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What is it about the Book? Semantic and Material Dimensions in the Mediation of the Word of God

ABSTRACT

When the Christian Bible is referred to as the 'Word of God', the common understanding is that this refers to its textual content. There are, however, a variety of other uses made of the bible that point to an understanding of the Word of God as not just the textual content but also the material book itself. This article explores a number of uses of the physical bible as an instrument of spiritual mediation or power that have been practised since the early days of Christianity to the present time. Some of the understandings underlying these material practices are explored, along with differences in the religious-cultural context that sustain these different views, including the differences in religious hermeneutics between the oral and written word, the importance of the concept of the book in Christian identity, the relationship of fetishism and theological understanding, and cultural differences in understanding the relationship between textual and material signification.

Keywords: bible, material religion, oral Christianity, writing, fetishism

The Christian Bible is a book compilation of sixty-six historical documents which holds a distinctive place within Christianity as 'The Word of God'. While the specific meaning of this attribution is a matter of significant dispute, the most common reference is to the semantic content

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of the text as a written record of God's self-disclosure to people in the past and a distinctive reference point and agent of the ongoing self-disclosure of God to people in the present.

It is a widespread Christian belief that the textual content of the Bible conveys divinely significant meaning to people of all ages in all contexts and situations. This belief underlies the vast amount of time and energy that has been expended throughout Christian history on this textual signification: establishing the definitive content of the text, preserving and reproducing it, and interpreting the meaning of that content to the numerous issues and contexts within which Christianity finds itself. Because the Bible is a diverse collection of texts whose writing, editing and compilation stretched over 1,000 years and over a variety of cultural contexts, the potential for disagreement on these textual questions is inexhaustible.

However, recurring through Christian practice from very early in the history of Christianity and largely unaddressed in biblical, textual and media studies, are a number of uses of the Bible as 'the Word of God' based not on the reading and exegesis of its textual content but on the physical use of its material form including its talismanic uses. These uses are based not primarily on textual signification but on what Engelke calls 'a signification of the book' (Engelke 2009: 84, 89, 93). A number of historical instances of these uses can be noted.

One was the use of the book as a defense against evil. John Chrysostom (347–407), for example, described the scriptures as 'divine charms' and refers without criticism to a popular practice and conviction at the time that 'the devil will not dare approach a house where a Gospel book is lying, much less will any spirit or any sort of sin ever touch or enter a soul which bears about it such sentiments as it contains.' (*Hom in John* 32) Chrysostom also refers in a supportive way to another popular view that hanging the gospel on one's bed, with an adjacent coffer in which to place money, was an effective defense against the devil (*Hom in Eph ad Cor: 43.7)*.

Chrysostom refers to the widespread and popular practice of carrying scripture verses around one's neck as amulets. Small extracts of scripture written on small pieces of papyri for this purpose have been found in archaeological explorations. The practice was apparently sufficiently widespread that the Council of Laodicea in 360 explicitly forbade clergy from engaging in the practice.

> They who are of the priesthood, or of the clergy, shall not be magicians, enchanters, mathematicians, or astrologers; nor shall they

> make what are called amulets, which are chains for their own souls. And those who wear such, we command to be cast out of the Church. (Canon 36)

The bible or parts of it were also seen as effective as a health cure. Even the profound and influential fifth-century theologian Augustine considered it permissible in case of a headache to sleep with a copy of the Gospel of John under one's pillow.

Seeking divine guidance or an omen by randomly opening the book of scripture and blindly selecting a passage was a common practice, reflecting a widespread perception of the material text as being supernaturally endowed. A variety of instances from the fourth and later centuries are recorded where the chance overhearing of a text was taken as a personal omen, such as in the case of Augustine's call. The random consultation of a scriptural book for a personal directive, message or prediction was also common and a Christian adaptation of a fairly widespread cultural practice. Some surviving texts show a Christian adaptation of an ancient Greek oracle book known as the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, which provided a list of questions and sets of numbers linked to bible verses from which one drew an answer. Augustine expresses his opinion of such a use in one of his epistles: 'I do not like this custom,' though he adds, 'Although it could be wished that they do this rather than run around consulting demons' (*Ep 55.37*).

It is common for those educated in modern biblical, textual or theological studies to dismiss such practices as exceptional and inconsequential, seeing them as reflecting ignorance, superstition, or a magical view of the world that is incongruous with an 'intelligent' understanding of what a text is. It is common therefore for such material practices to be dismissed, discouraged or even condemned as un-Christian. Despite their censure and condemnation, such material practices have persisted within Christianity and continue today.

More recent critical perspectives on hegemonic practices in text and discourse have drawn attention to how what is presented as 'normal' practice is often only one option among a number of options, but is given heightened credence and authority by its association with powerful groups and discursive practices that work constantly to recreate particular constructed perspectives and practices as how things 'naturally' are.

In the case of the Christian Bible, the normalised view is that one gets meaning and religious benefit from the Bible by rational processes of

reading and systematically interpreting the semantic content of the text. But if there are a significant number of Christians, both in the past and the present, who appropriate benefit from the Bible by material rather than semantic practices, to what extent should such practices be recognised as legitimate 'Christian uses of the Bible'? To what extent do these material uses provoke consideration of possible hegemonies that have operated within Christianity to normalise particular practices through ab-normalising others.

This article explores this issue by asking the preliminary question, what is going on in material uses of the book of the Bible?

FROM ORAL WORDS TO WRITTEN WORD

One area of investigation lies in what takes place in religious experience in the transition from the presence but transience of spoken words to the permanence but distance of words when they are written. Significant work has been done on the different character of the word as spoken and the word as written (see for example, Finnegan 1988; Goody 1987; Ong 1967). A number of issues suggest themselves for their relevance to this issue.

One is how the power and presence of God are generated within the two modes of communication. In the spoken word, power is inherent in the dynamic constellation of the words spoken and received in a particular lived context by a speaker who is present. When these spoken words are reproduced in an external, permanent written form that are separate from the speaker, the written words need to be enlivened in some way to recover that same dynamism or power that is present in the physical stimulation of the oratorical performance.

When the written Bible is touted as 'The Word of God,' a practical issue therefore needs to be addressed, that is, how does God become a present reality or experienced as a power that can make things happen, when God is accessed through a lifeless text? This need for the written text to be enlivened or to become credible constantly emerges as a practical and theoretical issue throughout Christian history.

Sawicki, for example, explores the power dimensions of this in her analysis of the contests that took place between the oral prophets and the teachers in the early decades of the Christian movement. In Sawicki's analysis, the early Christian oral prophets carried the tradition within themselves and mediated the word and presence of God as a real-time experience through their performance of the word. Their spoken words evoked 'the presence, power and life of the once-crucified Jesus' and their

actions validated the truth of what they were saying by performing miracles and works of wonder which were attributed to Jesus being alive in them (Sawicki 1994: 86).

The literate teachers of early Christianity offered a different approach and media experience of the Word of God, reflecting aspects of Jewish Rabbinic and Greek *paedeia* practice, which was an incorporation of written text with oral discourse. Sawicki (1994: 84, 89, 93) paints the following picture:

> Teaching, for Matthew, entails the present application of reliable past words. Matthew's Gospel presents itself as an authoritative teaching text for the Christian community. Moreover, it presupposes that it, as a text, will be administered by a corps of Christian teachers – for whose governance it takes the trouble to encode some stern directives . . . In short, Matthew's advice to those who want to see the Risen Lord is to follow Jesus' teachings, trusting that the Lord is there in the person of the needy. To find out what Jesus' teachings are, one consults a teacher, who consults Matthew's text . . . While prophets might be able to evoke occasional intense experiences of the Risen Lord, teachers know the whereabouts of Jesus in the everyday.

This written-media-based hermeneutic method is reproduced in the common Protestant understanding of the threefold nature of the Word of God. The text of the Bible (the written Word), is brought to life for people in the words of the preacher (the proclaimed word), and responded to with obedience by the people (the lived word). The power relationships invoked by such hermeneutics are reflected in the controls that have been imposed on performance of the scriptures at different times throughout Christian history. Having control of the book of the Bible has been a significant source of power and establishment of the clerical office. The one authorised to administer the text – to read, interpret and bring the written word to life – has most commonly been defined through authorisation by the institution, an assembly, not coincidentally, of those already authorised.

More than just a difference in style or method, therefore, the issue of how one brings life and relevance to the past tradition, now contained in written texts embodied in the holy book, has been the site of ongoing struggles between different media-based contenders for the exclusive rights to be the ones who shape the ongoing interpretation of the tradition and the power and resources associated with it.

This ideological contest is illustrated by Matthew Engelke in his analysis of the practices of the Friday Masowe Apostolics, a group of loosely-affiliated churches that meet throughout Zimbabwe. In the early days of the movement in the 1930s, their founder Johane Masowe, rejected the significance of the Bible for Christian faith. While the identified reasons for this are varied and nuanced in their explanation, among them are the perception of the relative authority of the spoken and written word as mediators of divine reality, but also the ideological power exercised through the control of interpretation of the text, a control associated with the colonial enterprise.

> The introduction of literacy set the groundwork, from the missionary point of view, for progress on a number of inextricably interconnected social, economic, and religious fronts. Literacy, then, was the key not only to Christianity but also its counterparts – commerce and civilisation ... As several apostolics remarked to me, missionaries presented the Bible as a bottom-line authority – something to which everyone could appeal for the truth. In practice, however, they manipulated the message of the Bible to support their own agendas and ideals. As one church elder put it, 'we learned that we could not trust the whites or their book.' (Engelke 2009)

Criticism, even derision, of the idea that the physical form of the Bible has power, by those whose concern and authority lies in the rational exposition of its content, can be seen to continue those early ideological, media-related contests between the physical, miracle-working approach of the prophets and the grammatical, text-based approach of the teachers.

To draw meaning and spiritual benefit from the words of something that is written requires an advanced level of literacy, not just to read, but also to be enlivened by textual semantics. As biblical interpretation and textual criticism of the twentieth century became more developed and sophisticated, to get practical help from the Bible's semantic content using textual means, one needed to become a sophisticated critical thinker. Horsfield recalls an occasion in the theological college in which he taught a professor of New Testament, who taught classes on sophisticated critical studies of the biblical texts, also running private sessions outside the classroom that taught students how to set aside this critical view when reading the biblical text in order to get 'spiritual' meaning from it.

For a significant number of others throughout the history of Christianity, it is apparent that the text is brought to life through the

performance of its materiality. In these practices, signification is shifted from the 'words' of the text to the 'word' of the book as a material form – 'the word of God'. In the same way that the rejection of the Christian scriptures by the Friday Masowe Apostolics was in part an act of subversion of the colonial powers, the performance of the material book of the Bible may be seen as a subversive act or resistance against clerical power or the power of those who claim an exclusivity in interpreting the meaning and distribution of divine power.

THE PLACE OF THE CODEX IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

The early Christian adoption of the papyrus codex was an important factor in the development of Christian writings into a scriptural book and a significant factor in the conflation of boundaries of its material and spiritual character. The material form of the codex was also a significant factor in the formation of Christian identity in the early centuries of the movement. One of the elements of Christianity that distinguished it from other religions of the time was not just the content of its texts but also the form in which they were reproduced.

The early codex was made up of sheets of papyrus bound together between covers, similar to our current bound book. As a manuscript form, it was neither new nor invented by Christianity. It had been developed several hundred years earlier and was in occasional use in Graeco-Roman society as a notebook or for pocket editions, but not for literary writings, for which it was considered unsuitable and for which the scroll was most commonly used. Christianity adapted the codex form rather than the scroll for circulation of its writings at a very early stage. All papyrus gospel fragments that have survived from the early centuries have been from codices.

A number of factors have been identified for Christian adoption of the codex as the primary medium for their writings. It suited the type of anthologised material that was characteristic of much of Christian literature, such as collections of letters and gospels. The codex could be written on two sides of the page, so that two or three scrolls could be integrated into one book, making it more economical to produce and use and less bulky for travellers and teachers to carry. Its relatively easy page-turning facility also made it easier to use and refer to when one was in debates or a speaking situation.

A strong case has been made that the widespread Christian adoption of the codex was linked to the material form of an early edition of the letters

of Paul being circulated and used as authoritative documents in the scattered development of Christian thought and practice. A second-century martyr story tells of six Christians from a small North African village who, during a time of state persecution, were summoned to the Roman Proconsul to disavow their Christian faith. When they came and appeared before him, the leader of the Christian group had with him a codex form of Paul's letters, translated into Latin, ready to be drawn on for explanation and defense. Though the Proconsul was reluctant to punish them and pleaded with them to disown their faith, the Christians refused and were executed.

Stories such as this reinforced the importance and emotional attachment to the codex as an important identity marker for Christianity as a religion of the book rather than just the text. The codex set Christianity apart culturally from groups such as other imperial religions and the literati, who did not adopt the codex for literary purposes until several centuries later.

In time, the authority of the text and the particularity of the form and the attachment to it led to a conflation of the contents and the form. As Gamble (1995) proposes, 'the authority of its content carried over to the kind of book in which it was transcribed, and thus the codex was powerfully promoted as the standard form of the Christian book'. Mitchell (2006) sees the extensiveness and widespread Christian use of the codex as making 'a distinctive mark on material culture in the realm of books.'

The codex was also a factor in the processes of canonisation of Christian scripture. The finalising of the canon was an ideologically driven process to preserve not only what Christianity was in the past but also how Christianity was to be seen in the future. A number of criteria influenced the selection, including the extent to which writings were being used by churches, the association of the writing with a prominent early leader and/or apostle, and the extent to which the writing reflected the ideological and cosmological positions of the dominant Catholic Party in relation to a number of issues that were under active debate within the Christian movement (Crossan 1998). A number of different writers and Church Councils over several centuries had expressed their opinions on lists of books considered to be scriptural, those considered as contenders, and those writings considered to be heretical. While there was common agreement on a number of books across these lists, a number, such as the Letter of James, the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation, still remained in dispute.

These disputes were finally resolved in the early part of the fourth century, not on the basis of resolution of the outstanding questions of content, but by the production of a particular version of the book. In 332, the Roman Emperor Constantine, as part of his building program to establish Christianity as the official imperial religion, commissioned a large number of new bibles to be produced for placement in those churches. This major commissioning of fifty official copies of the whole Christian scriptures by the most powerful political figure of the known world had a number of significant consequences.

One was that it closed off any further discussion on the content of the Christian canon. What was to be the definitive 'Word of God' was resolved not by a church council but by the production of an artifact. From that point on no bishop would have dared use any other book as scripture apart from those used in the Emperor's bibles as decided by Eusebius. From that point on, Dungan observes, terminology about Christian writings changed. 'Where before scholars had spoken of "authentic," "spurious," "genuine," and "disputed" writings, now the terminology is dominated by two opposing terms: "canonical" (legal) and "non-canonical" (illegal).' (Dungan 2006)

A second consequence of this imperial action was the establishment of this body of Christian texts as a material artifact as well as an aid to devotion. The Bible acquired a utility in its form rather than simply its contents. While Jewish and Christian writings had been read as part of Christian worship since the earliest years of the Christian movement, the Emperor's bible project established the bible book as an integral part of the interior space of Christian buildings. This stimulated similar efforts by other civic bodies. Whereas previously, most churches would have had bits and pieces of copies of the scriptures in their keeping, Constantine's commissioning of the whole Bible to be produced as a single text to be placed in selected churches stimulated other cities to commission similar copies of the whole Bible to be placed in their churches, as a matter of prestige. From this developed a perception of the scriptures not only as a devotional book that inspires by its content, but also as a decorated artefact to be put on display, adored and inspiring by its form and presence. It was this objectifying of the Christian scriptures as artifact that laid the grounds for future uses of the artefact itself rather than just its content.

It's wrong to suggest such a separation of the form of the bible from its content without recognising that the two remain closely interrelated. The significance associated with the book is closely linked

to perception of the significance of its contents. But Engelke's observation, that 'Christianity is often referred to as a "religion of the book" but strangely enough not also a "religion of readers"', draws attention to the fact that the form and content are not the same. Christians have frequently perceived and utilised the book as the Word of God as a whole, without engaging with the details of its content. Whether one form of practice – engaging with the form or content of the Bible – is more legitimate than the other has been a contested issue.

EMBOSSING THE ARTEFACT - EMPHASISING THE WHOLE OVER ITS PARTS

What had been done publicly in Constantine's bible project was reproduced privately. The fact that Christianity, as a religion, had a book may have been a cause of attraction for both the cultured elite and the illiterate in Graeco-Roman society, though for different reasons. As people from the educated classes were attracted to Christianity, they brought with them their literate interests and practices of collecting books, both for private reading and display, into their practice of Christian faith. Full copies of the Christian scriptures were added to private collections, and a market developed to meet that demand. This included the artistic illumination of the Bible, a practice that has continued within Christianity since then (Bologna 1988; Westwood 1988) highlighting its material character, but in the process enhancing the aura of its textual content through the aesthetics and cost of its form.

It is in this period that we see the first contentions arising over the character of the bible as a book rather than a source of textual instruction or inspiration. John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople (347–407), criticises the appropriation of the Bible as artefact rather than for its content:

> for they tie up their books, and keep them always put away in cases, and all their care is for the fineness of the parchments, and the beauty of the letters, not for reading them. For they have not bought them to obtain advantage and benefit from them, but take pains about such matters to show their wealth and pride. Such is the excess of vainglory. I do not hear any one glory that he knows the contents, but that he has a book written in letters of gold. And what gain, tell me, is this? The Scriptures were not given us for this only, that we might have them in books, but that we might engrave them on our hearts. (Homily 32)

In similar vein, Jerome (347–420) in several of his letters was critical of the indulgence with which the scriptures and other Christian writings were being produced. In one he bemoans the excessive concern with the appearance of the scriptures rather than their content: 'Parchments are dyed purple, gold is melted into lettering, manuscripts are decked with jewels, while Christ lies at the door naked and dying' (Epistle 22). In another, written to a woman who had asked for advice on how to raise her daughter, he cautions about not being distracted by the decorated form in which the scriptures were being produced: 'Let her treasures be not silks or gems but manuscripts of the holy scriptures; and in these let her think less of gilding, and Babylonian parchment, and arabesque patterns, than of correctness and accurate punctuation' (Epistle 107: 12).

Yet the artifactualisation of the Bible continued, with its embossment and decoration becoming the source and destination of some of the most advanced and opulent artistic expressions then known, and appreciated today as among the most beautiful art works created.

With the artefact itself being seen as possessing power, extensive practices developed related to honouring and protecting the book, ranging from protocols for handling and protecting it to curses and anathemas on those who damaged or misused it.

One cause of concern was protecting the artefact against damage. The Third Council of Constantinople passed a canon which declared a year's excommunication for anyone who injured the books of the Old and New Testaments, or cut them up or gave them to book dealers to be erased for reuse. With their key roles in the reproduction and preservation of texts, protocols for the care of books became part of the rule of many monasteries. Written curses in bibles included threats of excommunication, leprosy, condemnation to hell, or having one's eyes put out. An eleventh century edition in the Abbey of St Peter in Salzburg includes the words, 'To the bearer of the keys of heaven the Curator Parhtolt who made this book offers it with joyful heart that it may be an expiation for all sins committed by him. May he who steals it suffer violent bodily pains.' A 1461 text had simply, 'Hanging will do For him who steals you' (Drogin 1983).

Part of the reason for this was the enormous energy and cost that went into its transcription and production, particularly as copies became more intricately embossed and illuminated. In rough and unpredictable living conditions, the material form of the text was vulnerable. But part also was the perceived holiness of the text, both in the nature of its content and the physical form of that content. Precedents like the story of the protective

force around the Ark of the Covenant that killed David's servant when he touched it inappropriately were invoked to reinforce the idea that the power of God embodied within the object of the book would act against anyone who threatened it with damage.

Another proscription was against changing the text. The changing of texts in the process of transcription was a not uncommon practice, either to amend what was seen as an earlier error of transcription, to clarify what was seen as textual ambiguity, or to deliberately change the intended meaning of the text for polemical reasons.

Part of these proscriptions, however, reflected the blurring that took place across the boundaries of material and spiritual practice, between text and form. Michelle Brown (2007) touches on this in her analysis of the medieval approach to sacred text:

> Logos, the Word, was the very embodiment of the Creator, revealed to Creation through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ and through the abiding physical manifestation of the Gospelbook that contained his teachings, itself incarnated through the combination of divine inspiration, the quickening of human labour and the materials – animal, plant and mineral – of Creation. That book became, literally, the Word made flesh, or rather, the Word made word.

FETISHISM AND THEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE MATERIAL WORD OF GOD

The use of the material form of the book of the Bible as an object of power can be seen in fetishistic terms, in that the power of the things represented or symbolised is seen as being present in the object. In relation to the material Bible book, the content of the text matters only in an attributive way. It is enough that the textual meaning of the bible is appropriated in a holistic rather than particular way. For that reason, the power of the performance of the Bible book works whether the person can read it or not or understand it or not.

Many of these practices can still be seen today, consonant with Morgan's (2005) observation that 'belief happens in and through things and what people do with them'. Perception of the bible as a sacred book with perceived inherent power is reflected in a number of African Christian practices, such as tying a bible to the ailing part of a person's body to mediate healing, using the book of the bible as a divining tool for identifying a robber, and placing a bible opened at Psalm 23 under the

pillow of a sleeping baby to protect the infant from supernatural evil. In Ghana and other African contexts, it is not uncommon for a bible to be buried in the foundation of a new house, both for symbolic purposes but also for divine support and protection. In the Church of the Twelve Apostles, one of the largest African independent churches, the Bible is placed or beaten on the head of a person thought to be possessed to help in the process of exorcism.

David Shank's account of African prophet William Wade Harris describes his use of the bible in three ways: 'sacramentally' by laying it on the heads of baptismal candidates, 'liturgically' by reading from it, and 'symbolically' by using it without opening it. Shank (1994) describes an instance of Harris' use of the bible for healing.

> (Prophet Harris) again approaches the agonized soul, opens the tattered Bible and holds it before her face, the while uttering a prayer ... He now approaches her for the second time, and once more holds the Bible to her face. She gradually calms down and comes to herself. She is now as helpless as a babe. She takes her seat with others of like nature and awaits baptism.

Smalley gives examples of Haitians enacting curses by tearing a page out of the Bible that contains verses of curses, generally one of the cursed Psalms, boiling the page in water to make a tea, and giving it to a person against whom they have a grudge. According to Smalley, the curse is considered to be more potent if the text is in a French rather than a Haitian translation of the bible, because the power is seen to be greater in an international language (Smalley 1991). In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa including Ghana and Nigeria it is likewise common for people to wash particular passages with water into glasses and mugs and drink them as 'medicine.'

The power believed to reside in the book of the Bible is seen as residing in related religious materials as well. Pastor Enoch Aminu from the *Pure Fire Miracle Ministries* in Accra, specialises in praying for women with reproductive health problems, and recommends to women that they also keep a copy of his magazine *Pure Fire* on their matrimonial bed, both to ward off evil and to make effective God's power of procreation. Indigenous Pentecostal movements in sub-Saharan Africa encourage members to place their enveloped offerings in their Bibles for some time and speak their needs unto them before presentation. Students also keep their pens in the Bible for weeks prior to examinations in order to

get them infused with the power of the holy word. In Kiev, Ukraine, the Nigerian pastor Sunday Adelaja promotes the reception and handling of his 'inspired' books and tape recordings with reverence to contribute to their sacramental value, on occasion urging his congregation to pray and even repent of the fact that the books of the 'man of God' had not been handled as responsibly as they should.

The power inherent in the object is a factor of the sanctity, authority and power of the divine words they were seen to contain. So the power inherent in the book of the Bible was not necessarily provoked by the power of the words on the page, but the embodiment of the idea or their association with the speaker of the words. This power within the book of the Bible was enhanced in those situations where texts were still seen as esoteric objects, not fully understood, and therefore surrounded by mystique, a perception, noted by Gamble, that was present in early Christian practice as well (Gamble 1995: 237).

The concept of fetishism in its origins and later modern anthropological and psychoanalytical uses, has been seen in a culturally judgemental way as being associated with more primitive, indigenous religious practices, leading to perceptions of material performances of the object of the Bible as likewise primitive and superstitious. More recent work on the material practices of religion and the interconnections between the material and immaterial dimensions of experience, as well as a consideration of theological concepts of the nature of 'The Word,' challenge such a simple dualism.

Christian theology has always promoted a constant movement back and forth between materiality, material practice, and immaterial spiritual meaning or significations. In the concept of Jesus as the Word of God, for example, Jesus' human words are seen as manifesting a deeper immaterial reality of the Word of God. Ong (1967: 180) notes, that in the process of development of the concept of Jesus as the Word of God from patristic times on, thinking has veered away from considering the Word in terms of sound to consider the Word in terms of knowledge-by-vision, with the Word or Son as the 'image' of the Father in a visual kind of way.

Christian theology is very diverse in its understanding of what the concept of the Word of God is and the senses involved in apprehending that word. The phrase 'the Word of God' has been used variously to describe God exercising power through an act of speech; the communication of God or messages 'heard' by particular people; proclamations of the prophets based on messages they said were received from God; what is said in sermons, particularly in Protestant

churches; God's communication to those who wrote the texts of the bible; what is actually written in the texts of the Bible; the book of the Bible itself as a single object; the man Jesus; the theological concept of the phenomenon of Jesus as the Logos. To exclude the use of the object in itself for a particular purpose on the basis that the Word of God is something else is an excessively simplistic argument.

Theology also encourages significant ambiguities around the signification of the material text of the Word of God. The reconstitution of material written words is facilitated by a number of non-literal practices of reading. The allegorical in particular facilitates engagement with the material text as allegorical rather than literal in nature, leading to a ready transition of the text from the plural sense of words to the collective singular concept of The Word. This is a reflection of what Derrida talks about as the difference between the book and writing. The text is regarded as a fact of literary history or container of information and signs characterised by difference, but the book also has 'a function as a sign itself of a sense of meaning as homogenous, present as a totality.' (Gellrich 1985)

In general understanding, the Word of God comes through reading and hearing the words of the content and building a meaning from the passages. It becomes the word of God through a transformation of the literal text into a divine sub-text – from text to discourse, or a transformation of everyday language and description and proscription into God's word, a medium of communication between the eternal God and the individual. For Augustine, the Bible is the word of God in material form that has immaterial qualities.

Theologically, therefore, even the content of the material text is operating at two levels: the realistic and the theological, the material and the immaterial. The concept of the material form of the book itself having immaterial power represents a similar transfer of material realism into a supernatural immateriality.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCE IN MATERIAL SIGNIFICATION

Material uses of the biblical text can also be understood within the context of a clash or differences in understandings of cultural signification on a number of things: the nature of symbolic representation, the relationship of the material sign and its signification; and whether religious belief is best understood as an interpretive genre or an interventionist genre.

Latino Catholic theologian Roberto Goizueta identifies this in his analysis of the differences between Latino and Euro-American

Catholicism in the USA, with Latin American Catholicism being rooted in popular medieval Iberian Christianity with a more baroque character, and Anglo-Catholicism rooted in Northern European post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism with a more rationalist, precise and uniform practice. Goizueta links the difference to the different philosophical alignment with Aquinas' theological realism and materialism, in the case of Latino Catholicism, and with Ockham's nominalism, in the case of Anglo-European Catholicism.

The difference between the two comes out most clearly in their approach to symbol and ritual. The Latin American Catholic approach was based on a more organic, intrinsically symbolic worldview.

> Medieval Christianity had a unified, profoundly sacramental view of the cosmos: creation everywhere revealed the abiding presence of its Creator, a living presence that infused all creation with meaning . . . As the place where one encountered the living, transcendent God, all creation was assumed to be intrinsically symbolic; that is, creation re-presented God, made the transcendent God present in time and space for us, here and now. That God had not made the world only to withdraw from it, leaving it to its own devices; rather, the Creator remained intimately united to creation. (Goizueta 2004: 38)

Ockham's nominalism arose from a concern that this organic, holistic relationship between God and material creation compromised God's transcendence, and proposed instead the separation of God from creation. God was removed from the world into a supernatural sphere, with the material world pointing to God, as it were, rather than embodying God. This became the rationalist cosmology, which informed their view of the symbolic as a sign signifying another reality. It was left to the consumer to make the connection.

> Medieval Christians had looked upon creation as intrinsically symbolic, making present its Creator in our midst. In the wake of nominalism and neo-scholasticism, however, the ultimate meaning of creation could no longer be encountered in creation, which could exist independently of its Creator; now meaning have to be imputed to creation, or imposed upon it from without. From without, the rational mind would impose a meaningful order on a world that itself lacked intrinsic meaning. Physical existence no longer 'revealed' a God who lived in its very midst; now, physical existence 'pointed to; a God who related to the world extrinsically; it was left up to the rational individual to make the connection . . . If there were a

> relationship between God and creation, it would have to be one forged and explained by the human intellect ... From sometime in the sixteenth century on, the world-as-symbol could only point away from itself to a God who remained impassible and aloof. Creation would no longer be a privileged place of encounter with the Sacred but a mere sign pointing elsewhere ... (Goizueta 2004: 40)

This dominant modernist theological view of the symbol explains the problem that modern Christianity has with the use of the material object of the book as a spiritual tool. It reflects a cultural position of evolutionary superiority, which positions rational Christianity as the more advanced understanding, and the realist position and its contemporary expressions which it departed from as primitive and superstitious. Goizueta considers this as one of the ongoing tensions between Latin American and Anglo-American Catholicism today.

> One might even argue that it is precisely the Latino (and medieval) 'realist' or 'materialist' notion of symbol and ritual that modern western Christians find most distasteful among Latinos/as, dismissing such ideas as mere infantile superstition in the face of more rationalist (read 'mature') understandings of religious symbol, ritual and faith. (Goizueta 2004: 38)

If you apply this analysis to different understandings of how the material book of the Bible becomes the Word of God, you can see similar differences at work, with the rationalist view seeing the material text as valid only in pointing to a reality beyond itself. The connection, as Goizueta suggests, is a rational one that needs to be forged and explained by the human intellect. In the more realist or materialist view, the material embodies the reality.

This links to a second dimension of this cultural difference, and that is the nature of spiritual reality between these two perspectives, and whether spiritual reality is fundamentally a material presence or force, or a rationally ascribed characteristic.

In a way similar to Goizueta's description of Latino Catholic Christianity, it is common for Africans to hold a sacramental view of the universe in which the differences between what is physical and what is spiritual are less demarcated than in the rationalist West. Good and evil are not just moral evaluations of the significance of particular actions, but spiritual forces equivalent to physical forces that have direct material impact and consequences. As Ghanian theologian

Kwame Bediako (1995) explains, in the African context, the 'physical' acts as vehicle for 'spiritual' realities. In the face of this, the significance of religion is not just as a rational interpretive or ritualistic symbolic ordering of the universe, but a source of devices by which one enlists the power of good against the forces of evil.

African cultures share a similar sacramental worldview with Pentecostal Christians whose pneumatic emphases include the ability of the Spirit to mediate God's power and presence through words and objects (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). In line with this, African-led Pentecostalism innovatively utilises new media in fascinating ways to mediate the 'anointing' of the Holy Spirit. Words, texts and images of the anointed of God, when reduced to print or captured on various audio-visual storage systems, are believed to possess the same powers that inspired their initial oral delivery.

The same material qualities are seen in the power of the materiality of the Bible. When faced daily with spiritual forces, the religious response in this context is not a passive interpretive one, nor a rationalist one of re-interpretation, it is an activist, interventionist one of countering spiritual forces encountered in the material world with spiritual resources embodied in material objects. In this situation, the application of the material book of the Bible is one of the tools.

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