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MISAPPROPRIATION AND INSTRUMENTALISATION OF THE WORD OF GOD

EVIL PASSIONS IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Maurice Salib

The history of Christianity is paved with examples of misappropriation and instrumentalisation of the Bible by those who were called to transmit it: theologians. So are the teachers of the law, the scribes, the Pharisees, the priests and the pastors all guilty¹⁵¹?

It must be said that this is not a new phenomenon. Two thousand years ago, the Word of Christ, who came to fulfil the Word of God, was barely spoken when it was already transgressed. Before Him, the prophets of the Old Testament had the role of bringing the people of God back into line with the commandments. If the transmitters of the divine Word had all been faithful, there would certainly have been no need for so many prophets.

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So there have always been the shepherds, those who serve the Word, and there have been the usurpers (false shepherds), who use the Word to establish personal power or to participate in a clannish, iniquitous system, contrary to the values of the Gospel.

Saul of Tarsus persecutes the first Christians before living his way to Damascus, understanding and serving Christ under his new name: Paul the apostle. Simon the magician wants to buy the Holy Spirit to perform miracles and gain more money and fame. Ananias and Sapphira lie and claim to have given all their wealth to the church, although they had kept some of it for themselves. Some Christians in Corinth boasted of the gifts of the spirit they had received and took pride in them.

Centuries later, the celibacy imposed on priests and monks is an instrumentalisation and a misuse of the Word of God, which had no other purpose than to increase the power of the ecclesiastical authorities to the detriment of the secular power, because it lost the fortune of the nobles, who entered the orders and did not leave them again, since marriage was excluded because of the vow of chastity. There are many other dark pages in the history of Christianity where evil passions overrule the values of the Gospel. These include the crusades, the inquisition and the trade in indulgences.

The Pharisee and us

Of the Jews in the region of Beroea, in the book of Acts (17:10-11), we are told: "When they arrived, they went to the synagogue of the Jews. More courteous than those in Thessalonica, they received the Word with all goodwill, and every day they examined the Scriptures to see if it was so. The attitude of the Jews of Beroea is exemplary and if it is mentioned, it is because it does not seem to be self-evident. Indeed, to refer to the Word and remain faithful to it is not obvious. The interpreter or teacher of the Word can therefore distance himself from it to the point of betraying it. As a pastor in Geneva for 25 years, I can assure you that

the theme of the book *Ethics and the Overcoming of the Odious Passions* is very topical and that the examination of the exercise of power in Protestant circles today does not, unfortunately, escape deviant passions and, more globally, iniquity.

Christ and his disciples, from the very beginning of the Christian adventure, are confronted with the instrumentalisation of the Bible for personal power purposes. In chapter 23 of the Gospel of Matthew we read the following about the theologians of the early Christian era:

“The scribes and Pharisees sit in the chair of Moses: [...] do therefore and observe whatever they may say to you, but do not be governed by their deeds, for they say and do not do. They bind heavy burdens and put them on the shoulders of men, while they themselves refuse to lift them up. All their actions they do to make themselves noticed by men.”

So here is a rebuke, an attack on the Pharisees by Jesus. And what an attack! The most violent of all, perhaps, in the Gospel of Matthew. This should not surprise us, for God has given us the Word to set us free and he does not want us to use it to shut each other up. Here we have a good example of what Jesus' freedom was: for Him and for the Jews as a whole, the Pharisees, the scribes and the doctors of the law were the official religious authority. And that is why Jesus advises people to “do what they say”, since these scribes have the mission of transmitting and teaching the Word of God.

Coherence between words and deeds

At the same time, Jesus realised that there was a gap, not to say a rupture, between what the religious leaders said and what they did. He is not going to be gentle. Let us listen instead to how he addresses them, a little further on in the same chapter, Mt 23:

“Woe to you, scribes and hypocritical Pharisees, who tithe mint, fennel and caraway, while you neglect the most important things in the Law: justice, mercy and faithfulness. Blind guides, who stop the gnat in the filter and swallow the camel!”

Let us note in passing that Jesus can get angry, express his anger, but that he has a sense of humour.

At the beginning of his public life, Christ was very close to the Pharisees. He liked their scrupulous fidelity to the Law of God. But soon, he will separate himself from them, criticising their attitude. Why did he do this? For one and only one reason: these people do not love. They love themselves. They are hypocrites. They put all their trust, not in God who saves, but in themselves, in what they do well.

They practice works and not grace, form and not substance, letter and not spirit. For them, God is an accountant, one who keeps a rigorous two-column account of the good and evil done by each person. They have a false idea of God because they take themselves to be the centre of the world. We remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14):

“He spoke the following parable to some who were convinced that they were righteous and despised everyone else: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed to himself, ‘O God, I thank you that I am not like other men, who are thieves, evil-doers, adulterers, or like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I pay tithes of everything I get.’ The tax collector, standing at a distance, would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘O God, have mercy on this sinner.’ I tell you, this one went home justified, and not the other, for every man who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

These religious authorities recommend relief from suffering, but they attack Jesus when he heals on the Sabbath. They put burdens on people's shoulders that they themselves do not touch with their fingertips. Hence the pride, vanity and desire to appear in all these self-righteous people. From being servants of the Word, they have become owners of this Word and they lock it up, barricade it, instrumentalise it and divert it.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, who shut the entrance to the kingdom of heaven before men! For you yourselves do not enter it, nor do you let in those who would” (Mt 23). They do not serve God and do not let others serve Him, but they use God to appear. They therefore want titles, consideration, honours. Hence Christ's violent attacks on the religious authorities of his time.

Yesterday... and today?

These words of Jesus are also addressed to us today. Will it reach us in its criticism of the religious authorities of our time and in its criticism of the attitudes, sometimes false, of the Christian people?

Let's take a closer look and examine the Pharisee in each of us. I believe that every Christian and every parish should be able to hear this at some point, so great is the temptation to withdraw and abuse power. Whenever we think we have the ultimate truth, whenever we think we have appropriated the one and only way of living faith and spirituality, it is probably the Pharisee in us that gets the upper hand.

There is a radical criticism of the pastor or parish priest who is responsible for transmitting the Word, of the whole institution and therefore of each one of us. We do not have to evade it or run away from it. We have to take it for ourselves as Christians today. Those who have left the church because of the deviant behaviour of the authorities, and therefore contrary to the Word, are more numerous than those who are still there. So much so that this question has become legitimate: is there still a relationship between the so-called Christian institutions and the

Church of God? We must be self-critical. Jesus invites us to a threefold examination: am I faithful and true in my relationship to 1) myself, 2) to others and 3) to God?

This raises several questions for us: Am I really doing what I say? Do I not, for example with my children, sometimes have a double attitude, teaching them values that I do not practice well, demanding that they go to catechism but never accompanying them to worship or to Mass? By the way, we want quality pastors and we are right, but let's not forget that the pastors of tomorrow are among our children today!

Do I not also seek consideration and honours in my profession?... in the Church?... in society?... do I serve or do I serve myself? Have I not made myself a little self-service religion where one takes some and leaves some, cleverly accommodating myself with the Law? Do I not judge others too much, placing overwhelming demands on them? Do I make my profession or my role as a father or mother a service and not an instrument of power?

For my part, I wonder if I am not one of those who say, who teach, who advise, but who do not do? It is easy to say, but are my actions in relation to, and in conformity with, what I teach? Am I an encouragement to those I meet to read the Word and live it?

“Let each one examine himself”, Paul told the Corinthians (1 Cor 11-28). Personally, I do not think I can escape criticism. But there is more. I also sometimes wonder if, in the name of faith, in the name of a Protestant ethic, we are not putting burdens on the shoulders of others that we ourselves do not touch with our fingertips. For example, in Geneva, at the beginning of September, we proclaim a day of fasting, “the Genevan Fast”, but do we fast, do we pray? I also wonder if, under the guise of the Word of God, I am not trying to get my own will across... In other words, I wonder if I am not using the Word of God to justify the ideology of the moment, my own ideas as a man, my own opinions. It can go that far! Yes!

That's why I like the attitude of the Jews of Berea in the book of Acts: "Every day they examined the Scriptures to see if it was so". And I, when I ask myself a question, am I going to look at what God says in the Bible, what He teaches me, in His Word, so that I can conform to it before I answer?

There is nothing more beautiful to me than a Bible whose pages have been marked and corroded, and whose tired binding tells of its owner's diligent use. My friends, every time a Bible is destroyed by its use, a woman, a man is built! Because he who reads the Word is taught and therefore he is being built up. The Bible is a living Word, a Word that asks to be read, better, to be meditated upon, like the psalmist who says that he has made the Word of God his food, and that he meditates on his law day and night. "Ruminate on the Word" for the monks, "Sola scriptura" for the reformers.

Scripture Alone!

This should be a daily reality for us, and should permeate our entire spirituality throughout our lives. It will be a bulwark against the instrumentalisation of the Word for personal power and thus against the misuse and betrayal of Gospel values. There is a virtuous circle and an iterative system: the more I read the Word, the more I know it, the more I understand it, the more faithful and coherent its interpretation is with the whole of the biblical text, the more sensitive I am to any misappropriation or instrumentalisation, the less I go astray.

This, dear friends, is what we are invited to remember, we, the heirs of the Reformation, which is always to be remade, and which is never accomplished once and for all.

All of us, readers of the Bible, are therefore sometimes teachers, sometimes taught.

I believe that in the history of the Church there has been a shift, a deviation, a kind of betrayal of the Gospel. Little by little, a distinction

has been made in the Church between teachers and the taught. This is classic in theology. There was the teaching Church, i.e., the pope and the bishops (but also the professors of Protestant theology), who had a monopoly on sound doctrine and consequently were charged with a supervisory function (supervision of pastors, for example). This was based on a necessity: to avoid doctrinal deviations, to maintain the purity of the faith, so that people would not imagine anything, so that parish priests and pastors would not say or write anything.

During the Reformation, if the intention was good, since it was a question of putting the Word of God in all hands, the means used could not prevent slippage: Bucer in Strasbourg tried to improve morals within the Church but he provoked a two-tier Church: on the one hand, an elite Church, very professing, bordering on the sectarian, and on the other, a Church of the people.

This was the case with the pastoral acts for all, at the limit of the secular administration and outside of catechesis. With John Calvin, in Geneva, there was the morality police, which was supposed to help the people become more Christian, but which ended up exceeding them, because this police was more like an inquisition and denunciation than teaching and encouragement. Calvin burned Michel Servet, who did not think like him, which led to the words of Sébastien Castellion addressed to Calvin: “To kill a man is not to defend an idea, it is to kill a man.”

Consumer or servant of the Word?

As you can see, there is nothing new under the sun. So there was this ministry of vigilance on the part of the teaching Church. And then there was the teaching Church, which had the right to listen, full stop. And gradually, this distinction grew, a gap was created between “teachers” and “taught”. And this is a question of power. He who has the knowledge has the power, nothing new there either. Teacher taught is dominant dominated. It must be acknowledged that spiritual authorities,

not only in Rome or Geneva, have often played this role and exercised a real domination over minds. But Christians, too, have played the same game: they have often been content to be consumers (or tasters) of the words of such and such a priest or pastor. In this way they reinforced the “teacher-taught” gap, content to say amen to whatever the pastoral authority said.

“Every day they examined the Scriptures to see if it was so.” Basically, I think we all need to examine ourselves in the light of this word that Christ speaks to us today. Because there is a solution, and Jesus gives it to us. He tells us: “You are all taught by the Word” (Jn 6:45). All of us, pastors, parish priests, members of the congregation and therefore every Christian, are able to possess and read a Bible. All of us, on an equal footing, have to put ourselves at the school of the only Master, the only teacher: Jesus. There is only one Father. There is only one guide. There is only one schoolmaster. There is only one Word. We are all followers of one Master and servants of one another. We are all brothers and sisters, raised in the same school.

And if today, as a pastor, I were to impose my own opinions on you, that would be extremely serious. I can only be a “servant of the Word”. But for this I need you, who examine the Scriptures every day to see if this is so, and who say amen (in truth) with me, or who stop me and gently correct me if I go astray. So it is not enough for us to read or know the Word. We are indeed called to live it and to put it into practice in our relationships with one another. Yes, we are all at the school of Jesus. But we each have our own talents, our own ministries. One will encourage those who are exhausted, another will share her humour with those who are sad, another will listen to those who need to talk. You have understood that there are not those who bring and those who receive. There must not be those who are “assisted” who only have the right to listen and remain silent. Each of us has received something

different from God for the good of all. So let us not deprive each other and let us enjoy the Word of life together.

This is the price of regulation and counter-power in the face of misappropriation, instrumentalisation, and unjust passions. On the basis of biblical revelation, every Christian can and should judge, evaluate, and question the present ideologies, idolatries, and abuses of power of our institutional authorities. This will be the only guarantee of their continuity. This is Christian ethics, which is a consequence of our spiritual practice, not a prerequisite.