

## INTRODUCTION

Is the Bible a problem for Christianity?<sup>1</sup> It seems such a weighty book; weighty physically, but weighty also in the sense of authoritative and trustworthy. Indeed, most Christians would see it as the foundation document for the Church.<sup>2</sup> How then could it be that Christians could take different or opposite sides of an argument yet claim that Scripture supported what they said, or even that their view was based on Scripture?

I first noticed this when, thirty years ago, the proponents and opponents of apartheid and the proponents and opponents of the ordination of women to the priesthood were all quoting the Bible in support of their positions. We have here two examples, one from the world of politics, and one from the world of (internal - though some would argue not) church affairs. They are, of course, linked. Both are about the relationship between different groups of human beings – is it to be one of the preservation of existing roles of dominance and subservience, or is there the possibility of partnership and equality? They are also linked by references made to the Biblical treatment of relationships within the household – sometimes called the *Haustafeln* (Household Codes)<sup>3</sup> – which apparently support the model of dominance/subservience between husbands/wives and masters/slaves as divinely ordained, though the tradition of interpreting them differently has a long history.<sup>4</sup>

As we heard the arguments I, and many others, wanted to be able to say that particular uses (for example the defence of apartheid) were unfaithful to the Bible, illegitimate, and wrong. There were several reasons for this desire: an ethical responsibility, an uneasiness with the otherwise implied plasticity of Christian orthodoxy, the need for Church unity, for example. This thesis is an attempt to think through the possibility of judging between competing interpretations.

It will be helpful to look briefly at these two issues in slightly greater detail.

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1 see Robert Carroll: *The Wolf in the Sheepfold* (SPCK 1991)

2 see John Barton: *People of the Book* (SPCK 1993)

3 Colossians ch 3 v 18 – ch 4 v 1; Ephesians ch 5 v 21 – ch 6 v 9; I Peter ch 2 v 18 – ch 3 v 7

4 see Clarice J Martin “The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: ‘Free Slaves’ and ‘Subordinate Women’” :pp 206 – 231 in ed Cain Hope Felder : *Stony the Road We Trod* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1991)

## 1.1 The Bible and Apartheid <sup>5</sup>

It is possible to divide attitudes (including Christian attitudes) to apartheid into three: being in favour, being opposed (through peaceful, democratic and legal channels), and being violently opposed.

Those in favour relied on a number of arguments, perhaps more subtle than is sometimes recognised: they were ostensibly (and, if they were given the benefit of the doubt, naively) arguing for separate development, and for loyalty to the state, rather than in favour of outright exploitation of blacks, even if that is how things turned out. The argument was first, that God had created in humankind both unity and diversity (this was justified by reference to Eve as the mother of all living beings,<sup>6</sup> to the lists of nations descended from Ham, Shem and Japheth after the flood,<sup>7</sup> also picked up in the New Testament,<sup>8</sup> and reinforced by reference to God's creation of separate languages at Babel<sup>9</sup>). This diversity, since coming from God's providence was not nullified by Jesus, but instead restored and sanctified. Hence the separate races should develop separately. Second, that the State had absolute and divinely ordained authority<sup>10</sup> which as God's agent was to be obeyed by law-abiding Christians. The present situation was to be maintained, because that represented 'Law and Order', while those opposed were argued to be communists, who were anti-Christian, if not the anti-Christ! There could be no action or argument against separate development, since this would be opposition to the State.

A different view was taken by those who, while opposed to apartheid, were not prepared to go as far as, for example, violent opposition and resistance. These tended to appeal to Biblical texts talking about reconciliation, and about non-violence and about "rendering to no man evil for evil."<sup>11</sup> They

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<sup>5</sup> see John de Gruchy: The Church Struggle in South Africa; (Collins, 1986) e.g. pp71ff and ed D M Paton: Church and Race in South Africa (SCM, 1958)

see also Human Relations & the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture (published by the Executive Council of the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), Cape Town, 1976)

There is, of course an enormous literature on Apartheid and the South African situation.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3 v 20

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 10 v 5

<sup>8</sup> Acts 17 v 26

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 11 v 6-9

<sup>10</sup> Romans 13 v 1-7

<sup>11</sup> I Thessalonians 5.15

argued for economic and political sanctions. Many Anglicans, for example, both in South Africa and world-wide, tended to subscribe to this view. For many, they did not go far enough. The point was made that the proponents of this view had no authority to speak for oppressed people in South Africa: it was said that it is one thing to preach about turning the other cheek when reasonably comfortably off, and secure; it is a very different matter when caught up the immediacies of a violent and unjust situation.

A third stance called for liberation for the oppressed - not so much by appealing to the oppressors, as by calling the oppressed to rise up. The blacks should rely no longer on palliative hand-outs from whites, but should seize power for themselves. Anything less would leave blacks in the same dependent relationship with whites. This view relied on texts like the Exodus story, and Jesus' use of the prophecy of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth.<sup>12</sup>

## **1.2 The ordination of women**

A text to which those in favour of the ordination of women have often appealed is Galatians 3.27f (in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave nor free.....); on the other hand those against have sometimes referred<sup>13</sup> to one from (probably) the same writer - that is I Corinthians 11.2-16 (which talks about women being subordinate to men and not addressing the congregation).<sup>14</sup> Another line of argument was to introduce a different authority – that of tradition: ie that the Church, since its earliest times, had not ordained women. This was not to be seen as a sexist position, since the Church had given women important and responsible roles; rather it was to be seen as faithful to divine ordinance in allocating different roles to the two sexes. It was argued that Jesus, and (on occasion) Paul, were prepared to go against convention when they felt it was right; that they had not in this case, meant that it would not be right to ordain women.

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 4.16-30

<sup>13</sup> Within Anglicanism this line of argument against has usually been adopted by evangelicals, and those disposed to taking a higher view of Biblical authority; whereas the argument appealing to tradition (or the practice of the whole Church) has more usually been taken by those sympathetic to Roman Catholicism.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Hayter: The New Eve in Christ (SPCK, 1987) provides a useful discussion of these and other texts.

### 1.3 Analysis

These two examples highlight some of the difficulties with interpreting or using<sup>15</sup> the Bible. Different parts, appealed to by different communities with different political interests, seem patient of widely opposed interpretations. The particular selection made from the Bible may determine the course of its interpretation; or be determined by it, for it may be shaped by the presuppositions of the interpreter, which therefore need to be considered. Indeed, theology has an autobiographical dimension.<sup>16</sup> What the original author may have meant in his or her own context (if that can be given meaning) is brought into play against possible current applications. The authority of the Bible may be balanced against that of tradition, which includes the tradition of interpretation of a particular passage. Further, although there is a general problem of perceived vulnerability for all texts because they are distanced from their authors, the Bible has a particular role within communities, and its vulnerability may be particularly troubling. It is in practice a highly political text, which means, many writers have argued, that there is an ethical dimension to any interpretation of the Bible.

Other problems of interpretation included internal contradictions within the Bible, conflicts with known science or history, unbelievable events,<sup>17</sup> areas of silence. Hermeneutics – the science of interpretation – was in some ways the attempt to deal with these sorts of questions. Modern hermeneutics is often traced back to Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834), and there are discussions of it which have a general application to all texts, as well as specifically Biblical treatments. However, many hermeneuticists are interested in theoretical, philosophical treatments of the subject. At most they may offer their own discussion of particular sections of text; their work could not easily be applied to our two earlier examples. I, on the other hand, wish to pursue what may be seen as practical or comparative hermeneutics.

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<sup>15</sup> Some writers distinguish interpretation and use: see the discussion in Chapter 2 Section 2.1.3.4

<sup>16</sup> Quite properly: one (over)view of the Bible is that it is the story of God's dealings with his people: i.e. it is the Biography of Israel. cf ed Ingrid Rasa Kitzberger : The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation (Routledge, London 1999) This collection of post-colonial writings is predicated on the view that the personal voice – the autobiographical element – is central to a proper, authentic interpretation of the Bible.

<sup>17</sup> Not just miracles, but the recorded ages of the patriarchs, or the number of Israelites. cf Bp Colenso's The Pentateuch and The Book of Joshua Critically Examined (publ in parts Longman, Green, Roberts, Logman and Green, London 1862 – 1879)

#### 1.4 Practical,<sup>18</sup> comparative,<sup>19</sup> hermeneutics

First, it would be desirable to be able to consider competing interpretations written by authors with very different sets of presuppositions and interpretative frameworks – as in the two examples above. In that case, to take a particular theoretical line might be to exclude parts of a writer's thinking from the outset.<sup>20</sup> A comparative hermeneutic would need to avoid narrow prescription.

Second, a practical hermeneutic could avoid some of the apparently undecidable debates of modern hermeneutics, and take a more pragmatic approach – relying perhaps on the pragmatic style of thinking of philosophers such as Peirce and Rorty.<sup>21</sup> For example, some writers have argued that there is a distinction between use and interpretation. Yet practically speaking, when a writer attempts a Christian treatment of some aspect of life, this distinction begins to disappear; concern for the problem under consideration (by either writer or reader) will make it harder to distinguish whether the interpretation of Bible came before or after the problem.<sup>22</sup>

Third, the highly theoretical treatments of many hermeneuticists are perhaps rather hard to put into practice, for a reader faced with a Biblical text. This would be particularly true for those outside the academy. Yet they have a stake in the political decisions associated with the two given examples – and many others more current: a practical hermeneutic would need to be accessible and useful to Christians without formal theological training.

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18 cf Paul Ballard's article : "Practical Theology as an Academic Discipline" : Theology vol 98 March/April 1995 pp 112 – 122  
Ballard argues that Practical Theology is a proper academic discipline, and offers a bibliography of some key recent texts.

19 Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 103 seems to criticise the idea of a comparative hermeneutics : his view would be that the proper test must be each hermeneutic against the truth about the text, rather than hermeneutics against each other. "What is left over, after the elimination of meta-physics I suggest, is 'comparative hermeneutics': the analysis and criticism of the way various cultures see and interpret. Argumentation gives way to conversation and story-telling, and philosophy becomes an 'edifying discourse' that no longer makes knowledge claims. recall the non-realist point : there is no vision of the true – beatific or otherwise – only versions."

20 Itumeleng Mosala, for example, takes a Marxist view, and considers that parts of the Bible are already ideologically tainted. In his Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology on South Africa (Eerdmans 1989) he is therefore unable to begin a dialogue with some sections of Cone's writing on Black Theology – as we shall see. See also Phyllis Trible: Texts of Terror (Fortress 1984)

21 Charles S Peirce: The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (eds Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss : Harvard University Press 1934 – 1936)

Richard Rorty : Consequences of Pragmatism (University of Minneapolis Press 1982)  
see Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) pp 100, 101

22 Kelsey : The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology (Fortress 1975) p 213 suggests a distinction between "what God is using the Bible to say" and "what God is using the Bible for."

Fourth, a practical, pragmatic hermeneutic could offer some consideration of what actually goes on when people engage with the Bible. Their presuppositions, characters, autobiographies – even the methods they use, and the order in which material comes to them – all have an influence on the interpretations they make.<sup>23</sup>

Fifth, whilst modern hermeneutics, within both Theology Faculties and Literary Critical Faculties, has been largely philosophical, there is a tradition of more practical approaches to texts. Rhetoric and poetics have been interested in the attested effects of texts, and how those effects are achieved; they examine the important issues of power and performance.<sup>24</sup> They are not just about literary devices, but also about genre, subject matter, the logic of an argument. To be sure, one application of a comparative hermeneutics would be to assess a theologian's use of the Bible – that is to look at a (secondary) text about a (primary) text – which is slightly different from the general view of hermeneutics, but then an important dimension of *all* texts is their intertextuality. Texts refer to, allude to, rely on, share and define genre with, other texts. Just as words take their meaning in difference, so do texts. The study of rhetoric and poetics is at least suggestive of the possibility that an effective practical hermeneutic could be developed.

One last point is that the area of political theology (or social Christianity) is frequently treated as part of ethics.<sup>25</sup> However, I believe that an approach from a biblical angle is appropriate for several reasons. First, insofar as the Bible is the foundational document for Christianity, Christian ethics is derived from it,<sup>26</sup> so that it is a second order exercise looking at the second order exercise of political theology. It may instead be instructive to look more directly at the relationship between political theology and the Bible, especially since “the excitement which accompanied the recovery of political theology in our time arose very evidently from the reading of the Bible.”<sup>27</sup> Further, approaching political theology from this direction may be more accessible to those outside the academy. Finally,

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<sup>23</sup> Schleiermacher was interested in the psychological aspects of interpretation, arguing that the gap between author and text was spanned not by objective analysis alone, but also by intuition and imagination, which would help recreate the author's mind. See Duncan Ferguson: Biblical Hermeneutics (SCM 1986) p 167

<sup>24</sup> see Eagleton : Literary Theory (Blackwell 1983) p 205

<sup>25</sup> We shall see in Chapter 9 that many, though not all, of the writers reviewing and assessing the writings of my chosen authors do so from a philosophical or ethical point of view.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, some ethicists would not see it like this.

<sup>27</sup> Oliver O'Donovan : The Desire of the Nations : Rediscovering the roots of political theology (CUP 1996)

and importantly, Biblical language has supplied both the rhetoric of the politicians and the resistance of the oppressed; there is a direct relationship here which has nothing to do with ethics.

The intention of this thesis is therefore to develop a practical hermeneutic, and then test it out on two authors of political theology.

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He continues: “The ‘Political hermeneutic’ belongs to the Scriptures and is imposed by the exercise of reading the Scriptures. The Scriptures in their entirety, that is, and not only certain texts within them. Older traditions of political theology grew weaker as their exegetical foundations shrank, dwindling to a few cherished passages (Paul on the authorities, for example) which appeared to have lost any connection with the messages of the prophets, evangelists and apostles. It had once been very different, as students of the high Medieval and Reformation Christian traditions know well.”

O’Donovan later (p 27) suggests “The hermeneutic principle that governs a Christian appeal to political categories within Hebrew Scriptures is Israel itself – or the governing principle is the kingly rule of God.”