

Using the Bible as a Protestant Religious Practice

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Introduction

In a popular introduction to Christianity, Rowan Williams addresses Baptism, Bible, Eucharist and Prayer. The picture Williams draws of a baptized Christian is a very Protestant picture: »One of the things that Christian people characteristically do is read the Bible – or rather, in quite a lot of circumstances, they have the Bible read to them.« Williams immediately creates an important distinction. Inheritors of the Reformation are part of a culture of literacy, yet for most Christians worldwide and throughout the ages »the Bible is a book *heard* more than read«. Reading may not be the primary mode of engaging with the Bible; the Christian life is a »listening life«. Williams adds that »[o]ur visual model of Bible-reading is probably still very much formed by the idea of a person sitting alone in a room with a bound volume. But that is a very modern and minority approach to the Bible«. ¹ Though the use of the Bible may be part of the normal Christian life, the way the Bible is used is very much culturally determined.

In order to address the question of how the use of the Bible in Protestantism interacts with culture, I depart from two assumptions. First, Protestantism stimulated a specific use of the Bible, indicated by practices like the authority of biblical texts in theological reasoning, the discipline of homiletics as the art of text-based preaching, and telling biblical stories in Christian education. Second, Protestantism as a cultural influx made the Bible into a tangible and material, cultural object. For instance, the Bible was sold (economics) and in paintings the Bible appears as a material – usually leather – book (art). The tension between the use of the Bible as a religious practice and the way it changed European culture is illustrated in Vincent van Gogh's *Still Life with Open Bible*. The painting shows a large open Bible and a small yellow copy of Émile Zola's *La joie de vivre*, with a quenched candle in between. It marks the era of modernism and the farewell to religious authority. Van Gogh's painting touches upon a cultural understanding of the Bible as a source of wisdom and the enlightenment move from biblical authority to modern thinkers. The painting questions biblical authority, yet it is not clear whether van Gogh enjoys it or regards it as a sad cultural fact. As the son of a liberal Protestant minister, van Gogh was raised in a context in which modernism and religion merged. His painting brings to the fore how the Bible has become a cultural artefact, reflecting a major cultural change in the use of the Bible, while the painter tries to »reconcile the Bible with modern literature«. ²

¹ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian. Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*, Grand Rapids, MI 2014, 21 f.

² Kathleen Powers Erickson, *At Eternity's Gate. The Spiritual Vision of Vincent van Gogh*, Grand Rapids, MI 1998, 92 f.

Method

According to Paul Ballard research and scholarship on the actual use of the Bible is lacking. He cites Andrew Village, who writes that »the academy remains largely ignorant of what other people do with the Bible«. ³ Although this paper does not attempt to fill this gap, it points to possible directions for research in the area of the reception of the Bible as a sacred text. My approach to reception is pragmatic, concerns lived faith, and takes the material object of the Bible as its starting point. First, the approach is pragmatic, because it takes the actual use of the Bible as the unit of analysis. Furthermore, its focus is upon lived faith or lived religion rather than on expert knowledge or institutional representations. ⁴ Finally, having a bible, publishing a bible, translating a bible, selling a bible or reading a bible are all pragmatic instances of lived religion; they also exhibit a *material* approach. This approach to reception helps to further understand the interactions between religion, sacred texts and culture. In the remainder of the paper I present eight different examples of using the Bible. ⁵ The concluding section formulates a hypothesis on the mutual impact of Bible and culture.

Prototypes of Using the Bible: Worship and the Book

Example 1: Using the Bible in Protestant Worship

The first scene concerns a regular worship service in a Reformed congregation in the Netherlands. In the sanctuary, four screens are installed that project the lyrics of the hymns on to the walls of the church in four different directions, thus enabling worshippers in all corners of the church to read the lyrics and sing the hymns. During the sermon illustrations are projected and the Scripture readings are also visible on the screen. The liturgical experience is dual: the voice of the preacher, reading the scriptural text out loud, creates an aural experience; the projected words on the screens, to be read along by the audience, create a visual experience. In the service three Scripture readings are read and projected, in two different Dutch translations. When we take this scene back in time, say twenty years, the experience is still both aural and visual. The preacher reads the words out loud. The congregation search for the text in their physical bibles and read along as the preacher reads the text.

³ Paul Ballard, *The Use of Scripture*, in: Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Oxford 2012, 170.

⁴ For lived faith or lived religion approaches, cf. Wolf-Eckart Failing/Hans-Günter Heimbrock, *Gelebte Religion wahrnehmen. Lebenswelt – Alltagskultur – Religionspraxis*, Stuttgart 1998; Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Oxford/New York, NY 2008; Charles Marsh et al. (ed.), *Lived Theology. New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, New York, NY 2016; Sari Katajala-Peltomaa/Raisa Maria Toivo, *Lived Religion and the Long Reformation in Northern Europe C. 1300–1700*, Boston, MA 2016.

⁵ »Example« is a lighter concept than case (as in case study research) or indicator (as in Grounded Theory research).

Four material differences correlate: first, worshippers use physical copies of printed bibles; second, in the liturgy there is a brief silence so that everyone has time to find the appropriate place in their bible; third, those who read along with the scriptural text interact with the printed words in their own individual space rather than interacting with a screen that is watched together; fourth, there is no freedom by the preacher to choose what translation is used at the expense of the reading experience of the worshippers. The differences between the scenes, however, exhibit remarkable similarities. First, the scene indicates how Protestant believers *use the Bible*. The Bible is used as a book in which you have to find your way personally or a text which is projected upon a wall and interacted with visually in a social environment. Second, the Bible functions within the lived faith of people in a way that reflects cultural patterns; it is taken to church, found in a pew or presented as a movie projected upon the wall. Third, the Bible appears as *cultural object*. It is a printed book that you have to learn to engage with or it is a picture projected upon a screen. Hence, the story of the Protestant, particularly the Reformed, use of the Bible in worship is tied up with the story of technology and commerce. In this way, the lived faith of people reflects cultural patterns and conditions.

Example 2: The Story of the Spread of Luther's Bible

In 1522, a few years after Erasmus released a critical edition of the Greek New Testament, Martin Luther translated the New Testament into the German language. In the same year William Tyndale started translating the New Testament into English, based on a copy of Luther's German Bible. Within four years the first edition was published. Also in 1522 Jacob van Liesvelt started his translation of the New Testament into Dutch, again based on Luther's translation of the New Testament.

The combination of Bible translation and a publishing house that agreed to print Luther's Bible proved to be a fruitful one, although perhaps more in terms of business than in terms of adherence to the new religious orientation. Recent research makes clear that the spread of the Reformation depended less upon the publishing houses and the printing presses than was previously assumed. Ultimately, publishers are commercial houses, serving those from whom they can make money. According to Hyojoung Kim and Steven Pfaff, theology students were more important than printing houses:

Mobilized students [e. g., those trained in Wittenberg] spread the new theology to towns and catalysed the formation of local critical mass to bolster urban agitation. In returning to their places of origin, students risked the dangers of agitation, helped bear the costs of local organization, and endowed the emerging movement with trust and mutual expectation.⁶

⁶ Hyojoung Kim/Steven Pfaff, Structure and Dynamics of Religious Insurgency. Students and the Spread of the Reformation, in: ASR 77 (2012), 188–215, 190.

Cities with universities exposed to the new Reformed teaching »through student enrollments were more likely to institute reform.«⁷ Those who were educated to read the Bible took copies of it and the reading practices in which they had been trained from one city to another.⁸ Although technology provided the conditions, the real impact lay in the connections between centres of intellectual exchange, such as universities.

The importance of the academic network for the rapid spread of Luther's translation indicates a specifically Protestant theological combination. First, religious practices are socially rather than structurally ordered. In the spread of Protestantism, communities and networks of believers were more important than buildings, clergy and fixed rituals. Second, the spread of the Bible indicates how central the Old and New Testament are to the Protestant religious practice. Because, as Luther said in his letters, »Holy Scripture is for the common good, reading the Bible should not be the privilege of priests.«⁹

Luther's Bible was certainly not the first European Bible in the vernacular language,¹⁰ but two of its features were unique. First, Luther had the opportunity of using the Greek edition of the New Testament. Furthermore, his translation succeeded in using a kind of German that was the language of everyday life. God spoke German; hence the Bible could be truly heard as God's Word to us, today. Again, cultural developments and social engagement went hand in hand. A critical edition, the outcome of the culture of humanism provided the cultural conditions for Luther's Bible. Engaging with everyday language, however, created the religious experience of hearing God's word in the vernacular.

Obviously, the centrality of the Scriptures as a sacred text is not unique to the Protestant branch of Christianity. Yet there is something about the way that the Scriptures are *used* as the primary tools for spiritual formation – in schools, churches and homes – that is rather distinctive of Protestantism: Bible reading has become a private practice.

The Multifaceted Story of Literacy

Example 3: Reading the Bible as a Devotional Practice

The recent study, »God in the Netherlands«, a ten-year survey among the Dutch population concerning their religious affiliations and behaviours, confirms the findings of previous studies.¹¹ Church and religion are declining in Dutch society. Fewer and fewer Dutch people pray and read the Bible. In a large study of Bible ownership, reading and

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cf. Rodney Stark, *How the West Won. The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*, Wilmington, DE 2014.

⁹ Quoted in Cebus Cornelis de Bruin/Frits Gerrit Murk Broeyer, *De Statenbijbel en zijn voorgangers. Nederlandse bijbelvertalingen vanaf de Reformatie tot 1637*, Haarlem ²1993, 51.

¹⁰ Sabrina Corbellini, *Cultures of Religious Reading in the Late Middle Ages. Instructing the Soul, Feeding the Spirit, and Awakening the Passion*, Turnhout 2013.

¹¹ Ton Bernts/Joantine Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966–2015*, Utrecht 2016.

literacy, Clive Field concludes that Christianity is »becoming de-coupled in everyday life from the holy book on which it is founded«. ¹² Yet when we take a closer look at the figures, another pattern in the Dutch data is also relevant: two thirds of members of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and even 86 percent of members of other Protestant denominations are Bible-readers, against 25 percent of Catholic believers. The Dutch researchers draw two conclusions: Bible reading is primarily a Protestant practice and only a small number of Protestant church members indicate that they »never« read the Bible. From the published data, we cannot be sure that the people who would certainly call themselves believers are the same people who indicate that they regularly read the Bible. Yet, it does not seem to be a strange hypothesis to state that more than half (9 % »often« read, 9 % »sometimes« read) of those who call themselves believers (18 %) still read the Bible fairly often. Given the overall decline in institutional religion, the reading of the Bible continues to be an important devotional practice among Dutch Protestants. ¹³

Example 4: Individualisation of the Reading Experience

In the English-speaking world the study bible for students, families and children has become very common in the twentieth century. In recent years in the Netherlands three different study bibles were produced for various church denominations, with special editions for men, women, teenagers and families. There is a special edition for soldiers and military personnel with dimensions that fit the personal equipment of a soldier. Not only believers, but unbelievers and atheists may enjoy having their own bible. From 2012 onwards, the Dutch novelist Guus Kuijer started writing a series called *The Bible for Unbelievers* (4 volumes). Each age group, denomination, and target group has access to a bible specifically designed for its needs. Bible translation continues to grow, not only among those languages and peoples that do not have a Bible translation in their mother tongues, but also in parts of the world where Bible translations have been common from the Reformation period. The number of translations has exploded. In the Dutch language there have been three completely different Bible translations within a decade, ¹⁴ each of them commercialised and in-

¹² Clive D. Field, Is the Bible Becoming a Closed Book? British Opinion Poll Evidence, in: JCRel 29 (2014), 503–528, 519.

¹³ Digital bible reading seems to be practiced predominantly among Evangelical Christians. Cf. Tim Hutchings, Design and the Digital Bible. Persuasive Technology and Religious Reading, in: JCRel 32 (2017), 205–219.

¹⁴ NBV 2004, HSV 2010, BGT 2014. The *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (New Bible Translation), abbreviated as NBV, is an interconfessional translation of the Bible in Dutch and was published in 2004 by the Protestant and Catholic publishing houses in The Netherlands, in cooperation with Flemish partners. The *Herziene Statenvertaling* (Revised edition of the translation of the States [1637], like the English Revised King James Version), abbreviated as HSV, is a private initiative and was published in 2010, mainly used in conservative Protestant denominations. The *Bijbel in gewone taal* (Bible in Plain Language), abbreviated as BGT, was published in 2014 and consists of a translation in plain Dutch with a limited vocabulary, using simple sentence structures. Cf. for the latter: http://bijbelingewonetaal.nl/uploads/2015/07/NBG_ENG_proef-4.pdf [2018–05–15].

dividualised into different editions. Handing over the Scriptures to common believers leads to a wide dispersion, so it seems. Everyone has a bible that connects to his or her life-situation and speaks the language of his or her spirituality, walk of life, gender or level of education. The Reformation has been blamed for the fact that faith became individualised. Whether or not this is true, the Reformation certainly led to an individualisation of the Bible.

Example 5: Industrialisation of the Bible

The Bible created a new sense of community and contributed to a shift in the societal order, especially in connection with education and the rise of industry. In an article in *Economic Inquiry on Protestantism and Education*, Timo Boppart, Josef Falkinger and Volker Grossmann, suggest a connection between Bible reading practices and the literacy of the Protestant part of Western Europe.¹⁵ Does the intrinsic motivation for Protestant believers to read the Bible contribute to a growing literacy among Protestants during the industrialisation? Based upon a Swiss dataset, taken from tests that were created to test the educational level of men in military service, they draw the following conclusion: »Protestants had developed higher cognitive skills in all education fields at the time of industrialization. This indicates that Protestants must have been more aware than Catholics that educational investment pays off economically, in addition to enabling them to read the bible.«¹⁶

Reading the Bible was made possible by translation into the popular language. Yet another smaller and less impressive, yet very influential invention should be added to this: the invention of a standard for referencing biblical texts. In 1551 Robert Estienne, also known as Robertus Stephanus, a former Catholic and sixteenth-century printer, was the first to publish a bible that included a numbering system. He used the bible verse as a unit for numbering, an invention of Renaissance and Reformation rhetorical culture. According to William Weaver it influenced the educational system in sixteenth-century Europe because Estienne's division of verses was very much indebted to humanist reading practices.¹⁷ It generated two innovations in the practices of reading. First, linguistic units (verses) became a means for (academic) referencing. Second, in the King James Version, for instance, paragraphs with verse numbers changed the visual appearance of the Bible as a printed book.

Hence, the educational system both impacted the reading practices and the reading practices impacted the system of education and contributed to the rise of science in the seventeenth century and the development of industry in the eighteenth century.

¹⁵ Timo Boppart et. al., Protestantism and Education. Reading (the Bible) and Other Skills, in: *Economic Inquiry* 52 (2014), 874–895. Cf. Sascha O. Becker/Ludger Woessmann, Was Weber Wrong? A Human Capital Theory of Protestant Economic History, in: *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124 (2009), 531–596.

¹⁶ Boppart et. al., Protestantism and Education (as note 15), 892.

¹⁷ William P. Weaver, The Verse Divisions of the New Testament and the Literary Culture of the Reformation, in: *Ref(TS)* 16 (2011), 161–177.

Cultural Impact on or from Reading the Bible? Dating and Entertainment

Example 7: The Bible as a Source for Mass Entertainment

In an article *Materializing the Bible*, James Bielo offers an array of ethnographic methods to study the reception (or, as he calls it, the ›consumption‹) of sites that integrate religion and entertainment, ›commerce and devotion‹ or ›fun and faith‹. Although mainly located in the United States, there are over two hundred biblical theme parks that, according to Bielo, »materialize the written words of biblical scripture into physical, experiential attractions«. ¹⁸ Pilgrimages to so-called ›real‹ sites have been part and parcel of Catholic spirituality. Yet theme parks, such as the Ark Encounter, a site that reconstructs the narrative of the Flood and Noah's Ark, are products of committed creationists, usually evangelical Protestants. The intention is ›to ›make the Bible come alive‹ by transforming written scriptural words into a material, experiential environment«. In his study of Bible-based attractions Bielo also includes the way visitors engage in ›devotional labor‹, such as praying and the reading of biblical texts. He concludes that in the various stages of the entire consumption process, Bible reading takes place. In preparing for the visit or the pilgrimage, during the visit – because the biblical text is part of the actual exhibition, and after the visit – sometimes the ›reading of the bible‹ is a defining variable for certain groups of visitors, such as in the case of a group of ministers visiting a Bible-based attraction. This mixture of entertainment in the materialization of scripture and a historical reading of the biblical text illustrates how cultural expressions have an impact on reading the Bible.

Example 8: Impact on Interracial Dating?

Not much qualitative research has been done in the area of using the Bible in devotional practice. There are quantitative studies, however, that take the devotional use of the Bible as a controlling variable in other areas of life, which may hint at various qualitative aspects concerning the intended and unintended effects of reading the Scriptures devotionally. For instance, around the turn of the century, Leslie Francis concluded that the devotional reading of the Bible had a minor yet significant impact upon the sense of purpose in life among teenagers. ¹⁹ Samuel Perry has put forward the hypothesis that evangelical believers and mainline Protestants are *less* likely to engage in marrying someone from another race. ²⁰ His data seems to support his hypothesis as he writes that »those who frequently attend church and affirm biblical literalism are less

¹⁸ James S. Bielo, *Materializing the Bible. Ethnographic Methods for the Consumption Process*, in: *Practical Matters* 9 (2016), 54–69.

¹⁹ Leslie J. Francis, *The Relationship between Bible Reading and Purpose in Life among 13–15-Year-Olds*, in: *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 3 (2000), 27–36.

²⁰ Samuel L. Perry, *Religion and Interracial Romance. The Effects of Religious Affiliation, Public and Devotional Practices, and Biblical Literalism*, in: *Social Science Quarterly* 94 (2013), 1308–1327.

likely to have dated across race«. ²¹ Yet the story continues. Interracial romance, as Perry writes, is more complex than this. Perry borrows an idea, put forward earlier by Gerhard Emmanuel Lenski in 1961, that those who engage in more private devotional practices such as prayer and sacred text reading show a more favourable attitude towards racial integration. Perry's research seems to confirm this idea. He concludes that »participating in devotional religious practices such as prayer and sacred text reading is highly predictive that individuals engage in interracial romance«. ²² Hence, a belief concerning the authority of the Bible or church attendance may not have the impact that the actual devotional *use* of the Bible may have. Martin Luther may not have realised that giving the Bible to common believers would in the end have such consequences for romantic relationships.

Conclusion: Production or Reception

Has the emphasis on the Scriptures and the use of the Bible had any impact on European culture? It seems so. But the argument can also be reversed: cultural changes have had an impact on the use of the Bible. Therefore, the relationship is much more complex.

I recall the scene of Sunday worship. The contemporary congregation compared to the same congregation say twenty years ago, reveals the paradoxical situation that while the Protestant Reformation has put the Bible into the hands of ordinary believers, practices in contemporary worship seem to communicate a contrary movement: there is no need any more for physical bibles that believers actively interact with, because technology has made the Bible as cultural object obsolete or changed its cultural presence. So, if we relate Bible reading practices and cultural impact, the latter must be understood in two directions: impact upon culture and impact of culture. Impact has a production and a reception side. The following diagram gives a tentative result of the argument:

<i>Production</i> of culture <i>by</i> using the Bible (impact on culture)	Creative tension between Production & Reception	<i>Reception</i> of culture <i>in</i> using the Bible (impact of culture)
Interracial dating Social & Private devotional practices Industrialization?	Bibles for target groups Biblical theme parks Educational practices	Etienne's verse-numbering Technological innovations (printing, digital) Everyday language (translations)

²¹ Ibid., 1316.

²² Ibid., 1324.

The one objection against the tendency to take ›cultural impact‹ and ›using the Bible‹ as separate categories concerns the fact that using the Bible is itself a cultural practice. Religious practices are always embedded in cultural practices. Although this objection is reasonable, religious practices do not necessarily emerge from cultural processes. In other words, despite the mobility of theological students, the availability of printing houses and the accessibility of a reliable Greek text of the New Testament, Luther could have decided *not* to translate the Bible into the vernacular. Translating, disseminating, and reading the Bible are bound up with the religious nature of the sacred text which plays a role in the communication between believers and God. Religious practices cannot be reduced to cultural processes.

This paper has been predominantly explorative. The relation between the Bible as a sacred text and cultural developments and expressions is a complex one. It points to further research in two areas: (1) how did European culture contribute to the devotional use of sacred texts, and (2) how does the presence of sacred texts shape cultural expressions and developments? The actual use, rather than the beliefs about the sacred texts, may be of vital importance for understanding the dynamic relation between religion and culture.

