

## Christianity & Literacy

Too many pubs don't serve meals on Mondays. That's a problem for me because Monday is my day off. It's also the origin of this talk. One Monday last September, my friend Margaret and I (together with Tommy the dog) had walked along the cliff top from Pegwell Village to Cliff's End, where the hovercraft used to come in, with a view to having lunch in the local pub. Being Monday, however, lunch was unavailable at Cliff's End and we were obliged to walk onto to Minster, where I'm glad to report, our hopes of refreshment were not disappointed. On the way, Margaret told me about her study into literacy in Tudor England. I was surprised to discover that far more people in Tudor England learned to read than learned to write. That is surprising because nowadays children are taught reading and writing at more or less the same time. We learn our letters, both how to recognise them and how to form them, in infants' school or before. Margaret explained that, in Tudor times, there was much more to writing than reading. You had to mix up your own ink. There were no bottles of Quink on sale in Smith's and Dr Biro's invention lay centuries in the future. You had to be able to fashion a goose feather into a quill pen, using a pen knife, a sharp instrument which you might not want to put into the hands of a five year old. Most significant of all was the cost of what you wrote on – materials like vellum and parchment. Industrially produced paper only became available in Elizabethan times, production beginning on the banks of the River Darent. Good Queen Bess' golden days also saw the invention of the pencil, but neither pencil nor paper were cheap nor freely available. You definitely didn't want to waste scarce and expensive materials on childish scribbling. So why would you want to learn to write, or read, come to that? You didn't need reading and writing to be a labourer or most kinds of domestic servant. Tradesmen kept accounts on tally sticks. Maybe if you wanted to be a lawyer or a clergyman or an academic or the steward of a great estate, or one of the royal officials, it would be worth the trouble and expense of learning to write, but why bother otherwise? Why indeed did people learn to read? One principal motive was in order to read the bible, the prayer book and other religious works.

My grandfather was born in the 1890s and, as a boy, he had known many adults who couldn't read and write. It was only in 1880 that school attendance became compulsory for all children aged five to ten and even this law was widely disregarded. Only about 82% of children attended school in the 1890s. At about that time, one of my predecessors as Rector of Cuxton, Canon Charles Colson, wrote in the parish magazine, begging parents to send their children to school. Many homes were very poor and they needed any income their children could earn in the fields and factories. Besides, if they were growing up to be farm labourers or housemaids, what need did they have of book learning? Canon Colson made quite an eloquent case for the wisdom of parents sending their children to school, but his writing presumably had little impact in households where people didn't read. Many of that generation of boys, of course, died in the First World War, but those who survived came home to an entirely different world in which literacy and education generally would become ever more important.

Anyway, my grandfather's point was that, while he knew many people who couldn't read and write, he didn't know any who couldn't do money sums. I'm told that the same is still true of the street children of Brazil. People learn if they are sufficiently motivated. They learn what they want to learn.

The Dean of King's College London, where I studied Theology, came from central Europe, where most people grow up learning several languages as a matter of course. He frequently lamented the difficulty we British students seemed to have learning languages, but, of course, it's not some genetically inherited disability we suffer from; it's the fact that, living on an island which at one time headed an empire on which the sun never set, we seldom have to communicate with people who can't speak English.

So what motivates us to learn? It would be wrong to discount the power of religion. Gobekli Tepe is an archaeological site in Turkey, excavated from 1996 onwards. What is remarkable about it is that it is a temple without a city. It had always been assumed that human beings first built cities to live in and that, when they became sufficiently prosperous, they went in for luxuries such as temples. Gobekli Tepe has resulted in a major rethink. Could it be that nomadic tribes first came together in large numbers to build temples to their gods and then started building cities in which to live and work around the temples? It has been suggested that life was actually easier for hunter gatherers leading a nomadic existence in scattered communities than it was for early farmers settled in towns and tilling the soil with the sweat of their brow. So why did they settle down, till the ground and build cities? Was it in fact because of their religious attachment to their temples? Maybe animals were originally farmed in order to provide meat for temple sacrifices. It is true, however, that many cultures regard the taking of animal life, whether in hunting or the slaughter of farm animals, as in itself an act of sacrifice. That was true of the people we used to call American Indians and it is true, to a certain extent, of modern Jews and Muslims. Kosher and Halal methods of slaughter reflect the conviction that all life is sacred. The slain animal is to be accorded respect and the lost life is offered back to God.

Etymologically, "civilisation" is from the same root as "city". In the ancient world, only city dwellers were civilised. We country bumpkins were uneducated barbarians. If ancient religion gave rise to the city state, it was also the origin of civilisation. So why, when Ur was one of the very few cities in the world, did God tell Abraham's family to leave it and take up the nomadic life in Canaan?

It isn't hard to discover other examples of the importance of religion to the development of civilisation and its decisive role in education and learning. It was astrologers, especially those of ancient Babylon, whose observations of the heavens provided the original data on which the science of Astronomy is based. It has been suggested that more sophisticated religious ideas made scientific analysis of the cosmos possible. If your people believe that the sun, the moon and the stars are gods, it's potentially impious or blasphemous to treat them as the objects of your investigations. Once, however, you understand (as Jews, Christians and Moslems understand) that the heavenly bodies are actually God's creation, just as we are, then they are no longer off limits. You can study them, catalogue them and even travel to them once you've invented sufficiently powerful rockets. Galileo's conflict with the pope was an aberration in the story of science and religion. It was the Roman Catholic Church's erroneous scientific theories, not its Christian faith, which Galileo got into trouble for arguing with.

It was the priests of ancient Egypt who kept the records of the Nile's yearly inundation, enabling them to tell farmers the right time to plant their crops. Pythagoras is in many ways the father of Western mathematics and the father of Western philosophy. His main interest, however, was religion, which led him to believe that there must be order in the world. I should put it this way. The world has to make sense because it is the creation or reflection of a rational mind, infinitely greater than our minds, but nevertheless rational, so that we can conceivably begin to understand it, him or her and the universe which is its, his or her creation. Mathematics makes sense (at least to mathematicians). There are scientific laws. You can trust gravity and thermodynamics and all the rest always to be the same, every day, everywhere throughout the universe. Men like Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle and Michael Faraday believed that because they believed that the laws of Science are the Laws of our immutable God as surely as are the Ten Commandments. Science is motivated by awe and wonder and seeks order in the cosmos. Whatever the motivations of atheist scientists today, belief in God was a major factor in motivating the pioneers of modern science, as it is of many Christian practitioners of science today.

Coming back to books, perhaps the hardest group of students for teachers to teach are working class boys and young men. They've got too much energy to sit in a classroom and, if they're not enthused by the subject matter or motivated by the prospect of a job to which their studies are relevant, they tend to be disruptive and inattentive. And yet, how many Muslim young men devote themselves to the study of Arabic so that they can read the Quran in the original? Muslims believe that no translation can convey the beauty and depth of God's Word to Mohammed as well as the original. And so they learn a complex and beautiful language in which to study it. Likewise, Jewish boys learn at least some Hebrew so that they can read from the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) in its original language at their Bar Mitzvah. I guess girls do the same at the relatively newer ceremony of Bat Mitzvah.

Judaism, Islam and Christianity are all, in a sense, religions of the book, though we should never forget that the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life (II Corinthians 3<sup>6</sup>). As a clergyman, I'd better give the bible reference!) Christianity has been credited with inventing the book. By book, I mean codex, the sort of book with pages sewn together between two covers. Before the spread of Christianity, most books were in scroll form. It's probably an exaggeration to say that we Christians invented the codex, but we certainly made it popular. If you're sharing your faith with someone or arguing about it, and you want to find, say II Corinthians 3<sup>6</sup>, it's much quicker to thumb through till you find the page you want than to unwind and rewind a long scroll until you get there.

Christianity began in Palestine, where most people at that time spoke Aramaic (which is similar to Hebrew, but not the same). Jesus spoke Aramaic. Some of the words He used are Abba, Amen, Talitha cumi and Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?. Their Bible was pretty much what we call the Old Testament and was written mostly in Hebrew, with small parts in Aramaic. Some Hebrew words and phrases have come into English from the bible like Hallelujah. The only Hebrew word I know which has come into English other than from the bible is sugar, which is curious, because the first time I flew El Al, I put pepper in my coffee, not realising that sugar was Hebrew for sugar.

After Christ's Ascension, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles and the rest of the Church quickly spread the Gospel throughout the Eastern Roman Empire where the *lingua franca*, ironically enough, was not Latin, but Greek. The New Testament, therefore, was written in Greek. The Old Testament had already been translated several times into Greek, most notably in the version known as the Septuagint. S Jerome translated the bible into Latin, the Vulgate, as the Gospel spread westwards across Europe and southwards into Roman Africa.

There was no written form of some of the languages of the so-called Barbarian peoples of those days. But Christian missionaries were determined that these people should be able to read the bible and to follow the service books in their own tongues. Reading the Word has always been essential to Christian belief. S Ulfilas or Wulfila actually devised an alphabet for the previously unwritten Gothic language, so that the Goths could have their own bibles in their own language. S Cyril and his brother S Methodius did something similar for the Slavs, drawing up the alphabet which became the Cyrillic alphabet (named after Cyril) in which Russian and similar languages are still written today.

In order to promote the reading of the Word and its study, Christians gave us the codex form of the book and actually brought the possibility of written culture to tribes such as the Goths and the Slavs. Literacy of course then made possible many other kinds of learning.

Following the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, it is well known that, during the so-called Dark Ages, learning was kept alive in the monasteries of Ireland, Great Britain and Europe. The monks read and copied and studied the sacred texts. It was in the context of monasteries as centres of learning that other studies could flourish such as Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. Often the priest was the only literate person in the parish and most of the business of ordinary people was conducted in the church porch under his guidance and supervision. In fact, my proper job title is still *clerk in holy orders*.

Sadly, the mediaeval Catholic Church became determined to keep all this knowledge and the power, which it offers to those who avail themselves of it, to itself. The Bible was only to be available in Latin and people caught reading or sharing English versions of the Scriptures could be put to death. In spite of the danger, however, it has been calculated that there were more copies of portions of the Bible in English in circulation in mediaeval England than there were of any other English books. The motivation to read the Bible was sufficient not only to learn to read it, but to possess it and to share it with others, even at the risk of being burnt at the stake. Similarly in the world today, there are people willing to risk imprisonment and death for the privilege of possessing and reading the Bible and of sharing it with other people. Jesus Himself is the Word of God.

The Reformation (the Tudor period in England) more or less followed the development of printing in Europe. Bibles and prayer books were translated into the languages of Europe and formed the principal market for printed books. Soldiers of the parliamentary army in the English Civil War were supplied with a special edition of the Scriptures. Ordinary people heard the bible read and took part in the prayer book services in church and, if they had books at home at all, they were likely to be the bible, the Book of Common Prayer, Foxe's

Book of Martyrs and Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress. Only Shakespeare had anything like the same influence on the development of the English language. I remember my mother remarking on how, as a child, she learnt to read in part from following the services in church, a much wider vocabulary and more ambitious grammar than she would have encountered at school or home. There are 588 pages devoted to quotations in my copy of the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations. Of these 38 are devoted to the Bible (King James Version) and 16 to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. What an influence on the development of the English language.

I had better not go on too long. The bible itself says, "of making many books, there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh (Ecclesiastes 12<sup>12</sup>). I must, however, mention Sunday Schools. The monasteries had been the principal centres of learning in the Middle Ages. Some of the funds which became available through their dissolution under Henry VIII were used to fund grammar schools. Cathedrals had choir schools and there were various other religious educational foundations. But nobody bothered much about the education of poor children until C18, when philanthropists such as Hannah Ball and, especially, Robert Raikes founded Sunday Schools. Raikes' vision was that the road out of poverty and poverty's often concomitant vice and crime was education. They met on Sundays because the poor children were at work all the week. The first thing was to learn to read and the text book was the Bible. He began in 1780 and by 1831 1¼ million (about 25% of the population) were in Sunday Schools. Overlapping with the Sunday School movement, the National Society for Promoting Religious Education was established in 1811 by the Church of England, aiming to provide a school in every parish. There were 12,000 national schools in England and Wales by 1851. Cuxton had a national school which was replaced by a council school in 1906, though our buildings were still used by the state system as late as the infancy of Steve's mother in law when children had to walk from Halling to the old buildings at Cuxton for lessons which Halling School did not provide. Other religious bodies also provided schools and promoted education in the C19, but it was not until the 1870 Education Act that the state began to take responsibility for the education of children in this country. The National Society is still going strong and, in many communities, the church school is still the only school and is often the preferred option where there is more than one school on offer to parents.

I should finish there except that Steve told me to finish with an anecdote from my experience as a naïf young clergyman. My title parish was All Saints Orpington, where I served from 1980-84. It was frustrating trying to teach the young people. They seemed much more impressed that I ran marathons (albeit very slowly) than that I could expound to them the teaching of S Athanasius. One winter's evening, the senior youth club had arranged to hold a wide game in Knole Park. On the night in question, the rain was coming down in torrents in Orpington. They persuaded me nevertheless to take them on the train to Sevenoaks in the vain hope that it might be better there. It wasn't, but they decided to go to Knole Park anyway. I had more sense and gave them strict instructions to meet me at the station at such and such a time. After about twenty minutes, even they gave up and came to find me. I asked them how they knew where I would be. "The pub nearest the station," they said. So I had managed to teach them something after all. Any questions?