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The “Savage Text”?

The Bible as an Idol?

The Bible has become Christianity’s most acute problem. In some parts of the Christian Church the text of scripture rivals or even exceeds in importance the very reality of the God to whom the scripture points. This is a remarkable irony. The heirs to the movement that smashed countless icons, paintings, statues, and stained-glass windows on the grounds of one of the Ten Commandments (“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below” – Exodus 20:4!), have installed an idol that exceeds them all.

One way of exposing the elevation of the Bible is to examine one of the names which has been attached to it, the “Word of God,” or “God’s Word.” The Bible and the Church say God’s Word is Jesus Christ. “The Word became flesh ...” (John 1:14). The term “the Word” refers in John’s Gospel to Jesus Christ. The Word is the divine self-communication. All Christians (as far as I know), including the growing number of **evangelical, conservative, and literalistic** ones, accept this belief unanimously. Of course they do – it’s in the Bible! Jesus Christ is what God “speaks” to the whole creation. Christ is God’s own self-disclosure. It is a core belief in all the churches. The problem is that some Christians combine this core belief with a further, non-core belief with which it is incompatible. The damaging add-on is the claim that *the Bible* is also the Word of God. But the

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Bible does not make this claim. (How could it, for it has no consciousness of itself?) No, this is a modern **ideology** about the Bible and about which the Bible and the Creeds know nothing. It is a colossal mistake, and one which cannot be rectified or normalized by being constantly repeated.

Once the Bible is identified with the Word of God the text of scripture rivals or even replaces the Word of God, which is Jesus Christ. This is a disaster, for as St. Paul observed in a comparable context, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). **Biblicism** becomes **bibliolatry**, the actual *worship* of the Bible by assigning it the same status as that which is accorded by Christians to Jesus Christ. The Person is replaced by the proposition: flesh by words; the Word of God by written, and much-disputed, text. Speaking for **Anglicans** who are confronted with biblicism in many of their churches, Maggi Dawn wisely advises, "So while we owe it to ourselves and our tradition to guard and treasure a high view of the Bible, we need to avoid venerating scripture excessively, to the point where it displaces Christ the Word, and silences the capacity of Christ the Word to speak through the words on the page."²

This book is written in part to defend innocent Christian victims of this mistaken elevation of the Bible, for it has deleterious consequences for Christian ethics, for the personal conduct of millions of Christians all over the world, for the social and moral teaching of the churches, and, wherever it has influence, for politics. Christians all over the world are following the Bible instead of following Christ. But the main reason for writing *The Savage Text* is itself evangelical. The Church's mission is to spread the **good news** of Jesus Christ. This mission is frequently impaired by the ideological biblicism that accompanies it. This book makes a small contribution to the removal of this impairment.

The "savage text" is the name this book gives to the Bible (or passages from it) when its use results in the marginalization, or persecution, or victimization, of any of the people or creatures for whom (according to the Christian **Gospel**) Christ died. The savage text, it must be stressed, is not the Bible. It is not those parts of the Bible

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that depict or authorize violence. There is plenty of violence in the Bible, but the savage text does not refer straightforwardly to these passages. That there is much violence in the Bible is unsurprising since the biblical books were compiled over a period of some 700 years in the land, still war-torn, of Palestine, and the oldest parts probably date from the tenth century BCE, possibly slightly earlier. No, the savage text is not the Bible. It is what Christians have made of the Bible when they have used its pages to endorse cruelty, hatred, murder, oppression, and condemnation, often of other Christians. The savage text is what the Bible, or parts of it, becomes when it enables Christians to convert the good news of God’s revealed love in Jesus Christ into the bad news that people are the wrong color, or race, or gender, or denomination, or orientation, or religion, or class, or empire, just because they differ from the Christians who are preaching this bad news. The savage text belongs to a “mind-set” that authorizes condemnation of any view or practice which is not that of its official or most powerful readers. When the Bible becomes a savage text, the theology that is proclaimed from it is already faulty. The savage text makes hatred holy. It makes seekers after truth its jealous guardians. Perhaps the worst feature of the savage text is the divine authority it claims for its strictures. The savage text is implicated in the moral case against Christianity. Who wants to defend a faith that customizes hatred?

The vision for this book dawned on me during my involvement over the last two decades in the bitter arguments within the churches about sexuality. Readers will know that the Christian churches are presently locked in damaging controversies over sexuality and gender, and in particular over homosexuality. Indeed the **Anglican Communion** of churches, to one of which I belong, is in danger of splitting itself apart over these questions. These controversies have resulted in the frequent misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and fear of sexual minorities, especially of homosexual people, inside and outside the churches. Such people are frequently victims of Christian **homophobia**. They suffer the pain of rejection that compulsory heterosexuality enforces upon them.

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The Savage Text does not contribute directly to the resolution of these debilitating arguments. Rather, it asks how Christians have been able to conduct, in public and on a global scale, arguments that appear to have exposed prejudice, fear, and hatred to the extent that the very mission of the churches in the world has been compromised. Churches all over the world are arguing about these matters, and with regard to homosexuality (but not in other areas such as divorce and further marriage) it is probably fair to say that conservative views have prevailed. My interest was alerted to how conservative Christians have used the Bible in their assertions about lesbian and gay people, their relationships, and their place in the Church, the priesthood, and the **episcopate**. Gradually, and with increasing horror, I began to form the opinion that this use of scripture might resemble earlier uses of it, when Christians victimized children, women, Jews, the disabled, witches, people of color, slaves, scientists, criminals, heretics, and even animals, nature, and the environment. This kind of Bible use is intolerable and should have no place at all in Christianity, in any version of it. Neither is its misuse confined to fundamentalists or extremists who can be neatly differentiated from the more “mainstream” type of Christian view. Dozens of respectable bishops and their carefully chosen theological advisors lend their episcopal weight to savage, exclusionary policies which they claim to find in the Bible. I have concentrated mainly on manifestations of the savage text in Protestantism and Anglicanism, but there are also references throughout to Roman Catholic teaching. Since Protestant churches have no **Magisterium** or central teaching authority, and generally do not value tradition, the weight of interpretation that the Bible is required to bear is greater in these churches. The title, *The Savage Text*, began to suggest itself. It is the name I give to uses of the Bible which convert the good news the Bible brings to the world into *the savage text* that persecutes, condemns, and banishes. *The Savage Text* lays bare these savage interpretations of scripture, and shows that there is a “shadow side” to Christianity that remains disturbingly alive.

The Savage Text is neither a work of social science investigating religious behavior nor an attack on Christian faith by one of its

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opponents. It is a Christian theological work that is written for the sake of the future of Christianity. The Christian faith professes the self-giving love of God in Christ as the basis of its existence, mission, and practice. For it to be credible in its third millennium it must recover its vocation as the embodiment of the divine love, and its practice of the **Great Commandments** and the **Golden Rule**. It learns this vocation from the Bible. Thankfully in every generation including our own, there have been many faithful Christians who read the Bible in immensely fertile and creative ways, and who inspire the Church in fulfilling its vocation. Their presence in the Church is thankfully acknowledged here, but it is not the subject of the present work. For there is much in the Bible that, without due care, lends itself to work *against* this vocation. For the good of the Gospel it is time to devote attention to this, to examine how it works, and to seek to minimize its influence.

The readership of the book is likely to be of two kinds. Students of theology, religious studies, and ethics will find much here about the use and abuse of the Bible in relation to ethical questions, historical and contemporary. But since the Bible and its continuing use is of interest beyond the demands of the curriculum in universities and colleges (and since the *Manifesto* series is concerned with broad issues in the humanities and the social sciences), I hope to attract that mythical character beloved of publishers, the “general reader.” Specifically, there are thousands of potential readers outside or on the fringes of the churches who remain interested in living, practical, intelligible theology. Some are puzzled by the obsession of churches with issues to do with sexuality; other readers may be curious about the religious roots of homophobia, and anxious to see the churches more obviously striving to be welcoming and inclusive communities. There are many members of churches who are weary of over-cautious or censorious leaderships, and who long for a more adventurous, less risk-averse way of “being church.” There are millions of people who define themselves as “spiritual” yet think there is a moral deficiency within the churches at the present time. Since the harm caused by the savage text extends beyond the boundaries of the churches, there should be

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interest in it from beyond these boundaries also. In short, there are countless general readers, and I hope to attract some of these as well as students pursuing their university studies. It is with general readers in mind that a glossary has been included at the back of the book for all names and terms in bold type in the text, and why the names of biblical books are included in full (and not by standard abbreviations).

The Savage Text is unique in that it is a book about the Bible that allows itself to be molded by actual Bible use in and by the churches. I won't be trying too hard to expose **fundamentalism**. That has already been well done.³ But a characteristic of fundamentalism is that it is impervious to criticism and indeed thrives upon it. I am more concerned with the inroads made by a conservative biblicism in many of the churches. It is 30 years since Dennis Nineham wrote *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*,⁴ and 45 years since his *The Church's Use of the Bible, Past and Present*.⁵ John Barton's admirable *People of the Book*?⁶ is 20 years old, and concentrates on the *authority* of the Bible, whereas I already locate that old question in the separation of the Bible from other sources such as tradition, reason, and of course church. Keith Ward's excellent *What the Bible Really Teaches: A Challenge for Fundamentalists*⁷ makes similar proposals to mine, except that I think “what the Bible really teaches” begs further questions (not least because Jehovah's Witnesses and others make similar claims), and that the Bible has to be understood more overtly through the faith of the Church which produced it. Ward does not concentrate on examples of *historical* Bible use as I am about to do. *The Savage Text* concentrates on the bizarre results that arise out of the excessive veneration of the Bible, and offers proposals for avoiding textual savagery in future.

The perspective taken in the book is both traditional and progressive. There is no truck here with a theological **liberalism** that reduces the contents of Christianity to the narrow scope of the “**enlightened**” Western mind, or that replaces the God of Jesus Christ and the Creeds of the Church with whatever anyone takes God to be, or that assumes all religions or even all versions of religions are equal before they have even been compared with one another. The book

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is *traditional* and conservative in locating itself in the tradition defined by the classic Creeds of the Church (none of which contains a doctrine of scripture or ideology of the Bible). The book is *progressive* in allying itself with the lively influences within Christian traditions that encourage change so that “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3) is able to retain its freshness and seductive appeal. If to be “liberal” is to believe that “genuine faith is committed to the search for truth, wherever it comes from,” that “God invites us to do our believing in ways appropriate to the twenty-first century,” that “We never have absolute certainty,” and that “Only God is infallible,”⁸ then this work is unashamedly liberal too.

The tone and style of such a work represents a challenge. On the one hand there will be philosophical, theological, and historical argument which, if it is to be successful, must be sharp, forensic, and clinically efficient. On the other hand, there is little point in perpetuating the polemics that Christians hurl at each other. It must be possible to demolish poor arguments without demolishing the people who are taken in by them. There are deeper reasons why a peaceable tone is required. Anyone who argues, as I do, for a radically inclusive Christian Church, cannot, without scoring a spectacular own goal, alienate or exclude those Christians who already belong to it and with whom one presently disagrees. And anyone who disputes the claim of another to have privileged access to truth cannot simultaneously claim to have privileged access to truth either. In much of what I say I may be wrong. In the end one can only strive for clarity, offer arguments, and learn from people with whom one disagrees. This is important in any discipline, and vital in the Church. If there are lapses of charity in what follows, I apologize for these in advance.

The Manifesto of “The Savage Text”

Authors in the Blackwell *Manifesto* series can be expected to court controversy. They have a manifesto (an Italian term meaning “denunciation”), a *manifestus* or public written statement about which there

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may be little public agreement. It will not be easy to balance controversy with charity. This is my manifesto. I hold:

First, that there are two principal types of Bible use current among Christians. By “type” I mean “a number of things or persons sharing a particular characteristic, or set of characteristics, that causes them to be regarded as a group.”⁹ There are as many kinds of Bible-reading as there are readers, but the set of characteristics that reduces to two main groups concerns what the Bible is *for*. The first type assumes that God has made Godself known to humanity through the human being, Jesus Christ. The Bible *witnesses* to the truth of God revealed in Jesus. Everyone can know God through Jesus, and the Bible has been, and remains, the indispensable witness to the divine self-disclosure that was Christ. This might well be called “the witness principle.” The most famous Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, made a succinct statement of the witness principle:

The Word of God is God Himself in Holy Scripture. For God once spoke as Lord to Moses and the prophets, to the Evangelists and apostles. And now through their written word He speaks as the same Lord to His Church. Scripture is holy and the Word of God, because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church *a witness to divine revelation*.¹⁰

The second type of Bible use, in practice if not always overtly in theory, assumes that God has made Godself known to humanity equally through the human being, Jesus Christ, *and* in scripture. In this second type, the Bible does not merely witness to the truth of God revealed in Jesus. It shares the truth of God which is Jesus. Jesus *and* the Bible *together* constitute God’s truth. On this view the Bible becomes, or is in constant danger of becoming, a co-equal source of God’s revelation. The Bible on this view is not unfairly regarded as an inspired guidebook to supernatural realities and earthly ethical practices. The Word of God is God’s self-communication to humanity. That self-communication is supremely Jesus Christ, but not of course confined exclusively to him. God can “speak” in countless ways to

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people. Reading the Bible for millions of Christians has been and remains one such way. But, as we shall shortly see, the text of the Bible is also incriminated in countless atrocities and acts of cruelty. Problems arise within the “guidebook view” when all scripture is regarded “in equal measure as the Word of God.”¹¹ Still worse problems arise when the text of scripture is assumed to *be* the Word of God, when it is clearly and offensively inconsistent with the divine Love revealed in Jesus Christ. If the Bible is to be called “the Word of God” (as Barth does), then it is in a derivative and secondary sense that is “a witness to divine revelation.” I think it is misleading to ascribe that name to the Bible.

Second, that the first type, or “witness principle,” is the historical, classical, and even **Reformed** way of handling scripture. Fundamentalist and many evangelical Christians adhere to the second, mistaken, view. But many other Christians also affirm the second view, not because they belong to any particular party in the Church, but out of an excessive reverence for scripture, often as a result of neglect of other sources of God’s self-communication such as tradition, reason, wisdom, experience, nature, art, beauty, and so on.

Third, that whenever the guidebook view is held equally with the witness view or even preferred to it, the revelation of God in Christ is endangered, compromised, or even denied. Divine authority can then be claimed for all kinds of horrors such as slavery, the persecution of Jews and other races, the beating of children, the burning of witches, male gender superiority, compulsory heterosexuality, and so on. The Bible in these cases ceases to be holy because it ceases to witness to God’s Word in Christ, and becomes instead a savage text. It follows,

Fourth, that whenever the savage text is proclaimed, it undermines Christian faith in the Word of God made flesh, and causes suffering, injustice, and endless division among Christians (because the Bible inevitably means different things to them).

Fifth, that the popularity among many Christians of the savage text is gained by offering a bogus *simplicity*, a guidebook to dissipate the complex realities of late modern life. The savage text also offers a *bogus*

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identity, continually reinforced by defining all those with whom its readers disagree (just about everyone in the end) as wrong. Opponents are simply Other.

Sixth, that the designation “People of the Book” can never be applied to Christians without converting Christianity into a faith more like some of its rivals, thereby negating its profound distinctiveness as the people of the God who, in order to reach God’s people, became one of them. By some dizzying irony, the dominant attitude to the Bible among many conservative Christians resembles more the dominant Islamic attitude to the Qur’an than an authentic witness to Jesus Christ.

And *seventh*, that, in the name of the One to whom the Bible bears its essential witness, Christians must renounce overt and covert bibliolatry.

The Argument of the Book

This, then, is the manifesto. Chapter 2 considers the possibility that the Bible has been used as a savage text in the bitter current arguments about sexuality among the churches. That possibility raises the further question whether the condemnation of “homosexual practice” is an extension of an older savage use of the Bible against other minorities which exhibit difference. That question is the subject of part II.

Chapter 2 examines some examples of Bible use in support of the attempt to show that God disapproves of homosexuality. The failure to establish the conservative case, and the suffering that results from it, set the agenda for the rest of the book. Are there similarities between the repressive use of the Bible against sexual minorities and the repressive use of the Bible against many others?

Chapters 3–6 develop links between Bible use in present controversies over sexuality, and Bible use in other historical controversies. They will show how at other times the Bible became, or becomes, a savage text legitimizing the Christian mistreatment of people of

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color, slaves, non-Christians, the environment, children, Jews, women, and other minorities. It will show that a literal reading of particular passages of scripture, along with many other social, intellectual, and cultural factors, contributed to disgraceful practices and continues to do so.

In the aftermath of the damage that the undifferentiated appeal to scripture continues to do in converting it into a savage text, chapter 7 asks why this counter-Christian tradition at the heart of Christianity continues to hold sway. The pursuit of an answer leads to the uncovering of defects in the Protestant **Scripture Principle** and to the quest for a more charitable and Christ-like way of handling non-biblical books and nonconforming Christians. Chapter 8 disowns the epithet “People of the Book” as applicable to Christianity. Christian faith is faith in the **triune** God, made flesh in God the Word, to whom the Bible *and* tradition bear fallible witness. The tendency to “personalize” the Bible, and thereby to treat it as an object of devotion, is strenuously resisted. Some principles for the *peaceable* reading of the Bible are suggested. When the love of scripture replaces the love of God, the savage text reappears. The Christian scriptures are the compilation of the Christian Church which is still learning how to become a godly “community of readers,” capable of honoring the self-giving God who is Love and whose Spirit leads into all truth.

There is a bewilderingly large and ever-growing number of English Bible translations, each favored by particular groups of readers. Which one should be used in this book? I have decided to use the King James or Authorized Version of 1611! Any deviation from this version was frowned upon in the Baptist Church where I first came to faith in 1959, but that is not the reason for using it here. The King James Version has had more influence in English-speaking countries, and over a much longer period, than all the other available English translations put together. I dusted off my well-worn and marked-up copy when writing this book for three reasons. First, it conveys a sense of historical weight. For nearly 350 years Protestant and Anglican Christians used this version and no other, and when newer translations began to appear (e.g., the Revised Version, in 1881) they were

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revisions of, not replacements for, this historical text. Second, it conveys a magisterial sense and an authoritative tone that no other English version has managed to achieve. In a sense that is hard to grasp today, many of the millions of Protestant Christians who used the Authorized Version believed that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who inspired the original manuscripts, extended also to the translators and compilers of this sacred work. Much of it they knew by heart, as well as by rote. And third, the renewed encounter with its archaic prose helps us to regain a sense of historical development, as well as the historical relativity of all attempts to convey the meanings of the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts. Whenever the unfamiliarity (or inaccuracy) of the Authorized Version becomes an obstacle, alternative readings are provided.