

Who's Afraid of the Big Good Book?

July 13, 2008

A week or two back, I saw a Jewish comedian on the television. Maybe some of you have heard of him. Lewis Black? ... He did a bit on religion, and part of that was an aside about the Bible. About how the Jews have their book, the Tanakh, and Christians have their book, the New Testament. He had said this to say: "Every Sunday, I turn on the television set. And there's a priest, or a pastor, reading MY book. And interpreting it. And, their interpretations, I have to tell you, are usually wrong. It's not their fault, because it's not their book."

That's humor, but there is a nugget of truth in it. You'll find some misunderstandings of the Bible out there on the television, radio, the internet, in books, and even sometimes in the pulpits. I know, many Unitarians may have a hard time believing that, but it's true.

The real reasons go a little bit deeper than whether the reader belongs to the religion in which the book originated. Although I think that a case can be made that the Christian understanding of the Hebrew Bible - the Christian "Old Testament" - is sometimes error-prone, I think that the bigger reason for difficulties lie with the fact that both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles are often difficult for modern, English-speaking people to understand.

Our preconceptions about the Bible also have the potential to skew our understanding of it, whether they are religious doctrines about the nature of it or non-religious elements of our personal world-view. I say that they have a "potential" to skew our understanding of it since it is possible that such a preconception, if true, could also skew our understanding toward the *better* view. For better or for worse, we have no choice but to bring some preconceived ideas with us when we sit down to read the Bible. That's the nature of the human beast.

No one is more aware of the difficulties of understanding the Bible as someone who has spent time trying to understand it and trying to evaluate the diverse ideas about it found among scholars, students, and seekers. Me, I think of myself as a kind of seeker: an enthusiastic. I have a reputation, well-deserved or not, among friends as the "go-to" guy for people with questions about it. And let me tell you, I've been stumped plenty of times. Worse, I have a few unpleasant memories of giving an answer I *thought* was right

and later learning that I had blown it. And that's especially bad because the people I'm trying to assist are often those who revere the Bible and hold it sacred. I feel like I've really let them down.

And that brings us back to the joke that I opened with. When Lewis Black says of Christians that the Hebrew Bible is "not their book", what he really means is that it *is* his book. The book of his religion. My religion, Unitarian Universalism, doesn't really have a book. We often *refer* to books, including the Bible. But we are creedless, and in the sense that Lewis Black is talking about, bookless. Nevertheless, when someone outside this tradition - with or without malice - misinterprets the foundations of Unitarian Universalism out loud and in front of me, I feel unhappy about it. Sometimes, rightly or wrongly, I feel a little bit personally disrespected. The point I am trying to make here is *if* we talk about the Bible in public - in our own pulpit, in our forums, amongst friends at school and work, we should take special care that we get it right. Where we might have something contentious to say about the Bible, we should be careful not to set ourselves up as arbiters of absolute fact (a rare thing in Biblical scholarship), but we should give our opinions as something suggested to us by the scholarship with which we are familiar. As something to consider - and if our listeners are interested or challenged by it - we should suggest they ask questions about it and research it on their own. We should make to them a respectful offering. People sometimes accept offerings, respectfully made.

Before you ask, I am a relatively recent convert to that particular point of view, and I have often been guilty of doing the opposite of what I am suggesting. I'm sorry.

When Diane and Maurine asked me for a synopsis of this presentation to place in the newsletter, I phrased the answer as a question:

"Can our lives be enriched by a closer acquaintanceship with the scriptures, and can we enhance our relationships with our neighbors by showing a better understanding of the words that many of them revere?" I think it's fair to say that often our relations to the larger community here are strained because of seemingly irreconcilable differences about religion and - more importantly - politics. And I think it is largely true that our religious differences are often the underpinning and foundation of our political differences. And, I wouldn't be here today if I didn't believe that we have the better position in the debate about who's right and who's wrong. I believe that it is worthwhile for us to vigorously pursue that debate. But, I think there are other issues at stake besides that debate. Our fourth principle as Unitarian Universalists is "a free and responsible search for the truth." It's probably my favorite. But before it are our first,

second and third principles, and each of them reminds us that the people inside and outside our congregations with whom we might differ on these views are human beings, having inherent worth and dignity, are owed compassion and acceptance; and are to be encouraged in their spiritual growth. And so, as we take our argument for a better society forward, and struggle with religious differences we sometimes see as a hindrance to the betterment of our world, it is important that we remember that the people we are dealing with are our brothers and sisters. And when those differences have behind them a Biblically rooted controversy, we need to remember that the Bible, historically, is our book - at least one of our books - but it is not ours alone.

The other question I posed in summarizing this presentation was whether our lives could be enriched by a closer familiarity with the Bible. I believe it can. I'm not the only one who does. On our web-site, alongside our seven principles can be found six sources from which our living tradition is drawn. The fourth is "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." Those teachings, of course, are from the Bible. Truth be known, had it not been for our forbears, congregations of people who revered the Bible, there would likely be no Unitarian Universalist congregations today. I think it's fair to say, then, that the Bible has already enriched our lives. That's not to mention the influence of the Bible on our larger culture through literature and through social movements of the past. In the present, can you and I find ourselves enriched by studying and understanding the Bible more thoroughly? I think we can.

Certainly, having a deeper knowledge of the sacred foundation of our neighbors' faiths will empower us to better understand and commune with them - and it may possibly even earn us a more favorable standing for making our case to them for social and political change. Will our case carry more weight coming from strangers harboring no care for the ideals of the population or from friends who take pains to find common ground?

I find that study and understanding of the Bible is satisfying and enriching in its own right - just as study of the ancient classics or modern art may be. Who isn't rewarded by a journey of discovery, and in what other literature can we find so much potential for discovery in one volume?

Should we be so suspicious of modern religiously conservative movements that we find ourselves unmoved by the poetry of the Bible or unchallenged by its exhortations to love one another radically? To love our enemies? To love our neighbors as ourselves? I hope that we don't allow the ephemeral political and religious movements

of today to make us so jaded.

Please don't misunderstand me. I don't believe that attention to the Bible is a requirement for a fulfilled and meaningful life. Certainly there are other pursuits just as important or more so. I believe, instead, that for those of us who are so inclined, study of the Bible can be very rewarding work.

And for the last few minutes, I want to return to one of the opening subjects. How does one avoid pitfalls in interpreting the Bible and so understand it as it was meant to be understood? My own approach is neither unique nor universal.

My viewpoint is not an innovation of my own - it is the ostensible method of many students of the Bible, both Christian and non-Christian.

It is not universal. I do not accept the teaching, based on an interpretation of Second Timothy 3:16 and further elaborated on systematically and logically, which says I must understand each author, each book, each passage of the Bible in a way that can be made consistent with all the others authors, books, and passages in the Bible. In other words, I reject the notion that we must necessarily treat the Bible as a unified and consistent whole, free from error because of the inspiration of God in its writing. If, in fact, the Bible is entirely internally consistent, if it is internally consistent and free of any error, an epic narrative encompassing all of time until the end of the apostolic age, then I believe that we will discover that from earnest study, and possibly then draw the conclusion that to reach such a condition it must have been the product of God's inspiration. I see no need to take such a proposition as a starting point. I don't think we owe our faith to doctrines set forth by well-meaning but not infallible preachers. I think that to approach the Bible that way is to pre-dispose oneself to error from the outset, and I reiterate that it is unnecessary, as careful study of such a supernatural text should lead one to the necessary conclusion without the need to approach it with that prejudice.

Likewise, I do not think we must believe the Jewish religion to properly understand the Hebrew Bible nor believe the Christian religion to properly understand the Christian Bible.

What I believe we must do is, to the best of our ability, reconstruct the intentions of those who wrote the books of the Bible in the context of their religion, culture, and history.

This is much more easily said than done. It turns out that it is not always a simple task, or even a possible one, to determine what those original authors even *said*! Bible scholars before us have put countless hours into the task of simply reconstructing what we call the "originals" from the ancient manuscripts we have to study of the Bible. And while they have done an amazing job, there are passages in the Bible that remain intractable - for which we may never know with certainty what the "original" said. More problematic still is what we mean by the word "original". That's because what these scholars have reconstructed is not necessarily the original writing, but rather the final edition copied in manuscript form over the centuries. There is ample evidence that some books of the Bible are not the works of a single original author but rather the final results of editing, compiling, or even reworking one or more earlier writings or oral traditions. These writings and oral traditions are not available to us for study, making it all the more difficult to discern their meaning.

Despite the obstacles, much progress can be made toward understanding the meaning behind the writings that we find in our modern Bibles.

Using the work of scholars before us who have done their best to reconstruct something remarkably close to the original text and translate it into a language with which we are familiar, we find that language can often be our friend. Most times it turns out that the plain meaning of the words, that is to say the most straightforward grammatical reading of the text in the context of the pertinent literary form, is often the best one for conveying the intention of the author. By literary form, I mean by example: the narrative, the poetic, the metaphorical or allegorical form. The literary form is not always obvious, but can usually be determined with relative certainty by those familiar with the original languages and their idiomatic conventions. When we supplement this background with background about the historical circumstances of the writing, the intended meaning is often relatively easy to adduce. This method, more or less, is sometimes known as the grammatico-historical method. As the grammatico-historical method, it is the one most accepted by... The UUBC?- Unitarian Universalist Bible Committee? No - I just made that one up. Liberal and secular Bible scholars? No - though they do often employ a similar method. No, this is the favorite hermeneutic of conservative Christian Biblical scholarship. Those conservative Christian scholars who follow this method are, unfortunately in my view, also committed to a few other, more problematic ideas about authorship, dating, and harmonization. But they recognize the value in taking the words of the Bible more or less at face value in most cases. And so do I. Because language is pretty useless if words don't have any meaning.

Of course, one cannot commit oneself exclusively to one hermeneutic. The Bible demands deeper thinking than that, and sometimes requires us to dig a little bit deeper

than we are in a habit of doing. Scholars of all theological stripes recognize this, and it is in these cases that we really have to re-examine the lenses through which we perceive our object of study before we continue to delve. These are the cases where we owe it to ourselves and to those who hold these texts sacred to be as careful as we know how to be. These are the cases which challenge us and by which we will be measured. All we can do is our best.

Last summer, I suggested to Jeff that we host a morning Bible study group during the summer, while the Adult Forum was on hiatus. He enthusiastically agreed and asked me to go ahead and get started with it. Truth was I wasn't ready to get started with anything. But Jeff has a way of letting us put our money where our mouth is when we suggest good ideas. And I found myself up at all hours of the night every weekend trying to get a Bible study ready for the next morning. When fall came and the Adult Forum reconvened, we carried on a few weeks and then tried to withdraw so that it wasn't necessary for forum regulars to choose between two groups. Helen and Matt approached me shortly thereafter to bring our study into the forum roughly once a month. That was a blessing to me, because the nature of the forum is that the topics are widely discussed amongst the attendants rather than being prepared and presented entirely by the speaker. That meant more sleep for me.

Judging by attendance at our summer Bible Study and interest in the forums devoted to the topic, we Unitarian Universalists still have plenty of native interest in the Bible. I hope that, one way or another, our Bible studies will continue with a fair degree of regularity on Sunday mornings. And I hope that our study group will evolve to function with more than one leader, or without a leader at all. And I hope that our study group will be *so good* that other Chattanooga congregations, even maybe some of the more conservative ones, will want to emulate it and send their leaders or members to watch and participate in it. That outcome may lie at the end of a most difficult path, but if we are committed to it, we can achieve it.

I close with one of my favorite passages from Scripture. 1 Corinthians 13:1 through part of 8 as translated in the Revised Standard Edition:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful;

it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.