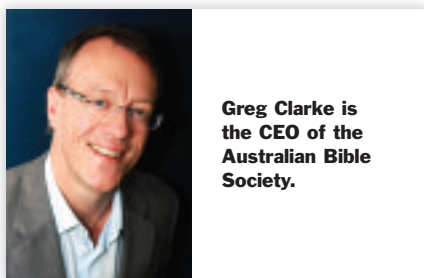


THEOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF THE BIBLE

THE RETURN OF THE COACH

AUTHOR GREG CLARKE

As secularisation marches on and we transition to a post-Christian era, it's tempting to think the Bible has had its day. Not so, according to Greg Clarke, who argues the evidence points in the opposite direction.



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In boxing terms, the Bible can be either Coach or Sparring Partner. Sometimes it will be both, but one's attitude to it usually falls primarily into one role or the other. Those who view the Bible as their Coach are most likely to have their worldviews shaped by its teaching. Those who view the Bible primarily as a Sparring Partner are more likely to have their worldviews shaped by other inputs, which are then compared and contrasted with the Bible to see whether it can 'take the hits'. The most pressing of questions for theologians in the 21st Century is which of these roles will dominate.

In this article, I maintain that the role of the Bible as Coach is on the rise, and the pursuit of the Bible as Sparring Partner, whilst still significant in some small circles, is not at the heart of theological endeavour as it might have been in the late 20th Century. In other words, the view of the New Atheists that 'religion spoke its last intelligible or noble

or inspiring words a long time ago',¹ is rejected by increasing numbers of academics, Bible readers, church leaders and social analysts all over the world.

a. Transformative power of the coach

The Bible is a transformative text, challenging, interrupting and rebuilding the philosophy, ethics and historical horizons of both individuals and states. Would the world look anything like it does without the influence of the Bible? For instance, could we have expected universal human rights to have emerged without the Bible? Archbishop Rowan Williams doesn't think so:

It never does any harm to be reminded that without certain themes consistently and strongly emphasised by the 'Abrahamic' faiths, themes to do with the unconditional possibility for every human subject to live in conscious relation with God and in free and constructive collaboration with others, there is no guarantee that a 'universalist' account of human dignity would ever have seemed plausible or even emerged with clarity.²

Many mainstream scholars without obvious religious affiliation agree. For instance, Professor of History at Columbia University, Samuel Moyn, in his book, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*,

writes about the prevalent Christian worldview that shaped the UN Commission Declaration of Human Rights in the 1940s:

It is easy to overstate the global and multicultural origins of the Universal Declaration in light of more contemporary pressures and desires...To the extent the main actors came from outside 'the West'... the ideology closest to their hearts was a Christian one.³

In other words, biblical thinking and the worldview that emerges from it 'coached' the key proponents of the development of a universal human rights charter in the mid-20th Century, and it is fanciful to suggest that without such a worldview a charter like this would otherwise have been achieved. One of the marked blind



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spots of intellectual life today is the under-estimation (and sometimes denigration) of the place of the Bible in the nurturing of values, attitudes and a worldview that many non-Christian people (let alone Christian believers) hold dear. Credit is not given where credit is due. The Coach often goes unacknowledged.

b. Translatability: coaching beyond the West

In contrast with this, there are elements of the Christian church where the Bible and its influence are being recovered, and a new focus on the ‘coaching’ approach to Scripture is taking place. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI published his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*. This document presents conclusions from the Twelfth Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which focused on ‘the word of God in the life and mission of the Church’.⁴ Benedict calls for the shaping of Catholic minds by the word of God in the Bible, both for individual formation and for societies: ‘A sense of the Bible as a great code for cultures needs to be fully recovered’ (p177).

Benedict emphasizes the universal translatability of the Christian faith, such that the worldview of the Bible can

and must be ‘inculturated’. ‘The Church is firmly convinced that the word of God is inherently capable of speaking to all human persons in the context of their own culture’, a conviction, writes Benedict, that springs from the Bible itself in which God promises Abraham that he will be a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:3, 18:18). Far from being limited to coaching Israel and the early Christian community, or the Christianized West today, the Bible in its translatability has capacity to shape worldviews universally, a feature not

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common to many, if any, other major religions.

As one of the few religions that was and is promoted beyond its initial language group, Christianity has survived and flourished largely because of its attitude to translation. Yale Professor, Lamin Sanneh, writes that through the translation of the Bible the Christian religion neither promoted one culture’s superiority nor denigrated any culture as incapable of receiving divine revelation:

[B]ible translation was based on the idea that all languages were equal in terms of their value and right in

mediating the truth of God but, by the same token, equally inadequate in relation to that truth. No language could claim exclusive prerogative on the truth of God, just as conversely no one language was intrinsically unworthy to be a language of faith and devotion.⁵

This concept of translatability has now been tested across nearly two centuries of rapidly advancing Bible mission and across 451 languages⁶ and, despite struggles, insurmountable theological issues in translation are rare.

The work of translation is partly responsible for the migration of the locus of Christian activity from Europe into what is described as the ‘Global South’ during the past several decades. Whereas scholarship has often concentrated on critical accounts of imperialism in mission, Philip Jenkins points out that recent work has clarified the extraordinary efforts of missionaries in Africa and Latin America to contextualize the Bible in their translations, attending to metaphors that made sense locally, and removing other possible linguistic barriers to understanding: ‘However

unconsciously, translation transforms Jesus and his followers into Africans for African hearers, makes them Chinese for a Chinese audience.⁷

While the Bible more readily comes under criticism in Western and North-American academies and even churches (i.e. it is Sparring Partner), in the Global South a fair generalization would be that the Bible already resonates with a dominant worldview: supernaturalism.⁸ The new Christian churches of Africa, for example, which have grown from 10 million members to 350 million in just one century,⁹ are completely comfortable with the Bible's miracles, healings, visions and prophecies. Bible teaching *clarifies* an existing worldview rather than threatening or overwhelming it. 'For better or worse,' writes Jenkins, 'the dominant churches of the future could have much in common with those of medieval or early modern European times' (p8).

and worldview to new examination. Discussing the authority of the Bible in a postmodern context, theologian Richard Bauckham establishes the unique nature of the biblical metanarrative as *yet unfinished*: 'We are ourselves writing the current chapter of the story, and for that purpose the overall biblical metanarrative functions authoritatively by setting the direction of the plot for us to follow.'¹⁰

Such an understanding of biblical authority makes room for the unexpected, remarkable growth of the Christian church in places like Nigeria, China and Central America, where the 'coaching' of Scripture is shaping churches and societies in new ways, not immediately recognizable to those who equated the European Christian tradition with the Christian worldview itself. This is the humble task of theology in relation to the Bible: to keep resisting the notion

University of Aberdeen, can write that those in his line of work should 'avoid construing dogmatics as a set of improvements upon Scripture', instead always referring people back to the Scriptures, to the deeper reading of them, and to finding the gospel of Jesus Christ within them: 'As such, it is a summons to attentiveness, a reminder that, because the use of the Bible is always threatened by domestication, the church has always *to begin again* with Scripture.'¹¹

Whereas postmodernity opens up Christianity to cultural novelty, it also invites new ways of reading Scripture whilst maintaining a stance of submission to it (in other words, letting the Coach remain the Coach). There has been an enormous increase, especially among evangelicals, in the number of academics who would not only consider Christianity an important focus of their work, but would also say that their own

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Many in the late Christian world of the European West might say that this is definitely for the worse, and that the African church will have to go through a modernizing experience, during which a more scientific and rational worldview will triumph and superstitions be left behind. Although something like this might occur, it is highly presumptuous to suggest that the African churches will simply follow the path of modern Europe towards marginalizing the Christian faith. In fact, many would avoid such a path on the grounds of the failures of modernity to provide significant intellectual and social solutions for Europe in the 20th and now 21st Centuries.

c. Postmodernity and the coach

Furthermore, the West has moved through the modern phase into postmodernity, which once again opens up the questions of faith, interpretation

that the Bible has already 'coached' some people, who simply then need to coach others. Rather, theology renews people's interest in and respect for the Bible. For this reason, John Webster, Professor of Systematic Theology at the

faith-perspectives are of importance to their scholarship. Christian scholarly societies have flourished, as has the role of professed Christians in mainstream academic institutions. The 'scandal' of the absent 'evangelical mind' so lamented



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Christian tradition in a manner where the script is set, but the players continually change. This analogical construct is surprisingly powerful in addressing some of the key concerns of the postmodern mind. It allows for difference in a broader context of unity and tradition; it focuses on experience rather than reason, without surrendering the power and importance of rationality; and it provides an important place for the individual actor (be he/she

by Professor Mark Noll in 1995 has been addressed with enthusiasm over the ensuing decades.¹²

As a case study, one area of focus is literary criticism and theory in relation to the Bible. This discipline has been

of the dominant social paradigm or a disempowered minority) without losing the undergirding universal story of which the actor is a part and a herald.

In Vanhoozer's model, the theologian is a dramaturge, shaping the already

d. Coaching in the digital age

Finally, I turn to consider the importance of digital technology in returning the Bible to the position of Coach for both Church and Academy.

Apparently, it took 500 monks to assemble the first concordance back in the thirteenth century (to the Vulgate Bible). In 1737, it took Alexander Cruden just less than a year to construct his English concordance, but it is well known that he was mad (just like the main contributor to the Oxford English Dictionary, Professor James Murray).¹⁴ Today, madness is no longer a prerequisite to searching the Scriptures, because our computers do in moments what these pioneers gave their lifetimes to achieve.

As well as aiding Bible search and grammatical research, the internet is providing opportunities for wider ranges of enquiry. The self-assessing, self-

script and developing a 'treatment' of it for the players.

growing steadily since the 1960s, when attention to the literary character of the Bible was reignited in North America and England through the work of Nathan A. Scott Jr, Amos Wilder, Frank Kermode and Stanley Romaine Hopper, among others. Kevin Vanhoozer, now Blanchard Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, Illinois, was a product of the generation in which the literary turn in biblical studies occurred. Starting with his doctoral work on Paul Ricoeur, Vanhoozer has developed a sophisticated understanding of the process of communication between God, human author, text and human reader/hearer. His most recent major work employs dramatic theory to understand the way doctrine operates in the church and the world, a move in his words from 'theory to theater'.

Just as Richard Bauckham describes the Bible's worldview as an unfinished metanarrative, so Vanhoozer would see doctrine as the 'playing out' of the

received script (Scripture) and developing a 'treatment' of it for the players (the Church):

The theologian is an advocate both of the script and of the performing company, with a dual responsibility to understand the play and to make it intelligible to a contemporary audience... For while the ultimate aim is to produce wise performances or performed wisdom, its biblical interpretations are neither uncritical nor unrelated to analytical procedures that seek to explicate the text.¹³

This sustained metaphor of Scripture as dramatic story lowers many of the barriers to accepting the 'coaching' authority of Scripture, since it does not demand uncritical or de-contextualized acceptance of a fixed text, but rather encourages the re-interpretation of the text as it is 'performed' in Christian communities and traditions, but within the limitations of the 'script'—the fixed canon of the Bible.

correcting nature of open-source style web-based theological enquiry makes global wisdom accessible to anyone with an internet connection. Far more exposure is given to the process of theological reasoning, as scholars post their developing thoughts on a subject, rather than simply their final works. To take one example, blogging has moved from a fringe activity to a mainstream practice in theology over just five years. It enables interaction between scholars internationally in a hitherto impossible manner, with posting and commenting occurring in real time. Australian theologian and prominent blogger, Benjamin Myers, notes that 'the immediacy of blogging begins to mold theology into a more flexible, provisional form of discourse'.¹⁵ Myers notes that blogging makes theology more akin to pastoral work, because it can be responsive to enquiry, community-oriented and timely. This corresponds well with Vanhoozer's approach to



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doctrine as performance, providing a virtual stage, an international cast, and an undetermined number of acts. Furthermore, Myers notes that blogging is actually a form of reading:

No longer is reading an activity reserved for private study: that carefully crafted space where thought is cultivated under conditions of silence, leisure, and economic privilege... To read a blog is to participate in a collective reading process: on any given day, we read the same post, the same thread of comments and responses... Such reading is not so much an end in itself as the means to a particular form of community. The very act of reading theology thus becomes a collective project.¹⁶

John Webster's job description for theologians, to call people back to a deeper reading of Scripture, is to some extent being answered in the technological form of the theological blog.

In 1999, the American Bible Society hosted a forum called 'Futuring the Scriptures: The Bible for Tomorrow's Publics' in which questions relating to

the Bible and Media were addressed, primarily by theological academics. Even around a decade ago, the dominance of the world-wide web was hard to imagine, and few of the papers addressed the significance of the internet and digital technology for the future of the Bible. The papers concerned with the emerging digital age were more driven by fear than possibility. Robert S. Fortner wrote that, 'every image, text, and sound delivered via the Internet is now a component in a great stew of possibilities in which no single ingredient is any more significant or crucial to the whole than any other'.¹⁷ Richard Thieme, a former priest working with new technologies, worried that the uniqueness of Christianity is threatened by the globally distributed data of the internet and 'the pressures of the digital world will continue to transform formerly exclusive paths into preferences' (p57).

A decade of digital technology has shown these fears to be less significant than the enormous possibilities that have

been opened up by the internet, digital devices and other online services. For example, consider the YouVersion Bible project. YouVersion (www.youversion.com) provides 50 versions of the Bible in over 30 languages, all free to anyone with internet access. Lest these figures wash over us, this is the equivalent of a century of missionary work around the world endeavouring to provide people with the Bible in a language and format that they understand. YouVersion is radically changing the model of Bible distribution, having had over five million downloads of their 'app' onto Android phones in less than a year. YouVersion also provides Bible reading plans and the ability to connect with others around the world who are studying the same Bible passage that you are reading. The impact of such global reach for the Scriptures is hard to calculate.

Whilst 'The Bible' Facebook page is not the page with the most 'friends', it is frequently rated as the most interacted-with page on Facebook.¹⁸ In other words, people are more active posting primarily Bible verses and comments about Bible verses on this page than any other community-style Facebook page. The vast majority of these comments are instances of people whose worldviews are 'coached' by Scripture, with the occasional invasion of atheistic criticism and mischievousness.

As the online experience becomes increasingly visual, people are encountering the Scriptures differently.



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This is happening in the world of scholarship, the world of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and also in the arena we might describe as 'biblical education'. For example, the oldest complete copy of the New Testament, Codex Sinaiticus, is now viewable online (at www.codexsinaiticus.org). This provides for anyone with internet access a document that was hitherto viewed only by a select and elite few scholars. Such democratization of biblical

one kind or another is likely to be the ascendant format. Furthermore, such technology is currently driving a new appreciation of and interaction with the Bible, which seems to go beyond novelty to genuine refreshment of what it means to 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' the Scriptures. It is also distributing the Bible globally at a previously unimaginable pace, such that those in isolated, politically restrictive or un-Christianised communities have access

interacted-with page on Facebook and the film attracting most attention around the world is called *The Tree of Life*. The Coach is back. Theology that, in John Webster's words, 'enables readers to find their way around the biblical world' will be in high demand as the Christian drama continues into the next act. ©

ENDNOTES

- 1 Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Sydney edition: Allen & Unwin, 2008), p8.
- 2 Rowan Williams, 'Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious Perspective'. Retrieved from <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1575>. 29 February 2008.
- 3 Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Harvard University Press, 2010), p66.
- 4 Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini: The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Strathfield, NSW: St Paul's Publications, 2010).
- 5 Lamin Sanneh, 'Bible Translation and Ethnic Mobilization in Africa'. Robert M. Fowler, Edith Blumhofer and Fernando F. Segovia (eds), *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible for the Third Millennium* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), pp161-2.
- 6 Most recent statistics available at <http://www.ubs-translations.org>.
- 7 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity*, Revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.132.
- 8 In particular, supernaturalism assumes a divine agent or agents who act outside the physical laws. Therefore, Bible stories in which divine figures act offer no surprises to supernaturalists: nothing more need be said to 'explain' the events. In contrast, a naturalist will be asking, 'How did this really happen?'.
- 9 Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p4.
- 10 Richard Bauckham, *Scripture and Authority Today*, Grove Biblical Series B12 (Grove Books: Ridley Hall, Cambridge, UK, 1999), p11.
- 11 John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp129-130.
- 12 see Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). For an account of the rise of evangelical scholarship, see John Micklethwait & Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Rise of Faith is Changing the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), chapter 7: 'Empires of the Mind: God and the Intellectuals', pp192-210.
- 13 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p247.
- 14 Michael Fraser, 'Tools and Techniques for Computer-Assisted Biblical Studies', June 1996. http://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/pubs/NT_Seminar_ord_Fraser_1996.html. Retrieved 29/07/2011.
- 15 Benjamin Myers, 'Theology 2.0: Blogging as Theological Discourse'. *Cultural Encounters*, Vol 6. No.1, 2010, p54.
- 16 Myers, *op.cit.*, p56.
- 17 Robert S. Fortner, 'Digital Media as Cultural Metaphor' in Fowler et al., *op.cit.*, p43.
- 18 Although 'The Bible' Facebook page does currently have a remarkable 8,113,201 'friends'. <https://www.facebook.com/TheBible>. Retrieved 30/08/2011.



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history increases awareness of the origins of the Bible, dispels many myths about it (i.e. that it was written in Jacobean English!) and enhances the likelihood of cultural sensitivity around the nature of the Bible. It also plays a role in apologetics by emphasizing anew the *material* reality of the Bible—that it has been copied, on multiple materials, found in fragments, reassembled and checked against multiple attestations of the text.

No doubt an article such as this one will be out of date very quickly in its reflections on digital media and the Bible, just as the 1999 ABS study seems unaware of what is to come. The digital realm seems less predictable than any other branch of publishing past or present. However, it is clear that for those who consider Bible engagement a valuable activity, digital technology of

to the Bible. The enthusiasm with which it is being received suggests an age of significant theological engagement is upon us, in which the non-European forms of Christianity are likely to come to the fore.

IT IS STARTLING TO THINK THAT, WHEN a global perspective is taken, the study of the Bible may soon return to the centre of the educational experience. Such a view runs against instinct in 21st Century Sydney, from which I write. Here, there are tired arguments taking place over Scripture teaching in public schools, religious influence in politics, and evolution. But at the same time, around the world university courses on religion are on the increase, publishing in Christian theology has experienced a renaissance, the Bible is the most