

The Bible in the future

What future is there for the Bible in our churches? Despite the large numbers of Bibles in circulation in the form of books, videos and audio recordings, in comic strips or cartoon form, we must stop proclaiming victory. We can even go so far as the art historian Timothy Verdon and talk about Biblical illiteracy¹ According to a statistic from New Zealand, which I believe is probably true for Europe too, only 11% of Christians read their Bible daily and 24% read it once a month². Why has Bible readership collapsed to this extent, especially in historically Protestant European countries? What should we do about it?

1. THE EROSION OF BIBLE PRACTICE

a) The sociocultural deflagration (destruction)

Before looking at avenues to explore, it is important to understand the reasons for this disastrous collapse, and the term is not too strong, given the lengths the Bible distributors are going to. First of all, I am absolutely not accusing the historical players in the "Bible" galaxy, such as the Bible Societies or Scripture Union movements. They have done a huge amount of work, and translations, for example, have kept pace impressively with changes in society.

If we want to understand what is happening, we need to look not at spiritual issues but at what is happening at a sociological and cultural level. From the sociological viewpoint, French-speaking Europeans are totally disconnected from their Judaeo-Christian roots. Belief in the widest sense of the word has not disappeared, but explicit references to Christianity have been binned. It is not unusual for children or adults visiting a museum to have no idea who this "chick" holding her "kid" is, or why they appear in so many paintings.

Our messages fall into intergalactic space where there are no references to Christian faith or to the Bible. How do you expect Europeans to interpret spiritual Christian realities when even the most basic keys for interpreting them are missing? In one of our [videos](#), an actor speaking the Bible text talks about Abraham building an altar in Canaan. Unfortunately, the word for altar in French (autel) sounds exactly like the word for "hotel", and this is what an average European would understand first and foremost.

b) The catechism, cornerstone of Bible practice

For several centuries, the majority of native Europeans were catechised. This meant they had acquired the basics of religious language, and were able to articulate the theology underpinning Christian faith. Movements seeking to spread and popularise the Bible could therefore count on certain givens that made it much easier to understand the Bible text. It was like seeds planted by others which, when they come into contact with water, bud and blossom. The same problem arises over the issue of evangelisation. When addressing new converts, the evangelist was drawing on a legacy of knowledge that was just waiting to come to life. Today the same message gets lost, finding no anchoring point. It's like a climber who finds himself up against a smooth rock face, without any grips.

When it comes to evangelism, I'm not convinced that distributing the Bible text to people who are not yet Christians is the best thing to do. Of course, we've all heard stories of people completely outside any Christian context who responded positively on reading the Bible, without any additional explanations. But this isn't a sufficient argument to suggest that the Bible texts can be understood as if by magic, just because they are the Word of God. God does not dispense with culture when making himself understood. The Bible must be translated into the language of potential readers. However, the readers also need at the very least to have an understanding of the vocabulary used, because it is not a part of their everyday life.

c) Electronic orality as a new cultural vector

Until now we have been hooking the Bible onto the cultural train of books, but now electronic orality is here, a new train running on parallel tracks. For the time being the two tracks are running side by side, like when leaving a station, but in a few years they will be splitting definitively, each going off to its own destination. The book train will continue, but it will have fewer and fewer passengers. Orality trains will become increasingly frequent and they will definitively be carrying most of the passengers.

Unfortunately, cultures are based on large scale duplication technologies, such as printing and now digital media, which have never been and never will be universal tools, covering the whole gamut of human experience on a single medium. Culture is increasingly compartmentalised. But book culture should not blame digital technology. It paved the way by filtering everything through the printed text - as if the world could only be understood if it was described in writing. Culture does not reflect the whole of human reality, but uses it to forge its own perception of that reality. **If we transpose this to the area of faith, the orality culture will establish its own understanding of spiritual reality. Above all, it will impose its own approach to the world of the Bible, just as the book culture imposed its own approach.** As I write these lines, I am not writing a report on spiritual reality, just my opinion about that reality. Hence the importance of the Holy Spirit's mediation. Only the Holy Spirit can put us in touch with the spiritual reality that best suits our need and our situation, using a cultural instrument. Unfortunately – or maybe fortunately – he only lifts a bit of the veil. But once in eternity, we shall see God as he is, without a cultural filter.

d) From study to show

Every culture also generates its own techniques of appropriation. For a book-based culture, especially when it comes to the Bible, the main thing is to study the text. Even for personal meditation, what some call a quiet time, believers study the text using questions, analysis, interpretations and commentaries. This is basically an intellectual approach in which the body and gestures have no role. Today, people *experience* culture rather than thinking it. A painting is often analysed visually, while in oral culture a painting is first and foremost a matter of feeling. For medieval believers, stained glass church windows provided a spiritual atmosphere before being an illustrated explanation of Bible stories. **The difficulty is to shift from a text you study to a text that is staged.** Too often people remain locked into a literary approach illustrated by “images” instead of owning the message through a story that is told, whether by gestures (mime, theatre), by using the body (placing oneself in a listening position to encourage meditation), or by sound and the ear, the preferred entry point for orality. We must get people to listen to the text before getting them to read it. **The fact that the Bible text has lost its influence is therefore also directly related to the changes in techniques for engaging with reality.**

e) Professionalism has killed spontaneity

For Roman Catholics, particularly in times past, the priest very often acted as a filter between the believer and the Bible text, even to the point of refusing believers access to it, for fear that they might interpret it wrongly. Protestants (including evangelicals) have never forbidden that direct contact, but went about limiting access by other means. Professional exegesis was set up as a new filter or new necessary key to understanding the text. **Obviously, exegesis is important, but when it comes between the believer and the Bible it also takes away a lot of spontaneity and freedom.** Indeed, Bible scholars often scorned the simplistic approaches to the Bible among some Christians. This was not exactly likely to stimulate engaging with the Bible. It led people to doubt that it was possible to understand the Bible without the help of professionals. Let it be said loud and strong, some Bible scholars are just as guilty of helping people lose their faith as some believers, lacking scientific culture, with their rash interpretations.

f) A failure to teach people to meditate

Internet provides huge possibilities for disseminating the Bible, and churches and specialist organisations do not hesitate to do so. A Google search for the word “Bible” comes up with no less than 106 000 000 references (Sept 2009). Logically, the impact of this should be in line with such massive dissemination.

Yet the Bible is still perceived as a rare and precious commodity. It is true that until the end of the 20th century the Bible was only accessible physically and not virtually. You had to go to a bookshop to buy a Bible and not all bookshops sold them. The Christians' book was not cheap and many still did not own a copy. Moreover, in Roman Catholic circles, putting the Bible in the hands of all believers was by no means a priority. It was therefore natural to want to focus on spreading it. I'm not certain that the number of daily readers was actually higher at the time than it is today, at least in mainline denominations. Evangelicals insisted a lot on personal contact with the text. It was something of an Evangelical trademark, but the trend has significantly reduced nowadays. **Pastors have often subcontracted the incentive for daily reading to other organisations.**

The greatest difficulty is no longer distribution, but appropriating the content of the Bible. The

Bible cannot be read like a novel or listened to like a radio programme. There is a need to teach believers to meditate and, as in any learning process, you have to give regular booster injections if you want people to continue. We have often rambled on about the Bible, in sermons and Bible studies, but have we truly helped Christians to engage with the Bible in their day-to-day living?

2. SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

a) Community appropriation of the Bible

Reinforcing the value of the Bible among believers should not start with communication techniques, but with the community. While Web 2.0 type media are destined to play a very major role, **it is not digital technology that is going to save the practice of engaging with the Bible.** God never entrusted his message to parchments, books or, more recently, to virtual media. This is not to say that parchments, books or the Web have not directly contributed to people gaining direct access to God, without any human intermediary. The message has been entrusted to men and women and even children. It is when this Word passes through the filter of community that it will be best preserved. And this is also what will safeguard against certain tendencies. The solitary reader of the sacred text will have to confront their understanding with the interpretation of the group. The professional Bible scholar can help to bring some understanding, but at the same time this will be amended by the user group.

The community will also be a factor for mutual encouragement, providing it is looked to as a way of helping others to enter into regular, personal meditation.

b) Working with the word

Book-based civilisation has locked the word into texts and speeches; electronic orality is going to follow the same path, packaging the word into emotional parcels made up of image and sound bites. **As Christians we must learn once more to work on the word in order to communicate. God does not write and neither does he show himself. He speaks – note the subtle difference!** We must give to the spoken word and to verbal expression more than its due - getting people to speak, giving them “the floor”, helping them to say things and express what they think or feel through speaking. Before adopting the culture of books or electronic orality, Christians should be at ease in their own culture, in the way that people of that culture speak and speak to each other, and that God speaks to them. It is only in community, in the widest sense of that word, that we can speak to each other. We can of course use video-conferencing technology, but the real forum for the spoken word is a flesh-and-blood community.

c) To>Bible: a community tool³

To>Bible aims to revitalise the circulation of the spoken word and the Bible text within the fabric of the church, using the springboard of community.

Bible communication today is very compartmentalised. The texts used for preaching often aren't related in the slightest to the rest of the church's activities, and still less to people's personal quiet time. Because of other sources of information and training, such as internet, TV and books, Sunday morning's texts get drowned in a flow of news, blogs, comments, videos and more.

To>Bible brings together various community activities around the same texts collected under a given theme. In practice, the pastor preaches on the texts used by the believers for their personal meditation. Groups that are already in existence also work on those same texts. Up to this point there is no need to add new structures or meetings, because existing possibilities are sufficient for making in-depth contact with the Bible text.

Were the community to want to get more into the present day mindset and dynamic of networking, it could provide for other reinforcement activities such as testimony suppers. Some people in the community may have experiences that they would be willing to share, around the selected themes. They can prepare supper and invite other members of the community or even outsiders to come and listen to them, during supper, telling of what they have experienced with respect to one or other of the chosen texts.

Postcards can also be a way of making people think. Participants in To>Bible give their postal address to receive a postcard sent by another member of the community. The sender prays and chooses the

recipient. The sender also prays about what to write on the card, but the message should always be related to the texts used in the To>Bible.

The idea is to create connections and interaction among people, just like in social networks. Please note that we're talking of using the networking mindset, and not necessarily about using digital media.

Of course, Twitter, Facebook and others can be put to good use, but the ties forged in the church itself between real people have no equivalent on the web.

Henri Bacher, 2009

¹ This term is used by the art historian Timothy Verdon: <http://www.homelie.biz/article-23923977.html>
This link also includes a survey into Bible use conducted in 2008 by GFK-Eurisko and professor Luca Diotallevi.

² Details taken from a video by Mark Brown:
[Video Presentation of 'The Bible in the Digital Space'](#).

³ To>Bible is a generic name created by Logoscom. Here we describe how it works but there are no resources available yet except for some training videos about group work:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-kZZbKdxSQ> <http://www.youtube.com/user/logoscom#p/a/u/1/5UyqoT2qKT0>