

The Twenty-sixth

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

**THE WORD IN PRINT:
Does the King James Bible Have a Future?**

delivered by

The Rt Revd & Rt Hon Dr Richard Chartres KCVO
Bishop of London

at Westminster Abbey
on Thursday 26 May 2011

and

at Keble College, Oxford
on Friday 27 May 2011

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**Dean Eric Symes Abbott
(1906 – 1983)**

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***The Word in Print:
Does the King James Bible Have a Future?***
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*THE WORD IN PRINT:
Does the King James Bible Have a Future?*

“Translation it is that openeth the window to let in the light; that breaketh the shell that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain that we might look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well that we may come by the water even as Jacob rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well by which means the flocks of Laban were watered.”

So Miles Smith in his essay, *The Translators to the Reader*, printed at the beginning of the 1611 English version of the Bible. The cascade of phrases conveys the reverent excitement at being able to look into the book of God’s Word in the vulgar tongue at a time when scripture was the foundation not only for the study of divinity, but also for a little while longer the essential prolegomena to history, anthropology and politics.

So much has been written and said about the making and the subsequent influence of the translation of the Bible commissioned by King James, that I feel a little like Ruth gleaning after a combine harvester.

The question remains, however, whether the events of this 400th

anniversary year will prove to be a long and ceremonious leave-taking, or whether re-assessment of the significance of the 1611 translation will confirm its place in the living culture of the English speaking peoples, and renew its life as a sacred text used in the worship of the church and not merely cherished as a literary artefact.

A wealth of publication has enriched our appreciation of the making of the King James Version. Before the quatercentenary celebration of the Hampton Court Conference I was thrilled to read Adam Nicholson’s *Power and Glory*, the prose of which sparkles with Jacobean spangles. More recently, Gordon Campbell’s *Bible* and David Norton’s *The King James Bible: A Short History* have with admirable clarity traced the story of English translations from the versions available to the translators of 1611 to the abundance we enjoy today. There are many other books old and new which have been helpful, as well as Melvin Bragg’s stimulating television account of the radical impact of the King James Bible.

The intentions of the translators are clearly stated in Miles Smith’s preface: “We never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation nor yet to make of a bad one a good one ... but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one not justly to be excepted against; that hath been our endeavour, that our mark.”

As is well known, the project was initiated by King James in person during the course of the Hampton Court Conference.

The Puritans were hopeful that the accession of King James with his Presbyterian education heralded further reform in the church.

There was good deal of dismay in puritan circles that the church was but halfly reformed. There were lingering traditional festoons. As Milton later said, puritans believed that the church was disfigured by “gugawgs fetcht from Aron’s old wardrobe.”

James was familiar with Continental academic practices; he relished disputations and saw himself as a latter day Solomon, or rather Constantine, presiding as the Emperor had done at the Council of Nicaea, bringing peace and unity to the Church. In this spirit he convened a conference at Hampton Court.

The bishops were examined alone, but when the puritans were ushered into the Privy Chamber, they found that Bancroft my predecessor of London and Bilson of Winchester, with a bevy of Deans, were waiting for them. William Barlow, Dean of Chester described the scene.

“The King’s Majesty entering the chamber, presently took his chair

[the noble young Prince {the nine year old Henry} sitting by upon a stool]”. In the awful presence of the monarch, the four Puritans knelt down to present their case.

“Pernicious and pestilent” prelate I may be, but I can find it in my heart to sympathise with the petitioners’ plight. The Puritan Quartet stepped onto the stage and became extras in the drama of the Royal Supremacy. They were in a Court used to ceremonious and symbolic communication to plead that the liturgy be abridged and purged of ceremony. They were on their knees representing a tendency in the Church of England that objected to kneeling to receive the host at the Holy Communion.

The King was enjoying himself. Not since King Alfred had such an intellectual come to the throne. Like many great men, James had developed the fatal facility for continuous utterance and he constantly intervened as the delegation made their points.

James closed the discussions with his famous aphorism, “No Bishop, no King”.

But during the conversation between Dr Reynolds and the King, the former had pressed for a new translation of the Bible on account of the “corruptions” in those which had been authorised in the reigns of

Henry VIII and Edward VI. When the request is decoded, Reynolds wanted a Bible without what puritans regarded as tendentious translations like the use of the words “bishop” and “church”. In apparently agreeing with him the King described the very opposite of what Reynolds wanted.

James characterised the Puritans’ favourite translation, the Geneva version, as “the worst of all”. He proposed that a new translation should be prepared by the best learned in the two universities: that it should then be reviewed by the Bishops and presented to the Privy Council before being ratified by royal authority for use in public preaching. The Bishop of London broke in complaining about the marginal notes in the Geneva version which, among other examples of eisegesis (reading into the text), firmly identified the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) with the figure of Anti-Christ in the Book of Revelation. The new Bible was to be an instrument of peace and tendentious marginalia were to be omitted.

Nearly a century of experience of the impact of scripture in the vernacular had illustrated both how dangerous the bible could be, but also how necessary it was as a foundation for establishing the peace and good order of the realm.

In the origins of our English state the bible has played an explicit

and vital role. The law code of King Alfred issued towards the end of his reign in the 890’s begins with the Ten Commandments and copious citations from the Mosaic law, passing on to the New Testament before the king rehearsed some of the laws of his predecessors, which were equally framed against a biblical background.

Beyond specific legal enactments, however, the story of the chosen people, the Israel of God, was a potent narrative around which the story of the English nation crystallised.

In this hallowed place, the Coronation Church, it is right to be candid that the biblical account of monarchs and their rule runs the gamut between a celebration of sacral kingship and denunciations of despicable tyranny.

In the first book of Samuel, the Israelites ask for a king to lead them in the struggle against the Philistines. Samuel the prophet prays to the Lord who answers that the people “have rejected me that I should not reign over them”. The prophet then depicts “the manner of the king that shall reign over you”: “He will take the tenth of your sheep and ye shall be his servants.”

“Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel”. They

desired “that we also may be like all the nations and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles”. Government is a necessity in this fallen world but it is also a tragedy.

There is no place in the biblical world view for an idolatrous attitude towards the state. Kings are warned by the prophets that they face judgement from a higher court, from the King of Kings and father of the fatherless who is “a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm and a shadow from the heat.” There is a wealth of references to wicked kings and the divinely ordained fate that overwhelmed them.

The people should also bear their share of guilt for the crimes of wicked rulers. One of the marginal notes to the Geneva version highlighted the radical implications of I Kings XIV: 16 - “the people shall not be excused when they do evil at the commandment of their governors.”

In this spirit the New Testament, Acts V: 29 says that “we ought to obey God rather than men”.

But there is a contrasting tradition. Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon king. There was a sacral aura around

royal power. David even when being hunted by a vengeful Saul refrained from killing him when he had the opportunity “seeing that he is the anointed of the Lord”.

In the New Testament, St Paul is forthright about the respect which should be accorded to rulers in Romans XIII – “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God and they that resist shall receive unto themselves damnation.”

Throughout our history the emphasis has been first on one side then another of the biblical account of the duty we owe to God and to our rulers. What Nick Spencer has called the Bible’s “intrinsic indeterminacy” has engendered a dynamic rather than a static political culture.

The marginal notes of the Geneva version offered a commentary and interpretation of the biblical narrative in contemporary terms. One of the reasons why the King James Version has endured is that it did not seek to fix the interpretation of the text, but left it open to fresh engagement with very different historical contexts.

The bible rejects an idolatrous view of human power but it also

recognises the providential role of pagan rulers like Cyrus of Persia and the Emperors of Rome.

In the ancient world Caesar was quite simply God. The Emperor was literally divinised.

In parts of the Islamic world God is Caesar and his will is expressed in the holy Quran.

At this point it is important to note the distinction between the status of the holy Quran in Islam and the Bible. The Quran contains a phrase which has been used in a creative and inclusive way describing Jews, Christians and Muslims, as “peoples of the book”. Christians, however, cannot really be comprehended in this definition. In the Christian faith, the Word of God is made flesh and the bible is a witness to the communication of God in the life, death, and resurrection of his human face, Jesus Christ.

In the Christian world, Caesar is certainly not God and God is not to be equated with Caesar. There is room for secular life and institutions whose scope requires constant negotiation as a result of the teaching of Jesus himself that we should render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God that things that are God’s. This could easily be seen as a weakness and a source of constant

turmoil, but in our own history there is no denying the political impact of the recurring biblical debate about the proper relations between God and Caesar.

The outworking of this biblical tension is clearly and comprehensively described in a book just published. In a well worked field, Nick Spencer’s *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible* is fresh and a very good preparation for the debates of the twenty-first century – about which more anon.

The contrasting views of the bible as bulwark of the established order or radical challenge to the status quo are well reflected in the battle of the frontispieces to the translations published in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The English translations ordered to be set up in churches in the reign of Henry VIII have title pages teeming with royal and hierarchical imagery. By contrast the Geneva version featured a frontispiece of the Exodus; a story which has been repeatedly used in liberation struggles. The Israelites are approaching the Red Sea and their deliverance from the army of Pharaoh is clearly imminent. The Geneva version was dedicated to the Queen, but its iconography was very different from that of the Bishops’ Bible published in 1568, which once again exhibited a portrait of Elizabeth on her throne with

a small vignette of a minister preaching to a large and attentive congregation.

The name of King James is now firmly attached to the translation of 1611, but unlike Henry and Elizabeth he is not depicted on the title page. Instead there is a symbolic depiction of the Holy Trinity with the four evangelists at work on their gospels. Most prominently in two niches in a wall stand Moses and Aaron. It was unusual at this period to include Aaron, and the purpose seems to have been to emphasise the role of the priest in the English Church. Aaron's knife recalls the temple sacrifices and his cup the blood sprinkled upon the altar.

The whole design is composed to reflect universal Christian tradition. It respects both Catholic and Protestant sensibilities without tying the translation to any particular reign or set of political circumstances. The 1611 frontispiece advertises this translation as one that transcends the competing visions represented by enthroned monarchs or tumbling Pharaohs.

The appointment of 54 Translators to work in a number of syndicates on different portions of the Scriptures is another illustration of the King's determination to include as wide a range of theological opinion as possible in his Church Establishment.

The King's instructions to the Translators directed that they were to use "circumlocution" and language in which meaning was to be "set forth gorgeously". There was to be light but as Adam Nicolson says, there was to be "no terror of richness" – richness of the kind found in Jacobean art and decoration. The English of the Authorised Version was never the language of the street, but a middle way between the demotic and Greek and Hebrew. Plainness was to be married to majesty in stately language which has had a profound influence on English sensibility ever since.

In this place it is right to celebrate the influence of Eric Abbott's predecessor as Dean of Westminster, Lancelot Andrewes. His company was responsible for revising the translations of the books of the Old Testament from Genesis to the Second Book of Kings.

There was a great contemporary interest in Hebrew studies as the work of revision got underway. Although it was to be many years before Oliver Cromwell welcomed Jews back to settle in England, those with millenarian interests eagerly sought out Hebrew texts. George Walker, the Puritan incumbent of St John the Baptist Watling Street, a tiny parish in the City with less than 2 dozen houses, persuaded 18 parishioners to club together to pay £26 to save a Babylonian Talmud, printed by Daniel Bomberg in the first half of the sixteenth century, from the Venetian Inquisition. The

book survives now in Lambeth Palace Library as part of the Sion Collection.

As a former Master of Pembroke, Andrewes recruited most of his company from Cambridge from competent Hebraists and scholars who had long enjoyed his patronage.

One such was the Reverend William Bedwell, who had begun his studies in Semitic languages including Arabic at Trinity College in the 1580's. There was no Professorship at the ancient universities in this subject until 1635, but scholars of Hebrew and Physic agreed on the importance of being able to access the Arabic corpus in the original. Pembroke was the centre of interest and research in the subject under Andrewes. He it was who encouraged Bedwell to set about compiling an Arabic dictionary, which became his life's work. The manuscript is preserved in the University Library which did not at the beginning of the seventeenth century possess a single manuscript in Arabic.

In 1611 Bedwell had already been provided with a City of London living at St Ethelburga's Bishopsgate, where he signed the Churchwarden's accounts in Arabic as "al-faqir" – the humble one.

He was in demand as a translator from classical Arabic. For

example, a letter arrived from the Sultan of Aceh addressed to Queen Elizabeth who was by that time dead. The letter proved to contain a request to the monarch to send an English nymph for the Sultan's harem. James debated the question and decided that it was beneath the dignity of a Christian King to accede to the suggestion, despite that fact that the daughter of a City grandee had already volunteered.

The translators of 1611 were serious and painstaking scholars but they were hampered by a paucity of books in the relevant areas. Trinity College, Cambridge for example, a royal foundation and ever since John Whitgift's years as Master the resort of the young, well born and talented, possessed only 325 books in its library in 1600, of which 75 were recently acquired law books and 160 had religious themes.

The library of another translator, William Branthwaite, Master of Gonville and Gaius, survives virtually intact and gives us a glimpse of his intellectual world. There was no literature in English and even very few English bibles and fewer commentaries. Continental religious books in Latin predominate, including works by Catholic authors. In addition there were editions of the classics and Camden's Britannia. Yet another translator, John Overall, Dean of St Paul's, appointed to preach before Elizabeth I, said that "he had spoken

Latin so long, it was troublesome to him to speak English in a continued oration.”

Andrewes and his company had been charged to consult previous translations and as is well known they were largely dependent on William Tyndale’s pioneering work.

In Tyndale’s version Genesis begins, “In the begynnyng God created heaven and erth. The erth was voyd and emptie, and darcknesse was upon the depe and the spirit of God moved upon the water.”

Andrewes’ version reads, “In the beginning God created the Heaven, and the Earth, And the earth was without forme and voyd, and darknesse was upon the face of the deepe: and the Spirit of God mooved upon the face of the waters.”

The sense is very much the same but Andrewes includes the definite articles before heaven and earth in his desire to adhere as closely as possible to the style of the Hebrew original. The effect of the whole is less racy but more stately, in a version that was after all designed to be read and heard in public.

The care taken over the initial translations and then the process of

revision was prodigious.

In 1610 there were nine months of daily meetings at Stationers’ Hall just opposite the palace of the Bishop of London which in those days abutted the North West corner of St Paul’s. The strictly Calvinist bishop, George Abbot, took a close personal interest in proceedings as had his predecessor Thomas Ravis. They had both served on the Second Oxford Company which was responsible for the New Testament Gospels; the Acts of the Apostles and one of the most controversial texts, the Book of Revelation.

Finally in 1611 the finished product was sent to the Royal Printer, Robert Barker. The first edition of the King James Version was printed in Northumberland House near Aldersgate. Because it was a revision, not a new work, it was not entered in the register of the Stationers’ Company.

The work was done in haste and teems with misprints easier to understand and forgive if you have ever struggled to read the black letter gothic type face which was used. In the 1612 study edition yet another inaccuracy was introduced in the text of Psalm CXIX: 161 which reads, “Printers have persecuted me without a cause”. The most notorious error appeared in the edition of 1631. The negative was removed from the Seventh Commandment in Exodus XX, and

this made adultery compulsory.

The King James Version was not an immediate best seller. For one thing the Geneva version continued to be printed in its easy-to read roman type face. There were about 70 editions of the Geneva Bible produced between 1560 and 1640, and it is estimated that about a half a million copies were sold in England alone. When it was discouraged by authority, false imprints were used on the title pages to suggest overseas provenance or that they were old editions. Andrewes, however, continued to use the Geneva Version in his own preaching and so did William Laud until the late 1620's.

But it was Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury who succeeded in leaving the field clear for the King James Bible by energetic efforts to ban the importation of better printed and cheaper foreign bibles, on the plea of protecting the domestic printing and publishing trade. By 1644 there were only King James Versions available for sale, and it became simply "The Holy Bible" – there was no other.

The King James version, however, attained this status partly because of the success of the King's intention to detach the translation he commissioned from the taint of religious polemic at a time when he still hoped that a great Council could be assembled to bring peace and repair the unity of Christendom. The panel of translators

contained doughty puritans like Bishop Miles Smith himself, with whose *Letter from the Translators to the Reader* we began. He notoriously clashed with Laud when they were respectively Bishop and Dean of Gloucester. The sermon at Smith's funeral extolled the late bishop's opposition to "papists, Arminians, and carnal gospellers." The bible which he helped to translate was not intimately bound up with the Laudian regime and did not share its fate. It was the fruit of a reign in which tensions in the English Church had not developed into an overt breach.

Hence it was that the version exported to the nascent English speaking colonies in the New World was that of King James. In America the King James Version has preserved an iconic status. Our recent guest, Barack Obama, swore the presidential oath on the bible Abraham Lincoln used at his inauguration in 1861. Jimmy Carter and George Bush Senior used George Washington's copy which he in turn had used in 1789.

The text was not frozen, however, and over the next two hundred years there were a host of detailed revisions.

The most important work was done in the second half of the eighteenth century by Francis Sawyer Parris in Cambridge and the more celebrated Benjamin Blayney of Oxford, whose edition of

1769 incorporated thousands of detailed changes and became the basis for subsequent editions. His abandonment of capital letters except for proper names had an impact on English usage which gradually lost the capacity, still possible in German, of introducing subtle emphases by capitalisation.

Less influential was *The Elegant Version* published in 1768. In Luke IX: 33 overawed by the transfiguration Peter elegantly says, “Oh Sir! What a delectable residence we might establish here”.

With the work of the Bible Societies established in the early nineteenth century and the spread of English throughout the world, the bible created in Jacobean England, a second rate power lying on the edge of the Continent of Europe whose scholars had to use Latin if they were to communicate beyond our shores, became the most printed text in history.

The development of Biblical scholarship, however, and the discovery of manuscripts not available to the Jacobean translators, ignited controversy in the second half of the century about the adequacy of the “Textus Receptus” on which the King James Version is based. This text was derived from mediaeval Byzantine manuscripts, but with the discovery of earlier manuscripts – notably the Codex Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus purloined by Tischendorf

from the Monastery of St Catherine in the Sinai desert – a number of variant readings were identified. The most sensational finding was that the earliest versions of St Mark’s Gospel lacked the final resurrection appearances described in XVI verses 9-20. Bishop Westcott, a Canon of Westminster before being appointed as Bishop of Durham, collaborated with the Irish scholar Hort in editing a Greek Text revised to incorporate the latest research. This was the basis for the Revised Version of 1881.

There was immense controversy. Philip Schaff, the American biblical scholar, illustrated the resistance to the attempt to supplant the King James Bible by claiming that “even in the enlightened state of Massachusetts, a pious deacon is reported to have opposed the revision of 1881 with the conclusive argument – If St James’s Version was good enough for St Paul, it is good enough for me.”

But of course the use of the best possible contemporary scholarship and the accuracy of the resulting translation is a very important matter. It is right to pay tribute to the industry and profound learning of the biblical scholars of our own day.

Even when the text is stable, translation is not an exact science and Miles Smith in his prefatory letter quotes St Augustine as saying that “variety of translations is profitable for the finding out of the sense

of the scriptures”. It is not desirable that we should return to one single translation of Holy Scripture, but we should not assume that just because translations are later in time they are uniformly superior.

At a recent bishops’ meeting we were divided into groups and set to study the first chapter of the Epistle of St James in a modern translation. Miles Smith’s successor as Bishop of Gloucester confessed to some unease about the translation in verse 6 “he must believe and not doubt because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind”. As an intellectual concept of course “doubt” can be a contribution to arriving at a firmer and more mature faith, and it was helpful to note that the Authorised Version had an equally plausible rendering of the Greek which shone a different and arguably clearer light upon the text: “ask in faith nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed.”

The language of the King James Version was never the language of the street. The project was to revise previous versions, some of them already old, and not to begin *de novo*. The language is slightly archaic and formal, reflecting the scholarly tastes of the revisers, although determination to keep close to the Hebrew and Greek originals saved the biblical text from the inhorn terms which

abound in Miles Smith’s own preface. He describes scripture as “a panary of wholesome food against fenowed traditions; a physion’s shop [St Basil calleth it] of preservatives against poisoned heresies; a pandect of profitable laws against rebellious spirits” etc.

The translation for which he was partly responsible is eminently more accessible than his own writing to modern readers and more understandable than much of Shakespeare. The King James Version created a special form of English – religious English heavily influenced by the constructions of the biblical languages. By being re-read countless times over the centuries it has kept much of its vocabulary current. As David Norton has pointed out, the Authorised Version has proved to be a species of Noah’s Ark for words. “Unwittingly” for example was in common usage until about 1630 when it fell into desuetude. Its presence in the AV led to its resurrection after 1815.

Much nonsense has been talked about the alleged incomprehensibility of the AV. The tens of thousands who listened to Martin Luther King’s speech at the great civil rights march in Washington did not find that his rhetoric, derived from the prophet Isaiah in the King James Version, jarred – it was neither obscure nor lacking in contemporary resonance.

There is of course a place for the demotic in conveying biblical teaching and there is no denying that language has changed and that we have changed over the past four hundred years, but the evidence of huge appreciation of the King James Bible in this quatercentenary year should not be ignored.

Since the First World War, and even more so after the end of the misleading post war revival of the Church in the 1950's, the Bible has been more and more edited out of political discourse and increasingly also expelled from school. In an orgy of post-imperial self-loathing, cultural amnesia was seen to be a gateway to a kinder and more tolerant world. In these conditions it seemed plausible to assert that the defection of so many people from the Church of England could be remedied by updating the language of the bible and the liturgy. Anybody who dissented was suspected of a superficial preference for the jewel casket to the spiritual treasure inside.

As some of the contemporary histories have chronicled, it is true that by the second half of the eighteenth century the King James Version came to be regarded with reverence as a model of English prose even by those who had abandoned orthodox faith. Mary Woolstonecraft, for example, in her *Female Reader* of 1789 uses the AV as an exemplar of "a pure and simple style". She was an early

example of a phenomenon which is common in our own time. Melvin Bragg's powerful TV programme for example was accompanied by a rather wistful confession that he could no longer believe as he once did. The 2011 Trust has also been successful in securing the endorsement of Richard Dawkins. For some this gives the game away and points to a divorce between a literary and a religious reverence for the bible of 1611.

Some clergy have reacted with hostility to this phenomenon and up and down the land especially at Christmas time there are fussikins, oft times reported to the bishop, as incumbents attempt to frustrate the desire of many of those who read at Carol Services to use the old version.

There was a fascinating example of the lingering antipathy to our cultural and religious inheritance in the reaction to the Royal Wedding in Westminster Abbey. In the acres of commentary in the secular press there was no criticism of the couple's decision to use the traditional language form of the service. Then a week later the Church Times published letters from clergy deploring the "archaic order" and expressing exasperation "that the language of the liturgy remained buried in the past" and "that once again the opportunity to present the church in a more up to date way was missed".

Then a week later another clergyman wrote to point out that the three who had decried the “stuffy service” were born respectively in 1960, 1951 and 1937. The royal couple [born 1982] had chosen the service and the author of the letter [born 1955] suggested that we should allow the young people their voice in church since “it would appear that nothing dates so rapidly as yesterday’s modernity”.

I have no desire to promote a cult of quaintness or dwell in the realm of gadzookery, but the power of the Authorised Version to connect with many of those who find the ordinary diet of the church banal should not be ignored. Difficulty of comprehension is a superficial explanation for diminished engagement with the Bible. Serious engagement is what is required, not an easy read under the mistaken impression that the library of books assembled in the Bible fits easily into a modern frame of reference. A defamiliarising strategy is sometimes necessary to enable the Bible to communicate in its own powerful voice. “For the word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two edged sword ... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

The philosopher John Gray in an article in the New Statesman argued that “the return of religion as a pivotal factor in politics and war is one of the defining features of the age, and it is time that Paine, Marx and the other secular prophets were gently shelved in

the stacks ... the books that have most formed the past and are sure also to shape the future are the central texts of the world religions.”

Political discourse and analysis has been confined to narrow channels in a stultifying recital of economic indicators. Just how one-dimensional our view of the world has become was revealed by the visit of a senior Chinese Communist official at the time of the Beijing Olympics. We had been introduced by a mutual friend and despite the urgings of his Foreign Office minder that he should move on he plied me with questions about Christian faith, the state and society prefaced by a stern injunction, “Don’t try to deceive me, I have read the New Testament.” In a very pragmatic Chinese way he acknowledged that every society needed spiritual glue and a shared moral compass. He was wondering whether Christians might be useful allies at a time when there were signs of fragmentation in China.

In the beginning, according to the Bible, “God created man in his own image”. It is this idea which has done more than any other to provide a foundation for human dignity and equality, and it is no accident that the cultures which have developed these notions have grown out of Judaeo-Christian soil and a biblical world view.

The great twentieth century Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, said

that he believed “in the ethics of Christianity but not the mumbo jumbo”. One of the questions for the twenty-first century is whether the ethics have a sustainable foundation without what Attlee describes as the “mumbo jumbo”.

Professor Nicholas Wolterstorff of Yale argues in a recent book *Justice Rights and Wrongs* (2008) that it is not possible. Inalienable and equitable rights were not possible within the accepted moral framework of the ancient world. Full and equal rights in democratic Athens, for example, were confined to adult, male, free-born citizens. The decision of the Christian ecclesia (the community of the church) from the beginning to enrol women, slaves and children in the new Israel was seen as deeply subversive.

Even the modern Kantian approach grounded in our rational capacities raises difficult questions about the status of those whose rational faculties are undeveloped or impaired. Professor Wolterstorff argues that only the uniquely Christian idea that “God loves equally and permanently each and every creature who bears the imago dei” provides a sufficient grounding for human rights.

Nick Spencer, in the book I have already cited, examines the way in which John Locke approached the subject of toleration using biblical categories. For many contemporary Westerners, religion is the

antithesis of tolerance and there are many appalling historical examples to support such a judgement. But we are having to re-open the debate on the basis and limits of tolerance in a free society, and re-engagement with biblical material could give depth and perspective to the discussion.

I would argue that Christians must be tolerant not because we believe so little about God but because we believe so much about God who so loved the world that he came in the form of a servant to love the loveless into loving. But politically toleration is far from a self evident virtue when you are faced with lethal apocalyptic terrorism.

This is not to argue for a “Bible-says-it-all-politics” which has been out of fashion since our disastrous flirtation with it 350 years ago. It is simply to recognise that all politics rest on assumptions, myths if you like, properly understood not as fairy tales but as archetypal stories about the human condition. Both our economic activity and our political life must have ground beneath them. Human beings are not just blind globs of idling protoplasm, but we are creatures with a name who live in a world of symbols and of dreams and not merely matter.

One thing however is certain. Every successful attempt to re-

energise and re-imagine the church is fed by re-engaging with Scripture, and then as Gregory the Great said “Scripture grows with its readers”.

The Christians in the New Testament used a venerable translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Their bible, the Septuagint, was over three hundred years old by the time St John set down his gospel. I hope that the celebration this year of our four hundred year old bible might make some contribution to releasing the energy of the scriptures to fertilise our rather one dimensional understanding of our destiny as a nation and as a human race.

We should thank God for all the work that has been done to recover the intentions of those who composed the various books of the Bible. Meaning, however, embraces the interaction of the text and the various communities of interpretation who have engaged with it.

Each text has a trajectory as well as an inception. Reception of biblical material in our own contemporary context exemplifies the power of the Spirit of God to make all things new.

The biblical text was not made as material for analysis in the study like an autopsy on a corpse. Rather the bible is to be re-membered; that is re-actualised in the life of the community.

We can see this process at work in the New Testament. The first Testament is not abolished by the second but re-interpreted and, Christians would say, fulfilled.

Interpretation which places all the emphasis on the author’s intentions tends to a univocal account of biblical truth. An interpretation attentive to the history of reception will be aware of the irreducible “plurivocity” of the text, which like God himself is ancient but always fresh.

To make authentic contact with the biblical text it is necessary to appreciate a discourse that is not meant to be scientifically descriptive or explanatory, and one that is frequently not even argumentative, apologetic or dogmatic. The metaphorical language of poetry may be the nearest secular equivalent, and we are fortunate to have a living translation, not a museum piece, which does justice to this truth.

One of the most urgent tasks in this historical period, when as the title of a book co-authored by the Editor of the Economist suggests “God is Back”, is to find ways in which the great world traditions of faith can come to appreciate one another’s richness without embracing some lowest common denominator syncretism.

Professor David Ford has argued that inter-religious understanding seeks wisdom in three ways:

Going deeper into the faiths of others;

Deeper into one's own faith;

Deeper into understanding the Common Good.

Jewish scholars in the United States pioneered a fruitful methodology to achieve these ends. They committed themselves to re-reading the classic texts in the light of the Shoah, while responding critically and constructively to modernity and engaging with people of other faiths in a world in which faiths are accessible to one another in an unprecedented way.

Their initiative has given birth to a movement called scriptural reasoning. Scriptural reasoning, as Professor Ford describes it and as I have experienced it, is an example of reverent reading rather than utilitarian reading. It educates participants who are at present mainly Jews, Muslims and Christians, imaginatively, intellectually and relationally in order to make a richer contribution to this century of huge promise and great peril for the human race.

I began with the question of whether the events of this quatercentenary year will prove to be a vast ceremonious funeral service for the King James Version, or an opportunity to re-engage

with a text which has from time to time inspired liberation struggles, while at other times it has given coherence and a moral compass to the various political and social experiments of the English speaking peoples. I hope that this year will be but the prelude to a determined attempt to reacquaint the young with a text which has been one of the major influences on the way we are now. The Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks, puts it thus: "The texts a culture teaches its children shape their landscape of literacy, their horizons of aspiration. People who can quote the Bible walk tall. They sing with the tongues of poets; walk with the wisdom of Solomon; find solace in the soul music of the Psalms; and hope in the blazing visions of the prophets. In an age of blogs and tweets, the King James translation remains the Beethoven of the soul; the imperishable music of spiritual grandeur."

We end where we began, with Miles Smith. "*It remaineth that we commend thee to God and to the Spirit of his grace which is able to build further than we can ask or think. He removeth the scales from our eyes, the veil from our hearts, opening our wits that we may understand his word, enlarging our hearts, yea correcting our affections, that we may love it above gold and silver, yea that we may love it to the end.*"

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