

• THE BIBLE IN THE CLASSROOM •

An Exchange of Views

THE CLASSROOM AS PULPIT

GEOFFREY WAGNER *

IN NEARLY EVERY Great Books course the Bible is included for literary instruction, alongside Homer, Dantë, Shakespeare and their peers. By this time in my life I have taught dozens of such courses in various institutions and, by participating in the ancillary committee work, have examined the curricula of scores of programs labeled Humanities, Great Books, Great Issues, Social Sciences, Introduction to Literature, and the like. Anyone who has sat on such committees will agree that it is very difficult to deny the Bible a position in surveys of the kind, and as a matter of fact it strikes me that the one choice all these courses have in common is, indeed, the Bible.

All the arguments for the inclusion of the Bible—as an anthology of literary types in embryo, as a thesaurus of lovely metaphors and heroic prose, as a conspectus of world wisdom—these are abundantly on record in the numerous aid-to-study books which will be listed as secondary reading for the interested student. But as one forced annually to grapple with the actuality of teaching the Bible as literature in the twentieth-century American classroom, I feel that the case against its inclusion is mounting. The problem that assails me, as teacher of the Bible, is very much a semantic refraction between literature and belief.

First and foremost, teaching the Bible as literature has always struck me as purely and simply an infringement of secular education. In theory it is not, but in practice it is. Anyone who has taught it to a hetero-religious group hard on the

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heels of the great Greek plays, say, knows that suspension of normal canons of judgment which quiets the class when it is taken "under study." Contemporary American students have been told by their society to tolerate the religious beliefs of others, and the result is that their minds close to controversy on this subject.

And perhaps rightly so. The class might have been debating whether or not Hamlet might have been a homosexual, or Shakespeare's Henrys syphilitic, but one cannot introduce these questions when discussing Christ. Yet, if the Bible is literature, the Gospels are a biography and Christ a character open to criticism within that particular art form. His alleged forebear, David, is criticized, after all. I hardly need point out the alteration in classroom tone when similar questions are thrashed out about Socrates and Christ.

Bible characters—whether they existed or not, whether there were five Josephs and fifty-five Christs—cannot be considered in the classroom as characters in the same sense as those existing in literary works. In short, a reverent superstition (often accompanied by what I can only call a *soapy* expression) pervades the class on all hands when the Bible is introduced, so that both student and teacher feel far less free than in discussing any other book of the course; the very permission of such an attitude is indeed a tacit encouragement to superstition, which some of the more reputable minds of our time consider unhealthy.

The New Testament treads on the toes of the devout Jews—and I recently had a student who was originally a Polish Catholic and who was converted to Judaism in Portugal (of all places), eventually reaching the United States via Brazil, who refused to attend my New Testament classes at all. Equally, the Old Testament can tread on the toes of the devout Christian in the ranks, and I find frequent objection from young Catholics to studying non-Jerome material. In one department we had the benefit of a Father who readily dispensed indulgences for this purpose! Since Christians study heresy in Homer without question, the struggling teacher can only breathe hard and hope for a Sign.

SIMILARLY, assigning something like Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, with subsidiary reading, can turn Jewish freshmen apoplectic. I imagine that most teachers strive to arrive at something of that heroic impartiality achieved by Purdue's great Hebrew professor, Harold Watts, but often when they do so they only succeed in infuriating all concerned.

Set in the center of this salad, then, the teacher emerges as least free of all. If he discusses homosexuality in the case of Christ, tossing in perhaps de Sade's allusions to the puns on sodomy with Peter, a sincere Christian student may complain to his Board of Education that the foundations of his faith are being attacked. Men have lost their jobs for less—at least in the New York and San Francisco municipal systems.

Now the answer to all this is supposed to be that Professor Puddlesworth teaches the Bible as pure literature, and so should you. In short, don't touch on beliefs. Open your classes on the Bible by clarifying how fair you're going to be, how no one's personal beliefs are to be injured, how everyone is free to believe individually, and how the class will simply consider and examine a great example of art.

Possibly this answer operates in England, where you assume the class is fully Christian, with a common agreement on absolutes which you either do or do not undermine by an approach. But in America, with its plurality of religions, the answer is damaging cant. Cant, because no one can teach a work so full of daily life as the Bible under the aegis of "pure literature" without retreating to the most dangerous form of literary aestheticism. It is damaging in that such an attitude actually detracts from the power the Bible has, since the students contrast it with the far more "engaged" attitudes shown towards Homer, Shakespeare, and their ilk. Particularly is limitation of response harmful because the Bible is taught beside such all-embracing authors as these.

And you hurt literature itself, of course, by teaching one great book on a different (more restricted) level than others, whose study has been emphasizing just how thoroughly a literary masterpiece must involve the whole of life and make

a total response to all of man's activities. Moreover, a congenial introduction of other disciplines which helps enliven so much textual study slows down, to say the least, with the Bible. Psychology can have a field day with *Faust*, but Freud and Moses make a mixture that falls awfully flat, at least in New York City.

In any case, what of those—just as fully protected by the Constitution—who regard the beliefs expressed in the Bible not so much as right or wrong as rather in the realm of ornament? Perhaps the Moslems I have had in my classes, not to mention the many clever Buddhists, are really the best people to whom to teach the Bible as "pure literature." Then again, perhaps not. Refreshing as it may be when such students find normally reverent moments hilarious, their reaction is one which wrenches belief out of line with literary expression altogether. Perhaps, after all, Othello's death was really a rib-tickler; both the cuckold and the *gilos* (or jealous husband) were traditional figures of fun to the Elizabethans. Ernest van den Haag has even suggested that along this road lies the interpretation of *Othello* "as a tract against handkerchiefs (in favor of Kleenex?)."

What of the final paradox, of those who—again quite legitimately—have no religious belief at all? Are we to say that they are unable to respond to literature? Surely the more accurate answer would be that they are the best to whom to teach the Bible as "pure literature."

BUT orthodox heretics, *pace* Mary McCarthy, are not supposed—yet—to constitute the majority confronting the American teacher. And then so many arguments rush in from what one might call the other side. To give one example: in teaching those parts of the Bible that can be allegorized (*Daniel* or *The Song of Songs*, for example), the instructor is obliged to defer to different interpretations of the allegory by members of different religions. *The Song of Songs* may be read as representing God's dealings with Israel or Christ's relation to his Church, or even, to an athiest, a fertility ritual. But this begins a chain reaction which is illegitimate in the

rest of the course, when some sort of critical order is being fought for and the teacher is perspiringly demonstrating the reverse, namely, that poetry is precise.

In Dantë, a leopard or a lion stands for something on the allegorical, or anagogical, level *and not for something else*. Teaching the Bible as literature lets the old it-means-one-thing-to-me-another-to-you heresy slip in, so destructive elsewhere. Indeed, if indulged in on the pedagogical level, it leads to the suffocation of literary values, as Wellek and Warren show, since if an image means one thing to Don and another to Markie, lying on his ear at the back of the class, maybe the whole thing is just so much junk anyway. In short, Markie is taught—what he always suspected—that the Bible belongs in the so-called crap courses.

There is one other difficulty on this side to be mentioned, that of translation. A Great Books survey will include foreign authors such as Homer, Goethe, Molière, Cervantes, Dostoevski. But in no case does the same sort of translation problem arise as with the Bible. That is to say, in the works of those mentioned, accuracy of the translation before the class can on the whole be resolved by appeal to dictionaries and/or fairly empirical experts. This is certainly not the case with the Bible where another kind of mistranslation—of a doctrinal nature—exists; such was lately shown, for instance, in some serious *Times Literary Supplement* correspondence (into which T. S. Eliot entered) over the originals for "virgin" and "young lady" in certain Biblical texts. The distinction is of some literary consequence.¹

¹ Compare the following passages for a starter: "No clearer geographical witness to the historical accuracy of the Biblical text is needed than that *the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea* both before and after the drowning of the Egyptians (*Exodus*, XIV: 22 and 29). We have only to turn to the Admiralty chart to find the path of dry land, exactly as described; in my time it was still in use by camelmen going to and from Palestine through Sinai. Our translators would not know of it, and so translated the Hebrew words *yam suph* 'Red Sea,' though every Hebrew scholar knows they mean 'reed sea.'" (W. R. Todd, "Trouble with Translators," *The Sunday Times*, June 21, 1959.)

And again: "In discussions of the miracle the assertion has fre-

My present Humanities classes nearly always include intelligent ex-Germans who teach me Goethe, ex-Russians who help me over Tolstoy, and ex-Greeks who put me straight on Sophocles, but none of the numerous Rabbinical students I listen to convince me that there can be settled answers to all the problems of translation with which the Bible is beset. There isn't the same kind of court of appeal; translation is much more a matter of viewpoint than with any other work, and you risk teaching (as "pure literature") a distortion of an original of a different nature—I mean different from a text containing perhaps a few purely linguistic slip-ups on the part of those heroes (and heroines) of the translation treadmill who make it possible for people like me to "put across" Homer or Racine against the roaring of contemporary traffic outside.

Standing in front of my mixed city classes in America, I often vividly remember my own schooldays in England, when chapel was compulsory twice a day, and three times on Sundays: when boys who arrived late for, or talked during, services were given six ceremoniously painful cuts with a cane (nonverbal communication with a vengeance). I remember a baffled German boy, who came over from Salem for a term, being exasperated at our (so deliberate) lack of discipline during Officers' Training Corps, and amazed by our

quently been made that an extraordinary ebb set in which made it possible for the Israelites to reach the opposite shore in their flight, their pursuers, who were too late for the passage, being overwhelmed by the returning tide. But it is clear that such a view violates the plain words of Holy Scripture which say that 'the waters were a wall unto them [the Israelites] on their right hand and on their left.' If merely an unusual ebb had been responsible for the passageway, there would not have been water on both sides. While holding to the principle just enunciated as to the method of God's working His miracles, we must not alter the Scripture account, but leave its senses unimpaired. What particular forces God employed in restraining the waters we do not know, but His Word, telling us that He did separate the waters, is sufficient evidence for believing children of God that the sea was divided in some miraculous way." (W. Arndt, *Bible Difficulties* [St. Louis, Missouri, 1957], p. 118.)

Also compare these passages with the Cecil B. DeMille interpretation.

parade-ground orderliness in chapel. There were priest-teachers all over the place; transubstantiation was as familiar as porridge, and everyone got Divinity credits in School Certificate. In a word, Religion ranked with French, Physics, or Chemistry. It was not an "extra," like Carpentry or (good old England!) Music.

Now this status of religion as a subject, which is under strong fire in England today, is anything but the philosophical premise of the average class in the crammed municipal college in New York where I now teach. It's conceivable that the parents of British school boys might still, in a majority, consider religion as conventionally pedagogical, but the parents of my harried students would be far from agreeing that it serves the needs of contemporary society as a classroom subject. Unfortunately they do not sit on committees for Great Books courses. "How seriously is religious instruction taken in our schools?" Sir David Eccles, the British Minister for Education, asked the other day. Replying in *The Observer* the eminently pro-Christian Arthur Barton admitted:

A Christian headmaster has an uphill task with an indifferent staff and a generally hostile upper school; a non-Christian going through the motions does a great deal of harm. I have been on a staff where only three out of twenty were present, and conversation drowned the prayers.

On a typical Secondary Modern staff there may be one or two convinced Christians, but this is by no means probable. As these persons have usually come to teach other subjects, and as their religion is their own affair, they do not necessarily teach R.K. [Religious Knowledge] at all. The rest of the staff simply have little or no interest in religion and do not wish to practise or teach it.

Anyone who thinks that religion still holds its old conventional place in schools would be astonished if he could hear some of the violent arguments that crop up in the half-hour between dinner and afternoon school. The older men, whether believers or not, generally main-

tain an uncomfortable silence; but the young men—and some of them may soon be headmasters themselves—have, generally speaking, no religious background, and are scathing in their denunciations of the Churches, the clergy, and the absurdities of dogma.

In this spirit I maintain that teaching the Bible as literature is not only an infringement of our policy of secular education, it is a disservice to religion itself. For the religious leader—the Rabbi or Father—is the last to want the Bible to be taught as “pure literature.” To the pious Jew it is outrageous to think of God’s words as decorative in this manner, while the Christian feels the sense of myth, and invention, which subsumes literature, to be utterly intolerable in this connection. Both find the Bible’s moral authority negated when it is taught by non-believers, which is what Mary McCarthy has suggested that most of us are.

Indeed, in this respect the Jewish student can make Arthur Barton’s argument stick; for he can justly claim an element of pedagogical distortion when a primarily Jewish document (for, at the very lowest level, the Old Testament is longer than the New, so demands more classroom time) is taught by a majority of non-believers, that is Christians, throughout the U.S.A.

In passing, and in thus raising the whole thorny problem of what constitutes a Christian society, I might mention that in one American university recently a large group of Jewish students were denied their appeal for observance of certain religious holidays by the administration, on the grounds that America was a Christian country. It is true that there is probably a majority of Christians here, but it is not true that the Constitution conjoins, relies on, or in any way prescribes Christianity for its citizens. It is well known that the First Amendment prohibits governmental “establishment of religion.” Pronouncements from the juridical bench, especially in sentencing, have until lately shown how official Christianity has remained for England; their counterpart cannot be found in pluralistic America.

NO OTHER great book in similar educational sequences is, then, *primarily* a repository of beliefs, as the priesthood would have the Bible considered—nor primarily propaganda, as the Gospels admit to being. Indeed, this raises another point, namely that the Gospels are more propagandist than the Hexateuch. (Are priestly revisions which treat “literary” errors as sacred good or bad?) And, as Lionel Trilling has asked, why not the Upanishads? What about the belief there? What also, one might add, about orthodoxies of translation?!

No, when you dissect the Bible critically for literary mechanics and effect, when you dispassionately study it for “form,” the foundations of what is called belief become eroded. You become involved in a semantic distortion, in trying to teach faith as knowledge, thereby destroying the former. Knowledge is examinable: faith isn’t. Indeed, if you are aiming at a purely scientific society, teaching the Bible as literature is a first-class tool for breaking down the habit of belief and the very quality of mystery inherent in religion. Thus, it seems to me that everyone would benefit by taking the Bible out of the classroom. Arthur Barton in England suggests that “one way of rescuing Christianity for young people would be to ban it in the Secondary Modern schools.”

Finally, the teacher on whom all this devolves is, I submit, put in an extremely unfair position. The fastest and, alas, most facile method of “bringing the past to life” is to make analogies with the present; so he cannot but help trespass on private beliefs. Even to examine the sacred past as a scholarly curio, to be approached only through its own civilization, is to do this also, and to fall into the more vulgar pitfalls of atheistic or so-called “freethought” manifestoes, in which so little *thought* can be discerned. Meanwhile, New Criticism of the Bible merely lands you in a hopeless tangle—and probably out of a job.

So there is no way out because literature involves the whole of man, his beliefs and moral judgments. As a result, certain literary characters will, to an elementary class, be congenial, others detestable. There will be argument as to which is which, but usually a fair consensus of agreement will be

reached as to the quality of invention behind the characters concerned. You are not hamstrung by doctrine as you are when discussing, say, Pilate's wife, a monster to most but a Saint for the orthodox Greeks, or the conduct of Ruth which is "doctrinally" good or bad. In this way, it seems to me, you interfere with the habit of believing itself in an illegitimate manner by presuming to teach the Bible as literature. In practice, the only lively class you can hope for must be a blasphemous one.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE:

An Argument Against Retreat

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GEOFFREY WAGNER'S "The Classroom as Pulpit" is a strong and lively argument against including biblical materials in literature courses in the twentieth-century American classroom. In general, my experience in the classroom draws me into agreement with some of his chief contentions: (1) that there is a tendency to abandon normal canons of judgment in the presence of biblical texts; (2) that the attempt to be impartial can lead to a futile and dangerous literary aestheticism; and (3) that, as a result of cultic prejudices, translation problems in the case of biblical materials are somewhat more unmanageable than in the case, say, of Homer or Sophocles.

By this response, I simply intend to continue the conversation which Mr. Wagner initiated. He will agree, I presume, that one of the reasons for the difficulties which arise in discussing biblical materials in a literary context is that they are texts with which vigorous belief-systems are *presently* connected, in which believers' emotions are *presently* invested, and in which cultic groups *now* have vested interests. Add to this, if it signifies anything different, that our contemporary cultural context and cultic structures have thrown around these texts a sacred cloud and have marked off biblical precincts

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with taboo-formulas. Consequently, I must agree that "the semantic refraction between literature and belief" makes the task of teaching and criticizing biblical materials in a literary context a very difficult one.

But I cannot leap with Mr. Wagner to the conclusion that the Bible should, therefore, be exiled from such a context. Mr. Wagner's difficulties and his inclination toward exorcism are results of a lethal cultic atmosphere of several different layers which pervades the classroom. This same deadly atmosphere expresses itself in other situations and with respect to other issues. I am inclined to argue, therefore, that Mr. Wagner should make priestly attitudes and cultic taboos the objects of his attack, not especially or solely biblical materials in literary contexts. Otherwise, he will find himself deprecating the symptoms of an illness, while letting the disease run its course unchecked.

THIS ambient atmosphere to which I refer prejudices the discussion of topics and ideas other than those connected directly to biblical texts. It throttles a free and critical penetration of and sensitive appreciation of such issues as are suggested, say, by Aeschylus' texts, "The race is soldered in sockets of Doom and Vengeance" and "We . . . have been . . . hardly mauled in the heavy claws of the evil god." It prejudices the treatment of Euripides' *The Bacchae* or certain poems of Catullus (for example, 32, 69, and 97, according to R. A. Swanson's translation). It emasculates a discussion of the Nietzschean views of human nature, morality, and religiosity. Contemporary cultic taboos and attitudes extend their influences beyond specifically biblical texts and images to many ethical, religious, economic, and political questions as they arise from the contexts of nonbiblical materials. I assume that Mr. Wagner would not want to excise such questions and the texts that generate them from literature courses because they too are ones before which minds snap shut. The attitudes and taboos to which I point should have been more directly the objects of Mr. Wagner's attack.

Although I do not deny that in the biblical fields there

are many men who "translate" the texts to fit their theological preconceptions, Mr. Wagner must admit that the sciences related to the biblical languages, textual criticism, and manuscript history are at least as advanced as those which deal with the texts of Sophocles, Plato, or Catullus. Scientifically speaking, it is about as easy to get an accurate and adequate translation of Jeremiah or Matthew as it is to get one of Aristophanes or Epictetus. One must distinguish between the status and competence of a science and the abusive uses made of it. I admit that, in the case of the Bible, there are many abuses and many abusers. Moreover, I agree that to establish this point about the sciences of biblical criticism does not assure success in communicating the results of scholarly textual studies to a typical hetero-religious American class of students. Again, however, the proper object of Mr. Wagner's attack is the abusers of the sciences of biblical languages and manuscripts, not the sciences themselves.

I RECOMMEND to Mr. Wagner Benedict Spinoza's early contributions to the sciences of biblical criticism as the philosopher presents them in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (Chapters 7-13). A summary of Spinoza's efforts in this field can be found in "Benedict Spinoza: A Pioneer in Biblical Criticism," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, XXIX (1960/61). I have particularly in mind the use by Spinoza of a number of semantic criteria for handling biblical texts—criteria which have not been sufficiently appreciated or adequately used among contemporary biblical scholars. To mention only one, the philosopher advances and insists upon a clear-cut distinction between the *meaning* of a text and its *truth-status*. "We are at work," he says, "not on the truth of passages, but solely on their meaning." Simply said, what he meant by "meaning" was the connotations of a biblical word or passage as they were determined by the context of the words or by the circumstances of life, language, character, etc., of the writer or writers. The problems met in treating the questions of existence and truth demand quite a different discipline.

Keeping such a distinction in mind, the Old Testament texts are in no more desperate circumstances than those of Homer or Aristotle when it comes to settling questions of meaning. The prevailing cultic attitudes which invade the classroom undoubtedly make it difficult to communicate this distinction; but it is there to be imparted. Mr. Wagner's real problem is not simply one of handling the Bible in a literary context but one of dealing with the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs of the students which lead them to mismanage all sorts of issues. Furthermore, I contend that it is precisely part of the teacher's business to impart and make useful to the student such a distinction as I have just mentioned.

Mr. Wagner's basic contention is, then, that his task as a teacher is harder to perform in face of Jeremiah than it is in face of Homer. This I will not venture to deny. It may turn out, however, that the harder task is the more important one. Other semantic criteria that can be related to biblical studies and this present discussion, I leave to the side.

Religious heterogeneity in the classroom is, from my perspective, a healthy and happy circumstance which tends to break down an otherwise immovable, monolithic cultic position against a scholarly treatment of biblical texts and their meanings. It helps to open those minds which would otherwise be "closed to controversy." With this, Mr. Wagner surely agrees. I will simply add the comment that the vigorous controversy and conflict which can arise from this heterogeneity may, by producing striking defeats for the priestly attitudes and protected world-views of some students, be a more effective teaching instrument than the impartation of information by the lecture.

MR. WAGNER remarks that "no other great book in similar educational sequences is . . . *primarily* a repository of beliefs . . . nor primarily propaganda." While I am aware of the presence of the clause, "in similar educational sequences," I must comment that what he should say is that most other great books are not repositories of beliefs or propaganda *presently* advanced vigorously by a truculent or evangelistic

organization. There are some people in the contemporary context who want to save bodies and souls; they have a vested interest in the Bible as a tool they can use to achieve their goal. We can hardly say the same thing about the *Odyssey*, *The Peloponnesian Wars*, or Vergil's *Eclogues*. But, it seems to me that the works of Homer, Euripides, Plato, Plotinus, and Marcus Aurelius are repositories of beliefs and propaganda for one or another world-view. They simply do not contain expressions of the party-line or gospel of salvation of a strong contemporary cultic movement. If our cultural context manifested a vigorous Olympian cult, Mr. Wagner would probably be facing the same sort of difficulty from followers of Zeus as he does now from followers of Jesus and be complaining about an abundance of prejudicial translations of Homer—except, of course, that the happy pluralism of the Olympian faith would result in a somewhat less difficult situation.

While I believe Mr. Wagner oversimplifies the antithesis between knowledge and faith and fails to appreciate that criticism and dispassionate study may have a positive therapeutic effect on faith (while eroding the foundations of superstition, which I do not equate with faith), I will simply say that, granting his position on this matter, to exile the Bible from literature courses and contexts and to consign it to its traditional cultic domains will result in extending and intensifying precisely those uncritical attitudes, superstitions, and semantic distortions which trouble him as they appear in the classroom. Mr. Wagner will thus, by his program, save himself and his classroom, and perhaps other teachers and their classrooms, from some troublesome situations and some perils to their integrity at the expense of giving the Bible and students of the biblical materials over completely and without a fight into the hands of the cultic movements which are propagating insensitive, uncritical, and dogmatic messages.

By eliminating the semantic refraction from his classroom, he will intensify it in our culture generally. Mr. Wagner will then really gain only temporary relief. And we

will be submerged more deeply in the "hopeless tangle" to which he refers. I am hopeful that Mr. Wagner does not really want to recommend this sort of retreat and defeat. If not, then it seems to me that he must keep the Bible in a context where it is the object of authentic and scholarly teaching, however difficult the job may be.

FINALLY, viewing this matter from the perspective of general semantics, I should think that the general semanticist, and scholars generally, would have to contend that they are engaged in a mission directed to the correction of semantic distortions, to the increase of knowledge and wisdom, and to therapy that looks to making people physically and mentally more healthy than they presently are. Mr. Wagner's recommendation is that we flee from the patient and let him die, lest by attempting to minister to him we contract his disease. I would have preferred that he recommend to us the medicines and instruments we ought to use to cure the patient's disease.

Mr. Wagner's article forcefully advances a nice analysis or diagnosis of the patient's environment and condition. For this, I am grateful. Some of his points are oversimplified, but this is understandable in terms of the short compass of the article. What I find to be most disturbing is that he is preaching a message of retreat for scholars and teachers. This is contrary to what I conceive to be the mission of the teacher and the general semanticist. In the face of semantic distortions, we try to rectify them, not isolate ourselves from them.