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Normativity of the Future

Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective

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with

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Biblical anthropology, especially that of a Catholic bent, is based on the conviction that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27), and original sin did not destroy this dignity. Therefore biblical anthropology supports the hope that, in the process of socialization and education, young people will usually learn elements in order to participate actively in the hermeneutical learning process.

Being fundamentally of a social nature, biblical anthropology also backs a fundamental trust in the collective wisdom of small communities and groups. It is this trust that lies at the foundation of hermeneutical learning processes which take the class group as their starting point. Structures that respect the basic needs of every person as individuals and as community members as well as open and honest communication are the best conditions for bringing out the best in people and for reducing the inclination toward evil. Hermeneutical learning processes are community-based. This implies that social control and group pressure, while carrying dangers of their own, make an important contribution towards preventing extremes.

Despite the undeniable risks involved in dialogical approaches and keeping in mind that they will only work when certain preconditions are fulfilled, we are convinced, both in regard to our interaction with the Sacred Text and in regard to teaching, they are viable options. Dialogical approaches are not, *per se*, the destruction of the Christian religious tradition, but they are the implementation of what this tradition ultimately calls for. Therefore, instead of lamenting their dangers and risks, we need to contribute all we can to help create the conditions of possibility needed for their successful implementation.

The Role of the Bible in Religious Education Reconsidered
Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible

Didier Pollefeyt & Reimund Bieringer

> "If our thoughts are not God's thoughts, if there is a strange and alien quality to the message of the scripture, then relevance is not the issue: the address is the issue. The factual address of the New Testament cannot be known by a reliance upon the past, since the fact of faith is that the kingdom of God always breaks in upon this present age through the death and resurrection of Christ; this inbreaking always comes from God's future to shatter and rebuild the meaning of our present."[1]

Recent research in primary and secondary schools in various European countries has shown a sharp decrease in interest for the Bible in religious education.[2] As a consequence of this, and combined with many religious and nonreligious frames of reference, the Bible is no longer taken for granted as the foundation of religious education. Moreover, the gap between biblical culture and contemporary culture is widening to such an extent that the relevance of the Bible for current education is increasingly put into question. Teachers of religion are confronted with the disinterest of their students when they ask them to turn to their Bibles, let alone when texts are read and analyzed in class.[3] In addition, even positively disposed listeners today frequently experience difficulties when listening to certain biblical passages. Teachers of the Bible are frequently confronted by their students with problematic passages. If reduced to such a selection of passages, it becomes virtually impossible to work with the Bible. From the perspective of modern readers, the Bible is seen by many as supporting patriarchy, anti-Judaism, slavery, anthropocentrism, violence, or intolerance. These perceived difficulties are the symptoms of

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer & David McI Gracie (eds.), *Meditating on the Word* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2000) 45.

[2] Christine Reents, "'Bibel weg – hat kein 'n Zweck!'? Zwölf Argumente und zwölf Gegenargumente," *Bibeldidaktik in der Postmoderne.* FS Klaus Wegenast, ed. Godwin Lämmermann, *et al.* (Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln: Kohlhammer, 1999) 337-344.

[3] Horst K. Berg, *Grundriss der Bibeldidaktik: Konzepte – Modelle – Methoden*, Handbuch des Biblischen Unterrichts, 2 (München: Kösel, 1993) 174-175 ("Relevanzverlust").

a deeper crisis and point to fundamental problems for practical theology in dealing with questions related to revelation, authority, identity, and religious education.

While there may be many problems with communicating the biblical message in the contemporary context, from the perspective of theology and religious pedagogy we cannot do without the Bible. Christianity, like Judaism, is a religion of the book, in which God speaks to the people through the word. Christian religious pedagogy is confronted with the question how to communicate the biblical message in today's context. However, teachers of religion often express their uncertainty about how to communicate faith with the help of the Bible. Frequently, their own theological and, more particularly, exegetical formation is experienced as being of little help in the realization of this task.

In this study we analyze the causes of this uneasiness with the Bible and suggest ways of restoring the relevance of teaching the Bible in a postmodern context. After analyzing the causes of the problem, an alternative approach is presented that is designed to help make the Bible relevant. The first cause to be discussed is biblical fundamentalism. We present the literal meaning of the Bible as a developmental stage of every human person. Problems arise when people refuse to grow beyond this stage or when, not having had the opportunity to learn about alternative approaches, they reject the Bible together with the fundamentalist approach. The second cause of the problems in teaching the Bible today is called 'scientific' fundamentalism. This refers to a specific way of using the historical-critical method that accepts nothing but its own methodology as a hermeneutic approach and ends up with a fundamentalist reading of its own research results. The third cause of the problem is the widespread moralizing use of the biblical message. This approach tends to reduce the biblical message to its ethical dimension and to reduce the ethical dimension to moralizing. In the fourth section, we present the opportunities and dangers presented by the digitalization of the biblical text. While we acknowledge that the inherent dangers metioned in the three preceding sections can all find their way into the digital presentation of the Bible, we nevertheless recognize the great opportunities that the new media provide in making an approach to the Bible more dynamic and interactive. In the final section, we present an alternative model. We propose an understanding of the Bible and its genesis as witness to the ongoing dialogue between God and human persons in community. With the writing of the last word of the Bible and the closing of the canon, revelation has not come to its end. Reading the Bible does

not excuse us from having to enter into a personal relationship with God. The Bible itself leaves much room for creative interpretation and invites critical dialogue. As a criterion for the reading of the Bible, we propose the question whether a reading opens up a future for all or whether it helps some gain advantages at the cost of others. We are convinced that the Bible will have a future if its reading and interpretation enables people to participate in building a future that is according to God's design.

1. The Literal Meaning of the Text as Locus of Revelation

Fundamentalist readings of the Bible claim that the Bible, seen as the infallible expression of God's word, has to be read literally down to the last detail. Biblical fundamentalism opposes the idea that God's word is being expressed by people who had only limited possibilities and resources. The Bible is treated as if God dictated the entire book word by word. The position expressed in a biblical text is uncritically accepted as the truth, without any awareness that biblical texts speak from the point of view of their human authors. Moreover, fundamentalism uncritically embraces the archaic mythology and cosmology of the Bible, as if we were dealing here with historical facts expressed in scientific language. This makes a broader understanding of the relationship between biblical culture and contemporary faith difficult, if not impossible.[4]

Unfortunately many contemporaries have only known a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. This leads even positively disposed people to develop an aversion to the Bible. The rejection of fundamentalism and the rejection of the Bible go hand in hand. The ever more complex postmodern world seems increasingly removed from the world of the Bible. The gradual developments since the Industrial Revolution in particular have estranged our world from the world of the Bible.[5] In addition, historical-critical studies have more forcefully brought to mind the widening historical gap[6] between then and now. Weary of such estrangement,

[4] See Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Origins* 23 (1993) 498-524, esp. 509-510.

[5] Ingo Baldermann, *Einführung in die Biblische Didaktik* (Darmstadt: Primus, 1996) 39.

[6] The idea of a "garstiger Graben" is connected with Gotthold E. Lessing, "Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft," *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert, part 8 (München: Hanser; 1979) 9-14, 12. Lessing spoke about a terrible gap between "notwendiger Vernunftwahrheit" and "zufälligen Geschichtswahrheiten."

some contemporaries brush aside all historical and contextual considerations. In their longing for security, albeit false, they display a surprising propensity to expect from the Bible ready-made and unambiguous answers to all their existential questions.

The consequences of 'hard-line fundamentalism' are well-known. Specific biblical passages are used in order to legitimize certain ideologies and unjust social practices, such as racism, anti-Judaism, or discrimination against women. There is, however, also a mild form of biblical fundamentalism that we frequently meet and of which we also find ourselves guilty at times. We easily fall prey to this kind of reading of the Bible whenever we find support for our own strong convictions in a verse or passage of Scripture. Then we tend to quote isolated verses in support of our own views ("Does not the Bible say that...?"). Once in a while, we are all "anonymous" fundamentalists, especially when this use of the Bible suits our purposes. Implicitly, biblical words are then considered to be the unmediated revelation of God's will with no need of interpretation. Such 'mild fundamentalism' can quickly turn into relativism when people become aware of the contradictions that are found in the Bible. They easily conclude, "You can prove anything with the Bible, and thus it is of no use." A teacher of religion might be tempted to counter a Bible quotation with which a student tries to prove a point by quoting a biblical text that says the opposite. This will either reinforce the polarized positions or lead the student to relativism and disinterest.

A special form of this 'mild fundamentalism' is what we might call 'atheist biblical fundamentalism'. Self-professed atheists in the classroom carefully select Bible verses. On the assumption that a literal reading is the only possible reading, they use these verses to point to contradictions in the Christian message or even ridicule it. Confronted with this kind of seemingly 'self-evident fundamentalism' of unbelieving as well as believing students, teachers of religion face a dilemma. If they respond by introducing the students to non-fundamentalist ways of reading the Bible, they run the risk of being accused of apologetics, trying to save the Christian message through contrived or far-fetched arguments. On the other hand, students who tend toward fundamentalism will accuse them of watering down the message of the Bible and selling out to liberal relativism. This difficult situation is reinforced by the growing influence of scientific language.[7] This phenomenon is also reflected in continental

[7] Marianne Moyaert & Didier Pollefeyt, "De pedagogie tussen maakbaarheid en verbeelding," *Ethische perspectieven* 14 (2004) 87-93.

secondary school curricula, for they increasingly tend to limit language to a vehicle that describes material reality in binary codes (true/false, 0/1). School education ignores that language cannot be reduced to its descriptive or empirical function and cannot do without metaphors to express the mystery that it bears.

In the context of education, the aforementioned dilemma is a hermeneutical challenge. The dilemma can be aggravated in the classroom by students in puberty and adolescence. For them, the powerlessness of the teacher in facing this dilemma adequately can be a reason for rejecting what they have been taught about the Bible since childhood, especially if they were raised with a literal understanding. Biblical catechesis for children is not necessarily fundamentalist, but a purely literal way of dealing with biblical texts runs the risk of being associated with fundamentalism. Introducing children to the Bible at a very young age leads to characteristic problems for the instruction of teenagers in the Bible. The Bible can only be taught to children, if the teachers adapt the biblical texts to the cognitive capacities and limits of children. As teenagers grow out of childhood, frequently they also part with the Bible. The Bible appears to them as a children's book, worst of all even as a childish book. This is a misconception, however, for the Bible is neither a children's book nor a childish book. The very existence of children's Bibles and the effort they all have to make to render the Bible understandable for children indicates that the Bible is a book for adults.[8]

This illustrates that the tendency to read the Bible literally originates neither only in specific circumstances (such as a sect) nor in certain sociocultural situations (such as the need for security in post-modern uncertainty), but is part and parcel of the faith development of every person. Reading the Bible (or other texts for that matter) literally is a developmental stage in anyone's growth of faith.[9] At some point in life, however, we need to move beyond this stage to a more mature way of reading texts. Therefore, discussions in class about the literal meaning of the Bible are not necessarily a symptom of the crisis in teaching the Bible, but are the unavoidable growing pains of moving from an adolescent to an adult way of reading the Bible. For teachers, it may well be a tiring enterprise to have to journey over and over again with new students along a path

[8] Burkard Porzelt, "Bibeldidaktik in posttraditionalen Zeiten," *Religionspädagogische Beiträge* 49 (2002) 33-48, esp. 38-40.

[9] James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1981).

they have travelled themselves a long time before. The struggle with biblical literalism or fundamentalism is not a *prolegomenon* to biblical instruction but an integral part of it.

2. The Historical Reconstruction of the (Con)text as Locus of Revelation

Historical criticism is certainly an excellent antidote to biblical literalism or fundamentalism. The historical-critical method therefore needs to be fully integrated into the study of the Bible and into biblical instruction. Historical criticism adopts scientific methods in its approach to the Bible as a historical book. It reveals the importance of the historically situated origin, context and meaning of the texts. The historical situatedness (as well as grammatical-philological structure) of the text implies that the text resists certain readings and cannot be interpreted at will. Sacred Scripture is God's word in human language.[10] In all its parts, it is written by human authors who lived in different landscapes and who made use of diverse sources and linguistic components. The text is transmitted to us in different manuscripts with many variant readings. Historical criticism can keep readers from projecting their own problems back into the Bible, forcing them to leave behind the idea that biblical texts are automatically relevant to their lives while inviting them to respect the text in its otherness. The text escapes human control and does not allow easy adaptation to one's own individual or political worlds. In other words, historical criticism creates a distance between now and then, between biblical and contemporary contexts.

A pre-critical reading of the Bible naïvely presupposed, for instance, that all the sayings of Jesus in the gospels are literal quotations of words spoken by the earthly Jesus and directly transmitted to us. Therefore, some editions of the Bible print the "words of Jesus" (taken at face value, not based on historical-critical study) in red.[11] However, historical critics are firmly convinced that many words of the Jesus of the gospels were never spoken by the earthly Jesus, but were put into his mouth by the evangelists and therefore reflect the views of second or third generation Christians.

[10] See Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Interpretation," 499-500.

[11] See, for instance, the New American Standard Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments (The Lockman Foundation) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 [1960]).

The historical distance between then and now is an enormous challenge for biblical instruction. According to some exegetes, it is becoming an ever greater problem for Christianity as times goes on.[12] Some scholars point out that the more time passes between the original setting of the Bible and later readers, the more the historical conditions and limitations of the Bible render it incomprehensible. For them, this is the context of the problems that arise when we try to use the Bible to communicate the Christian faith to the next generation. The question might be raised whether such a position is not in danger of becoming locked into in a hermeneutical circle. Whoever assumes that the biblical text is a thoroughly and almost exclusively historical text is left to assume that once nothing of the original historical situation remains, communication with the text will no longer be possible. Is it possible that such a degree of historical discontinuity could bring all communication to an end? Can the biblical text be reduced solely to its historical dimension?

The central objective of many practitioners of the historical-critical method is to go back to the historical bedrock of the Bible, despite and through its layered and constructed nature. Concerning the New Testament, this approach sees its main task in reconstructing Jesus' very own words (*ipsissima verba*) as precisely as possible.[13] This is the way historical criticism attempts to bridge the gap between fact and fiction. In our view, this shows that historical criticism never freed itself completely from a basic fundamentalist impetus. Historical critics are well aware that the Bible is to a large degree not a history book but a literary construct, i.e., the result of fiction and reconstruction through the eyes of faith. Nevertheless, they do not spare efforts to find the historical bedrock of these reconstructions, obviously with the assumption that only or primarily there the unmediated truth of faith can be found. We suggest that such an approach could be called 'scientific fundamentalism' if it is driven by the idea that, as soon as we have reliably reconstructed the words and deeds of the historical Jesus we have direct and unfailing guidelines

[12] Peter Schmidt, "Bijbel, waarheid en kunst: bronnen van leven?," *Leren aan de werkelijkheid: Geloofscommunicatie in een wereld van verschil*, ed. Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Acco, 2003) 117-128, here 118-119: "Secundo, dat de bijbel door en door historisch bepaald is, en dat het probleem van zijn bruikbaarheid als geloofsvehikel met het voortschrijden van de geschiedenis alsmaar zal groeien."

[13] See, for instance, Robert W. Funk, Thomas Sheehan & Marcus J. Borg, *The Once and Future Jesus: The Jesus Seminar* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2000) and Robert W. Funk, *A Credible Jesus: Fragments of a Vision* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2002).

for our faith and morals that need no interpretation. The origin of such 'scientific fundamentalism' is mostly fear of relativism. It is an attempt to identify a hard core in the Bible and in biblical faith that can be touched by neither the fleeting character of history nor the whims of human subjectivity. Even so, historical criticism has to face the fact that it remains intrinsically impossible to reconstruct and fully grasp the historical core of the Bible. Moreover, historical critics themselves have been the first to point out that reconstructions of the historical Jesus always bear the mark of the one who reconstructs. The image of the historical Jesus that emerges has the features of the one drawing the image.[14]

The underlying presuppositions of the position outlined above could be termed 'Jesus fundamentalism'. This approach seems to presuppose that interpretation is no longer needed once one has been able to reconstruct the words and deeds of the historical Jesus. This is based on a theology of imitation that assumes the historically authentic sayings of the earthly Jesus demand unquestioning attention and imitation, while later literary constructs have no (or at least considerably less) value. In stronger terms, only whatever is original is accepted as inspired. Whatever comes later is seen as watering down or even betraying the original message. Such an approach looks for truth in the past, not in the future. There is a persistent problem, however. Even if we could succeed in making a perfectly faithful reconstruction of the words of the earthly Jesus, even if we had tape recordings of his words, Jesus' *ipsissima verba* would still need to be interpreted and applied to ever new situations and circumstances. A few examples may help to illustrate this. If our reconstruction of Jesus' very own words demonstrated that he was influenced by the patriarchal society in which he lived, would that mean that we had to accept uncritically the patriarchal structures in our societies today? If Jesus had intended that his followers radically sell all their possessions as a condition for being a disciple, there would have been no one to provide for Jesus and his followers "out of their resources" (Lk 8:3), nor would there have been anyone to offer hospitality to early Christian missionaries

[14] George Tyrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963) 49: "The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well." See also Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1st complete edition by John Bowden (London: SCM, 2000) 6: "Thus each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him alive. But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Jesus in accordance with his own character."

or to host house churches. Things would have gone differently during Jesus' earthly life and the Bible would have been written differently. Another example may illustrate our point. It seems that Jesus understood his mission exclusively as a mission to the people of Israel, but the early church did not follow him in this respect. The first Christians did not say, 'Jesus confined himself to Israel, therefore we also confine ourselves to Israel'. If we concentrate exclusively on the earthly Jesus, we forget the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, and tradition.

Exclusive reliance on attempts to bridge the historical gap between then and now seriously limits our approach to the Bible. The Bible is more than a history book. It is instead the historical and literary result of the faith witness of the early Christian communities. The Bible does not wait for us to bridge the historical gap but contains a force that enables it to reach out to people. Certain kinds of exegesis run the risk of making the historical gap unbridgeable, alienating people from the Bible. As a result, it becomes hard and often frustrating work to read and understand the Bible. The spontaneous attraction to the Bible gets lost. This has important consequences for teaching the Bible, which should not be restricted to speaking *about* the Bible. Christian religious education should also start *from within* the Bible. In view of the struggle with biblical fundamentalism, it is of great importance to acquaint people with the historical background, the context, and the literary genres of biblical texts. The unsettling confrontation with the Bible as "other" needs to be an integral part of any biblical instruction. A complete reconstruction of the historical context of the Bible is impossible. Nevertheless, we need to do all we can in getting as close as possible to the historical setting of our texts. Historical criticism should therefore not limit itself to attempts to reconstruct the historical genesis of the text.

Examples are legion about how the historical-critical approach influenced religious education in schools and made created mini-exegesis courses. We know of instances where fifteen year old students were taught to distinguish the Yahwist and the Priestly writers in the Genesis account and to highlight these with different colours, or sixteen year old students were introduced to the secrets of the synoptic problem. There is the danger that with this approach, the underlying 'scientific fundamentalism' is handed on to the younger generations, and that teachers do not teach the Bible *from within* but simply speak *about* the Bible. The consequence is a reification of the Bible. The Bible runs the risk of being reduced to an arena of literary and linguistic exercises, while the investigation of its meaning is largely neglected.

Finally, we need to ask ourselves whether in today's culture, historical criticism does not *per se* lead to dissatisfaction. Post-Christian culture does not attach much importance to history any longer. Instead of understanding reality as Christianity does, in terms of a linear, chronological evolution (from creation to the endtimes), post-Christian culture prefers to think in terms of cyclic events (based on the rhythms of nature). Distrust of or contempt for the past, for tradition, and for old age is common, while creativity, renewal, fashion, hypes, etc. are the order of the day. This cultural context does not allow easy communication about the Bible from a mainly historical perspective, as referring back to the past rather than pointing to a new future. Exclusive emphasis on the historical character of the Bible will lead young people (given their fading historical consciousness) to perceive of the biblical message as outdated and lacking any perspectives for the (*i.e.*, their) future.

In this cultural climate, biblical instruction is a welcome opportunity for countering this ahistorical tendency. A historical perspective on reality, something that is typically Christian, has its own value. The more that familiarity with Christianity decreases, the less people are familiar with historical consciousness, for historical consciousness is not a natural given but the result of a particular education.[15] In this respect, biblical instruction based on the historical-critical method offers great potential. The historical-critical method and consciousness are an achievement of Christianity that has lasting value. This is true even if a one-sided use of this method is likely to provoke disinterest in the Bible by pretending to have all the answers to questions about Scripture or by locking Scripture in the past.

3. The Moral Message of the Text as Locus of Revelation

Certain circles of believers cling to the conviction that, with regard to ethics, the Bible is a completely transparent and uniform book offering simple and clear solutions to all ethical problems. When it is used in teaching children, the Bible is presented as a 'holy book' where everything is perfect. Preachers and scholars suggest that the Bible contains a beautiful ethical message, at times severe, at times romanticized. In order to

[15] Werner G. Jeanrond, "After Hermeneutics: the Relationship between Theology and Biblical Studies," *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies*, ed. Francis Watson (London: SCM, 1993) 85-102, 88.

uphold the conviction of the ethical uniformity of the biblical message, Bible didactics has no choice but to make selective use of the Bible. Children's Bibles are frequently put together in a way that leads to an ethically 'corrected' (i.e., 'more idealized') version of the Bible. The tendency is to select biblical texts that support a moralizing presentation of Jewish and Christian messages. Such a selective approach reduces the Jewish and Christian faiths to ethics, since the texts about human encounter with God are edited out. Such selective treatment of the Bible leads to a decrease of interest in the Bible, because the same stories are used over and over again in classes and liturgies, and are instrumentalized for the same moralizing lessons. Young people who grow up with a post-enlightenment mentality always expect something new. For them, repetition is intolerable and the slightest overlap leads to boredom. They do not find value in the patient rereading of the same text. Religious education aims at teaching the ability truly to enter into texts and at discouraging a reduction of texts to consumer goods, but this goal cannot always be reached in a postmodern classroom.

From this perspective, it is revealing to look at the place of the Bible in religious education curricula. In many cases, one will see that a systematic search for alternative, less familiar Bible texts has not been undertaken. A (temporary) concentration on a select number of biblical texts and thus the quasi-creation of "a canon within the canon" can be advantageous for the deepening of one's knowledge of individual texts. In today's world, however, it is most likely to create decreased interest in the Bible.

Moral indignation is great when young people or adults find out that biblical texts are not always in line with the moral norms they learned as children in biblical instruction. They are shocked when they realize that the Bible contains expressions of brutal violence and that biblical texts frequently seem to lack an understanding of the complexity of the human condition.[16] If the Bible is held up to teenagers as a stainless moral mirror, one may not be surprised if they in turn capitalize on the moral failures they discover in the Bible in an attempt to deflect attention from their own. They can be merciless in pointing a finger at morally objectionable and sometimes contradictory statements and practices in the Bible. In reply to such criticism, the Bible is often defended by explaining

[16] For instance, the invitation to forgive seventy-seven times in Mt 18:21-22 (cf. Lk 17:4) gives no evidence of being aware of the existence of abusive relationships in which such forgiveness is destructive.

away these difficulties using all kinds of complicated exegetical strategies, ultimately driven by the apologetic conviction of the Bible's historical truth.[17] When these strategies too easily push aside the *prima facie* meaning of the text or neglect its sometimes destructive effective history, they turn out to be counterproductive.

Teaching the Bible is not merely a matter of rational explanations, even if in some cases they are plausible and reliable in approaching the historical truth. Biblical instruction is also a matter of wrestling with the text. From the point of view of religious education, a '*resistant reading*' of the text is as valuable as a "*compliant reading.*"[18] In some cases, it is better to teach young people to read 'against the grain of the text' – for instance, from the perspective of the "underdog." However, this would require that the Bible is presented from childhood as a complex book that reflects *both* the holiness *and* the sinfulness of human life, and every shade in between. The Bible needs to be presented as a book about the human condition in the largest sense of that word. There is no reason why children's Bibles should not contain stories about unholy people and events, faithfully representing how the Bible presents life in all its ups and downs, disturbed by war and violence, at times satisfying and at times hurtful, at times tragic and at times fulfilling, transitory and often irreversible. From this perspective, the Bible is seen as a book in which God speaks through all things, because the world as a whole becomes a metaphor. In this, people experience that despite their sinfulness, God is present in their lives even if God is sometimes presented in morally objectionable contexts. A 'multidirectional reading' of Bible texts can be helpful in discovering the human condition and the active image of God as they are reflected in the text. In this kind of reading, there is not just one single cultural-historical canonized perspective, but there are several perspectives, voices, and actors in the story. Bibliodrama has proved to be a way of enacting such a reading.[19]

A multidirectional reading presupposes that we acknowledge, do justice to, and positively affirm the internal ethical and religious plurality of the

[17] See Werner Keller, *The Bible as History: Archaeology Confirms the Book of Books*, trans. by William Neil (New York: W. Morrow, 1956).

[18] See Reinhartz, *Befriending*, 81-98.

[19] Herman Andriessen & Nicolaas Derksen, *Lebendige Glaubensvermittlung im Bibliodrama* (Mainz: Grünewald, ²1991); Gudrun Lohkemper-Sobiech, *Bibliodrama im Religionsunterricht*, 2 vols. (Mainz: Grünewald, 1998); Heiner Aldebert, *Spielend Gott kennenlernen: Bibliodrama in religionspädagogischer Perspektive* (Hamburg: EB-Verlag Rissen, 2001).

biblical message.[20] Biblical instruction needs to move from the idea of one "grand story"[21] to the reality of many, often unknown, little stories. According to D. Würsten, the Bible is to be taught as "a multi-faceted book, with many tendencies, directions and messages" that cannot be reduced to one single "metanarrative."[22] This will probably prove to be attractive to young people in a postmodern age, encountering a God who opted to be revealed in such a complex book. This is a God who voices the greatest possible protest against the power claims of monolithic thinking.

> Such a theology that dares to persevere in the midst of diversity and thus accepts to endure in the midst of the enormous tensions often experienced there can rightfully call itself 'Biblical theology'. Indeed it is true: to live in the midst of plurality is not easy. Philosophy of difference is much more complex than monolithic philosophy. Theology that intensifies the differences is exceptionally uncomfortable – just as the prophets were troublemakers and dissidents, because over and over again they called their people back to the unrelinquishable primordial event of the Jewish religion, when kings, rulers, and others tried to transform religion into a 'system' in order to make it manageable.[23]

In this context, we have to point to the dangers of an instrumentalized use of the Bible in religious education that imposes an absolute meaning on a text. One could say that the biblical text is then made into a ventriloquist of *a priori* fixed views. In religious education curricula, many texts seem to have been selected because of the association of a word, a parallel thought, an accidental link with other areas in the curricula. Such selection hardly takes into account the larger contexts of the Bible passages. In fact, the proper contextual meaning of the text is obviously considered to be of secondary importance. Thus, students do not get the opportunity to learn *from within* the Bible or to discover their

[20] Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, Sharon H. Ringe & Frederick C. Tiffany, "Reading the Bible in the Global Context: Issues in Methodology and Pedagogy," *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia & Mary A. Tolbert (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998) 210-321, 314.

[21] Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*, Critique (Paris: Éd. de minuit, 1979).

[22] Dick Würsten, "Waarom protestantisme past bij een postmoderne tijd," source: http://home.tiscali.be/wursten/postmod/postprot.htm (access: 8 februari 2003). See also Dick Würsten, "Geloven in stukken en brokken: God ter sprake brengen in een postmodern klimaat," *Pastor in de weer: Predikant zijn tussen vraag en antwoord: Vriendenboek G. R. A. Schouten*, ed. Guy Liagre (Brussels: PPODOC, 1999) 125-137, 133.

[23] Würsten, "Waarom protestantisme past bij een postmoderne tijd."

own interpretations. In such cases, authors of school curricula have left nothing to chance: the "correct" answers are already known beforehand. The danger of this approach is a one-sided interpretation through the lens of a particular culture or way of thinking. Affective and depth-psychological dimensions of the story often go unnoticed. In many people's experience, however, these dimensions carry the complex and rich meaning of the text that our preprogrammed educational activities are unable to access.

4. Cyberspace as the Abyss of Revelation

The three approaches to the Bible that we just discussed are problematic because they are characterized by a static concept of the meaning and the use of the Bible. In recent decades, technology has offered the means for a more dynamic interaction with all kinds of texts including biblical texts. The consequences of the ongoing revolution in communications technology, namely the transition from printed to digital texts, will be and to some degree already is far-reaching. Specialists argue that the impact of this transition is comparable to the impact of the transition from oral tradition to written texts or from written to printed texts.[24] In the future, digital communication of the Bible will become increasingly prevalent. Theologians will have to make use of the new media in order not to lose touch with the cultural context of the world in which they live and to which they address the message. Similarly, biblical instruction will have to make use of interactive multimedia in order to meet the students in their own world.

Will the Internet be able to break open and reactivate the static reading strategies that are often prevalent in biblical instruction? Does the digitalization of texts also include dangers for the teaching of the Bible? There is certainly an enormous difference between reading a book and reading a text in an integrated, interactive, virtual electronic environment. In book form, the Bible presents itself to its readers with a certain logical and chronological unity. However, this is very different when texts

[24] Thomas E. Boomershine, "Biblical Megatrends: Towards a Paradigm for the Interpretation of the Bible in Electronic Media," *The Bible in the Twenty-First Century: American Bible Society Symposium Papers*, ed. Howard Clark Kee (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993) 209-230, 229: "The development of electronic communications in the 20th century is the most radical change in the primary means of communication since at least the printing press and probably since the development of writing."

are presented as part of a larger network of texts. The electronic presentation of biblical texts replaces a sequential approach of the Bible not by a non-sequential approach, but by a multi-sequential *event*.[25] To the reader, this kind of presentation offers an opportunity for fast and flexible movement through all the texts. This requires much more responsibility and creativity from the reader in comparison with the use of a printed version of the texts. At the initiative of the reader, textual and visual information appears and disappears much faster than in printed texts. Readers no longer decide beforehand the direction their reading process will take, but interrupt, sidetrack, or redirect their initial procedure much more easily. In other words, the fingertips of the user have much more power in an electronic reading context than in the conventional reading process, where a reader's fingers are limited to turning pages.[26]

As a result, texts in the digital environment certainly no longer inhabit only one world. They are now able to inhabit many worlds and to attract different and even contradictory meanings. Moreover, the virtual world turns every reader into an author and every author into a reader. In a virtual environment, all the readers have an awareness that not all the texts and translations are of equal quality. It has become so much easier to "process" texts, to move, copy, and creatively adapt them. It is equally possible to add one's own comments and to make links with other texts. Consequently, the original text loses its central place and takes on the role of providing the occasion for an involved dialogue between interested parties at times superficial, at times substantial. The far-reaching implications for the concept of 'canon' cannot be overlooked.[27]

In the digital environment the Bible is further reduced to the status of just one text among others, one story among many easily accessible stories. In the environment of electronic texts, people tend no longer to accept *a priori* standard texts that everyone is expected to read and know. All that will remain are texts that are read by greater or fewer numbers of people in more or less depth. The concept of an important, authoritative book that everyone is expected to know becomes part of a vanishing

[25] George P. Landow, "Hypertext, Metatext and the Electronic Canon," *Literacy Online: The Promise (and Peril) of Reading and Writing with Computers*, ed. Myron C. Tuman (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 1992) 57-94, 70.

[26] Phil Mullins, "Media Ecology and the New Literacy: Notes on an Electronic Hermeneutic," *From One Medium to Another: Communicating the Bible Through Multimedia*, ed. Paul A. Soukup & Robert Hodgson (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997) 301-333, 307.

[27] *Ibid.*, 320-327.

world, the world of printed books. This does not mean that people no longer need points of reference, 'centres' of orientation. We intentionally speak of 'centres' in the plural. One single, permanent, fixed centre can easily become tyrannical. Hypertexts, on the contrary, offer an opportunity for a dynamic, evolving concept of 'centre', of a multi-centred textual universe, even of a textual universe continuously re-centring itself, through a process that is guided by the complex interaction of millions of individual readers. This way, centres will come and go, but the process of continuously forming and identifying new centres will always prove necessary.

The increased digitalization of faith communication will make several demands on teaching the Bible. Versions of the Bible in digital form will need readily to be available. Equally, user-friendly tools for the study and interpretation of the Bible will have to be made available to students. Bible courses will have to be made accessible online and will facilitate individual Bible study. Democratization of access to the Bible will go even further by the establishment of all kinds of electronic communities. It will be essential in this environment to offer high quality Bible didactics that enable people to find their way in this new world.

If we search the Internet for sites on the Bible, we realize on numerous attractive sites and interactive software that Christians have invested huge amounts of time and money to make the Bible available in digital environments. A second look reveals that more popularizing sites frequently reflect approaches to the Bible that are more or less explicitly fundamentalist. Despite an attractive and dynamic presentation, the understanding of the Bible on which they are based is frequently very static and literal.[28] The historical-critical approach[29] (which we discussed above after the fundamentalist approach), and the ethical approach[30] (the third approach we treated above) are not absent from the Internet. This demonstrates that digital media as such offer no guarantee of a dynamic approach to the text. The Internet itself has become a battlefield for diverse approaches to the Bible. For biblical instruction, this means that students have to learn how to recognize different approaches to the Bible underlying various websites and to asses the opportunities and dangers implied in them.

[28] See, e.g., http://www.childrensbible.com/

[29] See, e.g., http://ebaf.op.org/english/

[30] See, e.g. http://www.str.org/ where the Bible is used to take an uncompromising stand with regard to moral issues (abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, euthanasia, etc.).

5. The Future Horizon of the Text as Locus of Revelation

Biblical fundamentalism, scientific fundamentalism, and the approach to the Bible as an ethical answer book have one thing in common. In their own way, each of these approaches attempts to identify in the Bible a secure and reliable *locus* of revelation. Biblical fundamentalism is convinced that the *locus* of revelation is the literal meaning of the texts. Scientific fundamentalism expects to find it by reconstructing the earliest layer of the text and, with it, the historical core of the biblical message. The ethical approach is certain to find the *locus* of revelation in universal moral principles and humanist messages derived from the Bible. All these approaches start from the assumption that the locus of revelation is a given in the text.[31] In a digital approach to Scripture, however, the text is left to the rules of the free market of continuously changing interpretations of individual users. At this stage, it is impossible to identify a potential *locus* of revelation in this approach.

Three of the four approaches discussed above are driven by an attempt to identify in the Bible a manageable, solid core of doctrinal foundations, historical events, or moral truths. In our opinion, it is this process of scriptural reduction that causes the syndrome that we might call Bible boredom. From the point of view of religious education, reading the Bible takes on the character of a preprogrammed activity. It becomes a procedure with easily predictable results. It does not provide the opportunity for active participation in the reading process, but provides a detailed film script so that the actors know from the very beginning how the story will end. Young people have a strong intuitive sense for situations where a truth is imposed on them and where they are denied the possibility of participating actively in discovering a truth. They prefer not to have personal convictions spoon-fed to them like reheated take-out meals.[32] It is not surprising that students resist this kind of biblical

[31] John S. Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991) 245: "I believe that the key to understanding how the Bible is the Word of God is found not by studying the literal text but rather by entering the experience out of which the literal text came to be written. The ancient words that have been employed to interpret the experience are themselves not holy. Indeed, they have frequently even blinded us from seeing and entering the experience they seek to describe because these words are always limited by their time, their culture, and they apprehension of reality."

[32] Christian Bühler, "Ist die Bibel wahr?," *Bibeldidaktik in der Postmoderne*, ed. Lämmermann, *et al.*, 48: " (...) es zeigt sich bald, dass damit die Arbeit mit biblischen Texten im Letzten sinnlos wird, weil sie nur noch das spiegelt, was wir bereits wissen, kennen

instruction. Those who nevertheless continue to be interested in the Bible and who have the technical means at their disposal might turn to the digital environment for help. In the virtual world of the Internet, however, they run the risk of either getting lost on fundamentalist websites or of seeking their salvation in sites that lack any historical, doctrinal, communal, or moral context.

Ultimately this begs the question: How can the Bible regain existential relevance in today's context? How can we avoid reducing the Bible to a set of preprogrammed truths? At the other extreme, how can we escape complete subjectivity in our approach to the Scriptures? Against certain practitioners of the historical-critical method, we hold that the Bible does not automatically become irrelevant simply because the contemporary cultural context has moved away from the original nomadic and agrarian cultures of the Bible. In order to be relevant to us, the cultural background of the Bible does not need to be identical with our own. For instance, the disappearance of shepherds and sheep from our own immediate environment does not make an understanding of the Bible impossible, because the essential human questions that were expressed in the metaphors of shepherds and sheep in biblical times are not fundamentally different from the questions of postmodern people.

Here we find the concept of the text as 'classic'[33] helpful. A classic is a text that expresses a truth so fundamental that it can be read and understood in the totally different contexts of respectively new readers.[34] For instance, the works of Shakespeare are still read and understood today, not only in Britain but even in Japan. In the language of literary theory, this is possible because each new reader succeeds in making a 'fictional

und was uns gerade passt. Wer nicht auf dauernde Selbstbestätigung angewiesen ist, wird sich hier zunehmend nur noch langweilen."

[33] For the place of the "classical" in hermeneutics, see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 285-290. See also David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 99-229 and Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 133-142. For an application of the concept of the classic to biblical studies see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco CA: Harper, 1991) 150-151.

[34] Gadamer, *Truth*, 289-290 comments: "... the classical preserves itself precisely *because* it is significant in itself and interprets itself, i.e., it speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past – documentary evidence that still needs to be interpreted – rather, it says something to the present as if it were said specifically to it. What we call 'classical' does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in its own constant mediation it overcomes this distance by itself. The classical, then, is certainly 'timeless', but this timelessness is a mode of historical being."

contract'[35] with the classical text. There are also, of course, texts with little cultural adaptability with which only a very limited number of people can actually succeed in making fictional contracts. Even in the Bible there are books or parts of books of varying levels of adaptability. Today it seems to be difficult for many Western people to make fictional contracts with the Book of Leviticus, the Letter to the Hebrews, or even some parts of the Pauline corpus. Nevertheless, the Bible as a whole continues to attract many people's attention and stands among the most read books. For this to continue, however, biblical instruction needs to invite young people to enter into a kind of a 'fictional contract' with the Bible or at least some core parts of it. This will most likely succeed if we do not reduce the Bible to a collection of inspired decrees literally dictated by God, to a kind of dead fossil only good for scientific analysis, or to a list of moral panaceas. Trying to enter into a 'fictional contract' with the Bible is often more difficult because people tend to be less open to poetic and metaphorical language, due to the dominance of scientific and technical language in our world. Therefore, people find it difficult to learn to appreciate the Bible's rich diversity of approaches to essential questions of life and death.

Understanding of the Bible as a 'classic' carries with it the risk of reducing the Scriptures to a vehicle of humanist archetypes. This not only ignores the otherness but also the uniqueness of the biblical texts. For believers, the Bible is more than a piece of world literature. They accept the Bible as having a revelatory and transformative meaning.[36]

This raises the question of how revelation takes place in and through the Bible. It is generally assumed that revelation is coextensive with the content of biblical texts. For example, there was a discussion several years ago in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States about the reading of biblical texts during the liturgy. In the context renewal from the Second Vatican Council, it had become customary in many churches to conclude the liturgical reading of a Scripture text by raising the lectionary and saying, 'This is the Word of God'. The gesture and words tended to be understood as meaning that the Word of God was limited to the written texts in the book that had just been read. After extensive study and discussion, it was agreed not to raise the lectionary, and to conclude the reading with the words, 'The Word of God'. This slight alteration was intended to express that revelation is not only a matter of written texts

[35] See, for instance, Martin Price, *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983) 4.

[36] See Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 169-179.

alone, but takes place in the entire process of reading, listening, interpreting, preaching, praying, and singing. In other words, biblical revelation comes about in dialogue with, not simply in silent obedience to, the content of Scripture. Revelation not only involves the text and the reader, but also *God* and the reader, while the text is a privileged medium that offers language, context, and a horizon of expectation.

The Bible is a witness to the ongoing dialogical process of revelation and communication between God and humans. In the Bible, we encounter how certain representatives of our religious history interpreted God's self-communication to them. Obviously, the earliest Christians did not presume that they needed the precise words of the earthly Jesus to keep their faith alive or to solve their problems as they moved into the future. The gospel of Mark, the oldest of the four,[37] is not just a collection of literal quotes of the earthly Jesus. Matthew does not simply copy Mark. Instead, the gospel of Matthew, like the gospel of Mark at an earlier stage, is the result of an active dialogue with God, as the evangelist and his community[38] were struggling with a new situation in the light of earlier Christian tradition (i.e., the gospel of Mark). The process of tradition, which is a characteristic of the entire Bible, both First and Second Testaments, is to be understood as an ongoing, ever-new dialogue with God, telling, retelling and "translating" the traditional stories. In dialogue with their new situations of reception, new stories and new "translation" originate.

Many people assume that this dialogical process of revelation came to an end in the writing of the last book of the Bible and the closing of the canon, and all that is left for us to do is to read and "repeat" the texts. If revelation is truly dialogical communication with God mediated by Scripture, however, then this process can hardly come to an end before human life and history reaches its end. Understanding the Bible this way results in a healthy relativization of the role biblical texts play in the process of revelation. The Bible is not the "be all and end all," as a certain understanding of the principle of *sola scriptura* seems to suggest. Even the Bible cannot excuse people from the task of entering into a personal relationship with God, albeit in dialogue with the Bible. In the Jewish tradition, the Torah is said to have seventy faces. The Torah is, as it were, waiting for each generation of new, unique, and irreplaceable readers.

[37] With many critical scholars we presuppose Markan priority. See, e.g., Christopher M. Tuckett, "Synoptic Problem," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 (1992) 263-270.

[38] We assume here that the intended readers of the four gospels were specific communities. For a dissenting voice see Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Chris-*

The Zohar, the influential mystical commentary on the five books of Moses, points to the joy that is experienced in heaven at each new interpretation of Scripture. Since the focus is not a literal reenactment of the biblical text but the personal communication with God, each reader counts. Without interpretation, without hermeneutics, the Scriptures are meaningless to people. The Bible presents itself to us as a mystery that challenges each new generation to interpret it and put it into practice.

When we read the Bible, we are not only witnesses of the ongoing rewriting of the tradition, but we are also invited to discover new meanings and to develop new interpretations in dialogue with the biblical text and the God of the Bible. The dialogical structure of the process of tradition welcomes participation in the dialogical process. The Italian movie *Il Postino* ('The Postman', 1995) portrays a postman in a small fishing village who enters into dialogue with the poet, Pablo Neruda. Through his discovery of metaphorical language, the postman is empowered to participate in the universe of poetry. He learns to interpret and change the world with the eyes of the poet, in the sphere of interpersonal love as well as in the sphere of social commitment, even to the point of a violent death.

Questions, doubts, resistance, indignation, and criticism are essential parts of the dialogical process of revelation. They should not be stifled or silenced by a misguided sense of politeness or piety. It should not be overlooked that the Bible leaves much room for critical dialogue and creative interpretation. The claim that the Bible requires absolute assent and unquestioning obedience is less based on Scripture itself than the fact that many of its readers lived for centuries under absolutist rule and the hermeneutics characteristic for such a form of government. Postmodern young people who have experienced only democratic societies unsurprisingly have no time for the exclusively unilateral and authoritarian biblical hermeneutics of past centuries. The experience of entering into critical and creative dialogue with biblical texts inside and outside the classroom is therefore very liberating for them. "It is not a sign of failure when readers of the Bible raise critical questions. Something rather goes wrong when they run away from the relationship with God with these questions, when we ask questions which treat the text like a thing. The texts contain the invitation to enter into dialogue with the one to whom they refer."[39]

[39] W. Dekker, "De bijbel als levensboek: Levenslang in gesprek," *Wapenveld* 4 (juni 2000) 3-8, also available at http://www.wapenveldonline.nl/artikelen/wpv0043-8.htm

When we rediscover that the Bible contains the stories of common people in dialogue with God and with each other, reflecting their joys and hopes, grief and anxiety, dreams and superficiality in every stage of their lives, it will be possible to integrate the Bible again into personal lives and the life of the community.[40] People can then enter the biblical world with their own life stories. Identifying with biblical characters and stories helps us discover a truth that transcends our own subjectivity. This is possible "where ... the story becomes a 'thou' for us in which some aspects of the 'Thou' appear, the 'Thou' to whom all these stories testify in one way or another."[41] The Bible does not impose this kind of faith in an authoritarian way. Instead, it speaks with an authority that people accept and respect from within.[42] "Our freedom and independence are respected, but not canonized."[43] This implies that each text does not have the same role or meaning for people in each phase of their lives. The Bible contains a multiplicity of stories that cannot be reduced to a single metanarrative. In a postmodern context, people can step into the biblical world through a variety of different gates and travel many different trajectories in reading the texts.

The Bible offers help to young people in their search for spiritual identity.[44] As a consequence of the so-called "turn to biography" in the theory of religious education, religion classes have been increasingly seen as contributing to the development of each student's own narrative identity in the sense of interpretative identity, i.e., mediated self-knowledge.[45] The many story lines offered in the Bible will inspire young people in giving shape to their own life story. This can only succeed if biblical instruction, like other ways of teaching religion, seeks to meet young people in their own spiritual and cultural contexts, and if young people are given a voice

[40] See *ibid.*

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] While this may be true with regard to the Bible as a whole considering its many different voices, this may not blind us to the fact that individual parts of biblical books do at times try to wield external authority. See Reimund Bieringer, "'Come, and You Will See' (John 1:39): Dialogical Authority and Normativity of the Future in the Fourth Gospel and in Religious Education," *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*, ed. Herman Lombaerts & Didier Pollefeyt, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 180 (Leuven: Leuven University Press/Peeters, 2005) 179-201, in the present volume, 361-376.

[43] Dekker, "Bijbel."

[44] Mark A. Pike, "The Bible and the Reader's Response," *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 7 (2003) 37-51.

[45] See Joke Maex, "Een hermeneutisch-communicatief concept vakdidactiek godsdienst," *Leren aan de werkelijkheid: Geloofscommunicatie in een wereld van verschil*, ed. Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Acco, 2003) 67-80, 70.

to enter into dialogue when we teach the Bible. There must be a movement from the text to the world of young people. A purely historical-critical or literary-critical approach to the Bible will never succeed in involving people in the worlds of the texts. Methods need to be used that invite young people to bridge the gap between the text and their lives, between living as individuals and as members of a community.[46] Only in this way can biblical texts have an impact upon the formation of the narrative identities of young people and guide them into "designing their own future."[47]

In the area of pastoral ministry, a variety of methods has been used for years in an attempt to restore the narrative and interactive relevance of the Bible. Some have criticized such approaches as turning the Bible into a self-service restaurant. That is, people then only enter the biblical world through the gate that looks familiar to them, so that the Bible is misused as a decontextualized and arbitrary solution to their own existential dilemmas. Such criticism, however, is unfounded, at least as long as the basic achievements of the historical-critical method and the inner dynamics of a hermeneutical reading are taken into account. Respect for the enduring results of historical criticism guarantees respect for the otherness of the text. Hermeneutics is not to be confused with the legitimization of mere subjectivism. In contrast with many other approaches, hermeneutics has not abandoned the search for the truth of the text.[48]

Our optimism is founded upon a 'hermeneutics of alienation'[49] which in our view is characteristic of the Scriptures. Even if we initially recognize ourselves in a biblical story, during a second reading we shall encounter the otherness of the text and always be challenged by the text. As a result, we shall not complacently be allowed to be at peace with our own comfortable interpretations,[50] but shall be urged to leave our comfort zone, both in our individual and social context. For instance,

[46] See Ingo Baldermann, *Der biblische Unterricht: Ein Handbuch für den evangelischen Religionsunterricht*, Grundthemen der Pädagogischen Praxis (Braunschweig: Westermann, 1969) 267-280.

[47] Jacobus G. Schaap, *Interactief leren in godsdienst en levensbeschouwing* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1994) 297-320.

[48] See Ilse Cornu & Didier Pollefeyt, "Religieus opvoeden tussen openheid en geslotenheid: Bijbels geloof in een Babelse wereld," *Leren aan de werkelijkheid: Geloofscommunicatie in een wereld van verschil*, ed. Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Acco, 2003) 45-65, esp. 56-58 ('Truth as u-topia').

[49] See Paul Ricœur, "Le problème du fondement de la morale," *Sapienza* 28 (1975) 335-336.

[50] See the issue of Katechetische Blätter 128 (2003) on "Biblische Irritationen."

people today can easily relate to the discussion between Abraham and God in Genesis 18:16-33 concerning God's plans to destroy Sodom. Abraham argues with God, "Far be it from you to do such a thing" (v. 25). Even as we fully identify with Abraham, however, we are confronted with the question of whether we can also leave behind our secure place and turn away from idolatry, just as Abraham did. Even if we honestly have to admit that we make selective use of the Abraham stories, the aspects we neglect will keep nagging us, for the Bible resists being used *à la carte*. Another instance further illustrates this. Peter can be a reference figure in his betrayal of the suffering Jesus, when his fear is stronger than his fidelity (Mt 26:69-75). The figure of Peter can also remind us, however, of Jesus' invitation to come to him across the water, an invitation that Peter accepted only after some hesitation (Mt 14:29). At a still later moment, moreover, there is the image of Peter who accepts being the 'rock' on which Jesus will build his church (Mt 16:18). Both in Abraham and in Peter, contemporaries find certain dimensions attractive and others difficult to accept. In recommending that we take a good look at the dimensions we find difficult we do not intend to suggest that we have to accept these blindly. Here again, reading the Bible often includes wrestling with God for the sake of God.

A final question to be asked in this context concerns the ultimate norm for testing interpretations. Indeed, what matters is not interpretation for interpretation's sake. The hermeneutics of the Bible developed above is frequently confronted with the criticism that it leads to pure subjectivism, individualism, and relativism, to uncommitted *Spielerei*. The background of this objection is the fact that, in our hermeneutic approach, we do not accept every element of the biblical text blindly as unquestionable authority. This is why we are often confronted with the criticism that calling into question a certain aspect of the biblical text will lead to total subjectivity. People fear the domino effect that such an approach might have. If one agrees to call into question one aspect of the Bible, one might soon be left with nothing. The ultimate question remains: On what or whose authority can we distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable interpretations *of* or elements *in* the Bible?

Although our approach accepts the legitimacy of a plurality of interpretative paths for biblical texts, this is far from saying that "anything goes." While we object to reducing the biblical text to one single meaning, we still find it very necessary to develop ways that allow us to exclude certain other meanings. We need hermeneutical rules that help us to identify readings that are *not* acceptable. Our approach assumes that the

criterion should not only be sought in the past (for instance, in what Jesus really said), but in the future that we encounter in the 'world' of the biblical texts.[51] The 'world of the text' means the particular universe that is created by the characters, locations, time, plot, rules, language, etc. of a text. In the act of reading, readers enter this universe and at times lose touch with the material world around them. Some literary texts offer utopias or 'alternative worlds' and invite readers to assist in realizing them. Biblical texts contain these alternative worlds as a horizon that appears to readers from an eschatological future. In Paul's letters, this alternative world appears as the "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), in the synoptic gospels as the "kingdom of God" (e.g., Mk 1:15), and in the gospel of John as "eternal life" (e.g., John 3:16). This is the horizon against which each interpretation needs to be tested. In our view, interpretations that threaten this horizon are unacceptable because they deprive some people of a future and legitimize the *status quo* of injustice, making it impossible for certain people and/or communities to develop towards the alternative world of the text. They destroy creation or usurp life at the cost of others.[52]

Interpretation of the Bible has always ethical implications.[53] To a larger or lesser degree, each interpretation either supports or undermines the *status quo*. There are no neutral, objective observation posts, either with regard to the biblical text, or with regard to the world where interpretation occurs. Every interpretation, not only feminist or liberation exegesis in general but also historical-critical interpretation that pretends to be objective and unbiased, is 'advocacy exegesis'.[54] Every interpretation takes up a particular cause and is linked with a particular ideology, a particular constellation of power that it either supports or undermines to a certain degree.

Our conviction is that the Bible has a future if its interpretation thwarts all attempts to deprive people of their future and if it empowers people to work for a future in resembles be like? What are the criteria to

[51] See Reimund Bieringer, "The Normativity of the Future: The Authority of the Bible for Theology," *Bulletin European Theology: Zeitschrift für Theologie in Europa* 8 (1997) 52-67.

[52] Frances Young, "Allegory and the Ethics of Reading," *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?*, ed. Francis Watson (London: SCM, 1993) 103-120.

[53] See Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Re-Evaluation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

[54] See Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1973) and Patte, *Ethics*, 50.

test which interpretations open up future and which close the door to the future? What we call "God's dream for all people" can indeed only be known in a mediated way. It is not immediately obvious for everyone in the texts. It cannot be determined by one individual or by one group of people. It cannot be fixed 'once and for all'. The way we perceive it, it is not unaffected by human limitations and sin. It is our hope that with many generations collaborating, humanity will see with increasing clarity what God's dream is and how to give it shape. Every generation in its own context will have to pick up the Bible and confront it with tradition and human experience in order to keep the dream of God alive in this world. Then the Bible will really create a future.