of Praise* provides ample cameos. On a larger scale we can think of a wide range of illustrations from the hospice movement to *The Urban Adventure*,¹¹ a large youth activity held in Manchester last year, or both the Government's and the Opposition's growing recognition that 'faith communities' are a valuable societal resource.¹² But so far these testimonies have not changed people's valuation of the Bible. Why? Partly because the media cannot come to terms with the significance of these phenomena, partly because most people do not see any connection between the stories in front of them and the Bible. But mainly I suspect because the counter evidence is overwhelming and more than neutralizes their impact. It is actually very hard to deny that the church is influenced by the culture far more comprehensively than it shapes it. Think of the way in which attitudes to sexuality or the use of Sunday¹³ are being changed.

Bible Society is committed to releasing the truth and resource of the Bible into our culture. I am sure there are many other people and organizations working for similar ends, but I share the insights gleaned through working at Bible Society to serve as illustrations of what can be done and to stimulate hope. We discern that the Bible is a cultural treasure, not only in the sense that it is some kind of museum that people should be persuaded to wander round to admire what they see and so be enriched. Rather, we believe that the Bible's voice is indispensable for the future

11 For insight into this process see Joyce Wills and Matt Redman, *The Urban Adventure*, Soul Survivor (2001).

12 Note, however, the inherent danger in this 'new functionalism'. 'Ultimately, we believe that these things are valid (church schools, families, life expectancy increases if you participate in community) not because they work but because they are in harmony with the character of God. The fact is that that our faith does not always deliver – at least not in the way that policy makers expect'. Jonathan Bartley, *Third Way* (May 2001), p 11.

13 I am not thinking here primarily of the serious attempts to understand homosexuality in a biblical framework being

worked out by some official church bodies but more of the acceptance of lax standards towards sexual behaviour generally by many people within our church communities.

Whether 'Sunday observance' is 'biblical' is not the point at issue here – all I am indicating is that the church is shaped more by the culture both through opportunities, like additional travel, sport and entertainment, and responsibilities, such as having to work on Sundays or visit elderly relatives who live further away. The 'Keep Sunday Special' campaign does not appear to have achieved much either in or through parliament or within societal developments. The 'Drop the Debt' campaign may be a counter example.

well being of our world. We want to bring the stories, values, aspirations and claims of the Bible to the very heart of contemporary living.

We are committed to the churches as an essential ally, but because of the dominating influence of the culture on the churches, Bible Society is committed to working in the culture – which brings us back to *The Miracle Maker*. It was intended that *The Miracle Maker* should only be available as a video. Icon, Mel Gibson's Film Distribution Company, had reached the decision that it was not economically viable to promote it to cinemas. Bible Society persuaded them that if we invested three quarters of a million pounds in marketing to schools and churches the outcome could be different. They agreed to try with a target of 100 cinemas. In the end over 350 cinemas took the film and we are well on the way to recouping our investment. Not only that, we now have a proven reputation for good business practice with a major film company and distribution agency. We like to think that we have also helped the churches gain a little street credibility, and confidence in the story the Bible tells.

This was clearly very popular level work. But we are also concerned to unlock the cultural treasure at the highest academic level and so regain the ground for the Bible as Scripture in the Academy and training institutions of our land. To do this we are in the third year of a ten-year project, 'The Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar'.¹⁴ Through an annual international and interdisciplinary consultation, followed by a publication of papers, we are seeking to explore the growing discontent with the claims by the historical critical method to be the sole interpreter of the Bible. Through the quality of the work generated by this process, we intend to resource the conversation and stimulate the debate; ultimately contributing to a change in perception of the Bible as Scripture which will be reflected in the media and education (in 20-30 years' time).

Somewhere in the middle, in terms of cultural seams, comes *The Telling Place*.¹⁵ *The Telling Place* is our storytelling track, which is largely devised and driven by the Northumbria Community. For the last three years this has been showcased at Greenbelt. But throughout the time much hard and creative work has been going on to build a network of storytellers, to introduce churches to its potential, running intensive, fortnight long training courses and arranging a scheme for apprentice storytellers. Cafés, pubs and even New Age festivals are now opening up to this

14 Two volumes have now been published: Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene and Karl Moller (eds), *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, and *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, Paternoster/Zondervan, Carlisle/Grand Rapids 2001. The consultation which will be the basis of the third volume took place in 2001. This engaged with Oliver O'Donovan and in particular with his book, *The Desire of the Nations – Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996. Both the book and the

consultation well illustrate that if people approach the Bible looking for simple connections from 'the book' to politics then their expectations will be drastically deflated. However, they also show that the Bible is an essential 'cultural treasure' (with some obstacles!) for any sustainable political theory and process.

15 *The Telling Place*, Hetton Hall, Chatton, Alnwick, Northumberland NE66 5SD, 01289 388477, thetellingplace@bigfoot.com. For another perspective visit the Network of Biblical Storytellers at <http://www.nobs.org>.

process so that the Bible can be encountered and its cultural treasure as story be rediscovered. Behind the process is a fundamental recognition that storytelling involves community – which sits well with the nature of the Bible itself.

We have started to experiment with 'lifestyle' presentations too. The first serious attempt was with Vogue, the high quality fashion magazine. Before the fashion shoot which transformed the Prodigal Son into the Prodigal Daughter, 'Bible studies' were held with the Vogue creative team, exploring some parables and other narratives like the Emmaus Road story. They found the experience stimulating and not boring. Moreover they saw that fashion had lost its soul and perceived that the Bible might help them regain it. Whatever else this experiment showed, it did convince us that the Bible has huge potential in some strange places to become a treasure, not only a cultural one but a spiritual one as well. So watch out for more adventures in this direction from Bible Society.¹⁶

Beyond Culture

It is easy to be pessimistic about the Bible in contemporary culture. There is ample evidence that it is losing its place as rapidly as church attendance is declining. We have attempted to look at some of the reasons for this. I have suggested that we need to recognize that some of the difficulty lies with our culture, as illustrated by education. However, we have also noted that there is a significant cultural gap between the Bible and today which functions in several ways, collectively tending to debilitate its impact. On the other hand, the Bible is a cultural treasure not only in the sense that it has been used as a source for our cultural expressions, nor merely in the sense that it is worth visiting like a museum. For historically, the Bible has been a major contributor to the shape and texture of our culture. Finally we have looked at some examples of how the Bible's worth for our culture might be represented.

Of course, the question remains not only as to whether the trend of the last centuries can be reversed, but whether even achieving such a new status for the cultural evaluation of the Bible would do justice to the challenge of the Bible itself and the way the church has engaged with the Bible as a text and tradition through which the voice of God can best be heard.

The Revd Dr David Spriggs is Head of Church Relations for Bible Society.

16 Another important area to help generate this sense of 'relevance' is film. In *Reel Issues*, Bible Society 1998, we have taken contemporary films and shown the connection with the Bible through the issues of identity, freedom, justice, hope and forgiveness. Damaris is another organization which has done similar work but with literature and other art forms as well.