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The sociology of knowledge and biblical interpretation

Edward E. Hindson*

ABSTRACT

The social, economic, political and other contexts of texts as well as of interpreters have an important bearing upon the meaning of such texts. Any interpreter should be conscious of this fact and will utilize it in his pronouncements on the meaning of a text.

The multidimensional character of the human enterprise dictates the complexity of the scholarly assessment to articulate man's understanding of truth. In the liberal theology of the nineteenth century issues were evaluated in historical terms. In neo-orthodoxy, following Bultmann, issues were conceived in existentialist terms. More recently, linguistic philosophy raised the issue of how language functions to create human meaning. Still further, the sociology of knowledge challenges our understanding of the whole issue of hermeneutics even further. What has become obvious is that the hermeneutical task is much more complex than simply trying to deduce a few rules by which to read the Bible.

In the sociology of knowledge the issue is raised about the social context of the interpreter as well as the text he is interpreting. Thus, the science of hermeneutics must treat as problematic the social context of the observer, as well as the social context of the author. Thus, the interpreter becomes an ingredient in the total look of translating the message of one era into another era. This is especially true of twentieth century attempts to interpret biblical passages that are millennia old. The task is what Rohrbough calls translating an agrarian Bible into an industrial age. Thus, hermeneutics becomes more than just translating words of one language into the equivalent words of another language. The purpose of biblical hermeneutics sets as its goal the translating of a culturally conditioned meaning of one society into the culturally conditioned meaning of another society. For example, Samson's leaving the wedding festivities (Judges 14:19-20) had a completely different connotation in that ancient culture than it would in ours today. We would consider the couple still married, but they did not. In fact, we tend to superimpose our own conceptions of marriage upon the text.

I. "MEANING" OF A CULTURAL CONTEXT

A. The meaning of words

One of the vital issues in hermeneutics is that of understanding the meaning of words

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

used in another culture. For example the word “compromise” has a much more positive meaning to the British than it would to Americans (even though both use the same English word). Thus, it is necessary to examine the entire process by which a word attains a certain meaning in a particular culture. The term, “redemption” had definite social and economic meaning in ancient Israel, whereas in our culture today it is generally viewed as being entirely theological.

The biblical interpreter is attempting to understand language that is often more than two thousand years old. In so doing he struggles with a gap of understanding between the modern world and ancient society, as well as an existential gap as to the significance to our generation of the meaning of the text. Does a word or term that had meaning in one society have meaning in our society? If it does, how can we best express that word or term in our language? Different cultural contexts caused the translators of the Geneva Bible (1560) to refer to the “covering” of the fig leaves as “breeches” and for the translators of the Authorized Version (1611) to read “aprons.”

B. The meaning of ideas

The major task in understanding the phenomenology of language is not to determine what a word says but what idea it conveys. Therefore, the gap between the interpreter and the biblical text cannot be bridged by historical criticism alone. While that is part of the necessary process, it stops short of asking what the words (properly understood) meant then as well as what they mean now. Under what circumstances does the particular text have relevance today? For example, cultures in which women wore head coverings readily accept I Corinthians 11:3–15 as binding upon them, whereas Western cultures readily explain away the text as culturally irrelevant.

From the standpoint of preaching, the task of the theologian-preacher is to proclaim what the text proclaims in a manner that is ideologically significant to his audience. Thus, the critical understanding of the text alone does not necessarily give us the intended meaning of the text. Therefore, the entire process of traditional biblical criticism must change in order to allow God to speak through the medium of the text. Thus, the interpreter himself becomes a vital link in the entire process of getting the text to the congregation.

II. SELF-CONSCIOUS AWARENESS OF THE HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS

Knowing that one is both a product and a victim of his own cultural context does not, in itself, guarantee that he will approach a text properly. One must continue to analyze his own cultural framework and hermeneutical subconscious in order to approach the Bible as honestly as a human being can in light of the total tradition of the Church.

A. Self-knowledge

Every society has elevated its heroes on the same basis that was meaningful to the preservation of that society. In time we tend to accept the criteria of elevation as legitimate. In fact, we ourselves reduplicate it. We accept some particular criterion and build our whole concept of reality and meaning upon it. Therefore, we must evaluate ourselves in order to understand our own biases and presuppositional beliefs which we bring to the scripture. These biases (more than a lack of critical method-
It is coming, as well as the cultural context sociology of knowledge to biblical hermeneutics from which the biblical passage was written. Challenges the whole field of biblical hermeneutics to examine the cultural context from which the biblical passage was written. It urges us to find some experiential consanguinity between author of the text and the contemporary interpreter. It takes interpretation beyond a merely historical exercise to a genuinely theological exercise in which the text can become truly significant for us today.

CONCLUSION

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12. See the very perceptive study by C. Villa-Vicencio, “Israel: An Image of Captivity for Contextual Theology,” in Theology Evangelicals, XIV, 2 (September 1981), pp. 48-62, where he examines the use of the concept of “Israel” in both imperialism and liberation theologies, contrasting in the latter American, South African, Black and Latin American approaches.

13. Accordingly Deist, op. cit., observes four characteristics of a hermeneutical framework: 1) it works unconsciously; 2) it looks obvious to the interpreter; 3) it posits new understanding in the perspective of existing understanding; 4) it views a text from one preferred angle.


19. For an example of this process in the Western world, see P. Karten, Patriot-Heroes in England and Ameria (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). He traces the development of such heroes as
Cromwell, Hampden, Sydney, Washington and Lincoln, showing the evolution from the historical
person to the mythological ideal.
20. Even those who place the highest meaning on criticizing "meaning" develop what J.C. Ping calls
"the language of faith" objectively meaningful.
21. This list is fully defined and developed in K. Mannheim, "The Ideological and the Sociological
54-66. Cf. also V. Meja, "The Sociology of Knowledge and the Critique of Ideology" in Cultural
Hermeneutics, 3 (1975), pp. 57-68. He examines the contrast between Mannheim and Marx's critique
of ideology.

Religious action considered as a
text: extending Ricoeur's model

Lincoln Michell

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to establish the scientific status of religious studies. Following
Ricoeur's model of "meaningful action considered as a text," it is argued that religious action is
also meaningful and can therefore also be construed in this way. Having established the
textuality of religious action, a science of interpretation is required to analyse its meaning.

Ritual is the language of religion. It brings into our daily life the invisible world of the
spirit and the unseen presence of God.

Morris Adler

ORIENTATION

The purpose of this paper is to contextualise
the study of religion within a scientific
framework. This problem is not new. Nor
are the strategies I propose to implement.
What is innovative to some extent is my
application of them to the methodology of
religious studies.

My primary source will be a seminal
article by Paul Ricoeur, entitled 'The Model
of the Text: Meaningful action considered as
a text', a veritable milestone in the present
debate. What Ricoeur seeks to establish here
for the social sciences in terms of their focus
on meaningful action, I shall attempt to
secure for the systematic study of religion in
terms of its focus on religious action, which
is of course also meaningful action. In the
process I shall be appealing to structural
linguistic theory, speech act theory, action
theory, hermeneutics and various other
philosophical insights. My aim will merely
be to propose some guidelines which may
stimulate and channel meaningful debate in
this area. I make no claim either to com-
prehensiveness or finality.

SCIENCE OF RELIGION AS A SOCIAL
SCIENCE: THE 'TRANSCENDENT' AS A
THEORETICAL STRUCTURE

Perhaps we may commence our in-
vestigation by establishing what kind of science
we are dealing with — or the group of
sciences within which our particular disci-
pline may be classified. I shall argue that the
science of religion properly belongs to the
so-called social sciences. While on the surface
this may be uncontroversial — in so far as a
large proportion of religious action is clearly
social action — the moment we probe
deeper, i.e., to the essence of religion, a
fundamental objection may be raised. While
the social sciences are concerned precisely
with the immanent structures of society in
this world, does not religion, in the main,
centre around a transcendental Being or beings?
beings that belong to another world? At least
this is true of the theistic religions. And if