

CREDO

I describe my religious background in the United States as “Suburban Presbyterian.” But even in that much diluted form, I acquired a detectable dollop of Scottish Calvinism. I was fascinated by the Bible, but despaired of ever reading it all. And then I had the usual period of rejection and falling away. When Barbara was born, Ruth and I were drawn back to the church – for her sake as well as for the music. First-St. Andrew’s United Church had a beautiful choir, led by Alan Barthel and then Paul Merritt, both of whom have been lifelong friends. But it also had a preacher, Alex Farquhar, who preached passionately about the most difficult passages of scripture, not just the lovey-dovey parts. (The text for the first sermon I heard him preach was Luke 14:26.) My intellectual curiosity about Christianity and the Bible and its shaping force in my culture became obsessive, and eventually I could apprehend the structure of this massive composite text, and finally could claim that I had read it through with some degree of understanding.

Eventually, I asked to teach a university course in Literature of the Bible, as much for my own sake as for my students. The course was strictly literary, non-doctrinal, non-devotional. But I prepared a personal Credo to explain my position before beginning.

I call myself a “liberal Christian.” Among current thinkers, I am closest to writers like John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan, Elaine Pagels, Karen Armstrong. I “believe,” but believing for me does not mean subscribing to a set of statements or doctrines. The United Church has no catechism, no 39 Articles. The original meaning of the word “believe” has much more to do with trust or commitment. I love the Bible, but do not take it literally. It is a human book, or library of books of composite authorship, written by fallible human beings over a number of centuries. My belief has no room for the unquestioned authority of scripture. If you disagree, you may wish to withdraw from this course now. It’s not an argument that I’m prepared to entertain.

All this raises the question of scriptural authority for the believer. In the eighteenth-century, John Wesley suggested what has become known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral for spiritual direction: Scripture, plus Tradition, plus Reason, plus Christian Experience or Faith. But this leaves enormous room for uncertainty. I embrace this uncertainty because “Faith” and “Certainty” are by definition not synonyms but antonyms, mutually exclusive opposites. If one claims “certainty,” there is no room for “faith.” When I criticize the writings of Scripture, my faith does not come tumbling like a house of cards.

Ezra Pound once wrote “I believe the Bible is the record of a barbaric tribe, while the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid are the product of a civilized society.” Perhaps. But the Bible narrates a search for faith in a world not prettified but depicted honestly as it is – full of human injustice, murder, rape, unmitigated malice, struggles for power, warfare of the bloodiest kind, total destruction. It is the record from the so-called Axial Age which

produced Western Judaeo-Christian culture (among others), and it is therefore the most available, interesting and useful record to me.

There is a reality in “spiritual experience.” It is an essential part of a full and complete life, whatever you call it or whatever particular form it takes. And (for me at least) it takes practice and discipline, it doesn’t just happen naturally without effort. And I’ve seen it transform lives. As Thomas Merton said to young men who wished to become monks in the Trappist monastery, this place is not a rejection of life. If you want a spiritual life, the first thing you need to do is to get a life.

SOME BOOKS

First is a short list of books that have been particularly important to my personal development over the years. The second lists books that have been especially helpful in my understanding of the Bible.

Karen Armstrong. *The Battle for God*. 2000.
J.S. Bach, *The Saint Matthew Passion*. 1727.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. 1937.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. 1949.
Marcus Borg, *passim*.
John Dominic Crossan, *passim*.
Dante. *The Divine Comedy* (with notes by Dorothy Sayers, John Ciardi, et al.). 1320.
C.H. Dodd. *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*. 1932.
Elgar/Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius*. 1865/1900.
T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*. 1941.
St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*. c. 1579.
Julian of Norwich. Long text published 1670.
Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. 1955.
C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. 1952.
C.S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*. 1964.
Milton, *Paradise Lost*. 2d ed., 1672.
Elaine Pagels, *passim*.
John Selby Spong, *passim*.
Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*. 1952.
Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*. 1939.

THE BIBLE: A HIGHLY SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Robert Alter & Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. 1987.
Robert Alter. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. 1981.
Robert Alter. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. 1985.

Robert Alter. *The World of Biblical Literature*. 1992.

Bernhard W. Anderson. *Understanding the Old Testament*.

Erich Auerbach. "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis*. 1953.

Roland Barthes. "The Struggle with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32: 22-32." In *Image/Music/Text*. 1978.

Sacvan Bercovich. *Typology and Early American Literature*. 1972.

Harold Bloom, ed. *The Bible: Modern Essays in Criticism*. 1987.

Harold Bloom. *Ruin and Sacred Truths*. 1991.

Harold Bloom. *The Book of J*. 1990.

Benson Bobrick. *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired*. 2001.

Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan. *The First Christmas*. 2001.

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Marcus J. Borg. *Jesus*. 2006.

Marcus J. Borg. *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. 2001.

Athalya Brenner & Carole Fontaine, eds. *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*. 1997.

Athalya Brenner, ed. *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*. 1993.

John Bright. *A History of Israel*. 1972.

Ursula Brumm. *American Thought and Religious Typology*. 1970.

Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis*.

Walter Brueggemann. *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory*. 1985.

Henry Chadwick. *The Early Church*. 1967.

John Dominic Crossan. & Jonathan Reed. *In Search of Paul*. 2004.

John Dominic Crossan. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. 1994.

Donald Davie, ed. *The Psalms in English*. 1996.

C.H. Dodd. *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*. 1963.

C.H. Dodd. *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*. 1932.

C.H. Dodd. *The Parables of the Kingdom*. 1961.

Austin Farrer. *A Rebirth of Images*. 1949.

Harry Emerson Fosdick. *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. 1938.

Sigmund Freud. *Moses and Monotheism*. 1937.

Northrop Frye. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. 1982.

Northrop Frye. *Words with Power*. 1990.

René Girard. *The Scapegoat*. 1986.

Robert M. Grant & D.N. Freedman. *The Secret Sayings of Jesus According to the Gospel of Thomas*. 1960.

R.R. Gros Louis, ed. *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*. 1974.

Geoffrey Hartmann & Sanford Burdick, eds. *Midrash and Literature*. 1986.

Abraham J. Heschel. *The Prophets*. 1962.

Abraham J. Heschel. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*. 1997.

Gabriel Josipovici. *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible*. 1988.

Carl Jung. *Answer to Job*. 1952.

Frank Kermode. *The Genesis of Secrecy*. 1979.

Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*. 1843.

Amy-Jill Levine *The Misunderstood Jew*. 2006.

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Amihai Mazar. *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000-586 B.C.E*. 1992.
Marvin Meyer. *The Gnostic Discoveries*. 2005.
Elaine Pagels. *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*. 1988.
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Gerhard von Rad. *The Message of the Prophets*. 1962.
Alan Richardson, ed. *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*. 1950.
John A.T. Robinson. *Reading the New Testament*. 1976.
Herbert Schneidau. *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition*. 1976.
John Shelby Spong. *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*. 1996.
John Shelby Spong. *The Sins of Scripture*. 2005.
John Shelby Spong. *Resurrection: Fact or Myth?* 1994.
Meir Sternberg. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. 1985.
Geza Vermes. *Jesus and the World of Judaism*. 1983.
James G. Williams. *Those Who Ponder Proverbs: Aphoristic Thinking and Biblical Literature*. 1981.