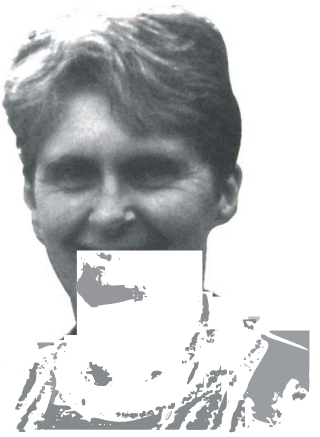

The State of the Bible in State Schools

by Terence Copley and Heather Savini

A number of surveys in recent years have suggested that the Bible is read less often and by fewer people than in previous generations with which a comparison may be drawn. The majority of adults have a limited knowledge of the contents of the Bible and even regular churchgoers are less familiar with the Bible than one might expect. Against this background teachers are required to teach Religious Education in schools, and it is almost inevitable that they will be required at some point to include reference to the Bible. Terence Copley and Heather Savini describe the influences which have led to the current state of the Bible in schools and identify strategies used by the Biblos project to enable the more effective teaching and learning of the Bible.

Terence Copley is Professor of Religious Education at the University of Exeter and directs the Biblos Project. His latest book, Spirituality in the State School, will be published by the University of Exeter Press in 1999.

Heather Savini is a former secondary school Deputy Headteacher who lectures part-time at the University of Exeter and is a research associate in the Biblos Project team.

Memories

Lots of adults in the 40+ age bracket have memories, many of them unpleasant, of encountering the Bible at school in assemblies or in lessons. It may have been presented without any introduction or explanation, or any of the culture clues that one would expect in introducing a 2000-year-old collection of documents to children. Or it may have been presented as non-negotiable, the book one was not allowed to question in a society in which increasingly children were encouraged to question everything and in which scepticism, from the late 1950s, began to take on the role of a faith. Or the Bible may have been presented by teachers who were not themselves enthused by it and therefore easily made it dull for children. Teachers often told children they "had to do it", a rather unconvincing reason for many children. For a smaller group of adults, childhood memories of the Bible in school may have been different, as an exciting and inspiring collection of literature that led them on to

further study or even faith commitment as adults. Survey evidence suggests that such children were in a minority; the bored, off-put ones were in the majority.

Research into the Bible in school

In fact from as early as the 1930s and consistently from then on, research evidence was revealing that children were not favourably disposed towards the Bible teaching they were receiving in school. They felt it was being used to "get at" them and they felt that those teaching it were confronting them with a stark choice: believe it, literally, or not. With that choice and with no understanding that there are more sorts of truth than merely literal, many children decided not to believe and discarded the Bible for no more weighty reason than that their science teachers were telling them that the world could not have been created in six days or that they had not personally seen anyone walk on water. The Second World War interrupted the research and led to a desire by MPs framing the Education Act to continue to teach the Bible as a foundation stone of western civilisation in contrast to the Nazified national curriculum in Germany. The Bible was also seen as an ecumenical lowest common denominator between the denominations, whose rivalry in education had caused major problems from Victorian times almost up to the 1944 Education Act. With this background, the Bible was seen as the only thing the new compulsory agreed syllabuses for use in state schools could agree on.

So the 1930s research into what children thought about it was largely forgotten until the 1960s and the work of Richard Acland, Harold Loukes and Ronald Goldman brought to the attention of teachers and interested partners in education, like churches, that Bible teaching was failing: by the end of compulsory schooling children had only the haziest factual knowledge of the Bible (e.g. they thought Jesus was born in Jerusalem or that Paul was the first king of Israel or that "Moseph" led the Hebrews out of Egypt) and they disliked it into the bargain. It seemed to some researchers odd to teach a living religion, Christianity, entirely through past events, and those only as recorded in the Bible. The result of all this was that school RE began to turn away from Bible-based syllabuses and start to explore Christianity in contemporary social issues. This was happening in parallel with the massive decline in the percentage of British children attending Sunday Schools: the UK was becoming less Christian in the sense of less churchgoing. At the same time Christianity was being pushed further out of national life and the final symbol of this was when a Conservative government, traditional supporters of church and state, abolished restrictions on Sunday trading in the early 1990s demolishing what was left of the Victorian protection of a day for religious observance and recreation for shop workers. By the 1970s the significant presence of religions other than Christianity in the UK had led to a shift further into teaching world religions. It was an unpalatable truth for many Christians that children found the study of other religions far more interesting than the old diet of Bible teaching. The tendency in world religions syllabuses was to present the Bible briefly in an RE teaching scheme about Sacred Writings, alongside the Torah, the Quran, etc: in other words to describe what it was, rather than to enter its pages.

The end of the Bible in school?

Was the Bible the real problem, or had it merely been badly taught? If Christianity couldn't be taught and understood simply by teaching the Bible, could it be taught adequately without it? That was a question that RE has only just begun to face. Are children naturally hostile to the Bible? Is the experience of children in Sunday School with the Bible the same as that in the classroom? Are children in "other religions" hostile to being taught their holy books? Is it possible to teach the Bible in a school classroom where there are children from different religions and none without offending anybody (or, more likely, anybody's parents!)? Moreover in an age in which far fewer people have contacts with churches, is the UK heading towards biblical illiteracy? Are large numbers of people dismissing the Bible as irrelevant without having read any of it? And, a harder question for the churches, are Christians themselves in danger of becoming biblically illiterate, especially outside the "Bible churches", denominations which have emphasised the centrality of the Bible, although sometimes at the expense of concentrating on a particular interpretation of it?

The hidden Bible

Not many children or adults quickly recognise the role of the Bible even in the English language. Bible quiz questions reveal a very low knowledge of its contents. Yet in casual reading of advertisements and newspapers in the last six months a Biblos team member spotted the following phrases: "the name, not the number, of the beast" (article on cloning Dolly the sheep), "Reid, the writing on the wall" (article on Bob Reid of Sears), "the new Jezebels" (fashion article), "Maybe this is what you did with apples in the beginning" (cider advert), "In the beginning there was the pencil" (Microsoft advert), "Go the extra mile" (car rental advert), "Davids wanted" (advert for microprocessor company). These samples were random. No formal survey was being conducted. See how many you can spot in a three-month period! It seems that plenty of biblical phrases are around, sometimes being used by people quite unaware of their original context.

Biblos

The University of Exeter School of Education, in association with Bible Society and generously supported by the London Bible House Fund and others, has devised a research project which is still ongoing. It aims not to go over the old ground simply of surveys of attitudes to Bible teaching, but to try to find new and effective ways to do it and then evaluate them. We consulted Jewish and Christian scholars about their understanding of biblical narrative. We consulted psychologists and professional writ-

ers and dramatists about their understanding of the nature and role of story in human life. We decided to try to identify key biblical themes and key narratives, not necessarily the well-worn ones, that might lead young people into a dialogue with the text. We wanted young people to be active rather than passive in "meeting" the narrative and to enter into it with background information and asking the right questions: what is it trying to say? About its theme? About people? About God? How does this correspond with my beliefs and experience?

We decided to test our ideas in selected schools in Ealing and Devon in order to get a wide range of pupil background and to have the benefits of working in urban and rural settings. We tried to identify themes which were fair to the great themes of the Bible but avoided language which children might find technical or difficult or "religious" in the sense of unrelated to what they think daily life is all about (atonement, covenant, sacrifice, etc). We wanted the themes to "bridge" the biblical narrative and its experience and the daily lives of children. In the end we came up with three key themes: Destiny, Encounter and Vulnerability. Young children and adolescents certainly experience these: their encounters as they grow up, their sense of being vulnerable and their own fears and aspirations about their personal destiny. The early classroom trialling of materials developed by members of the project team rapidly confirmed the ready interest of children in these areas.

Literal or Liberal?

From early Christian times there has been a lively, sometimes explosive, debate about the interpretation of the Bible. Nearly any Lambeth Conference will provide evidence. Who is right and which interpretation should be taught when the Bible is used in RE in the state school? The answer has to lie in the nature of education itself rather than in a disputed "right" answer about how to interpret the Bible. Education is not about telling people what to believe, but informing them and urging them to join the debate and seek truth for themselves. This is not a recipe for relativism: "Any dream will do" as the Joseph musical has it. The Bible is quite clear that any dream will not do. What it means is that the teacher has to be helped to present different interpretations with skill, understanding and sympathy. The teacher does not have to short-circuit the richness of the debate by deciding for the child and presenting a one-sided view, or by deciding not to present any view – a sort of silent literalism, allowing only a "believe it or not" option. Such a "simplification" is often a caricature of the people and events in the Bible. The question children should be encouraged to ask is not "Is the Bible true?", which is in some ways like the question "Are vitamins left-handed?" but "What is the truth in the Bible?", "What sort of truths are there?"

What Biblos found

The first report of Biblos, *Echo of Angels*, is due to appear late this year. But some of the findings are released early here for readers of *TransMission*!

Having identified our three themes: Destiny, Encounter and Vulnerability, the project team devised approaches and materials for teaching these themes from both Testaments in schools in Key Stages 2 and 3 (juniors and lower secondary). We found story to be not only a time-honoured teaching device, but one suited to all ages and abilities. But it is no good simply to tell the story (or worse, read it) and expect it to be understood. The child has to be provided with sufficient "culture clues" to enable them to see the story in its original context. Otherwise, torn out of their origins, Bible stories can be turned into secular morals (the victim in the narrative of the Good Samaritan was merely beaten by robbers but he has since been murdered many times in school assemblies) or else lifted into a culture that distorts them (Abraham can be made to look as if he is about to indulge in ritual child abuse). Without help with presentation, some teachers edit God out of the stories, because they are unsure what their own beliefs are, or because they think "God" is too difficult for children, or because "God" is seen as divisive since some children "believe" in God and some do not. The Biblos team confirmed their suspicion that the materials provided for teachers are probably more important even than the materials for children, especially in the primary school where the teacher will almost certainly not be an RE specialist. We tried to show in our sample materials how "God" can be handled sensitively and that to remove "God" from the biblical account is to destroy its centre and purpose. When "God" is replaced by Do-goodery, the Bible is trivialised.

This does not mean that teachers working with Biblos have been encouraged to insist that children should "believe in" God or that if they are from a religion other than Christianity that they should adopt a Christian view of God instead of their own. The Bible for Christians contains the Bible for Jews and deals with some Islamic prophets. It is bigger than one religion. We have kept this in view. But we have sought to be fair to the biblical narrative and show that God is at the centre of the experiences presented by the writers. It is the encounter with God in the context of the vulnerability of humankind and the aftermath that shapes the destiny of humankind again and again in its pages. That is what we want children to understand and compare to their own experience. Bible understanding has replaced Bible knowledge as a key aim. We want children not to half-digest the theology of others, but to start to theologise for themselves. At that point in the state school the role of the RE teacher has ended. A choice for or against faith commitment of any sort is the province of the child, their family and the faith community (if any) in which the child is growing up. What the RE teacher can hope to have done is to present rather than misrepresent the Bible, to open up different options for interpretation, and to help the child to start to see why the Bible has remained the most formative book in the western world. A generation of children who have had little or no biblical study within RE

might see this more clearly than their parents, as our research found that many of them were coming fresh to biblical narratives. It was some of their teachers who had the hang ups.

How can churches help?

Churches and other faith communities and state schools have distinctive and different roles, with some common ground. It is no part of a state school's job to try to recruit for or against any particular faith but to present accurately and interestingly every faith required to be taught in the legally-binding agreed syllabus for RE. It is a very real and central part of a faith community's role to welcome and nurture children and prepare them to be, or to consider becoming, committed adult members of that faith community. But churches and schools have a shared interest in children understanding and making informed judgments rather than falling back on a mixture of prejudices and ignorance.

Within schools where the RE is strong, a quite sophisticated interest in religion and spiritual issues is being developed among children. One measure of this is in external examination entries, but there are others. There is still a long way to go to make this sophisticated interest universal: around 9,000 candidates per annum sit "A" Level Religious Studies compared to 40,000 (History) and 26,000 (Sociology). The opportunity to sit RS is not provided in many sixth form centres and tertiary colleges so RS does not have the proverbial "level playing field" enjoyed by its rival subjects. This makes its total more impressive. Concerned parents (and pupils) should be pressing for this provision in their sixth form or college. Many of the children who develop a strong personal and academic interest in religion and spirituality as a result of RE lessons have no connection at all with any organised religion, yet sometimes faith communities bemoan the fact that they cannot reach the young. There must be scope for dialogue there.

Here are some practical ways in which members of faith communities might help state school RE:

- If invited into a school to be interviewed as part of a course in RE, be prepared to read a short biblical passage that has meant a lot to you and talk about it rather than lecture the children about the Bible. Don't assume they'll know any of it!
- Churches and other faith communities are represented by legal right on Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs) and if you are interested in or want to influence syllabuses, membership of a SACRE group is the route; your denomination at diocesan or area level will be represented.
- Don't get involved in detailed syllabus discussions, except through a SACRE, as it's time wasted: instead press to make sure RE in the school or tertiary college you know gets a fair time allocation alongside National Curriculum subjects (the famous House of Lords debate about RE in 1988 was largely sidelined into arguing about the content of RE instead of making sure that RE was happening at all in some schools).
- Remember that in a world religions RE syllabus, work on the Bible takes place within the study of Christianity and so the time allocated will be a percentage (Bible) of a percentage (Christianity) of 5% (the minimum time allocation for RE). The quality of what is taught is therefore critical in so short a quantity of classroom time.
- If you are invited to speak at or help to lead collective worship ("assemblies"), remember that children are like adults in that they don't like to be preached at, but they do like to enter into stories and join in the debate: what might she have done, why do you think he did this, why is God presented like this?
- In some schools where there is an existing relationship between local churches and faith communities, the faith community representatives might be able to help teachers to identify and present biblical narratives along with their culture clues: in other words, there may be people in the faith community who can be a resource for the teacher for consultation at the lesson planning stage. This might uncover a lot of people who would tremble at presenting something to a class themselves, but who would be delighted to help the teacher prepare and understand the material.
- OFSTED reports (or in church voluntary aided schools, Section 23 reports) are required to assess RE as part of whole school inspection. Do you know what the latest report on the school you are interested in said about the RE teaching and provision? It might show how links with local faith communities could help. Report summaries are available from the school and from the Worldwide Web. If no contacts exist between local faith communities and local RE, perhaps you can help to initiate some: RE needs faith communities as living exemplars of the ongoing influence of the Bible and commitment to its teaching; faith communities need RE to present their commitment and values (along with the different commitments of other people) fairly and attractively to young people who would never otherwise even hear about them.

RE and faith communities need each other. Meanwhile the Bible may be making a comeback in RE, but like all the best come-backs, it will not be by trying to put the clock back and go back to what Bible teaching in state schools was like twenty or thirty or forty years ago. It will need new skins. Funny, that phrase sounds familiar...