



Scribes Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven? Reflections on Reading ?The Bible for Politics? in Community, Secondary and Higher Education Contexts in Scotland

Author: Louise J. Lawrence

Journal Title: Discourse

ISSN: 2040-3674

ISSN-L: 1741-4164

Volume: 5

Number: 2

Start page: 99

End page: 122

[Return to vol. 5 no. 2 index page](#)

This paper was written for the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics (CSRP) seminar at St Andrews University, November 2005. I am indebted to David Horrell for reading and commenting on the paper prior to its presentation.

In recent years the methods and praxis of education within the UK have been variously scrutinised, assessed and transformed. The teaching profession is now familiar with understanding its role not primarily as a mediator of knowledge, but rather as a facilitator of active student-centred learning. We are trusted with the responsibility to educate people for 'engagement with the real world' (Kennedy 2005:3) and instil a belief in them of their power to effect change within their society.

The far-reaching implications of this vision for interpreting the 'Bible *for* politics' have developed in my own interaction

with three educational contexts (community, secondary and higher education) in Glasgow. The following discussion involves assorted reflections on these diverse experiences and their possible implications for the development of what I have termed 'a hermeneutics of presence' for 'reading the Bible *for* politics'.

The community education context I have explored is the Contextual Bible Study Group that has strong links through John Riches with the Divinity School at Glasgow University. The Contextual Bible Study Movement (CBS) was nurtured in the townships of South Africa during the apartheid era as a force for liberation. It was introduced to the West of Scotland in 1995 by a small ecumenical team (sponsored by the Scottish Bible Society) and adapted accordingly to address the specific needs of that context. The movement seeks to engage 'ordinary readers' with no specific training in biblical study in contemplative conversation with the text and values readers' experience as a stimulant for both interpretation and social praxis.

The **secondary** education context within which I worked was as a consultant and author for Learning and Teaching Scotland's support notes for Christianity (intermediate level). Here, selected biblical passages featured as introductions and cameos of each unit's theme. Christianity is a component of 'Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies', a programme which attempts, in part, to encourage reflection on societal relationships (including inter-religious and inter-ethnic) and as such shares ground with the citizenship agenda for Scottish schools. In compiling the notes, I realised that a critical balance needed to be sought between these two areas. The religious education syllabus tried to reflect the insider/believer's perspective on each religion and therefore showed that 'religious education is more than just the problem of pluralism'. Rather, as Jacqueline Watson reveals, it 'has a spiritual dimension which engages with the meaning and purpose of our lives' (Watson 2004: 268). Thus curriculum designers should be wary of a citizenship agenda focused on religious tensions alone for this 'may end by endorsing and reinforcing the popular view of religion as essentially about conflict' (Watson 2004: 268).

The **higher** education context on which I will be reflecting is a project that is still 'in process'; a module entitled 'New Testament Community and Ethics', which I am currently teaching at Glasgow University. Within that module I have adopted an 'in-service' learning paradigm, whereby students have to undertake various voluntary roles within society and reflect on structural and political elements of these in conjunction with biblical principles, themes, images and passages.

All three educational contexts have, in different ways, informed me about the utility of interpreting the Bible 'with the world' not just the academy. ¹ Indeed I contend that these sorts of readings provide both inspiration and control for more academically mainstream enterprises. It is no coincidence that Lisa Cahill, in her 1990 article, 'The New Testament and Ethics: Communities of Social Change', informs us that 'biblical scholars have become more explicitly aware of the social repercussions of [biblical faith] and also more interested in drawing social and moral analogies between the biblical world and our own' (Cahill 1990: 384).

Scripture has, of course, always pointed forward to a transformation of those lives oppressed by social and political factors and offers a model of relationship and community marked by inclusion and love as opposed to exclusion and distrust. This vision is empowered by eschatology and is a powerful way to prevent the church 'becoming fat, sleepy and abusive' (Hays 2000:128) and to resist 'ecclesial complacency and triumphalism' (Hays 2000:127), for eschatology grounds the 'politically subversive vocation of the church as an anticipation of God's future' (Hays 2000:127). It encourages the church to speak out mission to proclaim a creation restored.

If 'Scribes Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven' do indeed bring treasures old and new from their store, then reflections on the interpretation of the Bible within contemporary educational contexts that result in social or political deliberation should be seen as a jewel among those resources.

1. Introducing the Three Educational Contexts: Limitations and Possibilities

It is worthwhile mentioning at the outset hermeneutical limitations and possibilities associated with reading the 'Bible *for*

Politics' within the three educational contexts within this study.

Primarily, it is important to recognise the different roles played in each educational group. Facilitators in the CBS monitor time and summarise viewpoints, but do not direct ordinary readers' reflections; beyond suggesting a passage to look at, facilitators for the most part are passive figures within the process. This is not the case for the secondary and higher education contexts in which I am involved.

As an author for Learning and Teaching Scotland, I had to create active learning opportunities that would encourage reflection and understanding among the school children and effect positive results within their attitudes and actions to each other and their surrounding communities. In this respect, I had a more 'directing role' to play within the whole endeavour. To a lesser extent, as a module leader of 'New Testament Community and Ethics' I laid down parameters of how exegesis 'with the world' should be conducted and documented, but the students themselves actively reflected on their experiences *vis-à-vis* the biblical text sometimes in quite unforeseen ways.

Another aspect of the study that must be considered is of course the very different membership of each grouping. The members of the contextual Bible study met together as Christians in parishes, community centres and even prisons. This contrasted with the participants of my honours module in the university who were drawn from a variety of faiths (mostly Christian) and some atheistic backgrounds. The school context provided a different set of actors again; teachers remarked on the diversity of faith traditions, racial heritages and the general lack of biblical literacy encountered within their classrooms. With this diversity of agents in mind, how could I even begin to read the 'Bible for Politics' with some who do not number themselves among the Christian community of faith, nor share the belief that the Bible is in some sense an authoritative source for moral/political direction?

The equation of church and the world is not one of course that can be uncritically deciphered. Nor indeed can the Bible be read for politics in the same way in those communities comprised of Christians as those settings in which all participants do not share Christian beliefs or values. For, as Richard Bauckham notes,

Politics cannot do what the gospel and spirit can do, and politics cannot do in all societies what it can do in a society deeply influenced by Christian or other religious-ethical values.
(Bauckham 1989:10)

This point cannot be overstressed given the diversity of participants' standpoints *vis-à-vis* Christian faith within the three contexts in which I worked. Whilst Christian community may indeed be called to be a beacon of light set apart from the world, it is also surely true that seeing Christianity's message as of sole relevance to the church also robs it of its potential power within the world's more secular or plural environments. Kirkpatrick uses the image of the union of two individuals in marriage to explore what he sees should be the ideal 'symbiotic' relation between church and world:

Just as two persons who marry do not lose their unique and particular identities in that vow of union . . . so church and world can retain their particular identities even when they join together, each performing its distinctive work, in furthering the advent of universal community, the Kingdom of God, in and for the world. One may do it by fostering interpersonal communion and the other by developing institutions of social justice, but both contribute to the work of God in bringing about God's kingdom... **Symbios** means literally 'life together'...neither loses its unique identity but neither, ideally, claims to be self-sufficient or to draw its full meaning solely from itself. (Kirkpatrick 2001:112; 133)

As such, principles based within the Bible can stimulate reflection on situations in the world from a variety of Christian and non-Christian standpoints. David Horrell, for example, has recently spoken about Paul's ethics providing pointers for what he terms 'the communitarian-ization of liberalism' (Horrell 2005:50) whereby 'the resources of the Christian

tradition are used in the development of new forms of societal ethics' (Horrell 2005:52). Horrell even avers that this perspective:

might suggest some kind of post-Christian project in which the resources of the Pauline (and more broadly Christian) tradition made a contribution to the formation of stories with which human solidarity, and difference, might be sustained'. (Horrell 2005:50)

Even those working from within the Christian tradition are used to navigating the culturally remote worlds we find in scripture: slavery, purity laws, household codes and sacrifices are just some of the concepts that are encountered in these foreign texts. Yet we must also recognise that cultural remoteness alone is not something that should negate a project that tries to 'read' or 'inspire' our situation with scripture. Extreme cultural relativism means that we can learn nothing of relevance from any context other than our own. Similarly, those outside a Christian community can also surely bear witness to the stimulation of texts from other countries, times, environments and traditions for resources to 'think with' in their own lives. In Gorringe's words,

As Terry Eagleton says of Shakespeare, in many ways this reactionary old patriarch is still ahead of us, and this remains true for reactionary old patriarchs like Isaiah [Jesus] and Paul. (Gorringe 1998:265)

In part, all religious traditions must be anti-relativistic, in the sense that all believe that we have something to learn from the ancestors, related to us not only by tradition and history, but also humanity. This was particularly brought home to me working on the 'World Religions Syllabus' for Learning and Teaching Scotland, where each tradition is studied from an insider's perspective, but also can be seen to hold gems for reflection for others outside that tradition. A truly communicative vision of life would allow sacred texts to inspire a wide range of readers in different relationships to that text. As Meeks pertinently observed, 'texts don't have an ethic, only people do' (Meeks 1993:4). Texts cannot 'live' until someone reads and is stimulated in some way by them.

Reading scripture democratically and participatively is at the heart of all the educational arenas of this study and, as such, they deserve our contemplation. For, as Chris Rowland so eloquently states:

God's word is to be found in the dialectic between Scripture and the continuing story to be discerned in the contemporary world. (Rowland, 2000:17)

2.'Individualism vs.Community' and 'Social Exclusion vs.Inclusion'

One of the most heartening outcomes of the research was that all three educational contexts exhibited sensitivity to individualism's threat to ideals of community through their interaction with the biblical text. They also explored themes of exclusion, and saw that positive solutions to this lay in developing personal relationships with others.

Bauckham has characterised the industrialised West's individualistic pursuit of self-gratification and power as a 'Crisis of Freedom' (2002), the fall-out being a resistance to authority and notions of relational interdependence. He also recognises that this crisis can be addressed by rehabilitating the vision of the Bible that shapes identity in relationship with God and others. He writes:

Freedom is not threatened by, but formed and nurtured by dependence, belonging, relationship, community and?importantly and most controversially?authority...only in a context of values and practices of life in which human life is related to God can such freedom be adequately sustained. (Bauckham 2002:3)

Enlivened by the Spirit, the early church set about constructing communities, whose participants attempted, despite diversity, to stand in strong unity with one another and acknowledge their profound collective identity as ecclesia, the body of Christ and children of the father in heaven. In a world where models of inter-dependence are ever harder to sustain, reflecting on community images undoubtedly has a part to play in shaping contemporary visions and hope (notwithstanding the caveat that reflections are based on a minority community in the Roman Empire, so different from our global, contemporary perspective).

If the Bible creates images of community that can challenge the contemporary fascination with individual self-gratification, it can also provide food for thought in relation to another scourge that marks our society?exclusion. It became clear to me throughout this study that this is not a phenomenon with purely social symptoms, but one that also manifests itself in emotional and intellectual forms. The Government Unit set up to explore 'Social Exclusion' in December 1997 provides the following definition:

Social exclusion is a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals from areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown. It means being cut off from things that most of us take for granted: a job, qualifications, a home and a safe environment. (Social Exclusion Unit Pack, 1997 cited in Cooper 2001:77)

Stephen Winter has recently investigated the theme of social exclusion and notes that frequently government reports on the theme conceive of it as a problem to be solved. For instance, one recent recommendation states we must, 'develop integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates, including crime, drugs, unemployment, community breakdown and bad schools' (report cited in Winter 2001:66). Here, problems of community breakdown are blamed on impersonal forces, whether political or social, with human agents taken out of the picture?and effectively hidden. Yet, as Winter argues, it is crucial for such debates to be personalised, for, in his words, 'healing and the creation of inclusive societies requires a process of reconciliation' (Winter 2001:67) and reconciliation always involves relationships and the development and protection of bonds existing between persons.

Drawing on the Jewish philosopher Levinas' critical ideas regarding the reduction of the 'other' to sameness, Winter argues that we should:

refuse to allow a definition of social exclusion in terms of it being either their problem or the consequence of some impersonal force. The other, the socially excluded, summons us to total responsibility. (Winter 2001:68)

The New Testament, of course, provides powerful images of inclusion and social responsibility based on face-to-face interaction. Jesus conducted a 'ministry of presence' whereby personal relationships were the *modus operandi* of the Kingdom he founded. Through human touch, especially table fellowship and compassion, he sought to abolish exclusion and promote solidarity with others. It is this particular perspective that has coined my subtitle 'reading the Bible for politics' in educational contexts as opposed to 'reading the Bible politically', an enterprise which requires professional training and can, in theory, be done in complete isolation. Reading for something involves personal interaction with concrete changes of perspectives envisaged. In this sense, it is premised on what I term 'a hermeneutics of presence', which works in relationships and acknowledges the complex network of threads with which we are connected one to another.

3. Reading the Bible in Community: The Contextual Bible Study Movement

The contextual Bible study movement writes with its finger on the ground in 'base', 'ground-level' groups of untrained, ordinary readers. In many areas it shares a common identity with liberation readings (including an explicit emphasis

on praxis as the outcome of exegesis) but integrates important elements that minimise some of the shortcomings of 'reading from the perspective of the poor', namely the objectification of the marginalised as a group, itself a form of social exclusion.² Holman, in his work on the Easterhouse estate in Glasgow, for example, warns that intellectual reflection of this sort in many respects dehumanises those it takes as subjects and views them as passive elements to be acted upon, rather than agents capable of change: 'specimens to be examined and displayed not as human beings with the rights and capacities to participate in the public debate' (Holman cited in Graham 2000:93).

Gerald West, working in the University of Natal, South Africa, made monumental steps forward in this regard. He wished, as one of his provocatively entitled essays reveals, to let the 'dumb speak' (1995). He and other colleagues founded 'The Institute for the Study of the Bible & Worker Ministry Project', which set out to redress this imbalance and held as its goal the reading and study of the Bible amongst communities on the borders of society. One of the freshest principles the project contributed was to recognise that often sessions that opened with preaching and teaching stunted and silenced the people who felt too ill-equipped or ignorant to contribute anything of importance. Thus, rather than beginning from the history 'behind the text' (which requires trained knowledge) then moving to a reading of the literary presentation of the text and finally to the contemporary day, here the paradigm was reversed. 'Ordinary' reader responses based on 'community consciousness' were primary. Then came critical consciousness questions, which involved literary interaction with the text (not requiring specialist knowledge) and, finally, the historical situation where the facilitator could provide more substantive contributions. The sessions follow the same procedure and notably, akin to the liberation paradigm, have some form of change of attitude or praxis as their self-expressed outcome.

This movement has now set up an ecumenical cell to work in areas of Scotland. The religious sectarianism (which expresses itself more often in football team allegiance than religious discourse) that marks life in parts of Glasgow has contributed to remarkable exchanges in this programme. In the CBS, the text itself is made the unifying force, when denominational allegiance is perceived to divide participants. This is surely a living response to Paul's advice to the Corinthians to be united in their diversity as the body of Christ. It is also in itself empowering, forming a face-to-face relationship with the text, by those who felt they had nothing of worth or were not qualified to dialogue with it directly before.

John Riches reports on two CBS groups, one parish based and another among students at Glasgow University, on the parable of the ten virgins. He writes,

Both groups read this parable as Scotland prepared for the G8 summit. Both groups referred to the Make Poverty History Campaign...The urgency of the parable is a call to action, and there are signs of new hope and belief that we can make a difference today, if not now, when?
(Riches, 2005:25)

Alison Peden documents her experience of CBS within Cornton Vale Women's Prison in Stirling. Her findings are pretty 'arresting' in one way and another! First of all were the strong bonds of trust formed within the group; indeed new members had to be accepted by others before formal entry was permitted. No notes were taken at the sessions because inmates are suspicious of such documentation. The sessions were therefore viewed as an open arena, a safe space, in which they could express their innermost thoughts without any threat of comeback.

Many of the women commented on the emotions of Jesus within the Garden of Gethsemane at his arrest. One reflected on her own arrest as 'emotionless' due to her being 'high on drugs'. She felt emotions about the event were only starting to emerge now. Others reflected on Luke's infancy narratives, and the plight of Mary and Elizabeth both bearing sons that were to eventually leave their mothers. The prisoners directly translated these narratives into their own experiences of their children 'leaving' them, whether that was through them being taken into care, running away or other means. They also talked critically about God's use of wombs. Peden writes, 'Many of these women have had

their bodies used by others...they were not welcoming of a text which seemed to reduce women to only functional significance' (Peden 2005:17).

As a general observation of CBS groups, to begin with many participants talk about their responses to the text in third person terms; although probing deeper many personalise the stories. The prisoners, however, personalised the text from the outset. They saw that it could give 'language to their experience' (Peden 2005:18). The text was given profound correlation with their 'embodiment' and as such provided avenues to explore 'ways in which their lives may be trans-formed' (Peden 2005:18).

One of the most powerful images, drawn from one observation of an 'ordinary reader', that I have come across was on the resurrection narratives.³ One woman had been a victim of domestic violence for a number of years and had felt that the Church's response had been at the time 'you have made your bed, lie on it'. She had since left the relationship but now realised that, for years, she was suffocated by her life, she couldn't scream and she couldn't run out. She saw herself as dead and placed herself within the story in the tomb. In her words, she was crying out 'who will roll my stone away?'⁴

Though these various readers' readiness to align text and experience may seem pre-critical or casual, at the same time it is profoundly moving and motivating, constituting a championing of community, a reflection on exclusion, and powerful readings of the Bible for social and political development.

4. Reading the Bible in Scottish Secondary Education: Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies

My involvement in writing Learning and Teaching Scotland's *Support Notes for Christianity* was, of course, more active in regard to how biblical texts should be read 'for politics', especially issues of community and 'other-regard'. This is on account of the fact that 'Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies' within Scotland is conceived to provide occasions to consider and nurture values and attitudes in the context of relationships with others in community, and seeks to overcome social exclusion based on bullying, racism and sectarianism. In this respect, it shares some connections with a citizenship agenda.

It is worth noting that the Scottish agenda for citizenship education differs from English and Welsh provisions as categorised in 1998 in the Crick Report (see Blee and McClosky 2003). In Scotland, citizenship is not a discrete subject area but rather one that is seen to be relevant to a number of subject areas, not least religious and moral studies, and can be practically embodied in school and community initiatives. Learning and Teaching Scotland, in their 2002 paper on the theme, asked educators to provide avenues for children to be involved in decision making and participate in their wider contexts by volunteering in the community. They highlight the following as priorities for education in citizenship in Scotland:

- Opportunities for individuals and voluntary groups to bring about social and environmental change and the values on which such endeavours are based.
- People's material and spiritual needs and wants and the implications of these for issues such as environmental sustainability and social justice.
- The causes of conflict and positive approaches to resolving it.
- The barriers to full opportunity to exercise citizenship arising from socio-economic circumstances, prejudice and discrimination (*Education for Citizenship in Scotland: A Paper for Discussion and Development*, 2002:12).

Blee and McClosky reveal that there has been a lot of controversy surrounding the definition of citizenship. Some

focus more on national identity, but, as the Learning and Teaching Scotland report on the theme reveals, it should also be focused on global identities (2003). The Crick report itself has been criticised for its ambiguous introduction to the concept of citizenship that on one view seems to be sanctioning creative and independent thinking for a globalised society, and on another seems to protect and control a monolithic unity. In Lawson's words,

On the one hand, the government is concerned with issues of legitimacy and social order and is concerned to strengthen the status quo; on the other hand, citizenship education is seen as a means of subverting present social arrangements. (Lawson 2001 cited in Watson 2004:265)

More critical as regards our current theme, though, is the fact that intellectual, emotional and spiritual identities are often overlooked in citizenship schemes. This is one area where 'Religious Studies' has an enormous amount to contribute.

It is relatively early days, and reflection on the ways in which this agenda impacts religious education is only in embryonic form. Watson in her recent article 'Educating for Citizenship? The Emerging Relationship Between Religious Education and Citizenship Education' (2004) reflects on the links between the two, based on a recent study conducted by the University of East Anglia. Among viewpoints considered were:

citizenship education's concept of citizenship lacked the motivational force needed to give it integrity. Religious education was the answer to citizenship education because it employs open enquiry and debate, is sensitive to controversial issues, and particularly because it is rooted in beliefs which motivate people to action. (Watson 2004:263).

The study also felt that religious education was able to offer what amounts to a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' of the citizenship concept: in Watson's words,

religious education, by looking at a wide variety of views, was able to question all assumptions . . . and religious education's historical link with religious indoctrination meant that religious education teachers were sensitive to the risk of political indoctrination, while citizenship education was not. (Watson 2004:263)

Stepping away from this debate to the more particular nature of how the support notes I wrote contributed to consideration of community and social inclusion, we must note the following. The World Religion syllabus was based around three major units, 'The Human Condition'; 'The Goals of Life' and 'The Means to Achieve These Goals' within each religion studied. For the Christianity notes, each unit was prefaced by specially selected biblical text/s that were intended to act as dialogue partners with the rest of the unit. The Human Condition section asked 'from what do I need to be saved?' and opened with Genesis 1. This text encouraged the children to see the human condition not only marked by sin and death, but also by exploring ideas of stewardship made them see humanity's responsibility **vis-à-vis** the created order and conceive of sin not only on a personal level but also a structural and political level.

'The Goals of Life' section was focussed on the life and ethical example of Jesus. Key themes were relationship with God and 'neighbour'. Predictably, texts chosen for this section were the 'Parable of the Good Samaritan'; 'The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus'; the 'Parable of the Sheep and Goats'; and the following judgement discourse which shows how Jesus is to be encountered in the prisoner, the hungry, the naked...the asylum seeker, the drug addict, the alcoholic downstairs etc. Learning and Teaching Scotland made clear that they wanted children to probe more deeply into ideas of discrimination and prejudice and their own role in propagating such evils by exploring name calling, etc. Various outside speakers involved in initiatives countering sectarianism, for example, Nil by Mouth and Sense over Sectarianism, also had important parts to play in student activities.

'The Means to Achieve These Goals' section concentrated on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus as a means to salvation, also the Christian community as founding the Kingdom of God on earth, and participation in sacraments. The unit was prefaced by Hebrews 2:14-18, itself a text which shows the likeness between Jesus and humanity:

for this reason he had to be made like his brother in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

Also, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, and interestingly 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, in which Paul uses the image of a body politic to show interdependence between individuals:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body?whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free?and we were given the one Spirit to drink.

Research and/or visits to Christian inspired charities, Glasgow City Mission, Scottish Churches Housing Association (ecumenical homeless charity) etc. led to a student debate on 'This House Believes that Christian Faith is Nothing Without Social Action' (Lawrence 2004:96). Some schools also incorporated play-acting of biblical stories (often re-conceived in contemporary terms), which could then be performed in hospitals and nursing homes. In line with the Crick report, however, these activities were not to remain as mere 'voluntary work', rather teachers had to provide opportunities to reflect on the role that illness and healthcare has to play in shaping our society and the plight of the elderly as regards loneliness and so on.

The practical reading of the Bible for politics, within this syllabus, concentrated on the functional effect of scripture. This was a praxis-based exegesis where reading of the Bible was shown to encourage reflection on personal relationships within the classrooms, homes and wider community.

5. Reading the Bible in Higher Education: In-Service Learning in Biblical Studies Modules

One of the 'learning outcomes' of my module on 'New Testament Community and Ethics' at Glasgow University is to recognise that to truly understand Jesus' mission one must enter the sorts of contexts and meet the sorts of people amongst whom he spent the majority of his time shaping and enacting his kingdom vision. These were not primarily the professors or priests but rather the infected and infirm, the failures and the fallen, the broken and the broke.

It is for this reason that I have adopted the use of an in-service learning paradigm for this module. It was inspired by Alicia Batten's recent article 'Studying the Historical Jesus through Service' (2005). The projects are to be submitted after Christmas?and I eagerly await the results. I know one student is currently working in an AIDS clinic as a befriender and is videoing a Bible study meeting on World AIDS Day among the patients (both Christian and non-Christian) for the class to see. Others are compiling journals of their work outside the class. For now though I rely on insights from results of Batten's original project.

Batten firmly believes that 'bias has heuristic value' (2005:108) and encouraged her students, through service experiences, to confront these biases and document any changes of perspectives that had occurred as a result of their involvement. Students went out into contexts as diverse as soup kitchens, shelters, hospices and residential homes for the mentally or physically impaired, assigned with a five-fold task. First, they had to 'record what they observed at the site, including the physical surroundings, the interactions taking place, the smell and sounds' (2005:110) in as impartial terms as they could manage. Secondly, they were to confront their own prejudices, 'what

pre-suppositions did they have? What were their actions? Why did they feel uncomfortable?' (2005:110). Thirdly, students were asked to consider the immediate situations they found themselves in, what problems were people facing here, 'cultural, social, economic, physical, and/or linguistic'? (2005:110) Fourthly, students had to link the particular problems of the individuals they encountered to structural/social causes concerning race, gender, disability, class and sexual orientation. Fifthly, material obtained from the service experience had to be juxtaposed and read alongside material from the 'Historical Jesus' module. Batten writes,

here the students could write down biblical texts that came to mind, or write about what types of chronic injustices in first century Palestine (for example, exploitative patronage, onerous taxation) were comparable to the injustices they witness today. (2005:110)

One student working in an AIDS hospice recognised the social isolation that this disease evoked and compared it with those ostracised in the first century on account of demon possession or leprosy, 'they suffer not only from poor health, but also emotional deprivation and discrimination' (2005:110). Another offering language lessons in a mixed community felt the fellowship enjoyed within the group had mustered 'hope' among the participants, something she saw as endemic to the mission of Jesus.

Interestingly, some students felt that those amongst whom they worked did not appreciate their efforts. However within this criticism lay another important lesson to be learned. As Batten reveals, citing a student journal,

To truly serve, one must reach out even when the response is uncertain because as Jesus said, 'if you love those who love you what credit is that to you?' And then, the heart of service is radical and beautiful; it shows humanity at its best. (Batten 2005:110)

It is worthwhile noting that the whole project was built around Benjamin Barber's definition of service as 'something we owe our-selves or to that part of ourselves that is embedded in civic community' (cited in Batten 2005:109). This is an important definition to adopt and has certain affinities with some of the self-expressed aims of the Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies syllabus on which I worked. It also provides impetus for Winter's call for understanding social exclusion as a problem in which we are all personally involved, not something that happens as a result of impersonal social forces. It underlines the two-way nature of social engagement and affirms one's 'social responsibility to work with other people with whom one shares community' (Batten 2005:109). Service in this respect can be contrasted with 'a culture of charity' which 'often only reinforces the charitable person's sense of worthiness, for he or she is providing for the dependant person who, in light of an independence obsessed culture is ultimately deemed a failure' (Batten 2005:109).

Reflection on the social or structural causes of the particular plights observed nudged students from a 'charitable giving' mindset and the concomitant risk that it holds for masking 'our part' and 'role' in social injustice and marginalisation of others. As Batten reveals,

Students grasped the fact that when they attempted to go to the root of why many depend on food banks, or why some have no place but a hospice to go for care, or others are living on the street, they had to ask difficult questions regarding tax systems, health care organisation, lack of public infrastructures, the power of racial and gender stereotypes and so forth. (Batten 2005:112)

Perhaps, as the in-service learning paradigm teaches, in order to avoid a certain 'domestication' of the text, we must re-capture and expose ourselves to its 'alien' nature once more. One student on my module in Glasgow commented on how her experience of working in a refuge for prostitutes under the Kingston Bridge had completely upturned her

vision of particular stories surrounding such women in scripture. The student talked about her in-service learning experience 'de-sanitising' the biblical pictures she had in her mind's eye. In her student journal she cited the following excerpt from a poem by Kathy Galloway entitled 'Outside Holiness' to express this change of perspective:

I expect that the prostitutes Jesus mixed with
looked a lot like Audrey Hepburn, beautiful and
fragile and fallen,
and nothing like the fifteen year-olds on crack cocaine
down Anderston way,
who'll do anything you like (including risk AIDS)
for a tenner. (Galloway 1996:103-104)

6.A Hermeneutics of Presence: Scribes Trained for the Kingdom of God

In his 2000 article, 'The Engraver, the Chandler and the Trade Unionist: Reflections on the Grassroots Reading of Scripture', Rowland tells the story of a colleague at Oxford asking him the deceptively simple question of whether his attitude to scripture was one focused on 'inspection or reception'? (Rowland 2000:26). Rowland understands the question to be; does the text constitute a problem to be solved? Can someone trained in the requisite language and historical context make the text 'less intractable, less wild, more acceptable and comprehensible to modern sensibilities?' (Rowland 2000:27). Of course, this sort of specialised reading does play an important part within the professional exegete's job description, however it is also true that different relationships to the text, such as those explored in the three educational contexts of this paper, can yield surprising, even devastating results, and can often encourage the scholar to reappropriate, in Rowland's words, 'an attitude of humility rather than superiority before the text' (Rowland 2000:28). A text should be allowed to speak in our worlds 'so that, if you like, it may read us' (Durber 2002:70).

Throughout my journey into these three educational contexts, I have been reminded again and again of Paulo Freire's project of 'conscientization' where he sought to give tools to the people 'to conscientize them so that they could act within society?for its?and their?betterment' (Oakley 2004:448).⁵ Freire's ideas, though formulated in Latin America, have resonance still in the democratic West, especially as regards community and social inclusion. In Freire's words,

by sticking to social action that may help certain individuals cope with their situation, but not to challenge the system that perpetuates that situation, then we are merely attempting to 'soften the power of the oppressor . . . [which] almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity.' (Freire cited in Oakley 2004:448)

Of course, reading the Bible for politics within diverse educational settings cannot be the whole story. It is important to reclaim a place for the 'ordinary voice' in biblical exegesis, but the professional guild should not all be put out of jobs as a result. One can still evaluate between 'better' or 'worse' interpretations?knowledge of historical contexts can provide a control and test for the extreme relativism of 'any reading goes'. This is crucial, otherwise reading 'the Bible for politics', or indeed anything, would become a purely random pursuit. This is not, however, to reduce the importance and value of the inter-action that has taken place within the education initiatives I have surveyed. These contexts serve to make real and alive the links between Bible and world and give the professional guild a sense of perspective on our own readings, and the modesty to acknowledge the profound insights that can come from the 'mouths of [untrained] babes'. It is worth reminding ourselves from time to time that it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs.

The three educational contexts in which I worked in different ways adopted a powerful vision of a 'hermeneutics of

presence' where a premium was put on face-to-face interaction with the world and the Bible. Within Christian-based groupings such as the CBS, personal links with the text were frequently made, indeed scripture verbalised aspects of the participants' identity. In mixed faith/secular groupings addressed in the secondary and higher education contexts, a slightly different dynamic was at play. For both the school children and the uni-versity students, the Bible itself became a stimulating source to 'think with' on issues related to the maintenance of community and social inclusion. Indeed, encouraging students to draw contextual links between the Bible and social life within my module on 'New Testament Community and Ethics' is itself an appropriate educational aim, not only for Christians but for anyone reading and responding to this sacred text. Such results do not require or assume a Christian belief *per se*. For biblical scholarship, the project of reading in the educational contexts surveyed here cautions against an isolationist interpretative stance. Reading the Bible for politics involves some sort of interaction with the sphere outside the church, the arena in which political change and development occurs. As Kirkpatrick states:

[Christian] Community and society need each other. Without the resources of persons shaped by community societies would be nothing more than impersonal machines for the balancing of political and economic power. Without the resources of society, communities could not survive nor could they act responsibly towards persons beyond their 'boundaries'. (Kirkpatrick 2001:168?169)

To 'embody' a 'hermeneutics of presence' and truly read the Bible for political change and development (whether that be related to the reha-bilitation of community, exclusion, citizenship or whatever) we must engage in people's lives in all their social and religious diversity. For only there can transformation concretely be effected and God's power realised in an expectant, though still not yet fully redeemed, world.

Endnotes

- Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones in their book *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (1991) likewise recognised the importance of a 'reading of the world' alongside 'a reading of the text'. In their words, 'Scripture is best read in and through Christian communities. Such communities, however, find themselves within the political arrangements of wider societies. They need to understand these larger contexts and the ways in which they impinge on Christian communities if Christians' readings of Scripture are to enable them to live faithful-ly.' (Fowl and Jones 1991:44)
- For example Itumeleng Mosala, in his book *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (1989) chastised Luke's Gospel for addressing the poor as 'subject', mere bit parts in the realisation of moral virtue by the rich.
- I am grateful to Lesley Orr for relating this story to me. It should be noted that this did not actually arise within a CBS group, but nonetheless can be aligned with this project in its reading and consideration of scripture among those affected by domestic violence.
- She gave voice to a powerful theological assertion without ever reading Alan Lewis' book *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (2001) which also views countless people in our times existing within tomb-like spaces, physically and spiritually 'buried' under ruthless and violent political regimes, mental illness or social discrimination and exclusion.
- In his 1985 book *The Politics of Education*, Freire described the situation as follows: 'Education must be an instrument of transforming action...this...does not happen only in the consciousness of people, but presupposes a radical change of structures, in which process consciousness will itself be transformed.' (Freire cited in Oakley 2004:450)

Bibliography

- Batten, A., 'Studying the Historical Jesus Through Service', *Teaching Theology and Religion* Vol. 8 (2005) pp. 107-113
- Bauckham, R. J., *The Bible In Politics: How to Read the Bible In Politics* (London: SPCK, 1989)
- Bauckham, R. J., *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Westminster John Knox, 2002)
- Blee, H. and McClosky, A., 'Perspectives on the Provision of Education for Citizenship in Scotland and France, Including a Small-scale Comparative Study of Pupil Experience in Brittany and Scotland' (2003) available online: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003495.htm>
- Cahill, L., 'The New Testament and Ethics: Communities of Social Change', *Interpretation* Vol. 44 (1990) pp. 383-395
- Campbell, W. S., 'The Vision of God and its Impact on the Educational Process', *PRS-LTSN Journal* Vol. 1 (2001) pp. 25-30
- Cooper, N. 'Tourist or Vagabond?', *Political Theology* Vol. 4 (2001) pp. 74-90 Crick, B., 'A Note on What is and What is Not Active Citizenship?' available online: http://www.citizenshippost16.lsd.org.uk/files/033_Bernard_Crick_WHAT_IS_CITIZENSHIP.pdf
- Durber, S., 'Political Reading: Jesus and the Samaritans? Reading in Today's Context', *Political Theology* Vol. 2 (2002) pp. 67-79
- Fowl, S. E. and Jones, L. G., *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Eerdmans, 1991)
- Freire, P., *The Politics of Education* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985)
- Gorringe, T., 'After Christianity', in P. Esler (ed.), *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century* (T & T Clark, 1998) pp. 261-75
- Graham, E., 'Good News for the Socially Excluded? Political Theology and the Politics of New Labour', *Political Theology* Vol. 2 (2000) pp. 76-99
- Hays, R., *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (Harper, 1996)
- Hays, R., 'Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?? New Testament Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium', *Modern Theology* Vol. 16 (2000) pp. 115-135
- Horrell, D. G., 'Paul Among Liberals and Communitarians: Models for Christian Ethics', *Pacifica* Vol. 18 (2005) pp. 33-52
- Kennedy, K. J., 'Rethinking Teachers' Professional Responsibilities: Towards a Civic Professionalism', *International Journal of Citizenship and Teacher Education* Vol. 1 (2005) pp. 3-15
- Kerr, D. 'Citizenship Education in England? Listening to Young People: New Insights From the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study', *International Journal of Citizenship and Teacher Education* Vol.1 (2005) pp. 74-96

Kirkpatrick, F. G., *The Ethics of Community* (Blackwell, 2001)

Lawrence, L. J., *National Qualifications Curriculum Support? Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies? World Religions? Christianity* (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2004)

Lewis, A., *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Eerdmans, 2001)

Meeks, W. A., *The Origins of Early Christian Morality* (Yale University Press, 1993)

Mosala, I., *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Eerdmans, 1989)

Oakley, N. W., 'Base Ecclesial Communities and Community Ministry: Some Freirean Points of Comparison and Difference', *Political Theology* Vol. 5 (2004) pp. 447-465

Peden, A., 'Contextual Bible Study at Cornton Vale Women's Prison, Stirling', *Expository Times* Vol. 117 (2005) pp. 15-18

Riches, J., 'Worship Resources: Contextual Bible Study: Some Reflections', *Expository Times* Vol. 117 (2005) pp. 23-26

Rowland, C., 'The Engraver, The Chandler and the Trades Unionist: Reflections on the Grassroots Reading of Scripture', *Political Theology* Vol. 2 (2000) pp. 11-32

Watson, J., 'Educating for Citizenship? The Emerging Relationship Between Religious Education and Citizenship Education', *British Journal of Religious Education* Vol. 26 (2004) pp. 259-271

West, G., 'The Institute for the Study of the Bible and Worker Ministry Project, Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual', available online: <http://66.102.9.104/search?q=cache:OcRwLUloPIIJ:www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/isb/Contextual%2520Bible%2520Study.pdf+west+resource+manual+contextual+bible+study&hl=en>

West, G., 'And the Dumb Do Speak: Articulating Incipient Readings of the Bible in Marginalized Communities' in J. W. Rogerson, M. Davies and M. Daniel Carroll (eds.), *The Bible in Ethics* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) pp. 174-192

West, G., 'Reading the Bible in Light of HIV/AIDS in South Africa', *Ecumenical Review* (2003) available online: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2065/is_4_55/ai_111979986

Wink, W., *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Fortress Press, 1973)

Winter, S. 'Tackling Social Exclusion', *Political Theology* No 4 May 2001, pp. 65-73.

Reports

Learning and Teaching Scotland, 'Education for Citizenship in Scotland: A Paper for Discussion and Development' (2002) available online: <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/citizenship/planning/paper/index.asp>

Scottish Executive, 'Report of Cross-Party Working Group on Religious Hatred', available online: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/society/trhr-00.asp>

[Return to vol. 5 no. 2 index page](#)

Created on: January 18th 2010

Updated on: August 19th 2010