

Opening a closed book for the next generation

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400th anniversary of the King James Bible

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1. Is the bible a closed book?

Almost every teacher of religious education or pastor has had the experience or might have the experience that announcing the subject of the lesson by saying, “Today we will read something from the bible” or “This morning we will hear a story from the bible”, may – at least in the school context – mean that he or she almost immediately earns the reaction of a deep yawn or just opposition in the sense of “How boring”, or “Oh, no!”, or “Let’s ignore it”.

The younger generation – especially adolescents – show an emotional reaction after the announcement of bringing the bible into the classroom, but not at all as the teacher might hope for. The emotions are more or less negative and this is not really the best starting point for a religious dialogue or “religious dancing for joy”.

Obviously, it is not easy at all to bring the bible as a book into the real life of young people – at least from a certain age on. Therefore after such an experience described above many teachers just withdraw from any further attempts and close the book for the youngsters – and maybe even for themselves.

By the way: it seems worth mentioning that there are two groups of youngsters which react quite differently:

Firstly, there is the growing interest of a small number of young people who are just curious. Pastors and teachers report that for these youngsters the bible is that far away from their own personal experience and conduct of life that sometimes they are just curious to know more about “what is in there”.

And secondly, there is another minority of young people, especially from a rather evangelical background, which is deeply involved in the biblical tradition and shows a large interest to get even more involved into the meaning of it.

Nevertheless, they are minorities – at least in the European context – so in my second paragraph I will search for some reasons for the perceptions of the majority.

2. But why? Postmodern reasons for keeping at a distance

There are many reasons why amongst the young generation – especially at the stage of adolescence - the bible as a book and as an important tradition has lost its credibility, attractiveness and meaning. But why? I will highlight two aspects here:

- 1) What we know from developmental theory and psychology is that at a certain stage of growing-up the adolescent just feels the deep need to orientate himself or herself more and more autonomously and critically against all sorts of external landmarks. According to James Fowler, the *"synthetic-conventional"* faith which arises in early adolescence, characterized by conformity to religious authority and

the development of a personal identity, can change to a more "*individuated-reflective*" faith, whereby the individual takes personal responsibility for his or her beliefs and feelings. As one is able to reflect on one's own beliefs, there is an openness to a new complexity of faith, but this also increases the awareness of conflicts in one's belief and towards the beliefs of others, such as parents, teachers and pastors.

- 2) Now there is a serious complication with this theory. It presumes, namely, that adolescents have had a kind of religious socialisation beforehand. And exactly this has to be doubted if we look at the present generation. So the second reason why the bible seems to be a closed book results from the fact that many young people have just not had positive contact with the bible at all during their personal experience. It seems as if this tradition and all the narratives have almost faded away at least in the majority of the younger generation in many parts of Western Europe.

So, in the context of this 400th anniversary of the King James version of the bible, is there a spark of hope that the present younger generation will see a need to celebrate the 450th anniversary in the year 2061?

3. What about the child? Fundamental developments and achievements

Over the last 20 years there have been major developments in the field of religious pedagogy and education. Due to the dynamics of secularization and also due to a severe loss of familiar religious socialisation since the 1960s and 1970s, a significant and ongoing process of developing new

methods and models of religious education can be identified. In recent years, academics have started to focus on the question of how to open up the bible again for children and adolescents. Without going into detail, I will mention three major developments and achievements:

- 1) The child as a subject. Throughout the centuries of religious education, children have mostly been treated as more or less meaningless objects of instruction and indoctrination. Only since the second half of the 20th century have they been acknowledged as individuals and autonomous subjects and real partners in the religious dialogue. This change of perspective towards the child is a key factor for all possible actions designed to bring the bible back in the young people's lives.
- 2) The child as a theologian. In the last ten years there has been a growing interest and empirical research has been conducted on the child as a theologian. The reason for this is the observation that children have a high potential to formulate their own religious convictions and are able to interpret certain biblical stories in a kind of theological manner. For example, they find their own plausible descriptions of heaven, God, the importance of Jesus and so on. Just recently, the research has been widened into the field of a so-called youth theology: Dancing for joy need “lay theology”.
- 3) The child as a dialogue partner. As a main result of this research an important differentiation has been established which is speaking of theology of the child/youth, for the child/youth and with the child/youth. The reason for this is the fact that theology can only be expressed in a clear dialogical way. Of course there is a need to teach and impart knowledge, but the real challenge is to open space for

theological reflection and communication – and this in the sense of children and adults being at eye level. Biblical literacy requires experience, participation and performative ways.

4. How to open the bible again? The example of children's bibles

The fundamental developments and achievements about the child as a subject, as a theologian, and as a dialogue partner are not only academic issues but are reflected in the actual production of children's bibles.

During the last twenty years a high number of creative and beautiful bibles for the young generation have been published. In the German-speaking countries alone about 150 new children's bibles have been launched onto the book market.

It would take a whole day to give you a deeper insight into the broad variety of these volumes. So I won't go into detail here, but regarding the main question it is interesting to see note what these bibles more or less have in common:

- 1) Practically all the current volumes show many illustrations appropriate and suitable for the target group, mostly created by professional artists. In addition to their natural skills, the artists sometimes use all sorts of modern techniques including pop-art comic strip techniques, the manga tradition, or even computer-based drawing. Although in most cases the illustrations are developed in close cooperation with the respective author of the bible, the illustrations attempt to convey their own message and interpretation of biblical stories and texts.

- 2) You might wonder hearing me saying “the author of the bible”. Indeed, almost all of these present modern bibles refrain from covering the full original text of the Old and New Testaments, not only because of their length but also because of - what they call - the difficult, bulky and old-fashioned tradition as many passages include cruelty and horror and because the language is difficult to relate to nowadays. Of course there are full coverage bibles for children and young people – like the Good News. But in these cases the pedagogical intention is low and the illustrations are mostly nothing else but “nice”. So almost every children’s bible consists of a selection in the sense of a “best of”. That means most of the children’s bibles present a kind of biblical elementary curriculum which consists – in the view of the authors – of the most important stories and narratives.
- 3) The children’s bibles currently available experiment a lot with the language. So they refrain not only from full coverage but also from a kind of pure documentary style. In fact, the form of narration itself is a highly creative act of the respective author. So the text very often focuses on an elementary message, leaving out all the estimated unnecessary background, and concentrates on the main topic, or, for example, on the central words of the acting persons, which interestingly enough are very often formulated in the present form. I can mention one example. The so-called Volxbibel, created in a language which can be understood by young people, was realised by inviting and integrating young people into the continuous process of translation and publication.

5. What to do? An insight into King James version bibles for the next generation

After these explanations about current German-speaking bibles for children and the youth, we have to look more closely into the issue of this day. What are the consequences of these developments in connection with the anniversary of the King James bible? Isn't it almost impossible to find an analogy between the children's bibles in the German-speaking context that very often have left the original text almost completely behind and the full version of the King James bible?

In general, it is not easy at all to get an overview of how many special editions for the younger generation have been recently published that cover the full King James version text. There are some indications that also in the English-speaking world there are many different editions of children's bibles working with the same intentions and principles as the German-speaking bibles.

But the question now is whether there exist – so to say – innovative and illustrative versions of the King James bible? I don't know about the number but I can at least give you an impression. I would like to present some new volumes for children and teens to you that rely on the King James version itself and then take a closer look at two of them. There are a series of volumes published by Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan with the titles “My Holy Bible for African-American Children” (1994/2009), “Kids Study Bible” (1991), the “Teen Study Bible” (2009), The Beginner's Bible (2010) and the Discoverer's Bible for Kids (2011). In addition, I found an “Illustrated Study Bible for Kids”, published by Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee (2009), which also relies on the King James version text. Although we find a specific US American perspective

in these volumes, some general questions of the quality of the theological and educational style can be raised:

5.1 KJV Children's bible

As an example I shall pick out the Holy Bible for African-American Children, meant for the age from 7 to 10, as it is said on the back cover. There is no certain foreword, just a short sentence on the back cover about what this volume intends: Explore God's Word with this Bible created just for you and discover how much God knows you and loves you".

This Bible itself consists of course of an Authorized Kind James Version and a dictionary-concordance. Beside that one finds illustrations on 32 pages made by – as it is said – “award-winning African-American illustrators”, probably created especially for this edition.

The illustrations have in common that all figures presented have actually an afro-american look, no matter if they are from the Old Testament or from the New Testament, so Adam and Eve, Joseph, Moses, David and Goliath, but also Mary, Jesus and Simon are all more or less coloured people. Beside these illustrations one finds some prayers and biblical statements referring to certain biblical phrases. For example there is a page “I am Special to God”, where it is said: “God has a plan for my life” with the following quote from Jeremiah 29, 11: “I know the thoughts that I think toward you”, saith the LORD, “thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end”. Then on another page one finds “Ten Commandments for Children” with some interesting interpretations: For example to the Second Commandment: “You may not worship, or put more importance on, any person or thing, other than God. You must worship only the Lord, not your parents, not a friend, not a movie star or sports hero, not a car or boat or skateboard. Nothing”. And as the seventh

Commandment we can read: “Keep your thoughts and actions pure. Sex is a gift of God to married couples”.

And then there are explicit references to and about the African-American Community in certain illustrations as well as in some texts: For example we find something like a graffiti and rap page, and we find the following text: “The church has played an important role in ending slavery. It has led the struggle against discrimination and injustice. And it has helped to develop some of the African-American community’s and the world’s greatest leaders, including Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Barack Obama and Nelson Mandela. ... If God delivered Moses and his people, the Almighty would surely deliver African Americans from slavery, too. Later in the volume an inspirational quote of Barack Obama can be found: “If your’re walking down the right path and you’re willing to keep walking, eventually you make progress”.

I shall proceed to my next example:

5.2 *The KJV Teen Study Bible*

It is not surprising that the style of illustrations, the wording and the content of the features of this bible is very different to the first one: on the back of the book it is said: “As an on-the-go teen, you’re moving fast. God is moving faster!” This bible “will help you discover the eternal truths of God’s Word and apply them to the issues you face today”.

This study bible is not only full of informations, including biblical weights and measures, maps and introductions to the particular biblical books. But it shows in many different ways a certain age-appropriate approach: there is for example an alphabetical topical index including topics like Abortion, AIDS, Cyber sex, Demons, Drunk driving, Gangs, Hairstyles,

Homosexuality, Peer pressure, Rebellion or Witches – so to say the full youth programme. Now looking for the referred page for example about drunk driving: you are in the middle of Leviticus 26, 42ff: The Lord's warning of despising his judgements and the breaking the covenant. And here one of many characteristic comments in this volume is found: "Usually when you do the right thing, good things happen. But what if you make some bad choices? I mean, really bad choices, Like stealing and getting in trouble with the police. Or drinking and driving and wrecking the family car. Or going too far sexually and discovering that you're pregnant. Are you ruined for life? This Bible chapter warns that there are tragic consequences for disobeying God. But it also promises that God will not totally reject you, even for serious sins. You don't want to commit any of those serious sins. But if you do something wrong, remember God's promise. God will welcome you home and bless you again".

Apart from this there is an advice column in the style of letters, so for example a "José" asks: What could the Bible possibly say about music videos, computer games, movies, blogs, cyber sex or modern music, since none of them existed in Bible times? And Jordan answers: "Dear José. You're right. There is no verse that reads, "Thou shall not watch violent or explicit movies." But if you study God's Word, your answer is just as clear as if it did. Paul tells us what to focus our minds on. "Whatsoever things are true ... honest ... just ... pure ... lovely ... of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think of these things" (Philippians 4,8).

And as always some sort of testcase – what is stated about the question of homosexuality: In the context of Leviticus 18 it is noted: "This isn't the only Bible passage that says homosexual sex is a sin. Read also Romans 1:26-27. If someone tells you homosexuality is an alternative lifestyle –

meaning that it's OK – don't let those words fool you. It's an alternative all right. A sinful one”.

6. How appropriate and innovative are the King James version bibles? - Summary

After this closer look into two of the volumes, I will summarize some of the main characteristics:

- By keeping the text in the original version, they give young people the chance to become familiar with the holy words as well as with the tone and the narrative of the – so to say – good old Christian tradition. So the risk of some modern translations and interpretations of losing the feeling for the whole tradition is minimized;
- The additional material and covers of the volumes appear in a modern style, layout, and language;
- The topics and themes raised in this material include questions of daily life and the world of the youngsters – and at least in this material something like a cultural approach to the biblical texts can be identified;
- A lot of biblical information and also background information is provided;
- Due to this, the use of these bibles in school as well as in Sunday school and the families seems to be well possible.

But also some critical questions have to be raised:

- The additional material is merely cognition-based, so the opportunities for active and creative dialogue and interpretation for the youngsters are rather limited;
- The material encourages individual reading, but the current debate of a broad competence-oriented education is obviously not on the agenda of the authors and one wonders how the young generations copes with the traditional form and text;
- The historic-critical approach to the texts and traditions is also rather thin and some of the information tends to be rather "biblizistic", so the hermeneutical approach to the tradition is rather narrow; the well-known remark "Word of Christ printed in red letter" finds no further explanation throughout the interpretations.
- Questions of how to deal with different perspectives on the question of truth or the dimension of interreligious dialogue are not raised;
- Questions of disbelief and doubt are not taken into consideration;
- Moral questions seem to be dealt with in a rather narrow sense. The volumes do not provide space for ethical deliberation but rather give the "right answers" to moral questions.

7. Opening a closed book for the next generation - Conclusions

Without any doubt, the younger generation has a right to get in touch with biblical traditions, stories and figures as well as the theological interpretations of these traditions. If they want to orient themselves within the cultural context of the Western world and also contribute to the peaceful dialogue of the religions they should know as much as possible about this biblical heritage. And if they want to find their own way of

living more peacefully together it seems important that they understand as much as possible about the biblical basics such as the meaning of creation and providence, grace and reconciliation, solidarity and charity.

But obviously, within our modern and postmodern society, the opportunities to hear and read and communicate and reflect about these biblical contents are becoming rarer as all sorts of messages and offerings come across young people's lives and try to attract them and occupy their minds.

So - more than ever - it is important to create new spaces of reading and reflecting the bible including creative forms of discussing and interpreting and even re-shaping the old texts. So there is a definite need for a qualitative biblical and theological education including the hermeneutical task of doing theology for the youth and with the youth, and this without any limitations of critique and imagination, without any limitations of individual interpretation and the autonomous formulation of doubt, without any forms of indoctrination from their teachers and pastors, and with all possible freedom for the young generation to decide what they themselves read and understand as the core of the gospel.

And for this a careful use of the original texts is important. In other words, young people need empathic experts with whom they can share their interpretations and understanding with the most possible openness of minds. And this requires a quality of the bible editions for children and youngsters and so to say, an art of writing and illustrating and publishing. So the pure application like one can find it in the Teens Study Bible still requires a hermeneutical and dialogical argument. No quality in religious education without the quality of good editions and reliable personal relations.

So, above all, it is important that we as adults appear in our convictions and confessions and our daily Christian life for the young people as is formulated in the 2nd letter to the Corinthians: “Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2. Cor. 3,3). And therefore there is hope, that today’s young generation will still celebrate the 450th anniversary of the King James Version in 2061 – given that they will make good and important experiences with the contents and are allowed to be theologians for themselves, experts of their own free interpretation of the Bible and real dialogue partners about questions of the Common faith and the common Good.

Opening a closed book for the next generation: what a demanding and promising task!

Thank you very much for your attention.