Raising Awareness of the Bible in Contemporary British Society

A Case Study of Young Adults Who are Not Involved in a Faith Community

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Abstract

This paper explores attitudes to the Bible among non-churchgoers in the UK. It focuses on a case study of young professionals, examining their familiarity with the Bible and their opinions of it. It evaluates the ways in which the Church attempts to raise awareness of the Bible and asks how culturally relevant these approaches are to the people represented in the case study.

The participants had been exposed to the Bible to varying degrees in childhood but rarely read it as adults. They acknowledged that it was an important cultural document and some believed its moral messages were helpful, but it had little or no relevance to their daily lives. They expressed doubts about its historicity and viewed fundamentalist interpretations as dangerous.

The challenge to the Church in contemporary society is to encourage sceptical people to explore the text for themselves. Young professionals who are dismissive of Christianity may still be interested in the Bible as a literary or cultural text. Its publication in an accessible form, as a work of literature rather than as a religious text, may appeal more to such groups than the use of the Bible in sermons, on Christian websites or in discussion groups. The Church may need to be open to new ways of reading the Bible and be less possessive about its interpretation if it wants to broaden the readership, trusting that a divinely inspired text can speak for itself in contemporary society.

1 Introduction

In many flourishing British churches the Bible is seen as central to the Christian faith. It is believed to be God's message to humanity, revealing his character and his saving action in human history. In an era of declining church attendance, it is churches with a more conservative view of the Bible that are most likely to be growing.[1] This view is, however, at odds with a society where religious texts, organised religion and absolutes of any kind are increasingly regarded with suspicion. This case study aims to discover more about the attitudes of young, professional people in Britain towards the Bible, examining both their familiarity with the text and their opinions of it. The paper also discusses some of the ways in which the Church attempts to raise awareness of the Bible and will consider whether these strategies are culturally relevant to the group represented in the case study.

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1   Gledhill, "Churchgoing on its Knees as Christianity Falls Out of Favour", *Times Online Comment*, 2008 [Website]

2 Methodology

I collected most of my data through interviews using my own circle of friends as a case study. I interviewed 11 people, all of whom were British, university educated professionals, aged between 30 and 34.[2] I selected people who do not regularly attend church and who know me well enough to discuss a subject which is sometimes considered taboo in British society.[3] Complete strangers might have felt freer to criticise the Bible without fear of offending me but it is unlikely that they would have given the project their time and consideration so willingly. I encouraged interviewees to be as frank as possible and provided assurances of anonymity.[4]

One-to-one interviews seemed the best way of eliciting information on a subject to which many people had given little prior thought. It enabled me to clarify questions that people did not understand and to ask follow-up questions where necessary. I transcribed all the interviews and allowed the participants to review the transcripts before using them in my research. Several of them chose to clarify or expand on their comments at this stage.

I began the interviews with factual questions about whether or not people owned a Bible and how much of it they had read.[5] In the second half of the interview I encouraged people to share their opinions about its relevance and usefulness. This format allowed people to build up gradually to sharing some of their more deeply held views. I kept my own interjections to a minimum in order to give the interviewees space to respond. A focus group might have generated livelier discussion and elicited stronger opinions but it would have been difficult to transcribe in the time available.

I have given an overview of the participants' opinions though I recognise that my summary may overlook the subtleties of some of their views. I am also conscious that the centrality of the Bible in my own faith is likely to have influenced the research at every stage, including my analysis of the answers. I have tried to allow the research to speak for itself by quoting directly wherever possible and have included transcripts of the interviews in the appendices.[6] The case study is a qualitative piece of research, involving only a small number of participants from a limited sector of British society. It is therefore not possible to make generalisations about contemporary Britain based on the findings of this case study. However, the responses do give an insight into some of the views of the Bible current amongst well educated professionals and suggest themes which could be followed up in a wider scale study.

I have attempted to place the responses in a wider context by examining literature which discusses the place of the Bible in contemporary society and by comparing my findings with those of larger scale studies. There have been few recent surveys of attitudes to the Bible amongst people who do not attend church and the three most significant studies differ from my own in a number of ways. Hay and Hunt gathered data from four focus groups covering a wider age range (25-60) and including only people who described themselves as either "spiritual" or "religious".[7] Spencer's research, *Beyond Belief*,[8] and *Beyond the Fringe*,[9] was limited to agnostics and included people from a wider range of social groups than were represented in this case study. These studies did not focus exclusively on the Bible but

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2   Appendix 2: Profile of Participants
3   Hirst, "Social Networks and Personal Beliefs" in Davie, Heelas and Woodhead, eds., *Predicting Religion,* 2003: 91
4   Appendix 3: Consent Form
5   Appendix 1: Interview Questions
6   Appendix 9: Abridged Interview Transcripts
7   Hay and Hunt, "Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Do Not Go to Church", *Church of Scotland,* 2000: 6 [Website]
8   Spencer, *Beyond Belief,* 2003: 10
9   Spencer, *Beyond the Fringe,* 2005: 15

investigated attitudes to spirituality and the Church in general. The information on participants' opinions of the Bible is consequently limited, but some similar themes emerge.

In the light of the case study I have evaluated a number of ways in which the Church attempts to raise awareness of the Bible. Section 4 examines the Church's approach to hermeneutics and preaching, the use of discussion groups and internet resources and the way in which the Bible is published. Since it is not possible to survey all the available resources a small sample has been selected including the *Alpha Course*[10], the *rejesus* website[11] and the *Revelations* series.[12]

3 Findings of the Case Study

3.1 Background of Participants

The participants were asked at the outset to describe their own beliefs. Two described themselves as atheists, two as Christians and seven as agnostic or agnostic in combination with other categories. For example, Katharine[13] and Daniel used both "atheist" and "agnostic" to describe their beliefs while Lewis said, "I'll have a bit of agnostic. Throw in a bit of Buddhist/ Christian". [14] Thus most participants were not committed to a particular belief system but some acknowledged a leaning either towards or away from faith. Lewis' eclectic spirituality reflects an increasing tendency for individuals to "be more inventive with their spiritual lives", assembling private faith from a range of religious sources.[15] The participants were selected because they did not attend church regularly and it is therefore not surprising that they were less religious than the general population, approximately 70% of whom described themselves as Christian in the 2001 census.[16] However, since only 6.3% of the population attend church on an average Sunday,[17] it also seems that a lower proportion of the participants identified themselves as Christian than would be expected amongst non-churchgoers in England and Wales.

The descriptions of participants' parents' beliefs are an indication of the extent to which Christianity impacted on their upbringing. A few of the participants had at least one parent who was active in a church community, [18] while two identified their grandmothers as significant Christian influences.[19] With the exception of Daniel's father (anti religious), Lewis' mother (non-observant Hindu) and Emma's parents (both atheist), all parents were described as having at least nominal Christian beliefs or a belief in God. Occasionally cynicism was expressed about the sincerity of their parents' views. Michael, for example, described his father as "agnostic with occasional twinges of familial C of Eness".[20]

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10   Alpha International, *The Alpha Course*, 2008 [Website]
11   Jenkins and Stanley, eds., *rejesus,* 2007a [Website]
12   *Revelations,* 2005
13   Pseudonyms have been used by agreement with participants
14   Appendix 4: Beliefs of Participants and Their Parents
15   Percy, *The Salt of the Earth*, 2001: 65
16   Office for National Statistics, "Ethnicity and Identity", *Office for National Statistics,* 2004 [Website]
17   Brierley Peter and Heather Wraight, "Pulling Out of the Nosedive", *Christian Research,* 2006 [Website]
18   Ben, interview by author, London, 26 April 2008; Chris, interview by author, London, 9 April 2008; Katharine interview by author, London, 1 May 2008
19   Daniel interview by author, London, 1 May 2008; Jenny, interview by author, London, 9 April, 2008
20   Appendix 4: Beliefs of Participants and Their Parents

3.2 Familiarity with Religious Texts

Three participants did not own copies of the Bible but most had a copy "somewhere".[21] This reflects a recent ICM poll showing that 65% of adults in the UK own a Bible.[22] The extent to which participants had read it or heard it read varied widely from between "a few verses and chapters" to "half to three quarters" and depended largely on whether they had attended church, Sunday school or a church primary school as a child. No one in the group claimed to have read the Bible or heard it read more than three or four times in the last year.[23] In Hay and Hunt's research "not one of the participants mentioned reading the Bible".[24]

Most participants found it difficult to quote directly from the Bible although they were aware that there are "lots of sayings that are in common parlance".[25] Six were able to provide at least three quotations and most felt that they knew several but could not think of them under pressure. The most common themes were quotations from the creation story ("Let there be light" was suggested four times) and the saying "an eye for an eye" (also quoted four times). Out of the 30 examples given, more than half were from the Old Testament,[26] in spite of the fact that interviewees generally felt they were more familiar with the New Testament.[27]

Participants were asked to list the two Bible stories with which they were most familiar. All were able to list at least two and some mentioned five or six. The birth of Jesus was mentioned by eight people and elements of the Easter story by six. It is likely that both these stories were familiar to all the participants but that in some cases they did not mention them as only two examples were requested. Again, the creation was a common theme as well as the Wedding at Cana, presumably because of its prominence in the marriage ceremony.[28] Spencer's research also indicated that "the early Genesis stories were often the most familiar".[29]

In a wider scale study it would be interesting to assess how well people knew these stories as they were sometimes remembered from childhood. Michael stated that "primary school was probably the point at which I heard most of the Bible in assemblies...and going to the local church"[30] and Daniel acknowledged that he could not remember much of what he learnt as a child.[31] Knowledge of the Bible in Hay and Hunt's research also tended to be "limited to vague memories of Sunday school, catechism, or RE classes".[32] Three of the participants had been exposed extensively to the Bible as children or teenagers. Jenny by her grandmother,[33] Ben at Catholic church services[34] and Hannah through regular attendance at youth group.[35]

"What kinds of writings do you think are included in the Bible?" elicited a wide variety of responses, covering most of the genres of biblical literature. However, it was most commonly

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21   Appendix 5: Familiarity with the Bible
22   Ekklesia, "Big Decline in Bible Ownership", *Ekklesia*, 2004 [Website]
23   Appendix 5: Familiarity with the Bible
24   Hay and Hunt, *Church of Scotland,* 2000: 22 [Website]
25   Emma, interview by author, London, 21 April 2008
26   Appendix 6: Familiar Bible Verses.
27   Ben, interview; Katharine, interview; Lewis, interview by author, London, 2 April 2008; Michael, interview by author, London, 1 April 2008; Paul, interview by author, London, 21 April 2008;
28   Appendix 7: Familiar Bible Stories
29   Spencer 2003: 32
30   Michael, interview
31   Daniel, interview
32   Hay and Hunt, *Church of Scotland,* 2000: 22 [Website]
33   Jenny, interview
34   Ben, interview
35   Hannah, interview by author, 19 April 2008

understood to include history and narrative, including stories with a moral point.[36] Participants in *Beyond the Fringe* tended to describe the Bible as "an advice or rulebook", "a biography or history book"[37] or a "storybook".[38] As might be expected from a highly educated cohort the overall level of biblical literacy in this case study was significantly higher than that reported in Spencer's research where "any idea that it was 66 or so books rather than one (or at the most two), or that it was written over a time frame of centuries, was absent."[39]

Participants were asked briefly about their knowledge of other religious texts. None had an extensive knowledge, but some had read portions as adults[40] or had some exposure to religious texts at school.[41] Michael expressed an interest in reading the Qur'an[42] while Jenny was considering reading about Buddhism.[43]

3.3 Influences on views of the Bible

All the participants in the case study had heard the Bible read at weddings or, less commonly, funerals or christenings, in the last year. Four had attended other church services and five had heard it on the radio.[44] However, sermons heard at weddings or on the radio were not generally identified as an influence on their views of the Bible.[45] Indeed most participants struggled to give any examples of a time when they had heard a Bible passage explained.[46]

School, Sunday school or youth group, family and Christian friends all emerged as significant influences on participants' views of the Bible. The media had also had an impact, particularly on attitudes towards its historicity.[47] Participants tended to have learnt Bible stories at primary school or Sunday school but to have learnt more about comparative religion and the history of the documents at secondary school. It was here that people applied "more scepticism or critical thought",[48] moving on from the childhood assumption that it was simply the Word of God.[49]

The influence of family was variable with both religious fervour and antipathy to religion proving off-putting. Jenny observed that her grandmother's interpretation of the Bible tended to imply "that you weren't good enough or you weren't doing well enough or you weren't being holy enough",[50] whereas Daniel believed he had been influenced by his father's negativity about religion.[51]

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36   Ben, interview; Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview with author, London, 29 April 2008
37   Spencer 2005: 144
38   Ibid., 145
39   Ibid., 142
40   Chris, interview; Lewis, interview
41   Katharine, interview
42   Michael, interview
43   Jenny, interview
44   Appendix 5: Familiarity with Bible
45   Appendix 8: Influences on View of the Bible
46   Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Katharine, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview
47   Appendix 8: Influences on View of the Bible
48   Lewis, interview
49   Michael, interview
50   Jenny, interview
51   Daniel, interview

Christian friends were mentioned by six of the participants.[52] In this respect the atheists and agnostics are unlikely to be typical since my circle of friends from university (from whom eight of the participants were selected) includes an unusually high number of Christians, whereas most social networks are made up of individuals who share like-minded beliefs.[53] Moreover, since I was the interviewer, references to Christian friends were perhaps inclined to be positive. According to the participants, friends had helped them to understand the role of the Bible in the life of Christians,[54] had taught them something about the history of the biblical documents,[55] and had made them think about their own beliefs.[56] They had also played an important role in discussions about the Bible at youth group.[57]

3.4 Attitudes to the Bible

3.4.1 The Message of the Bible

Participants believed the Bible is important to Christians because it records the details of Jesus' life[58] and sets out the basis of their beliefs.[59] It shows Christians how to live their lives[60] and provides support in difficult times.[61] More specifically, it was suggested that it is used "in finding out...God's will"[62] and that it shows Christians "how they can be saved".[63] Daniel expressed reservations about its being used as a "dogmatic...instruction manual" although he acknowledged its usefulness to Christians in providing support.[64] Interestingly, these responses accurately reflect the main reasons given by Christians for reading the Bible, according to a recent survey. Christians listed their top three reasons for reading the Bible as "to find out about God", "to seek guidance or inspiration" and "to find comfort".[65] As discussed, several participants had extensive contact with Christians, which has undoubtedly contributed to their understanding of Christian attitudes.

Responses about the main message of the Bible fell into two main categories: those which emphasised the moral teaching of the Bible and those which described it in terms of the Christian's relationship with God. In the first category it was suggested that the Bible teaches people about humility and not being judgemental, greedy or selfish.[66] Its message was described as one of "tolerance, forgiveness, kindness, generosity."[67] In the second category, Lewis suggested an updated version of the first commandment: "Whatever happens stick to your God, it pays off in the long run".[68] The most complex response, theologically, was "that there is one God who created man, the world and everything. In order to be saved, forgiven

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52   Appendix 8: Influences on View of the Bible
53   Hirst 2003: 90
54   Daniel, interview; Jenny, interview; Michael, interview
55   Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview
56   Daniel, interview; Chris, interview
57   Hannah, interview
58   Chris, interview; Jenny, interview; Michael, interview
59   Emma, interview; Lewis, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview
60   Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Paul, interview
61   Daniel, interview; Katharine, interview; Rachel, interview
62   Hannah, interview
63   Chris, interview
64   Daniel, interview
65   Christian Research, "Congregational Attitudes and Beliefs Survey", quoted in Peter Brierley, ed., *UK Christian Handbook, Religious Trends No. 3,* 2001: 6.4
66   Paul, interview
67   Rachel, interview
68   Lewis, e-mail message to author, 15 May 2008

of sin and become closer to God, man needs to accept that Jesus was God's son and follow his example".[69]

In some cases participants alluded to both moral teaching and a relationship with God. Hannah, for example, summarised the message as "to know Jesus, to know God and to live with the Holy Spirit in your life," adding that "the main purpose of the Bible is to be a good person". [70] Arguably Emma's suggestion that the ten commandments are "a sort of summary"[71] also covers the twin themes of relationship with God and one's neighbour. Michael acknowledges both aspects of the Bible's message but suggests that only Christians can relate to the message about God;

> I think the main message of the Bible is 'God loves you, whatever'... Obviously that's not the main message for me because I don't believe in the first word [ie God]. So the main message for me is... the Christian morality I have bought into.[72]

Two participants questioned whether the Bible has a main message. Ben noted that "you could take different sections of it and come up with completely different conclusions... I don't think there is a single, unifying story."[73] Similarly Katharine observed that it is difficult to identify a single message in the New Testament because it is "a narrative of somebody's life" rather than a list of rules.[74]

3.4.2 The Relevance of the Bible

Participants were unanimous in believing that the Bible still has relevance in today's society. Primarily this was because of its influence on Britain historically[75] and because it still provides the foundations of our morality[76] such that "consciously or not a lot of our behaviour will be being influenced by that". [77] It was seen as culturally, legally and politically significant. Participants also believed it was relevant because it is still important to so many people and provides them with comfort and guidance.[78]

Some participants highlighted ways in which the Bible's impact on society continues to be positive. Some of the ten commandments were seen as providing a helpful foundation, summarised as "basically, 'Be decent'"[79] and it was suggested that "society can benefit from people acting in a respectful...generous...kind and ...forgiving manner".[80] The Bible was described as "a very valid and wise and successful philosophy"[81] and "a beautiful and historic work of world literature."[82] Ben suggested that the Bible "tackles issues that are still very relevant today" and might serve as a "launching point to...discussion of philosophy". [83] It

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69   Chris, e-mail message to author, 9 May 2008
70   Hannah, interview
71   Emma, interview
72   Michael, e-mail message to author, 9 May 2008
73   Ben, interview
74   Katharine, interview
75   Chris, interview; Emma, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview
76   Ben, interview, Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview
77   Michael, interview
78   Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview
79   Hannah, interview
80   Rachel, interview
81   Lewis, interview
82   Ibid.
83   Ben, interview

might also be used as a tool to communicate "peace messages and understanding and compassion",[84] though Jenny cautioned that "stories can be misinterpreted".

The Bible's relevance was seen as a separate issue from whether or not it was a reliable or divine document. It has value as literature "whether fiction or fact"[85], the stories have "good messages...regardless of whether you believe in the actual religious side of it". [86] As Katharine said, "just because I don't believe in God, it's not that I don't think the stories are useful to teach you how to behave".[87]

The Bible's status as an important cultural text generally justified its use in education, according to the participants. However, they emphasised that it should be introduced alongside other religious texts[88] and not given special status.[89] Crucially, children should "have a right to choose".[90] Four participants expressed objections to faith schools,[91] believing "that religion and education shouldn't be together in any form".[92] Daniel suggested that the teaching of the Bible might be best left "to families or church groups" on a voluntary basis.[93] Similar reservations about faith schools and the risk of breeding intolerance emerged in Spencer's research.[94]

Participants did not usually describe the Bible's relevance to their own lives and in some cases explicitly stated that it was not relevant to them personally. [95] The extent of its relevance was seen as limited in a number of ways. Hannah suggested that it was probably irrelevant to people who did not attend church or were of another religion, although she acknowledged that people unconnected with the Church sometimes found comfort at events such as funerals.[96] Some parts of the Bible were viewed as "not necessarily relevant or helpful to us in today's society"[97] and Jenny believed that "there are a lot of issues, in particular personal understanding that cannot be helped by the Bible".[98] Similarly, Hay and Hunt found that the Bible was often seen "in the same light as Shakespeare; part of our cultural heritage, but hardly relevant to daily life".[99]

3.4.3 The Dangers of Studying the Bible

Studying the Bible per se was not seen as dangerous but participants raised a number of concerns about its interpretation. In particular, a fundamentalist approach to the Bible, or any other religious text, was seen as dangerous.[100] There was a "potential danger in any kind of organised religion" [101], in "taking things too literally" [102] and "not questioning things", [103]

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84   Jenny, interview
85   Lewis, interview
86   Emma, interview; Paul, interview
87   Katharine, interview
88   Daniel, interview; Jenny, interview; Lewis,interview; Michael, interview
89   Emma, interview
90   Lewis, interview
91   Ben, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview; Michael, interview
92   Hannah, interview
93   Daniel, interview
94   Spencer 2003: 20
95   Paul, interview
96   Hannah, interview
97   Ibid.
98   Jenny, e-mail message to author, 15 April 2008
99   Hay and Hunt 2000: 22 [Website]
100   Ben, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Paul, interview
101   Emma, interview
102   Katharine, interview
103   Paul, interview

although Michael noted that "the Bible and Christianity is the faith that is the most criticised...which I think is a good thing".[104] Lewis believed that teaching the Bible "as authoritative truth"[105] is dangerous and Michael agreed that "studying it is fine, as long as it's ...not taken as gospel!"[106] Daniel noted that there were risks in the Bible being used to justify "something that the rest of society might not think is acceptable"[107] and drew attention to the challenge of deciding which parts of the Bible are still relevant today and which "may no longer apply".[108]

It was further suggested that an exclusive focus on the Bible might blind you to the "realities of every day life" and make it difficult to connect with people who had different beliefs.[109] Jenny raised concerns about the disruption of "existing belief systems and cultures through an insensitive introduction of the Bible",[110] a view echoed by Emma who felt that "teaching other cultures and religions about the Bible...can have a negative impact on ...communities where those teachings cut across what they believe".[111]

3.4.4 The Historicity of the Bible

All the participants admitted that their knowledge of the history and authorship of the biblical documents was somewhat limited.[112] However they made reference to a number of significant issues including the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls,[113] the compilation of the canon[114] and the difficulty of being certain about the authorship.[115] It was recognised that different authors had different perspectives[116] and suggested that "there have been translations and mistranslations" as the New Testament passed through different languages.[117] Doubts were raised about the historicity of the documents[118] and their reliability was understood to have been affected by a period of oral transmission.[119] Daniel estimated that the New Testament books might have been written "a few hundred years" after the time of Jesus.[120]

Participants in Spencer's research also questioned the Bible's reliability, believing that its contents had been disproved or were contradictory.[121] In *Beyond Belief* he observes that there was little idea that different genres of writing should be treated differently. Consequently, "the historicity of Adam, Eve and Noah determined the historical credibility of Jesus, Peter and Paul".[122] The questions in my case study did not explore this distinction

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104   Michael, interview
105   Lewis, interview
106   Michael, interview
107   Daniel, interview
108   Ibid.
109   Jenny, interview
110   Jenny, e-mail message to author, 15 April 2008
111   Emma, e-mail message to author, 30 April 2008
112   Ben, interview; Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Hannah, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview
113   Daniel, interview; Jenny, interview
114   Chris, interview; Jenny, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview
115   Ben, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview
116   Hannah, interview; Rachel, interview
117   Lewis, interview
118   Daniel, interview; Jenny, interview; Katharine, interview; Michael, interview
119   Jenny, interview; Lewis, interview
120   Daniel, interview
121   Spencer 2005: 147
122   Spencer 2003: 32-3

although Lewis suggested that there "may be more significant aspects of mythology for the earlier phases".[123]

3.4.5 Personal Responses to the Bible

The most common reason given for not reading the Bible more often was that there were many other books participants would like to read if they had the time.[124] The two Christians interviewed both stated that it simply did not occur to them to pick up the Bible[125] while others saw it as unreliable[126] or irrelevant to them personally.[127] The historic language of the Bible and "the gender structures that were in place" at the time of writing were a distraction.[128] In some cases participants had negative experiences of reading the Bible as a child. Daniel had found it boring[129] whereas Jenny "used to struggle because it made me angry to feel lectured by the Bible when 'it' ...didn't understand how I felt, and didn't seem to care."[130] There was some interest amongst participants in reading the Bible "at some point".[131] Michael, for example, suggested that believing the Bible to be unreliable was "an interesting reason for reading it"[132] and felt that he "should probably read it again as an adult".[133]

Some participants struggled initially to suggest a question that they would like answered about the Bible. Rachel admitted "I don't think it's ever occurred to me to ask a question about the Bible."[134] Several of the questions related to the history or authorship of the documents including an interest in finding out about the Bible's sources and historical accuracy,[135] seeing the original versions of the texts[136] and learning "which bits were written when and by...whom."[137] Michael questioned how Christians who were aware of the controversies surrounding the Bible could take it so seriously.[138] Jenny asked why the historicity of the Bible mattered and why it could not simply be considered "a really useful set of teachings which you can believe in for their own sake".[139]

Participants also asked questions about the authority and inspiration of the Bible, such as whether or not the Bible was true[140] and how Christians could know it was the Word of God since God did not write it.[141] Lewis asked why Jesus did not write the Bible himself.[142] Emma questioned why the Bible "should take precedence over any other historical or fictional

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123   Lewis, interview
124   Ben, interview; Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview
125   Hannah, interview; Rachel, interview
126   Chris, interview; Jenny, interview
127   Ben, interview; Paul, interview
128   Jenny, interview
129   Daniel, interview
130   Jenny, interview
131   Ben, interview
132   Michael, interview
133   Ibid.
134   Rachel, interview
135   Daniel, interview
136   Ben, interview
137   Paul, interview
138   Michael, interview
139   Jenny, interview
140   Chris, interview; Katharine, interview
141   Hannah, interview
142   Lewis, interview

texts".[143] Rachel's question about the Church's stance on abortion was the only ethical issue raised.[144]

4. Raising Awareness of the Bible in Contemporary British Society

4.1 The Use of the Bible in Church

The participants in the case study did not dismiss the Bible out of hand. People who are ambivalent about, or even hostile to Christianity, may be interested in understanding the Bible better and in making up their own mind about a text they believe to be culturally significant.[145] The Church has a role to play in making the text available and in encouraging people to explore it for themselves. Beaudoin notes that Generation X (born between the early 1960s and the late 1970s)[146] are "very suspicious of institutions",[147] a view was echoed by Emma who highlighted an inherent danger in "any kind of...organised belief system".[148] Nonetheless, most people attend church services occasionally[149] and it is one of the places where they are most likely to hear the Bible read.[150] If the Church wants to encourage people to engage with the Bible it needs to consider the way in which it interprets and discusses biblical texts in its services.

The Church needs to recognise the changing intellectual climate in which it is communicating. It is common to describe contemporary culture as "postmodern", a term that has been somewhat emptied of meaning through overuse. Here it will be understood to refer to a "general distrust of grand theories and ideologies".[151] Postmodernism tends to reject any attempt to explain the destiny and purpose of human history through a single metanarrative[152] and regards claims to universal truth as oppressive.[153] These concerns were reflected in the case study by participants who challenged the Bible's superiority to other religious texts[154] and its impact on non-Christian cultures.[155] It is no longer acceptable to assert what "the Bible teaches" and assume that people will accept its authority. [156] However, it is simplistic to claim that postmodern society is not interested in truth. Rather, McLaren suggests that people "care about truth so much that they don't want to pretend a subjective opinion...is more than it really is".[157]

The Church cannot expect postmodernism to go away; it is the "inescapable context in which we live and interpret"[158] and is better regarded as an opportunity than a threat.[159]

A new cultural context opens up new approaches to interpretation. The systematic theology which developed in the post-Enlightenment era tends to overlook the parts of the Bible that

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143   Emma, interview
144   Rachel, interview
145   Michael, interview
146   Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X,* 1998: 28
147   Ibid., 52
148   Emma, interview
149   Hirst*,* 2003: 93
150   Appendix 5: Familiarity with the Bible
151   Pearsall and Trumble, "Postmodernism", *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary,* 1996: 1132
152   Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*, 2003: 4
153   Ibid. 98
154   See sections 3.3.2; 3.3.3; 3.3.5
155   Emma, interview; Jenny interview
156   Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society,* 1989: 39
157   McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 2000: 167
158   Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, 1993: ix
159   Ibid., vii

are not easily assimilated. Postmodernity, on the other hand, encourages us to recognise the variety of biblical genres, the plurality of perspectives, the "sheer untidiness of the narrative materials" and the "proliferation of little stories within the larger ones".[160] Ben and Katharine were right to question the unity of the Bible's message[161] since the Bible itself "offers no summary of the whole story from beginning to end".[162] Brueggemann argues that a synthetic, rational approach has violated "what is most characteristically Jewish in the text" whereas a Jewish (and more postmodern) reading acknowledges the parts that seem "disjointed, 'irrational', contradictory, paradoxical, ironic, and scandalous".[163] Reducing the Bible to a list of rules and regulations or propositional truths[164] and trying to fit it into our own preconceived structure makes it boring and predictable.[165]

The parts of the Bible that are sometimes overlooked by systematic theology may turn out to be those that are most of interest to people who do not go to church. Jenny described the way in which a friend had introduced her to the Song of Songs, pointing out "'This is actually quite raunchy, this is quite different, there's all kinds of stuff in the Bible.' I didn't know about that at all before and I thought that was interesting".[166] People in contemporary Britain may be interested in the Bible as a source of spirituality, rather than as a record of absolute truth or a moral guide[167] and may therefore find the Psalms or wisdom literature a helpful starting point. Narrative may also be an appropriate genre in a postmodern society that values stories, even when it doubts their historicity.[168] This was reflected by participants in the case study who displayed an openness to some of the Bible's messages, in spite of their questions about its factual accuracy.[169]

The challenge for the Church is to remain true to its belief that the Bible is divinely inspired while recognising that its own interpretation is not necessarily inspired or final.[170] Theology should never be considered finished,[171] instead it should be a continuing search for meaning in which the Church participates with humility rather than dogmatism.[172] Preaching should not be seen as an opportunity to tell people what to believe but should be part of the process of inviting people into a "counterstory", a different way of looking at the world and ourselves.[173] It is an invitation to people "to see *this* story as *their* story".[174]

The traditional sermon may not be the best way of involving people in the process of interpreting the text, since it leaves little space for questions or discussion. Most participants in the case study struggled to remember an example of a time when they had heard a passage explained to them.[175] Lewis regarded the exercise as "a little bit pointless"[176] and Hannah noted that "they just read from the Bible and a lot of it doesn't feel relevant".[177]

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160   Bauckham 2003: 92
161   Ben, interview; Katharine, interview
162   Bauckham 2003: 93
163   Brueggemann 1993: 58
164   Wright, "How can the Bible be Authoritative", *Vox Evangelica,* 21 1991: 9
165   Wright 1991: 24
166   Jenny, interview
167   Percy, *The Salt of the Earth*, 2001: 165
168   McLaren 2000: 178
169   See section 3.3.2
170   McLaren 2000: 68
171   Ibid., 66
172   Ibid., 65
173   Brueggemann 1993: 25
174   Wright 1991: 24
175   Chris, interview; Daniel, interview; Emma, interview; Katharine, interview; Lewis, interview; Michael, interview; Paul, interview; Rachel, interview
176   Lewis, interview
177   Hannah, interview

Preachers need to build in opportunities for the congregation to feed back on and challenge their interpretation if they want to be taken seriously.

4.2 The Use of Discussion Groups

Informal discussion groups are one way in which people who do not usually attend church can begin to explore the Bible for themselves. The best known example is the *Alpha* Course, which has been attended by over 2 million people in the UK. The course is marketed as "an opportunity to explore the meaning of life" and is aimed at people interested in finding out more about Christianity. [178] *Alpha* is not without its critics, among both conservative evangelicals and those with a more liberal churchmanship.[179] The intention here, however, is not to assess the theology of the course but to consider the relevance of its presentation of the Bible to people such as the participants in the case study.

Alpha is usually run in an informal setting, sometimes in people's homes. It is "local and relational"[180] and may therefore be accessible to people who are suspicious of the Church as an institution. Each session begins with a talk which sets the agenda for the evening[181] and is then followed by an opportunity for discussion.[182] Unlike a traditional sermon, the format makes room for different perspectives and interpretations to be aired.

The Bible is central to the second session of *Alpha*, "*Who is Jesus*", which discusses the historicity of the Gospels.[183] The questions raised in the case study suggest that there is still a place for defending the historicity of the Bible. However, discussions about the factualness of the biblical story also need to address the question of why historicity matters.[184] Many Christians would argue that the factualness of the biblical story is integral to its message[185] but this is not self-evident. *Alpha* makes a good case for the reliability of the New Testament, discussing the dating of the documents and the extent of the manuscript evidence for their accurate transmission.[186] It also attempts to answer the question of why the accuracy of the documents matters by focusing on the person, death and resurrection of Jesus as central to the Christian faith.[187]

The "*Why and How Should I Read the Bible*?" session focuses more on the importance of the Bible in the Christian life[188] and deals with the issue raised by Hannah[189] of what it means to describe the Bible as "the Word of God".[190] Gumbel acknowledges some of the difficulties inherent in reading and interpreting the Bible without offering dogmatic answers.[191] However, this session assumes that people are interested in the Bible's relevance to their own lives, which was not the case for most participants in the case study. *Alpha* is aimed explicitly at people who are interested in the Christian faith and it is unlikely to appeal to those who perceive the Bible's value to be purely cultural or literary.

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178   Alpha International, "Ever Wondered What It's All About?", *The Alpha Course*, 2008 [Website]
179   Hunt, "Alpha – Strategy, Content and a Few Controversies", *Anyone for Alpha?,* 2001: 48
180   Percy 2001: 179
181   Hunt, 2001: 42
182   Ibid., 44
183   Gumbel, "Who is Jesus?", *The Alpha Course,* 2007a [CD-ROM]
184   Jenny, interview
185   Newbigin 1989: 66
186   Gumbel 2007a: 2
187   Ibid., 4 - 14
188   Gumbel, "Why and How Should I Read the Bible?", *The Alpha Course,* 2007b [CD-ROM]
189   Hannah, interview
190   Gumbel 2007b: 3
191   Ibid., 4-5

The participants in the case study were more likely to discuss the Bible with their Christian friends than attend a group for exploring Christianity, however informal. According to Tidball, most people start reading the Bible because they are personally invited to do so.[192] It is therefore important that Christians are equipped to answer challenging questions about the Bible. Orr-Ewing's book, *Why Trust the Bible?* Is a helpful resource born out of the experience of discussing the Bible with people who are not Christians.[193] She observes that in spite of the assumption that people in postmodern society are not interested in authoritative texts she repeatedly encounters questions about the Bible.[194] Orr-Ewing addresses most of the issues which emerged in the course of the case study including questions about the reliability of the biblical manuscripts, issues of interpretation, the way in which the canon was put together and the status of the Bible in comparison with other holy books.[195]

4.3 The Use of the Internet

Beaudoin suggests that the Internet is a safe place for Generation X to explore religion.[196] The *rejesus* website, aimed at "people who have little previous knowledge of Jesus or the Christian faith" is one example of the way in which Christian organisations are using the Internet to make Christianity accessible to this age group.[197] Although some of the participants in the case study already had considerable exposure to Christianity, there are a number of features of the website which might appeal to them.

Rejesus offers users the opportunity to download one of the Gospels[198] which is helpful in a context where not everyone has a personal copy of the Bible.[199] It might also overcome the reticence of people who feel that they do not have time to read the whole Bible.[200] Extracts from the Bible are also available on a visual timeline of Jesus' life which helps to put familiar stories into context.[201] The website includes a link to "Everyday Sayings" which builds on users' latent Bible knowledge by explaining the background to well known quotations.[202] As discussed, the participants in the case study knew that there were many sayings in everyday use but could not easily identify them.[203]

Like the *Alpha* course, *rejesus* offers background information on the historicity of the biblical documents and seeks to answer questions such as, "Did Jesus ever live?" and "What records of Jesus are there outside the Bible?"[204] The responses are brief but include suggestions for further reading that might appeal to a more academic audience, such as the case study participants. The tone of the website is not dogmatic and acknowledges the breadth of opinion on the subject of the Gospels "between those who accept every word ... and those who say they are so full of fantasy and propaganda it's impossible to know what really happened".[205]

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192   Tidball, *Using the Bible in Evangelism*, 1993: 52
193   Orr-Ewing, *Why Trust the Bible?,* 2005: 13
194   Ibid.
195   Ibid., 5
196   Beaudoin 1998: 90
197   Jenkins and Bruce, eds., "About Us: Credits", *rejesus,* 2007b [Website]
198   Jenkins and Bruce, eds., "The Story", *rejesus,* 2007c [Website]
199   See section 3.2
200   Lewis, interview
201   Jenkins and Bruce, *rejesus,* 2007b [Website]
202   Ibid.
203   See section 3.2
204   Tomkins, "The Story; Question and Answer", *rejesus,* 2007 [Website]
205   Ibid.

It is debatable, however, whether the participants in the case study would be likely to seek out information about the Bible on the Internet. Lewis was the only participant to mention the Internet as a place where he had read the Bible in the last year.[206] Hirst's research indicated that people tended to use the media to support their beliefs after they became involved in church, rather than using it to explore Christianity beforehand.[207]

4.4 Publishing the Bible

Most participants viewed the Bible as a significant cultural text rather than the Word of God.[208] If they were to read it, it would be "a bit like reading the works of Shakespeare or the dictionary"[209] rather than as part of a broader search for meaning. The Church has sometimes approached the Bible as a textbook,[210] without discussing the role of the human author or exploring its literary value. It is possible that people who do not go to church would be more inclined to read the Bible if it were marketed as a work of literature. This was the conviction of the creators of *Revelations,* a series of books from the Bible published as separate volumes.

The publishers of *Revelations* observed that most editions of the Bible looked thoroughly unappealing and that its "daunting length...added to its inaccessibility".[211] They therefore decided to publish the Bible in its constituent parts, using eye-catching jacket designs to attract a new readership. The publishers did not have a Christian agenda and commissioned introductions to each volume from people as diverse as Bono, Ruth Rendell and the Dalai Lama. The project regarded the Bible as "a work of literature" and was concerned with "celebrating language, encouraging dialogue and respecting the individual".[212]

The *Revelations* series is perhaps the most culturally appropriate way of marketing the Bible to people who feel there is too little time to read all the books that interest them.[213] The varied perspectives of the people who introduce the volumes demonstrate that the Bible is not only of interest to Christians and encourage the reader to engage personally with the text without anticipating a response of faith. The use of the *King James Version* is likely to appeal to people who regard the Bible as literature. It also appeared to be familiar to case study participants who sometimes quoted it in their responses.[214]

Revelations does, however, have a number of limitations. Holloway argues that the use of the *King James Version* is helpful in reminding people that the Bible is an archaic text that cannot be easily doctored to accommodate the values of contemporary society.[215] While it is true that the Bible spoke into particular cultures at particular times in history, the use of an old English version gives the impression that it was always an outdated and scholarly document. It does not communicate the fact that, unlike many of their contemporaries, most of the authors of the New Testament used common *koine* Greek, rather than classical language.[216] They were not primarily interested in producing works of literature but in drawing up "an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses" (Luke 1:1-2).

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206   Lewis, interview
207   Hirst, 2003: 93
208   See section 3.4.2
209   Ben, interview
210   McLaren 2000: 76
211   Byng, "A Note About Revelations" in *Revelations,* 2005: n.p.
212   Ibid.
213   See section 3.4.5
214   Appendix 6: Familiar Bible Verses
215   Holloway, "Introduction" in *Revelations,* 2005: 4
216   Duff, "The History of the Greek Language", *The Elements of New Testament Greek,* 2005: 9-10

An insistence on the use of the *King James Version* and the dismissal of "the banalities of modern translation"[217] is reminiscent of the resistance to translating the Bible into English in the sixteenth century [218] and suggests that only ancient language is appropriate for communicating sacred teaching. However, research carried out by the Bible Society a generation ago found that people believed that "a change in the language or format of the Bible" might make it more appealing.[219] There was also evidence in the case study that historic language is a distraction to readers.[220] The *King James Version* may reinforce assumptions about the Bible's irrelevance.

Some of the authors of the introductions to *Revelations* are hostile to Christianity and, though able to bring challenging and original perspectives to the text, leave little room for the possibility that it might be a dynamic text through which God continues to speak into people's lives today. The series may inspire people to read the Bible, but may not encourage them to consider its relevance to their own lives or to explore the Christian faith further. This is undoubtedly part of the appeal of the series, since it does not make personal demands on the reader, but it may not serve the purposes of the Church.

5 Conclusion

It should not be assumed that the Bible is of no interest in contemporary British society. Attitudes to the Bible expressed in the case study were remarkably uniform, regardless of whether people described themselves as Christians, agnostics or atheists. They tended to view the Bible as a significant cultural text that included some helpful moral teaching but which was vulnerable to misinterpretation by fundamentalists. Familiarity with the Bible depended largely on the participants' exposure to Christianity as children at home, school or Sunday school. Reading the Bible, or any other religious text, as an adult was not high on anyone's agenda but nor was it absolutely rejected.

People who do not attend church are rightly suspicious of literal interpretations and unquestioning dogmatism but may be interested in exploring the Bible for themselves. Christians need to be prepared to grapple with difficult questions about the history and authorship of the Bible and its application in the twenty first century in conversation with non-churchgoers. Resources such as *Alpha* or the *rejesus* website may prove helpful to people who have a wider interest in the Christian faith, particularly in answering questions about the historicity of the biblical documents. However, it is more likely that well educated, young professionals will read the Bible as literature, if at all.

The way in which the Bible is promoted as literature may sometimes conflict with the Church's view of the text as divinely inspired. However, the Church cannot afford to be too possessive about the Bible and its interpretation if it wants to broaden the readership. If Christians believe God's Word is life transforming, "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12) they should not attempt to dictate the way in which people approach it but should trust that God can speak for himself.

All approaches to interpreting the Bible are culture bound, including the systematic theologies of modernity.[221] The Church needs to be open to new ways of reading the Bible and should encourage people to interpret texts for themselves by adopting a more interactive approach to preaching. A divinely inspired text must be capable of speaking into

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217   Holloway 2005: 4
218   Crim, "Translating the Bible into English", *The Bible Translator,* 25/2 1974: 219
219   Harrison, *Attitudes to the Bible, God and Church,* 1983: 23
220   See section 3.4.5
221   Brueggemann 1993: 1

postmodernity just as effectively as it has done in the past. The Church should embrace the openness of non-churchgoers to the Bible's wisdom, moral values and powerful prose while attempting to communicate that the text is more dynamic, surprising, challenging and relevant than society assumes.

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