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HISTORICAL STUDY AS CULTURAL CRITIQUE: A PROPOSAL FOR THE ROLE OF BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Vincent L. Wimbush

I. An Autobiographical Introduction

Some things are a bit clearer to me today than they were a decade or so ago. For example, I can now better understand and articulate the reasons for my initial and continuing interest in biblical studies. It was the recognition of the pervasive influence of the Bible in the historical experiences of African Americans that first inspired the interest. The importance of the Bible among African Americans is not of significance to me because it is assumed to be unique in the history of the United States. I am quite aware of the historical importance of the Bible among the great majority of Americans, since the European settling of what has become the United States.¹ But the importance of the Bible among virtually all Americans has only added impetus to my interest in its functions among African Americans. The extent to which the Bible provided Americans a language with which to articulate different interests and concerns and negotiate social and political existence, to this extent African American reading of the Bible—and self-understanding—is different from the majority culture and needs to be studied carefully.

So it was neither antiquarian interests nor theological sensibilities, but first the recognition of the *function* of the Bible among African Americans in every aspect of their existence, in every period of their history, which attracted me to biblical studies. It was precisely because African Americans in particular, most Americans in general, used the Bible as authoritative reference for their ethos and mode of existence, as well as language world, that in my mind warranted more disciplined study of the Bible itself. It seemed important to know more about the language, imagery, symbols, concepts and views of reality which were biblical traditions, not merely to come to know the (Protestant-understood) “absolute” truth about Judeo-Christian origins, but primarily to aid African Americans to escape their *ideological* bondage to some types of “readings” of the Bible on the part of some traditions within the white dominant culture. These “readings” have had a complex history. They were initially partly forced upon, partly

accepted by, African Americans, first as slaves, then as disenfranchised people, even as they established their own churches.² My thinking was that African Americans' salvation from ideological bondage depended greatly upon the degree to which hermeneutical control of the Bible—for the sake of both a defense against alien, imperialistic ideologies, and offense in the sense of the construction of liberation constructs—could be realized by African Americans. And hermeneutical control could not be realized except through *critical* engagement of biblical literature and traditions. I imagined that the disciplined course of study of a graduate school program was needed to help me reach a level of competence for such engagement.

II. The Functions and Contexts of Biblical Scholarship

As far as my own personal and professional identity and orientation are concerned, then, it is important to underscore the *critique of culture* as a type of commitment or subjectivity as the primary impulse for critical biblical studies. Obviously, my understanding of the role of biblical scholarship in which I engage presupposes already some reflection on my part about my personal situation and history, as well as the context in which I work as a professional. I should like to challenge the guild of biblical scholars to rethink, relative to the different types of contexts in which professional scholarly work is carried out, especially, the roles or functions of the historical work which is biblical scholarship.³

That biblical scholarship can be carried out in different contexts—the undergraduate liberal arts college, the university graduate-level department of religious studies, the freestanding or university-related seminary, divinity school or rabbinical school, among others—is quite obvious. That biblical scholarship serves different functions relative to these different contexts should be more obvious than is actually the case. Because I carry out part of my teaching and research work in the context of a freestanding seminary, and because it is collective concern about professional theological education which provided the impetus for this paper, I should like to focus attention on what I think should be the function of biblical scholarship in the context of *graduate professional*

theological education. It is nevertheless important to say that given the other context in which I work as biblical scholar, a department of religion in the humanities division of a small graduate school, and given my understanding of the focus of my professional life and work, no *radical* difference between my work and self-understanding as biblical scholar in the seminary and my work and self-understanding as biblical scholar in the graduate school department of religion obtains. I concede that other understandings of the (personal and professional) self and of the appropriate role of biblical scholarship in different contexts may warrant a radical distinction.

In the different contexts in which theological education takes place the beginning assumptions which should inform biblical scholarship should include references to the historical and contemporary *functions* of the Bible in western culture in general, in American (U.S.) culture in particular. "Culture" as the suggested perimeter for scope of concern is important because it goes beyond, even as it includes, the narrow categories of theology and "the church" in terms of uses of the Bible.⁴ Failure to address the matter of the historical and contemporary cultural functions of the Bible is to fail not only to provide for the culture of intelligent lay persons a reason to engage and be influenced by biblical scholarship, it is also to fail to provide for the guild of biblical scholars any clear and compelling reason for its being. Purely antiquarian interest as a reason for the Society of Biblical Literature is naive, perhaps disingenuous.⁵ Were it not for the role the Bible plays in contemporary western culture, in the United States in particular, the size of the average religion department and the size of the average classics department would be the same, and SBL would probably still be able to convene at Union in New York.

Biblical scholars need, depending upon work context and professional self-understanding, either to begin to take seriously the cultural functions of the Bible as the presupposition and impulse for their work, or, as in the case of some scholars in seminary/divinity school contexts who already understand their work to be presupposed by the churches' understandings of the Bible as Scripture, to broaden the scope of concern to the perimeters of culture. The seminary/divinity school professor of Bible, certainly no less

than the college or university professor of religion, should be concerned about the function of the Bible in the larger culture. Beginning with cultural roles or functions would help establish a more common understanding of the function of biblical scholarship, lessening the need to cover up real interests with the rhetoric of antiquarianism, and obviating the need for radical distinctions relative to context. Those scholars whose work is motivated by religious/confessional interests would be able to include such interests within the larger cultural role. Those scholars for whom biblical scholarship has been explained as antiquarian interest would be more believable, insofar as they connect antiquity with contemporary cultural orientations.

III. Shifts in Method and Focus for Theological Education

If, in theological education, biblical scholarship is understood to begin with the recognition, and effort to understand the implication of the importance of the Bible in contemporary culture, a number of changes should follow. An initial interest in western cultural, including religious, orientations would be sustained by questions about origins and influences, to provide an explanation as to how a culture comes to be what it is. Initial interest in the role of the Bible in western culture in general or American culture in particular ought to lead to questions about origins. Here biblical scholarship can and should assume a powerful role—in helping western culture to understand and explain itself/

Nowhere is there a greater need for scholarship for the sake of clarifying cultural origins, ethos, and orientation than in the area of Christian origins. Because those documents collectively referred to as the New Testament have for almost two millennia enjoyed enormous cultural-political-ideological significance to the point of functioning as an icon, they have until recently not been subjected to consistently rigorous criticism. In a culture the foundational self-understanding of which is articulated through a typologically self-referential reading of the mythic stories of the Bible, critical examinations of Christian origins are very much in order. While it is certainly true that the Bible as Scripture has in different historical-cultural contexts inspired interpretations which are different

from original meanings, the very fact that it continues to be the springboard for discussion among different, often diametrically opposed, groups warrants study of the original moments and meanings. *The original meanings and moments are no longer to be seen as intrinsically important; they are important only insofar as contemporary groups and individuals within the culture continue to refer to the Bible in order to shape and articulate their different views about ultimate matters, including their social and political orientation in the world.*

The fact that in the history of the west dominant groups have used the Bible as part of the ideological legitimation of the oppression of other groups certainly requires the critical examination of the Bible, if for no reason other than the oppressed groups' self-defense. In the interest of providing, as it were, exegetical or hermeneutical "space" for all those for whom the Bible functions as an important reference point for, and language of, self-definition, the historical study of the Bible must make some adjustments. The challenge must be to experiment with heuristic categories which will advance clearer pictures of and explanations for the religious ways and self-definitions of the actors in the biblical stories. In the study of the original moments and contexts of western religious traditions—the classical cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, including Greece and Rome, North Africa, and the biblical worlds of Judaism and Christianity—the challenge is still enormous. And this is the case notwithstanding the number of literary documents, papyri, inscriptions and archaeological sites which have been discovered and studied, notwithstanding the number of grand interpretive efforts in regard to the region and period.

The question which remains is this—what do we really know about the worlds of antiquity, about the people who constituted those worlds? What do we know about what motivated them, how they understood themselves, why they formed social groups the way they did? Still we know too little about how "worlds" were constructed in antiquity, about how these "worlds" worked, how the languages and symbol systems were understood. Still we depend much too heavily upon generalities and abstractions—"Christianity," "Hellenistic Judaism," and the like—to explain phenomena. Without a greater degree of clarity about how

any world within antiquity worked, not only is it difficult to translate properly the “data”—texts, inscriptions, and so forth—it will prove problematic even to recognize what the “data” are and should be. Since historians create their own data on the basis of assumptions about how any world or phenomenon under scrutiny operated, the accumulation of “data” without the constant attempt to understand better how any world was constructed and operated is most problematic. Always a working construal must be in place, and the historian must be aware of it.

What certainly should be among efforts to understand how a world from antiquity operated are questions about the ways in which human beings could and did organize their lives into great and small collectivities, about the ways in which they produced goods for consumption in a political economy, about the different shares in a political economy, about the pressures and challenges which corresponded to different shares in a political economy, about the different attempts to respond to different shares in a political economy.⁶

The pursuit of such questions can facilitate an understanding of the Bible as part of the conversation carried on among different individuals and groups within a defined period of time about ultimate experiences and resultant self-understandings, and how such experiences and self-understandings were negotiated in a particular world. The extent to which an understanding of the different types of experiences and responses to a world articulated in the Bible is gained is the extent to which the Bible can be seen to be more than mere religion, viz., doctrine, creedal formulae, liturgy, and the like. It does, of course, include all of these things; but it is more than these in the sense that on the most basic level of intention doctrinal statements and the like articulate or mask self-definition.

If the Bible is viewed as parts of conversations about what to be and how to be in the world, then the effort to reconstruct as many of the parts of the conversations as possible should result in a better opportunity to make use of the Bible as a springboard for continuing conversations toward affirmation and liberation, about possible responses to different, post-biblical situations. Concentration upon social orientation, or ways of being in the world, should

prove helpful in clarifying the nature of the relationship between social origins and the development of different types of piety and social orientations.

Insofar as the isolation of different types of pieties or social orientations is part of the historical study of the Bible, what is involved is, according to historian of religion Kurt Rudolph, the "critique of ideologies."⁷ In this type of historical study what is involved is the critique of the ideologies represented in the Bible, as well as their attempted applications and reifications in post-biblical situations. Rudolph recognized that there was much at stake, especially for poor and disenfranchised peoples, in such historical study, as indicated in his quoting of a significant statement from Karl-Otto Apel's *Transformation der Philosophie*:

The direct, dogmatic and normative application of the understanding of tradition, established institutionally and socially obligatory, functioned within Europe until the Enlightenment and in most cultures outside Europe up to the present time. Now, however, it can no longer be revived. . . . By being alienated inevitably from their own traditions, the third-world cultures testify that systems of meaning—for example, religious and moral orders of value—must be conceived in closest connection with the forms and institutions of social life. Above all, they seek a philosophical and scientific orientation that mediates the hermeneutical understanding of their own and of foreign traditions of meaning through sociological analyses of the respective economic and social orders. This more than anything else makes it easy to understand the power Marxism has to fascinate the intellectuals of developing countries.⁸

But Rudolph also understood that such historical study had universal implications:

. . . the destruction of mutual prejudices and misconceptions is possible only through the critical relativizing of religious confessions and traditions that is brought about by religio-historical work. To this degree, a critique based on the history of religions—a historical, philological, socio-

logical, and psychological critique—possesses an altogether positive significance for the common life of humanity. It furthers understanding, tolerance, and mutual recognition on the ground of a shared approach to a tradition that is not accepted without examination.⁹

The historical study of the Bible which seeks to explain the social origins and development of the different orientations in the Bible could aid the contemporary west in liberating it from its own past. Such research should make it difficult for any type of piety or religious self-understanding to be commended without clarity about and respect for social origins and socio-political-economic implications. That such research can be of heuristic significance for the reconstruction of the classical cultures of the ancient Middle East, Greece and Rome, and the biblical worlds of Judaism and Christianity *and* relevant for present-day efforts to critique the ideologies based upon these ancient cultures should not disqualify it from consideration.

The historical reconstructive work of biblical scholarship would involve cultural critique in the sense that it would be focused upon the isolation of different types of pieties and self-understandings in the biblical world *as* ideologies, or *as masks* for ideologies. The extent to which such ideologies can be isolated, accounted for, and charted in terms of development, to this extent the continuing influence of such ideologies in contemporary culture can and should be identified and assessed. The work of identifying and assessing the influence of biblical ideologies on contemporary culture would represent cultural critique of both the biblical worlds and the contemporary world.

IV. The Study of Asceticism as Example

An example—which represents one of my own research interests—is in order. If focus upon religious orientation to the world is important as part of the effort to isolate the different types of pieties/ideologies in the biblical world, then the study of asceticism can be particularly illuminating.¹⁰ Asceticism—understood as a radical expression—is often a part of studies which aim to focus

upon forms of piety in antiquity. Unfortunately, too many of these studies reflect an understanding of asceticism as a single-issue, single-praxis, simply-inspired phenomenon, as the expression of piety which fully emerged only in late antiquity with the appearance of the "ascetic" institutions. Many of these studies have also tended to focus upon the origins and development of certain practices, and have assumed that common practices represent simple borrowing or direct influence. Such studies have been done without consistent attention to and respect for the now common proposition among scholars that critical to any discussion about what is constitutive of any culture is not ritual or practice or language in itself, but function and meaning.

Asceticism should, then, be understood not as a set of certain abstracted practices. Nor should it be equated in a simple way with renunciation, with a negative response to the world. "Ascetic" behavior must be associated with a sliding range of understandings of, and responses to, a particular (socio-economic-political) world. Each world with its own political economy, its own symbol system, its distinct possibilities for articulating meaning, will determine the parameters of the "range." As there were in antiquity different types and interpretations of experiences and what was required for meaningful existence, so there were different types of ascetic piety, meant to foster the realization of such existence. Asceticism can be associated with those individuals and groups whose understanding of and response to their world represented a type of critique, or opposition. But only an understanding of the ways in which their worlds worked, the ways in which such individuals and groups perceived themselves in their worlds, the types of options they perceived they had can bring full clarity to the meaning of their asceticism.

An attempt to isolate different types of patterns in social orientation in the biblical world, especially those patterns which represent responses to perceived alienation, or marginalization, would have clear implications for the study of the biblical worlds and contemporary culture. First, it would emphasize the importance of the function of responses to the world as self-definition. Social groups, including "religious" ones, and especially minority "religious" groups, establish communal identities by setting up

strong boundaries of exclusion, usually in the form of attention-getting rhetoric and social behavior.¹¹ Second, it would foster the use of a different set of categories for the classification of the diversity of expressions in antiquity. The different isolated types of asceticism understood as responses to the world would obviously cut across old categories such as "Hellenistic Judaism," "Palestinian Christianity," and the like. Given the focus upon responses to the world and self-definition, aspects of "Judaism" and aspects of "Stoicism," for example, may be found to be more similar to each other in ways far beyond the traditional understandings of influence, borrowings and parallels. Third, attention to asceticism as social orientation can help efforts to clarify the nature of the relationship between types of pieties and religious self-understandings and existence within types of political economies. Every religious tradition is in some way structurally related to a political economy, either establishing it, legitimizing it, or opposing it through direct criticism, or non-participation, viz., the construction of an alternative world or ideal. The investigation of different types of ascetic pieties understood as different responses to the world would help clarify and establish the relationship between social location and piety. With scholarly attention focused in this direction, no piety would be understood except as a response to a social situation, whether—to use Marxist terminology—functioning as "the opium of the people," or "the protest against real distress."¹² Other functional categories are, of course, available and appropriate. The point, at any rate, is to raise questions about the function and meaning of certain responses to the world and understandings of the world.

If such questions are pursued in the study of biblical antiquity, it is easy to see how the same questions can be raised of modernity and of the long western trajectory into modernity, especially with a view to clarifying the extent to which biblical traditions are of influence in modernity. For the reason that it is important to ask why certain groups in biblical antiquity understood and responded to their world the way they did, so it is important to ask, as Max Weber did, why it is that in modern times the world is understood to be a certain way and is responded to in a certain way, especially couched in biblical language and concepts, and with obvious inter-

est in biblical legitimacy of the understanding or orientation. The continuing relevance of social orientation, or response to the world, is obvious. What would be required of biblical scholars is the extension of the examination to post-biblical periods and situations. They would seek to chart the historical course of attempts to reify biblical teachings and models of behavior. Biblical scholars can and should do this type of work because their knowledge of the biblical traditions can put them in (historical-critical) perspective in order that an enlightened critique of them can be made. In addition, biblical scholars can offer a critique of the present cultural ideologies and orientations insofar as they are already informed by biblical traditions. They can help clarify the nature of the influence of biblical traditions, thereby providing an appropriate perspective for critique.

V. Autobiographical and Other Conclusions

Minority groups in the U.S. of the late twentieth century are especially vulnerable to ideological bondage. Given the rapid exchange of information, the intoxicating media images over and over again driving home the point that only a chosen few (by definition other than so-called minorities) are among the powerful, the chic and sexy, the beautiful, the glib, the bright and cunning, and that the rest are the ugly, the pitiful and pathetic, given televangelism, which deceptively comes-a-courting into the living rooms of the poor with the language of religious protest, but with the politics and ideology of the dominant classes—given these phenomena the type of biblical scholarship outlined above is especially needed by minority and oppressed groups. Not until such groups can assume hermeneutical control of biblical traditions and of the class-specific culture-specific, gender-specific origins of the ideologies which are behind them can they begin to construct for themselves liberating ideologies and self-understandings. Hermeneutical control cannot be realized until the whole of the biblical tradition is critically engaged, until the ideologies which constitute it are themselves critiqued.

It is important for me to say that since I have crossed an ideological and hermeneutical threshold, it is now impossible for me to

engage the Bible in a way that does not allow me to critique the ideologies and model orientations reflected in the Bible, as well as the efforts to apply biblical ideologies and orientations in the modern world. An understanding of the social origins and social functions of these ideologies proves helpful. Since biblical orientations to the world and their attempted applications in the modern world can haunt, enslave or liberate human beings, they must not be ignored. African Americans, especially, but also other groups of marginal and poor peoples, must come to know just how much is at stake in possessing such knowledge.¹³

It is also important to stress that given the crossing of the same threshold, it is no longer possible for me to see the importance of the Bible in terms of purely antiquarian interests. Beyond the naivete of such reasoning, it is clear that such interests simply cannot provide a convincing rationale for the study of this part of antiquity over against any other, especially given antiquarian interests. Invocation of the authority of Scripture is not adequate. The notion of "scripture" must be understood in terms of cultural tradition, conditioning and function. Hence, I am back to the notion of the importance of the Bible in the culture as the impetus for biblical scholarship. Since it can be argued that the history of western culture is to a significant degree the history of the role of the Bible,¹⁴ biblical scholarship can and should be a critique of culture.

As for theological education in general, it should be said first that the usefulness of the type of biblical scholarship outlined above depends upon the will to change. Biblical scholarship understood as critique of culture in the context of theological education presupposes an understanding of the role of theological education which is not in vogue. Seminaries are not notorious for being hotbeds of critique. What must change is the understanding of the role of seminary and church-related divinity school as "the church's school" in the sense of serving as any particular church's leadership factory, or in the sense of legitimizing and transmitting, often quite naively, dominant cultural values under the guise of denominational loyalty. Biblical scholarship should, along with other types of scholarship in the theological curriculum, help the future leaders of the churches and other institutions to develop

such skills as are needed to critique the "Christian tradition," the "Jewish heritage," particular contemporary communities and traditions as manifestations of these larger traditions, as well as the larger culture. That the self-conscious adoption of critique, understood in the broadest, most positive sense, will create some tensions, even difficulties, for theological education is likely. But that it needs to be done for the sake of continual reformation—of religious communities, the culture at large, including seminaries!—is clear. Seminaries and church-related divinity schools, because of their relationships with religious communities, viz., that part of the culture in which the Bible is in constant and dynamic use, are in a unique position not only to offer the critique, but also to help equip others to do the same.

Those religious communities which own and support theological schools should be challenged to see the role of critique in their best interest. Continual critique should foster continual reform. Continual reform should foster growth. The challenge, at any rate, is first to be laid at the desk of scholars; they must first be willing to think differently about the scholarly task in the context of theological education. I assume that all scholarship represents commitment of some type. This essay has sought to foster discussion about the type of commitment needed on the part of that scholar in the context of theological education who as historian—not *primarily* theologian, at least as understood in a narrow professional guild sense—wields the Word.

FOOTNOTES

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⁶ Malina, Bruce J., *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), p. 92.

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⁸ Ibid. p. 76.

⁹ Ibid. p. 77.

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¹¹ Meeks, Wayne A., *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of The Apostle Paul*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). pp. 94-96.

¹² Rudolph, *Historical Fundamentals*, p. 75.

¹³ Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. (New York: Crossroad, 1983); idem, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Smith, *Religious Diversity*, p. 55.