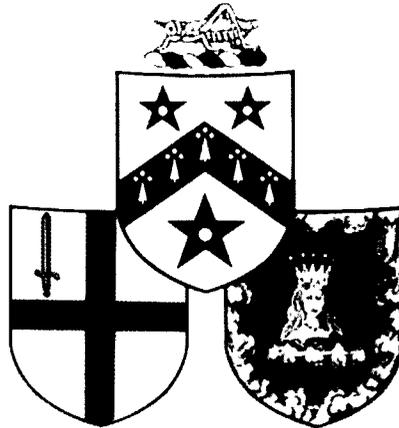


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RELIGION ON THE LEVEL

Lecture 2

WHAT IS THE USE OF THE BIBLE?

by

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18 November 1998

Religion on the Level

II

What is the Use of the Bible?

In my first lecture in this series I tried to adopt a certain tone of voice towards religion. Religion is an infinitely varied thing and it is always tempting to dismiss what others have made of it. Sometimes it is right to make these critical judgements, particularly if we recognise that there is a systemic contradiction between the claim and the life of those making the claim. Of what good is it, for instance, to claim to know that God is all-merciful, if we ourselves do not try to practise mercy? However, in most circumstances it is better to leave people to the devices they have created to get themselves through life. Frank Sinatra said that he believed in anything that got him through the night. On a more profound level, I am haunted by some words in the greatest of the Holocaust novels, *The Last of the Just* by Andre Schwartz-Bart. The book is the story of Ernie Levy, the last of "the just men", who died at Auschwitz in 1943. At the end of the story Ernie is in a box car with some women and children, many of them already dead, lurching towards the death camp. It is Ernie's burden to console the unconsolable. The children gather round him for comfort as he cradles in his arms the emaciated corpse of a child who has just died of dysentery.

"He was my brother", a little girl said hesitantly, anxiously, as though she had not decided what attitude it would be best to take in front of Ernie.

He sat down next to her and set her on his knees. "He'll wake up too, in a little while, with all the others, when we reach the Kingdom of Israel. There children find their parents, and everybody is happy.

"Because the country we're going to, that's our kingdom, you know. There, the sun never sets, and you may eat anything you can think of. There, an eternal joy will crown your heads; cheerfulness and gaiety will come and greet you, and all the pains and all the moans will run away..."

"How can you tell them it's only a dream?" one of the women breathed, with hate in her voice. Rocking the child mechanically, Ernie gave way to dry sobs.

"Madame", he said at last, "there is no room for truth here". Then he stopped rocking the child, turned, and saw that the old woman's face had altered.

"Then what is there room for?" she began. And taking a closer look at Ernie, registering all the slightest details of his face, she murmured softly, "Then you don't believe what you're saying at all? Not at all?"

"Tread softly, for you tread on my dreams" is not a bad motto for religious investigators. There are times when we should leave what we believe to be consoling fictions alone, and let people find what comfort they can against the emptiness or horror that confronts them. That is why in my last lecture I tried to leave to one side some of the ways of dealing with the religious question, without necessarily repudiating them. I suggested that there was a sort of gift relationship between believers and the thing believed in, whereby they found themselves believing or not believing; or not knowing enough to believe or not believe. Those categories of belief take care of most people, but what about those who do not fit any of them easily, the people I called God botherers, because the question of the meaning of Being was like a tooth that nibbled at their soul? What I am trying to find in these lectures, therefore, is a way in which the great religious symbols and narratives can be used by people who do not have and cannot find a settled attitude to the question of whether there is or definitely is not a beyondness to the answers the questions have provoked, an eternal, out of this world reality to which religious signs point. This week I want to apply this approach to the great narratives of the Hebrew scriptures to see what use we can make of them. If you already have a confident, fulfilling and love-enlarging way of using these narratives, you will not find the approach I am suggesting anything more than an intellectual curiosity. On the other hand, if you are intrigued by the great religious narratives, but have not found a way of adapting them to a life that seems to be cultures and aeons away from their world view, maybe something useful will emerge for you in this approach.

Something A.N. Wilson wrote in his book on St Paul will provide us with a useful entry point. It is a little polemical, this quotation, and it reminds us that part of the trouble with adapting religious discourse to our own situation is that finding one that fits us may sound like too peremptory a dismissal of an approach that works for others. Anyway, here is the quotation I mentioned:

"The modern Christian 'fundamentalist' who bravely continues to 'believe' in a real star of Bethlehem or an actual Garden Tomb in Jerusalem from which Jesus rose from the dead is making the same unimaginative mistake as Heinrich Schliemann when he dug in the sands of Hissarlik and thought he was finding Homer's Troy. Troy is in the Iliad, not in the sand. And because of Homer, not because of the sand, Troy exists in the collective consciousness of the human race".¹

We will find that there is a whole world of significance in that idea of the collective consciousness of the human race, and that it has particular importance when we meditate on the enduring power of the great religious narratives. It is the anonymity of the religious narratives that is the secret of their power. All great art is essentially anonymous in its impact. We do not need to know anything about its provenance for it to have its effect. We do not know who or how many people were behind the writing of Genesis or The Iliad, and we need not care, because these texts communicate truth to us at a level that goes beyond the artistry of any particular individual. They are archetypes that connect with the general condition of humanity; they speak of sorrow and loss, heroism and betrayal, faith and hope. This is why they go on touching us long after we have abandoned the official theories or teachings that have been derived from them. For instance, we do not know for certain who wrote the four gospels or when, but they still have power to connect with our lives today, so that, reading them, we sometimes have to put them down and look into the distance as their words strike ancient chords within us. The difficulty that many of us face today is that we find ourselves, to some extent at least, spiritually homeless, or semi-detached. We are no longer comfortably and unselfconsciously established at the

heart of any of the great traditions. And it is with the nature of tradition itself that I want to start.

There are a number of formulas that try to capture the atmosphere of our society in the final months of the second millennium, but the one that I think is the simplest and easiest to expound is the end of tradition: ours is a post-traditional society. A tradition is a system of ideas and practices based on a set of assumptions or premises from which a complex social or religious structure has evolved. Let me give you an example of a theological system or tradition that might help us to understand how some of these human constructs work. Here are some verses from the Letter to the Romans, chapter 5:

It was through one man that sin entered the world, and through sin death, and thus death pervaded the whole human race, inasmuch as all have sinned. But God's act of grace is out of all proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many, its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. If, by the wrongdoing of one man, death established its reign through that one man, much more shall those who in far greater measure receive grace and the gift of righteousness live and reign through the one man Jesus Christ.

It follows then, that as the result of one misdeed was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all. For as through the disobedience of one man many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one man many will be made righteous.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of that passage in the formation of the Christian theological tradition and its effect on human self-understanding. Let me pick out a few details. Paul takes it for granted that his readers will know the story of Adam and Eve from the Book of Genesis. Using that ancient narrative as a foundation or premise, he builds up his theological system. First of all, he suggests that human death is the direct consequence of the sin of Adam. He then goes on to

suggest that the primordial disobedience of Adam passed guilt on to us like some kind of metaphysical virus. Paul does not spell it out here, but we know that the tradition, as it later developed, held Woman to be disproportionately responsible for the Fall and its tragic effects, and that is why later Mariological developments took the form they did. Mary, alone of all her sex, was miraculously preserved from original sin, and was therefore not subject to physical death and, instead, was assumed bodily into heaven. But the Christological implications of this ancient narrative were even more profound. The first man's disobedience infected us with guilt; but the second Adam's obedience and self-sacrifice intervened mystically to switch off the offending gene that had condemned us to death. So Jesus Christ becomes the solution, the cure, to the problem created for the human race by the original disobedience of Adam and Eve, and the punishment of death that it had brought upon humanity. Once you accept the originating assumption, the premise on which the system is based, it works with captivating simplicity. And it has enormous dramatic power. It has profoundly affected the poetry of liturgy and hymnody, as well as the mechanics of evangelistic preaching. As a working tradition, its echoes are all around us, outside as well as inside the Church. People who have never read Genesis or Romans get the cartoon significance of Adam and Eve, the snake, the apple and the fig leaf.

But what happens when you question the premise, the originating assumption, on which the whole system is built? What happens to a tradition when you no longer believe in the claim on which it is built? We know that the story of Adam and Eve is a myth, a narrative device for conveying abstract truth; it is not history; it does not account for anything, except its own meaning. We know, for instance, that death is not a punishment for sin, but a biological necessity, an ineluctable fact of life. We experience it as loss; it fills us with fear; we rage against it; but we know it is not a punishment handed out to the human race because of Adam's disobedience. We also know that, captivating as such myths are, there was never any pre-lapsarian golden age of human innocence, any Garden of Eden from which our parents were banished once and for all. The myth is still powerful, of course, because it expresses the

tragedy of the ways we all go on ruining our own happiness, but it is not a historic event upon which we can build a sustainable system. Women are not disproportionately responsible for human sinfulness, and their subjection to men was an aspect of patriarchy, not a punishment from God. When we use the Adam and Eve myth today, therefore, we do not treat it as history, we do not build arguments upon it, we use it as a more or less instructive parable of the human condition.

There are religious communities that still use ancient narratives like this one in theological and moral argument, as though it were a fixed and established fact like the multiplication table, but the society we live in does the opposite. It questions the premises on which all traditional systems are based; and it repudiates the claims of religious revelation to decree infallibly how the rest of us should live. For example, when the tradition, quoting its scripture, tells society that women should be subordinate to men or that same-sex lovers should be condemned, society asks why, wants to understand the reason behind the prohibition. And here we come to the main difference between contemporary society and traditional religion. Post-traditional society is quite prepared to identify certain kinds of conduct as wrong, but the basis for the wrong has to be demonstrated, reasons have to be given. It is strongly opposed, for instance, to abusive sexual relationships, because it believes consent is an important ethical value, even in marriage. Traditional religions, on the other hand, operate on the basis of the authority of their claims, not their rational defendability. That is why when we ask them why same-sex love is wrong they do not offer us an argument that is persuasive, they offer us a text, they point to the tradition as though it had no history, they refer to it as if it were beyond argument. This is what we mean by fundamentalism.

Anthony Giddens defines fundamentalism as "defending tradition in the traditional way". A non-religious illustration might help us to make the point. Take the monarchy: this is one of our oldest traditional systems. If you were asked to justify the retention of the monarchy today, you'd probably offer a number of pragmatic arguments: you'd say it was a valuable symbol of the continuity of the nation or that it

was good for the tourist trade or for British exports or that it guaranteed us against ending up with President Thatcher. A monarchical fundamentalist, however, would scorn these attempts to rationalise the office and would point, instead, to the divine right of kings to rule over us. In other words, the fundamentalist defends tradition in the traditional way, and refers to original assumptions as though they were valid for all time and required no new justification. In periods of accelerating social change, fundamentalism is an obvious refuge. Its refusal to negotiate with the new consciousness is its greatest strength, but for those of us who find ourselves within the new consciousness, its insistence on holding on to the original meaning of ancient traditions renders them inaccessible to many of us, because it places the interpretation of the text beyond any kind of negotiation. For instance, as far as the tradition we are looking at goes, the fundamentalist would simply state that the Adam and Eve story is a historic event and Paul's exposition of it is literally true. Death is the wages of sin. The woman did fall for the tempter. Everyone is born guilty of an aboriginal offence committed by our original parent. Christ's mission was to rescue us from the destiny forged for us by the sin of Adam by substituting himself for us.

The tragedy of this approach, for those who cannot receive it, is that it may work to cut us off from the other possibilities the great religious narratives offer us for the exploration and illumination of our own condition. I would like to suggest that some of the themes in the Hebrew scriptures offer us the opportunity for personal and social exploration, leading to human wholeness. There are three complex and enduring human experiences expressed by the ancient biblical narratives. There is the theme of Falling into Captivity. Next there is the theme of Liberation through the Wilderness. Finally, there is the Discovery of the Promised Land and the Regret and Disillusion that accompany it.

There are not too many human themes or archetypes, but falling into discontent and then falling through discontent into some sort of prison or captivity is one of them. We can see it at its most dramatic in the simplest and starkest of the human dramas, that of addiction bred of deprivation. If you are a young man living without hope in a

desperate housing project in New York, Liverpool or Glasgow, then heroin is going to offer you a way out of your discontent, for a time and at a price. It's the Sinatra imperative again, something to get you through the long night of the soul, to dull the pain, to lead you into merciful oblivion. There may be ways of escape, mechanisms of fall, that do not have terrible landings, but they do not seem to have been invented yet. The cruellest part of the human paradox of discontent is that the instruments or places of release or escape themselves become the place of imprisonment. The substance that takes us out of ourselves, the secret relationship that gives us something to live for, become the instruments that take away our peace. In the case of the addict, no matter what the addiction is, the means of escape inevitably becomes the bondage from which there is no escape.

Addiction seems to be one of the characteristics of our era, though it is not obvious why this should be so. It may not take much insight to follow the logic of oblivion that prompts the kid from the housing scheme on the edge of town into addiction and death, but there are plenty of examples of generalised addiction in our culture. It may have something to do with the apparently limitless productiveness of global capitalism that has to generate new needs all the time, because the one thing it cannot do is stand still. G.K.Galbraith has described the affluent classes in our era as operating in a culture of contentment that insulates them from the misery of the poor, and that is undoubtedly a valid reading of our society. But it is not the only way to describe what is going on. There is also considerable evidence of radical discontent among the economically contented, especially in the area of human relationships. We seem less able to settle for what is merely good or endurable, rather than for the best; and there may even be something admirable in this refusal to settle for less. But the price we pay is a drifting search for an elusive contentment we rarely find, because there is always the promise of something more complete, something or someone more comprehensively satisfying. I am desperate to avoid a tone of condemnation here, mainly because I do not believe people are entirely responsible for the predicaments they get into, but there is as much to regret as to celebrate in the human situation of our time. The same was true before our time, of course: much to regret, much to

celebrate. The enduring of abusive relationships long after people should have quit them is something to regret, though the endurance itself was admirable. There is something wistful about our longing for perfect lives today, and something in me wants people not to settle for less than the best; but the enduring element in all these dramas of discontent is the self, *ourself*, so there is a strong likelihood that what we are bringing to these experiences of failure is as important a factor as the external reality we encounter. The wisdom of the ancient narrative of the Fall would suggest that whatever it is that gets in the way of our happiness is most likely to be discovered in our own failings, though we are strongly programmed to identify scapegoats to account for our miseries and the tragedies they create: "*The woman gave me and I did eat*", said Adam to God; so it would appear that finding scapegoats for human unhappiness is one of the oldest routines in the book. The Fall narrative can be used as an instrument of Socratic therapy. If we use it to interrogate the nature of our own discontents, it will help us to identify the mechanisms of blame we have constructed to shield ourselves from our own responsibility for the way things are with us.

The complement to the theme of Fall in the Hebrew Scriptures is the theme of captivity or bondage in Egypt. Of course, I am not suggesting that the texts leap from Fall to Captivity, but there is a sort of narrative logic to the scheme that reflects human experience. Our discontents lead us into experiences that begin by exhilarating us, gradually turn into habits that bore us, and can end by trapping us in relationships or routines that imprison us. And there is nothing that cannot be the vehicle of this process: natural substances, sex, emotional entanglements, greed for status and the toys it buys, work, spirituality, religion. Any of these, or any combination of these, can be the force that arrests and imprisons us. Breaking out and making it to freedom is tough.

So far I have implied that these dramas of Fall and Captivity happen particularly to individuals, and it is certainly true that most of my emphasis will be on the personal use of the great narratives in the struggles of our private lives, but a more profound example of this theme is provided by whole communities. Whole peoples and races

can be led into captivity by the compulsions of oppressing power and the same psychological mechanisms apply, the same creation of scapegoats, the same dynamic of final self-imprisonment. Any community that creates slaves or serfs ends up imprisoned by the very system that is meant to amplify its freedom. So it should not surprise us that the most dramatic and effective use of the great biblical narratives of captivity and the struggle to be free has been made by enslaved peoples, by Afro-Americans, by the oppressed people in South and Central America and Africa, by those anywhere who have found themselves in bondage and heard the great stories of Israel's escape from Egypt into the wilderness and the long trek to the promised land. This rhetoric of exodus and wilderness marks the speeches of Martin Luther King and the Black Theology movement in North America. It also marks the Liberation Theology of Central and South America. I visited a Base Community in El Salvador during the civil war in 1990, weeks after the massacre of the Jesuits at the university, and heard an exposition of scripture that burned with passion from a man who lived in a plywood shack in a shanty town. He was interpreting the passage in Luke chapter four where Jesus reads from a verse in Isaiah that proclaims good news to the poor, release for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and letting broken victims go free. There was no application from a distance, no spiritualising or metaphorising of the text to make it fit a very different context: the fit was perfect, it was about their situation, it described their experience, it was about their struggle for liberation, it was living scripture, their scripture, their narrative. This active, political use of the narratives is still the most appropriate and it is why oppressed groups anywhere are easily able to find themselves in these ancient texts and use them in a living way. In addition to providing oppressed groups with theological ammunition and stunning metaphors, they have also produced the best songs, none better than the great spirituals sung by the slaves in the United States during their long trek to freedom.

But let me turn back to the less exciting theme of personal captivity and the struggle for wholeness and freedom that is likely to be the most immediate use we will make of these texts. The narratives are remorseless in their announcement to us that there are no easy routes to personal wholeness and human freedom. The long process of

liberation may begin in exciting euphoria, in a midnight flight from Egypt, in an act of stunning resolution, but it is always followed by the long trek through the wilderness. This long trudge of discipline is true in all our human predicaments, but it is agonisingly true of the compulsions that afflict us and from which we long to grow and move away. There may be support systems, maintenance programmes, therapy and counselling, prayer and re-assurance, but there is no shortcut through the dry lands of effort. Growth is a cumulative process. Of course, it won't start at all without the strength that comes from the longing for freedom and the loving challenge our friends place before us, but once we are on the road we have to walk it. As far as our compulsions are concerned, it is a bit like slowly rewinding the tape of our days. The habits that imprison us were gradually wound round our lives by the slow accumulations of imprisoning habit, and they can only be unwound by the same process, slowly reversed. No violence or suddenness will work; the human psyche is not equipped with a fast rewind button. Of course, tips and techniques can help us along bits of the way. Nietzsche knew a lot about this. He said that there were only six ways of combating the vehemence of a drive. First, there is the avoidance of the opportunities for gratification of the drive, so that it will become progressively weakened till it withers away. Or we can impose a pattern of strict regularity in the gratification of the drive, so that we gain intervals of peace during which we are not troubled, and maybe go on from there to the first method. Thirdly, we can deliberately give ourselves over to the wild and unrestrained gratification of the drive in order to generate disgust with it and use the disgust to get power over the drive. There is what he calls the intellectual artifice of associating gratification of the drive with painful thoughts, so that the gratification itself becomes painful. Number five tells us to bring about a dislocation of the amount of strength we have by taking up particularly difficult and strenuous labours, or by deliberately subjecting ourselves to a new stimulus and pleasure that redirects our thoughts and urges it into other channels. In this regard, Bishop Gore spoke of "the compulsive power of a new affection", and certainly nothing is better at casting out the bitterness and sorrow of an old love affair than entering into a new one. Finally, and rather despairingly, Nietzsche suggests that for those of us who can endure it, we should weaken and

depress our whole bodily organisation by ascetical practices, so that in the overall weakening that occurs the particular drive that is disturbing us will be weakened as well. Nietzsche was a profound psychologist and I have quoted that guidance, because it shows what tough territory we are in when we start working on ourselves. The forty years wandering in the wilderness, with all its temptations and complaints, is an apt symbol of the human struggle for peace and wholeness. And no one gets it easy, or no one of any complexity.

What happens when we finally make it to the promised land of sobriety or relational stability or the mastery of some discipline or career? From a distance, the promised estate flowed with milk and honey and, from the heat and deprivation of the desert, that looked exactly like what we wanted. But who could or would want to live on milk and honey for the rest of their lives? It might be a good way to start the day, but as an invariable diet? Let's face it, it cloy, it soon has us longing for something more exciting, even for the diet of the wilderness, the manna and the quails, those moments of self-mastery and the mysterious contentment that the struggle itself brought us. What happens in the promised land, you see, is exactly what started the whole thing going in the first place, in that place called Eden we fell from. What gets going again is what never really stopped, though it was maybe too exhausted or depressed to be really obnoxious for a while, and that is *ourselves*. We come into the promised land along with all our ideals and longings, and pretty soon we are up to our old tricks. When I was in South Africa a couple of weeks ago, on the day the Truth Commission produced its report, I witnessed this depressingly ancient human reality. Of all the groups in South Africa that took part in the long struggle in the wilderness years of apartheid, who would have expected the ANC to try to block the publication of the report of those terrible years? But they did, along with Mr de Klerk. And Desmond Tutu, that true prophet, true in the wilderness, still true in the promised land, pointed out that he had not struggled to liberate the oppressed in order for them to become oppressors. That is always the struggle, the eternal struggle of the human heart. It is what turns God's ancient persecuted people the Jews into the persecutors of the Palestinians in their own land. It is what makes the man forgiven a mountain of debt

in the parable of Jesus into the persecutor of the poor man who owed him a handful. It is the failure to connect, the failure of identification, the failure of the imagination of the heart. That is why the struggle is never over, the promised land never delivers the promise, unless we remember the most important of the lessons that good religion teaches us: we ourselves are never cured of ourselves; we are always, in New Testament language, sinners in need of forgiveness and grace. That is why Jesus said the harlots and the tax collectors go into the kingdom first, because they had no delusions about themselves. But that'll have to wait till the next lecture.

¹ A.N.Wilson. Paul. The mind of the Apostle. Sinclair-Stevenson. 1997. p.73

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