

The Public Image of the Bible

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The Social Background

It is only eighteen years since CBRF produced Journal No. 2. Then H. L. Ellison and W. S. Galyer wrote of the Gospel for the 'man in the street'. Since then the 'man' has almost doubled his real income; the street is wider to cope with three times as many cars and the forest of aerials now provide colour TV instead of black-and-white. We are still in political and economic muddle but more affluently so. The childhood recollections of Sunday School are fainter. The U.K., apart from the occasional Royal wedding, is more solidly secular than ever. The *Honest to God* firework spluttered for a few years. *The Myth of God Incarnate* fourteen years later was hardly a damp squib. Religion is not news.

Yet the Bible is still a best seller. House groups burgeon. In the last five years my daughter has seen far more of her contemporaries becoming Christians than ever I did between 15 and 20 years old. The British Humanist Association, newly-formed in 1963, boasted a thousand names in Oxford, but now is shrivelled. Evangelicals have made steady progress in the Anglican Church — so much so that whereas in 1963 the majority of stalwarts in para-church organizations like Scripture Union had come through Brethren assemblies, now they are probably outnumbered by those who have come through CYFA and other establishment channels.

Against such a background, how shall I write of the public image of the Bible? Which public? Which Bible?

Which Public?

As Mr. Ellison said in 1963, evangelical Christianity has only rarely been of interest to the mass of the people of Britain. Most of the con-

verts of evangelical revivals were middle class. In 1963 he saw a slide to intellectualism. Eighteen years later it is painfully clear that we have two publics. We are reaping the dread harvest of the 1944 Education Act. Not that the Act was other than a high ideal, but it was, inevitably, applied by fallible, sometimes selfish, often blinkered, people. The General Certificate of Education — designed for the 20% with a particular reasoning ability — became a thing to be grasped at. The Newsom Report *Half our Future* fell quietly to the ground. The Robbins report, expanding University education, was more than fulfilled. Compulsory secondary education for all, 'appropriate to age, aptitude and ability' became a scramble to get as many children as possible through examination hoops and leave the rest in uncertificated limbo. The recent struggles to achieve truly comprehensive education may possibly bring healing, but it will take at least a generation. By our educational folly we have given status, power, privilege, greater income and job opportunity, and immensely greater self-esteem to those who can pass exams. The average Brethren assembly probably has more examination successes per member today than when Mr. Ellison wrote in 1963, and certainly vastly more than the average of the area in which the Hall stands. (There are exceptions, in one of which it is my privilege to worship.)

So we have two 'publics' — the 'educated' who tackle anything with the easy confidence that it can be understood, analyzed and weighed; and the other 60% of the nation who regard analysis as either mystery or waste of time, but who learn by watching and doing.

This division into two publics has been more than ever evident in the church. We are a literate lot, so it is likely that we sell our message best to the literate. So some of the great successes of post-war years have been among the 'educated'. Scripture Union work in schools (Inter-School Christian Fellowship) had phenomenal success, under God, in bringing hundreds of grammar school Sixth formers to intelligent Christian faith, passing them on to the immensely successful Inter-Varsity Fellowship whose University and College Christian Unions have trained thousands of highly intelligent, highly committed young Christians, many from completely non-Christian or anti-Christian backgrounds. In the late sixties and early seventies Michael Eastman launched his urgent appeal for 'all schools' with the target 'a Christian teacher and a Christian group in *every* school' and with special emphasis on the secondary modern schools. In the late seventies the Frontier Youth Trust and others blazed a trail for 'frontier situations' where Christians tried to communicate across the educational and cultural divide, to bring Jesus meaningfully to those who had fallen behind in the educational paper-chase.

The very difficulty of describing these two publics shows how little the problem is understood. I use 'educated' and 'uneducated' in quotation marks simply to put labels on them. It is not a matter of being 'good with brains' or 'good with hands' — many people are very good with both. Many a civil servant or teacher could have been a very competent mechanic or plumber if he had escaped the eddy that sucked him into university. Many a lawyer could be the gold-dust of engineering, a highly-trained toolmaker, if he had taken an apprenticeship at 16 instead of the expected route for A-stream pupils, into the sixth form. Nor is it a matter of moral quality or sober judgment of life. The 'educated' are as selfish, fraudulent, lecherous, kind, good or caring in their own well-expressed ways as are the 'uneducated' in their more open and blunter ways. It has been suggested there is a difference between the 'educated' emphasis upon individuality, personal decision and choice, and the 'uneducated' tendency to group solidarity and greater dependence upon peer-group in thought and action. There is truth in this (especially among the young) but peer-group pressures are still strong for the 'educated' and individual freedom is often freedom only to follow an accepted path. The main difference that seems to stand out (at least to me, immersed in the 16-19 educational scene, looking out on the world into which adolescents must go) is one of mental stance, confidence and expectation. The 'educated' *expect* to analyze things, to read about them, to listen to various points of view, to make judgments. They expect to fit individual things into a wider framework of society, which they expect to make sense according to broad principles. Insofar as they are optimists, it is an optimism of man's ability to solve his problems rationally, through technical expertise and efficient structures. The 'uneducated' have no such aspiration to understand the world at large. They have a healthy scepticism about government, local or central, and concentrate their energy on family and personal enjoyment. There is a 5% lower, underprivileged fringe (as there is a 5% super-affluent fringe of the 'educated') but in the main they feed well, clothe their children well, decorate and furnish their houses well and take their share of holidays abroad, and spend their Sundays servicing the car.

Views of the Bible

How do these two publics view the Bible? The 'educated' are fallen into the pit which they dug. C. S. Lewis said years ago that if you learn to 'see through' everything, you soon lose the value of sight. If you can see through the house wall, through the people inside,

through the back wall and the hedge beyond, there is nothing to 'see'. So the 'educated' have questioned and read and thought about every claim to authority or value. The learned language of university filtered slowly but surely to sixth form. Pupils learned from their gurus that science is fact, all else opinion. The values that held societies and nations together for centuries are dissolved into their cultural, social or political components. The philosophy of empiricism (knowledge comes only through sense experience) colours all thought, with its narrow view of 'proof'. Neither God nor any other absolute can be proved scientifically. So their world closes around them in a sad reductionism. All values, personal experience, love, duty, awe or hope can be reduced to their psychological or sociological account. The beauty of the sunset is in danger of being reduced to a catalogue of wavelengths. A very few of the 'educated' followed (and even fewer still follow) the logical positivists in saying that God-talk is meaningless (A. J. Ayer said that DOG is more meaningful than GOD) though this star has fallen since its heyday in universities post war. Tolerance has become the supreme virtue — provided always it be tolerance of enlightened twentieth century patterns and not exclusive or intolerant claims. Views are held with civility. Christians may follow their unenlightened ways provided they do not force them on others, or claim an absolute truth value for them.

The successor to Logical Positivism in academic philosophy in Britain was existentialism with its emphasis upon 'authentic existence' and personal decision. Along with this went a deep pessimism, anguish and dread about people bound by convention or leading purposeless lives. The hippie drug scene of the sixties represented one attempt to break out, the theatre of the absurd was another. Many of the 'educated' have absorbed this atmosphere — at university in long and anguished discussion about the meaning of life, purposelessness and discontent with society, but a few years later (because one cannot live in anguish — the 'educated' are also human) a joining in the rat-race but with a little more despair and sense of futility than their less anguished peers. For a few this has been, by God's grace (through people like Francis Schaeffer and places like L'Abri) the gateway to authentic existence in Jesus. For most it has deepened the despair of ever finding a firm basis for living. So eat, drink, be merry and read the Sunday papers.

How does the Bible fare in all this? The 'educated' public starts with a faint haze of half-remembered Bible stories, fogged in many cases by liberal teachers' attempts to explain and interpret anything miraculous in the life of Jesus. Michael Green (*The Truth of God Incarnate*, Hodder 1977) notes the presuppositions of scholarly historical critic-

ism and these have filtered through to those of the 'educated' who ever read or think about the Bible. The first presupposition is that miracles don't happen, either at Lourdes or Galilee, so those bits of the Bible must reflect an outdated, unscientific world-view. Secondly, the world is a closed system with its own laws, so genuine revelation — any message from 'outside' — is impossible. Jesus may have been a good teacher, a man for others, a free man, but no more so than Gandhi or the Buddha. So if the Bible is read, it is read with automatic mental translation into the thought forms of the late 20th century. In fact, it is not often read. Only fragments are remembered and trotted out in discussion — like Paul being anti-women, Jesus being anti-war, the Old Testament God being vengeful and Genesis teaching a 144 hours creation which is scientifically impossible. The general approach is that the Bible is no longer relevant to life, but a proper specialist study if you like that sort of thing. A very few of the 'educated' will have heard of the New Theology, form criticism, and demythologization, and even fewer have any real knowledge of these approaches to the Bible, but most will know that there has been a bit of upheaval in the church about it all and that 'even the clergy don't take it literally any more'.

How does the other public view the Bible? For a start it is, of course, a book — not a newspaper or magazine, or even a pulp novel such as you might possibly read of an evening or on holiday. It is thought of as hard-backed, long and academic. Then it is very definitely a 'religious' book. It is not necessary to any skill or useful knowledge like the car manual, or guide to home decorating or whippet-breeding. All the instinctive suspicion of the culture against book learning and 'them' can be focused on the Bible. You don't need books to tell you how to live. If polite, you regard book learning as 'for them with more brains than I've got', if impolite you dismiss it as a lot of words. The Bible is for religious people, particularly parsons who 'aren't concerned with us' and aren't all that brilliant at living, either judging from newspaper scandals. The presuppositions of the 'educated' surround everyone via the media. TV, papers, magazines, all carry the message: 'science is fact, all else is opinion'. No moral absolute; make your own mind up; respect other people if they keep themselves to themselves. The religious programmes on TV show wide diversity. The only thing that sticks is that religious people ought to care, but often don't (even the Salvation Army is debunked). The Gallup pollsters are told 85% believe in God but you don't need to go to church or read a Bible for that.

The main thrust that comes across for 'educated' and 'uneducated', bookish and non-bookish, is that the Bible is a tremendous irrelevance. It does not hit life at all. There is no reason why anyone except an en-

thusiast should ever read it. If pressed, there are ill-digested gobbets of empiricism and rationalism to show it's not very reliable anyway.

Which Bible?

Even in 1963 translations abounded. The NIV has now joined the team. To the general public, the Bible is still AV. That is what they are most likely to hear at the occasional funeral or wedding, or the ceremonial occasion on TV. Certainly the TV caricature parson will use AV language. The 'educated' write to each other in the *Times* about how bad it is to alter the AV or 1662 prayerbook, but in fact most of the 'educated' find the AV hard to read. The Elizabethan English is beautiful rather than informative. Like Shakespeare, you read it for beauty and the occasional quote but only expect it to *mean* anything if you are making it a special study. Recent versions have helped readability but not the motivational barrier. There is no expectation that the Bible will make sense in today's world. Many pick it up with a faint *déjà vu* feeling, the old faint memories. Those who come to it fresh find it hard to start. Start at the beginning and you immediately get the 'unscientific' hang-up. Start the New Testament and you face a page of names. If you are serious enough to get a reading guide you must be strongly motivated indeed, and may make more progress.

To the 'uneducated' the Bible is an even less likely starter. Again it is met only in AV or the occasional TV caricature, and AV is not only incomprehensible but also faintly comic. New versions help (there is not the same snobbish veneration of 'beautiful language') but even so there is little expectation that it will make sense.

So, beyond any educational distinction, there rises a monumental disregard of the Bible. It is utterly irrelevant to the life style of most citizens. Our post-Christian society is learning to live without God-talk, however much it may secretly draw on God's common grace through his people and through the human constitution. A whole vocabulary is dying. The things the Bible talks about — God, glory, sin, justification, righteousness, eternity — are fading from English language. In their place the media give a new jargon, the specialist terms of social, political and economic descriptions of man in society. Caring and community are seen as (vital) functions of family and state in which the church may possibly still be a factor along with Rotary, Help the Aged and the RSPCA.

The Bible says?

All this puts in dark and sharp colours the question: 'How do you use

the Bible today? Is it still the sword of the Spirit? Is it still the incorruptible seed? Should we wield it and sow it? If so, how?

There can be no question that the Bible is the church's charter. It contains all things necessary to faith and conduct. Churchmen who try to cut it down or out in favour of more modern bases for the Christian profession know not what they do. In maturity, every Christian must have a faith in Christ that stands not in the wisdom of men but in the Word of God. How will he get that faith if he starts from the 'public' mentioned above?

The sword is still wielded, the seed still sown in very direct ways. The Gideons distribute New Testaments (now mercifully NIV) to school children, nurses, police and hotels, and have a steady stream of exciting testimony to keep them going and keep all God's people praising him for the power of his Word. Texts outside churches and on railway stations bear silent witness — I have not heard of any direct reaction but always rejoice at a stab for God among the theatre notices on the Underground. But these are broadcast seed, bows at a venture, God's Word in God's hand, here a little, there a little, prospering whereto he sent it. What of the church's steady ministry, the individual witness of individual believers? Do they start with 'The Bible says . . .?' If you get your friend as far as a Billy Graham rally he will expect to see a Bible waved. If you get him to church even, he will expect it to be read. But if you talk person-to-person what has the Bible got to do with it?

I suggest that we must witness to Jesus and then *lead on* to the Bible to give content and historical basis to the outline we draw from our own experience. Our aim is to introduce friends, neighbours, colleagues to Jesus and his people. Whatever flimsy bridge we build, eventually we hope that bridge will carry some of our experience of the love of Jesus, his forgiveness, his reliability, his voice to us in his word. At some stage we pray that bridge will link our friends to other Christians, a house-group perhaps, a family service. There they may see for themselves a group of people finding that the Bible does make sense, does support hope and purpose in daily life, does build a Christian world-view. Thus we give in our own words and experience the substance of the Bible message and then lead on to the Bible we get it from. To start with 'the Bible says . . .' is, I suggest, off-putting and makes bridge building more difficult.

Years ago, perhaps, the Bible enjoyed some authority, some public standing and veneration so we could start there and lead people from the familiar words to the living Jesus. The Bible today is not a ready-made launching pad for the Gospel. It is still the historical base and essential study for the committed, but we work back to it, not from it.

What has this to say to the use of the Bible in church? First and foremost, all use of the Bible in church must be *understandable*. This may well mean abandoning the AV, but in whatever version, it must be well and clearly read. Exposition must be honest and clear. The hanging of sermons on a few texts damages the standing of the Bible. Sermons must show how the text is relevant, show it can be understood by the honest straightforward reader. The homegroup scores heavily because the reading can be slow, painstaking, open to question, involving whole people and not just their intellects. Like Jesus, the group leader can give people truth 'as they are able to bear it'. If they thus increase their expectation that the Bible can speak to them, they will go to church better prepared to listen to exposition.

So the third public, Christian believers, grows. The change in motivation and comprehension is dramatic. 'I'm catching up fast,' said a student, 'I've got to 2 Kings already!' 'Of course, I read the Bible much more now,' said a retired gentleman recently converted. 'It makes more sense, too,' he added artlessly.