Part 3: The Bible in Politics

The Bible as a Political Weapon

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In the hands of ultraright religionists, the Bible has been transformed from a religious document with significant meaning and authority for believers into a weapon to be used against the implementation of the First Amendment of the Constitution and against the rights and freedoms of those who do not accept certain beliefs or who follow certain life-styles. The Bible is a powerful weapon. It is powerful because in one way or another it touches the life of every individual in the nation either directly or indirectly.

During every hour of every day somewhere in the United States and elsewhere in the world, individuals are reading and studying the Bible. Some seek guidance through the maze of life's problems, some look for insight into human values, and some search for hints about the shape of things to come. During these same hours, fundamentalist evangelists exhort listeners to the electronic media to accept some particularistic interpretation of biblical passages as a revelation of divine intent and wishes, and at the same time plead for financial support for their particular divine mission.

Even if one ignores the radio and television preachers, it is almost impossible to escape the merchandising of religious festivals, including Passover and Easter, Christmas and Hanukkah. Religious music, commercial displays recalling biblical stories, and references to biblical events abound.

In addition, some of those who form part of our community life, who belong to local parent-teacher organizations, or who belong to local political groups are associated with religious organizations in which the Bible is the central guidebook. Some of these persons do not hesitate to quote the Bible as an authoritative text. Indeed, today no one can ignore the influence of the Bible, for the president of the United States has assumed the role of its promoter and has ignored the First Amendment in proclaiming this year, 1983, the “Year of the Bible.”

Despite the popularity of the Bible, most Americans know little of its contents, and most are ignorant of the results of biblical scholarship. During the past century or so, the Bible has been subjected to literary analysis, to study from the points of view of sociologists, archaeologists, semanticists and linguists, anthropologists, and scientists from other disciplines. We now recognize the Bible as the product of Hebrew-Jewish-Christian communities who lived in the ancient Near East some two to three thousand years ago. The views of the writers as expressed in the Bible reflect the ideas, beliefs, and concepts current in their own times and are limited by the extent of knowledge in those times. Because the Bible was produced during a one-thousand-year time-span, there are variants in attitudes and some contradictions.

In the ancient Near East, as in our present world, beliefs and ideas were not static. In the Bible we can trace the flow of concepts from neighboring nations. We can recognize different types of literature, including myth, saga, history, fable, parable, allegory, sermonic tracts, court documents, priestly instruction, prophetic utterances, hymns used in the temple, and apocalyptic commentaries about the intervention of God at the end of time. Each writing is different in style, purpose, and significance. Each must be recognized for the kind of literature it is and evaluated accordingly. Each must be recognized as echoing the times in which it was produced and as reflecting the particular point of view of the writer. Questions must be raised about the situation that called forth the writing and the author’s position within that situation. Ultimately one must ask why this particular writing was selected for inclusion in the corpus of sacred writings and why other compositions—some mentioned in the Bible, and some known to us as products of the same period—were not included.

Such study of the Bible is ongoing. It is extended with each new archaeological discovery, with the translation of ancient Near Eastern texts, with continuing linguistic studies into some difficult passages in the Bible. In other words, the use of the Bible by right-wing fundamentalists tends to be both naive and untutored.

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Then, one may ask, where is all this information about the Bible and why has it not been shared with the public? The answer is: It is available to anyone who wants to seek it out. It has not been shared with the public because our clergy, who have been trained in the best universities and seminaries in the country, have failed to live up to their calling as teachers and have failed to convey the best information about the Bible to their congregations. Whether they failed because they were fearful of disturbing their parishioners, or because they believed that such information made available to the laity would undermine belief in the authority of the Bible and perhaps of the faith, I cannot say. I can say they have failed to trust their people. Most of those who are members of liberal congregations are not prepared or trained to meet the extravagant claims of the fundamentalists. They may ignore what is being said by those evangelists who wave the Bible in the air as they talk. They may also assume that, because these ultraconservative speakers are quoting the Bible, what they say must be true.

Nor have the materials produced by liberal churches for the education of youth been informative about biblical research. For more than twenty years, I taught biblical history and archaeology at the University of Southern California, and year by year I became more and more aware of the failure of churches and synagogues to inform their people. It was depressing to be confronted by the ignorance of these young people about the book their religious organizations claimed was the most important document for faith and behavior. These young people were not only naive, they were ignorant, and they were not prepared for anything beyond what could be termed a grade-school approach to the Bible. Today, when these church people are confronted with claims and demands by the fundamentalists, they do not know how to respond.

For example, there is now pressure from right-wing religious groups to compel our well-trained science teachers in public schools to include in their teachings about the universe the biblical creation accounts. The fact that the creation story in Genesis 1-2:4a was recorded some twenty-five hundred years ago and before modern science was developed seems unimportant. What matters is that the account is in the Bible and therefore it must be true. The fact that some of the ideas in the Genesis account are out of harmony with the findings of modern science doesn't seem to matter either; they can be reinterpreted or science can be reinterpreted to produce a dubious harmony. For example, the first days of the biblical creation event are described in terms of the Jewish concept of a day—eveling and morning. But these days passed before the sun or moon or stars came into being—a cosmological impossibility! The biblical account states that trees and other green growth came into being before there was a sun, and this idea is in conflict with our understanding of photosynthesis. The biblical account is not only wrong, it is impossible. The biblical creationists are compelled to force science into a biblical mold or to force the Bible into a scientific mold, and neither attempt works.

The biblical account of creation is mythology, it is not science. It describes, as does other creation mythology from nations that surrounded ancient Israel twenty-five hundred years ago, the acts of a divine being, and mythology is classically defined as the story of the acts of divinities. Nor is the Genesis 1-2:4a account the only creation myth in the Bible. Immediately following, from Genesis 2:4b to the end of chapter 3, is another story, older by some five hundred years if our analysis is correct, that provides a different account with a different order of creation. The two ideas are in conflict. Like the ancient Egyptians, who also enjoyed several differing creation accounts, the ancient Hebrews were apparently able to live comfortably with conflicting theories. To interpret either biblical myth as science is to do violence to science. Nevertheless, the creationists who are part of the fundamentalist movement but claim to be scientists are attempting to force legislation to compel our public schools to teach biblical creationism in science courses. This is an effort to subvert the principles of separation of church and state of the First Amendment. Because so many in our liberal churches are biblically uninformed, some are willing to go along with the creationists. They ask, naively, "What is wrong with saying that God started the whole thing?" But this is not the issue. What is at stake is the teaching of biblical mythology as science.

I doubt that any educator would object to teaching biblical creation mythology as one of the efforts of our ancestors to come to grips with their cosmos or as the way the Hebrews interpreted the universe in the light of their own time. And reference could be made to our ancestors in Babylon, Egypt, the Mediterranean, and the ancient orient who also struggled with the question of origin and came up with their own mythic conclusions. But these speculations are not science. They are part of the history of ideas.

The forces for the proposed constitutional amendment to authorize prayer in the public schools are gaining momentum. This amendment was introduced by the president in May 1982. It had been called for earlier by Senator Jesse Helms, the Republican Senator from North Carolina. Back in 1979,
Senator Helms wrote a preface for a book by evangelist Homer Duncan titled Secular Humanism: The Most Dangerous Religion in America. Senator Helms wrote:

When the Supreme Court prohibited children from participating in voluntary prayers in public schools the conclusion is inescapable. That the Supreme Court not only violated the right of free exercise of religion for all Americans, it also established a national religion in the United States, the religion of Secular Humanism.

The resolution introduced by President Reagan in 1982 read:

Nothing in this Constitution shall be construed to prohibit individual or group prayer in public schools or other public institutions. No person shall be required by the United States or by any state to participate in prayer.

It was not surprising to read an article in the editorial section of the Los Angeles Times written by the fundamentalist evangelist Reverend Pat Robertson (February 6, 1983) calling for a constitutional amendment “that would restore our freedom to address Almighty God in our schools and public places.”

The lack of logic in Senator Helms statement is obvious: If prayer is not permitted in the public schools, then the Supreme Court is fostering the religion of secular humanism. This is, of course, complete nonsense and not worth further comment. Nor are the president and evangelist Robertson being entirely candid either. They know, as you and I know, that there is nothing to prohibit any individual from engaging in personal silent prayer anywhere at any time. As an educator, I am sure that some of my students pray for divine inspiration during exams when their sources of information fail. What the president and the evangelist and those associated with the so-called Moral Majority want is public prayer, which almost forces children to participate or face peer-group pressures.

What is equally interesting is the way in which these religious leaders ignore the Bible when it is convenient for them to do so. Jesus is reported to have told his followers to pray in private, rather than in public, and he provided them with the words they were to repeat as they prayed. One wonders if, should those who call for prayer in the public schools get their way, the next step would be to insist that the Lord’s Prayer be the proper prayer to be recited on the basis of biblical authority? It is not difficult to understand the objections of Jews and other religious minorities to this proposed legislation.

What Senator Helms and the Moral Majority do not seem to understand is that there is no dastardly plot afoot sponsored by the ten thousand or so members of humanist organizations. The humanism these religious leaders complain about was the product of the Renaissance and of the Protestant Reformation and of the Reformation in Catholicism led by Erasmus. Much of what is set forth in the Humanist Manifestos is not abhorrent to liberal religions and, indeed, has been echoed in some of their stances. I am not attempting to gloss over the differences between Renaissance and modern humanism, nor am I attempting to suggest that the liberal churches and the present-day humanists are one in outlook. Two facets of liberal religion and modern humanism do emerge from the kind of thinking that was present in the Renaissance and Reformation movements—the exaltation of the human and the analytical or critical approach to biblical studies. In other words, scholarly biblical analysis was born in the religious community and has been carried on primarily by members of the religious community.

Even as the religious Right would like to ignore the provisions of the Constitution for the separation of church and state by introducing their particular religious beliefs into the classroom, they would also like to ignore the Constitution by passing legislation to enable textbooks developed for use in state schools to be provided free of charge to schools run by religious organizations. In their own schools, they can teach biblical creation as science; they can pray and read the Bible in the classroom. It was for these very freedoms that religious schools were developed—to provide particularistic education. Now these same people demand that taxpayers who do not believe in their kind of mixture of religion and education should pay for the textbooks used within the religious schools. This would be a clear violation of the separation of church and state. What those who supported such legislation failed to realize is that such action would give the government control over at least some of the textbooks used in the religious schools and would begin an entanglement of church and state.

Beyond the attempt to legislate religion into public education, these same ultraright religious leaders have made and continue to make repeated efforts to legislate morals and sexual behavior between consenting adults. In 1975, despite furious opposition by fundamentalists, the California legislature passed a law legalizing all sexual acts between consenting adults. A group called the Coalition of Christian Citizens, led by California State Senator H. L. Richardson, a Republican from Arcadia, opined the bill. In presenting his opposing views, the senator quoted from the Bible at length, and thus through him the Bible was introduced as a social weapon aimed at limiting the freedom of those whose sexual preferences were not in accord with biblical teachings. The prime target was the homosexual community. Nor did the defeat of this measure mark the end of the pressure. A group linked to the Moral Majority, called Californians for Biblical Morality, was organized in 1981 to continue the pressure to limit the rights and freedoms of homosexuals. Its textbook is the Bible.

The rising divorce rate, the disintegration of the traditional family in American life, is an issue confronting all of us. The Moral Majority spokesmen would have us return to the biblical concept of family. This idea ignores what has occurred in our nation during the past century. To insist that women go back to the kitchen, to the roles of housekeeper, cook, and cleaner for the male, is to ignore the sociological and industrial changes that contributed to the change in the status and role of women. During World War II, in response to a national crisis, women entered the labor market in force. They demonstrated what many of them knew all along: that they could do the work that had previously been restricted to men as capably as the men. Women then began to enjoy freedoms they had been denied—
freedom of association, freedom to earn their own income, freedom to explore their potential as human beings on a wide creative front. When their husbands returned from the war, dual incomes increased the potential for living a richer and fuller life. Some women returned to their homes, but when their children grew to college age they returned to work to help finance college education for their offspring and to fill the void in their lives when their children left home. With the new status of women came new concepts about human relationships, new demands for recognition, new awareness that it was not call for women to return to the roles set forth for them in the fuller life. Some women returned to their homes, but when their freedom to explore their potential as human beings on a wide freedom of association, freedom to earn their own income, freedom to explore their potential as human beings on a wide creative front. When their husbands returned from the war, dual incomes increased the potential for living a richer and fuller life. Some women returned to their homes, but when their children grew to college age they returned to work to help finance college education for their offspring and to fill the void in their lives when their children left home. With the new status of women came new concepts about human relationships, new demands for recognition, new awareness that it was not necessary to continue an unhappy marriage. And this new freedom for women brought new freedom for men. Just as Eve, in eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, freed humans from existence on an animal level, so women, in discovering and achieving their own freedom, freed males from their fixed roles.

Divorce rates have risen and continue to rise. Members of the Moral Majority blame the increasing divorce rate and the change in marriage patterns on the humanist movement; they ignore or are ignorant of sociological facts and data. They call for women to return to the roles set forth for them in the Bible, but they are cautious and selective in the passages they choose to emphasize. They ignore the requirement that women dress modestly and eschew fancy hairdos, jewelry, and expensive clothes. Nor do they press the teaching that women should be subject to their husbands (I Tim. 2; Col. 3:18; I Pet. 3:1-6). To insist that women should not be teachers or not teach men would immobilize religious schools. They also ignore the teaching attributed to Jesus that any man who divorces and remarries commits adultery. To insist on the validity of this injunction would decimate their congregations and indict President Reagan.

The list of issues in which the Bible is used as a social weapon could be extended to include abortion, academic freedom, control of public libraries, and so on.

The fundamentalists who use the Bible as a sociopolitical weapon would have us turn to writings that are between two and three thousand years old for guidance in morals, human behavior, human sexuality, the interpretation of science, and national outlook. They would have us ignore or interpret in terms of the Bible the finest achievements in science, psychology, literary analysis, historical research, and comparative religions. They insist that the only acceptable ethical stance for our present society can be found in turning the clock back to the world-view of the Hebrew-Christian communities of the time of the Bible. In other words, these Bible fundamentalists are anti-progress and in this sense anti-American, for they would frustrate the very patterns that have made America a world leader.

In their use of the Bible as a social weapon, fundamentalists attempt to create a climate of fear. They warn that if America does not conform to their interpretation of biblical morality the nation will come under divine judgment and be punished or destroyed. They seek to find in occurrences in our national life fulfillments and warnings from Bible prophecies that they interpret and reinterpret in outlandish and unscholarly ways. Through radio and television preaching, they provoke feelings of paranoia, suggesting that their listeners should examine every dimension of American life for hidden humanist influence and for evidence of a humanist conspiracy. We in America experienced the disastrous results of such paranoia in the McCarthy era. The fundamentalists revive those old fears. They would link Soviet communism with American humanism and conjure up images of a co-conspiracy. It is regrettable that our president, in his recent address to the National Association of Evangelicals resurrected the Cold War concept of better dead than communist or atheist. Such rhetoric cannot help but feed into the propaganda of the ultraright and provide them with more fuel for paranoia.

Fundamentalists, in their use of the Bible as a social weapon, are involved in an effort that could result in the polarization of America, with pro-Bible forces on one side and all others in politics, education, social welfare, and human freedom on the other. The issues would not be freedom and justice and concern for human decency and human well-being, but the biblical position versus any other stance.

These Bible moralists seek to engender insecurity about the validity of our educational system, the feeling that what is being taught may be wrong and that teachers are either dishonest or dupes of the humanists or part of an educational plot. They encourage their young followers to put belief in biblical teachings, whether or not they are applicable or accurate, above the best insights, the best information, the best data that humans have been able to develop about our cosmos, our world, our human history, and ourselves.

These same devout religionists give verbal support to the idea of a pluralistic society, which has made this country so great and so strong. At the same time they label and denigrate every religious group that disagrees with them, including the National Council of Churches, Jewish groups, and all non-Christian religious organizations. Some of their labeling of those who oppose their particular positions is virulent and deliberately confusing. For example, senators who oppose their particular stance on abortion have been called “murderers” and violators of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” They have been labeled “baby-killers” by those who would confuse a recently impregnated ovum with a fully developed baby.

Finally, and this disturbs me greatly, they are willing to misinterpret American history, American constitutional principles, and all that provides the maximum freedom and justice for all. They insist that the Founding Fathers did not really mean what they said in the First Amendment, and by reading into the Constitution their conservative religious dogma they would subvert the intention of men like Madison and Jefferson and defeat the very principles upon which this great nation was founded.