

## **EUROPE AND THE BIBLE**

### **What the EABS means**

I'll start with our EABS Constitution, which includes the following clause:

The Association shall review its role at least every five years. Included in that review shall be the question of whether the Association still has a useful role to play.

We are about due for such a review and my farewell Presidential address is meant as a contribution to that process.

Many of you may not know that our Association was conceived originally as a European region of the SBL. After long negotiations with two SBL Executives, and following conferences in Utrecht and Copenhagen, our members were consulted and said they preferred an autonomous European society.

So what does an autonomous European Association of Biblical Studies represent? What are its goals? Our Constitution gives the following:

To promote the cause of Biblical Studies and related areas (e.g., ancient Near Eastern studies, Jewish studies, Semitic philology) in Europe.

To receive and circulate information for the benefit of members.

To encourage and advise co-operative initiatives among related regional, national, and international organizations, as well as individual EABS members.

To foster the development of younger scholars and provide a context that allows and encourages their participation in scholarship, discussion, and debate.

We have pursued most of these aims quite successfully. This year we are meeting with other organizations, and next year, as we have done before, we shall be meeting with the SBL in Estonia, where the SBL wished to join us. In the coming years we shall try to join with other European societies or conferences where possible.

Very soon we shall be launching a new website to enable a better dissemination of information and a wider participation. Research groups will be given control of their own web pages and hopefully use them to develop European research networks. Our Graduate network is already well advanced: it has its own online discussion and earlier this summer held a weekend research

seminar. The general aim of many of these developments is to create an active, or rather interactive, virtual community that materializes every year at its conference.

### **Defining ‘Europe’ and ‘Bible’**

But is there something beyond our own internal organization that we need to do? This is what I want to talk about under the title *The Bible and Europe*. Now, these two have a very special relationship. To a large extent, the Bible is a European creation. The New Testament was largely written in Europe, and in a European language. It was canonized, codexed and printed in Europe. That is true of the Hebrew Bible, of course, only if we make Europe a flexible space. A case could be made for such flexible geography: the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans created a Mediterranean world that was largely of European space but included the lands west of the Euphrates and at times beyond it. Whether or not we can stretch ‘Europe’ this far, the continent has contributed much to the Hebrew Bible’s reception: Maimonides and Joseph Caro from Spain, Rashi, Qimchi and Levi ben Gershon from France. These and other Jewish scholars also stimulated the learning of Hebrew among Christian scholars, of course. I do not want to forget Islam either, since I would regard the Qur’an as part of the reception of the Bible, too, whether or not most Muslims want to accept that assessment. And the world of Islam too, long including part of Europe, is now spreading

more widely among us. The ties between the Bible and Europe, then, are strong.

I mentioned just now the Mediterranean ‘Europe’ of the classical world, suggesting that Europe is a flexible space—historically, geographically and mentally. Geographically, the continent has no clear Eastern border: both Turkey and Russia bridge it with Asia. In addition to ‘Continental Europe’, we have the political Europe of the EU: we used to have ‘Western Europe’ and ‘Eastern Europe’, and their curious transformation into ‘Old Europe’ and ‘New Europe’. These various internal political and social boundaries are of course always shifting. Externally, we must also take into account former European colonies, with all their wonderful hybridity, now vigorously reimported to our continent—the Americas, the Indian subcontinent, Australasia and most of Africa. These are part of a cultural Europe, a civilization that we more often call, with a Eurocentric geography, ‘Western’. (From the American point of view, the Far East is ‘West’, of course). ‘Western’ is thus a European cultural brand. And the Bible, to pursue the market jargon, must therefore be regarded as one of its trademark ‘products’.

‘Bible’ is, like Europe, also a flexible item. This holds true even for the textual artefact and the canon, but the Bible is more than this. It is an idea, an image, a totem, an oracle, a cultural dictionary—constituted and reconstituted through a rich and varied reception that has defined Europe’s collective and

individual culture and the identity of its people. We can think of it in one way as providing a European cultural memory, since it resides in almost every aspect of individual and social life: reading (lessons, bible study, children's books, literature of all kinds, biblical scholarship), hearing and speaking (the idioms of modern European languages), performing hymns, psalms, sermons, mystery and passion plays, operas, oratorios, musicals), social rites (birth, marriage, death, victory, mourning), commemoration (festivals) seeing (fine art, church decoration, theatre and cinema), reenacting (myths of conquest, exile, redemption, paradise, judgment), and perceiving and understanding through the enactment of these mythical themes.

### **Christian Europe?**

It is more commonly said that Europe is defined by Christianity than by the Bible. Pope Benedict XVI has spoken of 'the Christian heritage which has made such a particular contribution to forging the identity of this continent': the German Chancellor Angela Merkel has claimed Europe's 'Christian values' and Christianity's 'significant influence' on European history. Even the President of that most secular of European countries, Nicolas Sarkozy, has said that 'without a basis in Christian culture, the European Union will have no firm foundation'. (I could, alas, find no quote from Silvio Berlusconi).

Demographically, it cannot be denied that Christianity is Europe's major religion, and has been since early mediaeval times. There are no reliable figures for Europe as a whole, but the figures for the European Union are as follows:

*Total population 494.7m*

Roman Catholic 224.5m (45%)

Protestant 57.8m (11.5%)

Orthodox 59m (12%)

Atheist 115m (23%)

Jewish 1.5m (0.015%)

Muslim 15.9m (0.03%)\*

(\*Russia 25m; Turkey 6m; Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina 4m; the Hindu population is statistically insignificant)

But current religious affiliation is deceptive and likely to change—as it will if Turkey, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina accede and if the number of the non-religious continues to grow at its present rate. Yet Christianity in its various forms is not only Europe's major religion, but is inscribed in the constitution and the political fabric of many European states.

The culture of modern Europe has undoubtedly been determined by Christian language and imagery and a Christian world-view. But that culture is also to a large extent a reaction against Christianity's own history of violent religious repression

and conflict. Christian states battled with Islam in the Crusades, in wars against the Ottoman Empire, against the Moors in Spain and in southern Italy. Christians discriminated against Jews, expelled them from Spain and subjected them to a policy of extermination in the Third Reich. These conflicts were partly the behaviour of an imperial religion, seeing itself very much the successor to the Roman Empire, and although the attempt to exterminate Jews was not directly inspired by religion, anti-Semitism has a strong Christian component and the policy drew support from some Christian leaders. To be fair and accurate, I should also remark that the plight of Jews in Europe has also to do with their own segregation, which has a religious motivation. A culture of non-belonging invites dislike and discrimination. Islam, too, while officially tolerant of Judaism and Christianity, is vigorously imperialistic and averse to religious conversion from itself. It is true, nevertheless, that outside Europe, Jewish-Muslim relations were generally quite cordial until the 20th century and the current tension between the two has much to do with European intrusion into Muslim lands and into Zionist agendas.

But more importantly, I want to underline the fact that these other religions also contributed to European civilization— Islam to medicine, science, philosophy and architecture—and to European Christianity itself—scholasticism and the Renaissance. We cannot imagine Europe as it is without the interaction of three religions.

However, of great significant in shaping modern Europe were the many wars *between* different Christianities: Latin versus Orthodox, Catholic versus Protestant, and both Catholic and Protestants against other Christian sects, many of whose adherents fled to European's new colonies. The major outcomes of the continental warfare that lasted from 1560 to 1715 led to a political split between northern and southern Europe, and from this European civil war, among other things, that post-Christian, humanistic Europe was born, with its insistence on secular and democratic political regimes affording religious toleration and exhibiting various kinds of accommodation between church and state (the Vatican being the only exception). In post-Christian culture, religion is freely practised and while it has little official or organized political role it still exerts a powerful cultural influence. For all religions are now protected from persecution—at the price of being privatized and relativized because it is largely from each other that they are being protected! Each one, accordingly, may claim sole truth but may not exercise that claim politically. Europe's humanism and secularism is the invention of Christianity but the solution to it. In that important sense Europe cannot be Christian any more than it could be defined in terms of any other religion.

### **Europe, Religion and the Bible**

But this modern European economy of religion and state has created a problem for Europe's Biblical heritage. So long as the Bible remains within the domain of any religion, it runs the risk of being privatized and relativized along with religion, becoming a resource only to believers of one or other religion. Since in modern Europe no religion can any longer command the allegiance of the entire European population, and many religious adherents are only nominally so in any case, the Bible is being culturally marginalized.

This is wrong, because the cultural memory that the Bible represents stretches beyond the boundaries of religious communities or even of religion itself, right through the secular Europe that has replaced the old Christian Europe. There has been, of course, a change in its role with the secularization of European political, social and moral discourse. In modern Europe, for instance, humanity is now less commonly defined in terms of God than God defined in terms of humanity; theology has given way to sociology and psychology as the key to explaining the human condition; humanistic history has replaced sacred history; science has replaced revelation. The Bible supports monarchic power only ceremonially: kings and queen no longer rule by divine right and the biblical language of God as king contrasts rather than reinforces human thrones.

These changes amount to a 'humanizing' of the Bible and the process can most vividly be charted in the academic study of

the Bible, which has gradually been withdrawing from theology into history, sociology, literature, philosophy, linguistics and other human sciences, while its practitioners more and more view their scholarship as detached (or semi-detached) from ecclesiastical interest. We can now realistically talk about secular biblical scholars and scholarship. The canon no longer functions as a disciplinary norm but is itself critically interrogated as a human construct. ‘Old Testament’ and ‘Hebrew Bible’ have become identified, squeezing out the differences between Jewish and Christian frames of interpretation. Now, these changes have not happened to the same degree everywhere in Europe, and they seem to be especially advanced in English-speaking countries. But the research programmes of the EABS dramatically illustrate precisely this development: they include historiography, cultural memory, sacred space, reception, anthropology, sociology, Samaritan studies, gender and linguistics. Theological or religious questions are not absent, but they do not dictate or dominate the agenda. Would that have been true of any biblical society 100 or even 50 years ago?

But as I said earlier, the demonstrable move towards the secular leaves the Bible vulnerable. So long as it is seen by *either* religious *or* secular interests as religious property, it will tend to be left to religion to sustain it, and thus invite disdain or ignorance from those inimical or indifferent to religion. Its

importance to European identity will dwindle precisely because it remains perceived as a religious text.

Given the role of the Bible in shaping the character of the entire European civilization, biblical literacy needs to be preserved outside Christianity (and outside any religion) and a mature and persuasive secular understanding of the Bible needs to be articulated and disseminated. We need to find something analogous to the role of Christianity's 'biblical theology' — not an *anti*-religious one but one that can include many different kinds of religious as well as non-religious response: the essence of European secularism.

### **Our Father Abraham**

One way forward lies to hand in the well-known phrase 'Abrahamic faiths'. For an obvious starting point for a pan-European re-appropriation of the Bible is the patriarch of Western, European monotheism — and even of atheism, since most of these are mono-atheists with a very clear idea of the one god they don't believe in. Despite the efforts of Jews, Christians and Muslims to make Abraham the exclusive father of their own creed, the biblical story defies them all. Abraham is an ancestor of the Israelites and thus Jews, but he is neither an Israelite nor a Jew himself: his firstborn son is the ancestor of the Arabs. The land he and his descendants are promised includes the territory occupied by Israel and Judah, but also the lands of others, ancient

Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites. He also mixes with his neighbours, including Hittites and Philistines. Abraham is not Torah-observing and has no cult other than his personal god: he builds altars but does not offer sacrifices. He is also certainly not a Christian. And if he is indeed the first *muslim*, submitter to god, he does not pray five times a day or observe Ramadan and apparently never went to Mecca. His religion, if we can really call it that, is a quite simple patron-client relationship with his own particular god.

Subscribing to no theological system and no cultic regulation, Abraham is admirably suited to be the patriarch of a post-religious Europe comprised mostly of Christians, Jews and Muslims and their respective atheists and agnostics. Indeed, in his Abrahamic hospitality (on which the European philosopher Derrida has written)—hospitality to family, to foreigners, to divine messengers—he is a model of that European religious toleration so notably absent from its Christian past but now characteristic of its post-Christian secular present.

### **The Canonicity of the Bible**

Abraham's immoral way of profiting at the expense of his wife's virtues and his willingness to sacrifice his son might even appeal to some modern European capitalists, but such behaviour leads us to a crucial question: does the Bible sustain a European moral or ethical identity, a set of values? Even Jews and Christians can

recognize that the Bible's ethical positions require discernment and sometimes have to be rejected. Modern Europeans can hardly embrace the subjugation of women, the glorification of genocide or the sacrificing of sons, in whichever Testament. But the Bible as a whole does not in fact dictate a particular ethical behaviour: rather, it places ethics at the centre of individual and social life, frequently arguing about how to behave properly. The dilemma of Eve tempted by desire, the offering of Isaac at a divine command, the covenant laws, the suffering of Job, the social critique of Amos, the parables of Jesus—all these provide a locus for reflecting on how humans can best live with themselves, their world and their neighbours, but they give no definitive answers. Even the disgusting book of Revelation, taken out from the stressful context that provoked it, makes us think about the nature of history, the end of the world that we ourselves could so easily bring about ourselves, about the occurrence of seemingly demonic evil. If freedom of speech, democracy, the concept of human rights—pillars of modern European values—are all alien to the Bible, at least it provides a vocabulary for our modern discourse about social responsibility, the nature of being human, tolerance and intolerance, atrocity, blind obedience, hubris and suffering.

Of course it invokes God, but so does nearly all ancient literature: gods are an inevitable part of most ancient ethical and metaphysical discourse. The modern European is free to accept

the God, or perhaps gods, of the Bible as real or as a creation of human imagination. The choice does not ultimately affect the truth that we Europeans are challenged and informed by it whether or not we think it connects us to a real deity. For in the end, the variety, contradiction and cultural relativity of the Bible's contents and its kaleidoscopic images of its god, force us back upon ourselves in true humanistic fashion. Its very openness, its lack of closure, its interpretative possibilities, are precisely, as Bloom argues, what it make it a true canon. It has provided the structures of thought and expression that enable a common discourse about values to take place within our continent, and the continents to which we have exported 'Europe'.

I have to mention at some point that there exists another European canon, the classical one, from which we derive the rational and aesthetic judgment and the democratic principles that the Bible does not encourage. This canon is useful also in illustrating that we can embrace the classical world without subscribing to its cults or gods, its worldview or its philosophies: so we can with the Bible. And just as European Christianity is a mixture of scripture—originally Jewish scripture—Greek philosophy (especially Neo-Platonism) and the Roman *imperium* (for had Constantine chosen differently we might all be worshipping Mithras), so does post-Christian secular Europe. It is not my wish to argue that the Bible is Europe's exclusive canon

nor to plead for our continued awareness of the classics. Others can and do make that case.

### **Bible literacy**

My concern—our concern—must be with the memory of the Bible—bible literacy—which is now visibly declining. Not at the same rate or to the same extent in every part of Europe: in many countries this decline is a future rather than a present threat. But in many parts of Europe, only biblical scholars and a few Christian clergy are really both knowledgeable of and interested in reading the Bible in anything other than a fragmentary way if at all. The situation in the UK is already serious. A recent study by the University of Durham has shown that the public is widely ignorant of the Bible despite 75 per cent of respondents claiming to own a copy. As few as 10 per cent of those surveyed understood the main characters in the Bible and their place in it. As few as 7 per cent knew the story of Whitsun and only 15 per cent were familiar with the stories associated with Advent. Young women wear crucifixes around their necks without any idea of who the figure is or what the cross was used for.

Such ignorance is not confined to non-churchgoers. The churches do not appear able to guarantee the reproduction of biblical literacy even among their own members. But many who profess Christianity hardly go to church, let alone Sunday school or Bible reading classes. How and where will they learn? Most of

the blame, I think, lies with a misguided secularism that regards the Bible as a religious issue and with the fetish of a multiculturalism that shuns the prospect of educating non-Christians into European cultural practices that derive from Christianity. While I would agree that religious education is not the business of the state, it is the state's business to furnish its citizens with the knowledge and resources to be culturally literate Europeans, and the Bible is an indispensable part of that repertoire. I am not speaking of 'religious education', but of cultural awareness: not of indoctrination but of literacy.

Without a living cultural canon, European culture will falter and disappear, and with it the backbone of the European identity that canons provide. Europe will revert to little more than a geographical space. The good news is that most Europeans actually seem to agree about the value of the Bible—even non-believers, including the fundamentalist atheist Richard Dawkins. My colleague Hugh Pypers has nicely described the role of the Bible in European culture in Dawkins' own language of 'memes' that, like genes, encode our cultural values. But the transmission of social memes requires a form of social reproduction. Where can one find in Europe those dedicated to the study of the Bible as a cultural resource? I mean, outside the religious institutions, which do not have the ability or resources to do this and are committed to their own particular reception of the Bible as a normative religious text.

We biblical scholars are the people best placed to sustain Biblical literacy. We are, of course, doing just that within our own circles, through teaching and publishing. But is that enough? Or should we fight for a broader agenda of biblical education? I do not believe the EABS should be a political body but perhaps we should be looking for ways to secure a proper recognition of the Bible's role in Europe's civilization and identity. We shall of course be acting out of self-interest: but self-interested lobbying is the largest-growth industry in our continent—and we cannot look to any others to take up this challenge.

The SBL shares the concerns about biblical literacy and has already begun to engage in consulting with school administrators and teachers offering Bible electives, providing training and teaching resources, as well as lesson plans. But the challenge is to go further: to persuade our governments and our educational authorities that the Bible is *not* religious education: it is part of European identity and needs to be known, used and respected by us all.