

Study on the Necessity of Teaching the Bible as Literature in University English Programs in China*

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Abstract—Owing to cultural egoism and Chinese university students' inadequate access to the biblical culture, students in colleges and universities in China have long been suffering from a serious lack of literary perspectives from the Bible, so much so that a large number of college students already have problems studying and appreciating literary works related to the Bible. It is for this reason that the author of this paper insists that teaching the Bible as literature in university English programs in China is both necessary and beneficial for Chinese university students and can largely broaden their horizon in understanding world literature.

Keywords—the Bible; literature; university English programs; the biblical background; necessity

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching the Bible as literature primarily, in the present context, means that one looks at the Bible in the same way one would look at any other literary work. Scholars have convincingly argued that "four of the major genres which are found within the Bible include narrative, poetry, letters, and prophecy or revelation" [1]. In terms of teaching the Bible as literature, Kirova Milena writes that during the last three decades we have been witnessing an unprecedented rise of attention to the literary specifics of the biblical text. Teaching the Bible as literature has turned into a constant presence in the undergraduate and the postgraduate schedules of most universities in Western Europe and in the United States [2]. Unfortunately, for the reasons explained below, students in universities and colleges in China still suffer from a serious lack of literary perspectives from the Bible, so much so that a large number of college students already have problems studying and appreciating literary works related to the Bible. It is for this reason that the author of this paper insists that teaching the Bible as literature in university English programs in China is both necessary and beneficial for Chinese university students.

II. FACTORS LEADING TO STUDENTS' POOR BIBLICAL BACKGROUND FOR UNDERSTANDING WORLD LITERATURE

The factors that have led to Chinese university students' poor biblical background are varied. A deeply-rooted self-pride in one's own national culture and the exclusion of

foreign cultures, an inadequate access to the Bible, a lack of qualified teaching staff and modern teaching facilities could all be the possible reasons for the students' inadequate biblical background for interpreting world literature.

A. Cultural Egoism Leading to the Exclusion of Foreign Cultures

It is well known that China enjoys a history of civilization over five thousand years, and Chinese always take an apparent self-pride in our ancient civilization and rich cultures. This cultural egoism naturally leads to the exclusion of cultures of other peoples. And the deeply-rooted cultural egoism in China has destructively led to the exclusion of foreign cultures, including other peoples' religious beliefs. Even today the idea is still prevalent in China that it is no use celebrating Christmas because it is a western festival and Christianity is merely the religious belief of another people. This might help to dissolve the complaints of some foreign teachers working in Chinese universities and colleges because they have to work even on Christmas day if the festival unfortunately falls on a workday.

B. Chinese University Students' Inadequate Access to the Biblical Culture

Chinese university students' inadequate access to the biblical culture is another important factor that, to a large extent, has led to their poor understanding of world literature. It is known that the introduction of Christianity to China has undergone a slow and painful history. The Bible was even labeled a "banned book" during the Cultural Revolution, so few scholars, if they were not Christian, could have a Chinese Bible to read, let alone ordinary readers. Only after China's opening to the world since the 1980s could Chinese scholars return to the Bible and renew their interest in researching it academically" [3]. Although in 1985 the Amity Foundation (a social service organization) set up by the TSPM (the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement") began printing Bibles in China and now prints one million Bibles each year, this number is vastly inadequate compared with the growth of the church and the ever increasing demand for the Scriptures. It is not known how many Chinese students now have or have access to a Bible, but not until recent years would many have seen one. It is by no means uncommon to find university students who cannot tell for sure what the Bible is when they are asked relevant questions.

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C. Cultural Dilemma Likely to Be Confronted by Chinese University Students

In his book *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, Foster comments that "Culture is so influenced by its dominant religious systems that whether a writer adheres to the beliefs or not, the values and principles of those religions will inevitably inform the literary work" [4]. Carl Schultz made the similar point that "The Bible is the common heritage of us all, whatever our religious beliefs, and we should be able to study it, up to a point, without getting into religious controversy"[5]. Therefore, for any educated person, whether a believer of Christianity or not, it's absolutely essential to know something about the Bible. Thus it is not hard to arrive at the conclusion that without some knowledge of the Bible, Chinese university students are most likely to come up against cultural dilemma, which, to a large extent, will surely and seriously affect their interpretation of world literature if they still have inadequate or even no access to biblical background information or culture.

III. ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE NECESSITY FOR TEACHING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE IN UNIVERSITY ENGLISH PROGRAMS IN CHINA

A. *An Analysis of The Old Man and the Sea as an Example of the Biblical Influence on Literature Understanding*

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is very popular among Chinese readers, but in literature classes both teachers and students tend to interpret and appreciate the novel as a literary work that reflects a struggle between an old man and the nature. Such is the usual interpretation of the novel, and of course it is not wrong. The old Cuban fisherman Santiago has been out to sea for eight-four days and returns home empty handed. Even his closest friend, a village boy he taught to fish, has left him to work on another boat. After three days of suffering Santiago arrives home safely with nothing but the skeletal remains of one of the greatest fish ever caught. Thomas C. Foster, however, interprets the novel from a Biblical angle, which would certainly enrich Chinese readers' literary perspectives as well. According to Foster [4], *The Old Man and the Sea* is very symbolic and can be regarded as "a really perfect literary parable." Two similarities are very apparent in the novel. One is the figure of the fisherman, Santiago, and "Jesus who had some dealings with fishermen", according to the Bible. The other is the child, Santiago's apprentice. The old man is "good with children", at least with this apprentice boy the same way that Jesus is good with children and his disciples. In Hemingway's story, the old man encourages himself with sayings like these: "A man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated". With such "inspiring things" in mind, Santiago eventually manages "to drag the huge skeleton back to port".

His return is like *a resurrection*...And the next morning, when people see the great fish, even the doubters begin to believe in him again. He brings "*a kind of hope, a kind of redemption, to this fallen world*" [4].

This quotation from the work contains such words as "resurrection" and "redemption" which are the terms from the Bible and convey connotations related to Jesus Christ. The old man could be seen as the epitome of Jesus Christ who returns to life from death and who can set the masses free from the power of evil.

B. *The Bible as a Window to the Dominant Religious Influence on World Literature*

Indeed, the influence of the Bible on American and English literature, as well as other western literature has been immense, valuable, constant, and steady ever since the publication of the King James Authorized Version in 1611. One can barely read Donne or Malory or Hawthorne or Rossetti or Shakespeare or Milton or Bunyan or Dryden or Addison or Pope or Whittier or Hemingway, to name a few, without running into quotations, plots, characters, whole stories drawn from the Bible. McAfee writes in *the Greatest English Classics*:

If every Bible in any considerable city were destroyed, the Book could be restored in all its essential parts from the quotations on the shelves of the city public library. There are works, covering almost all the great literary writers, devoted especially to showing how much the Bible has influenced them" [6].

Generally speaking, the biblical influences on Western literature can be seen in the following aspects. First, countless subject matters, materials and even titles in western literary works have been directly derived from the Bible or based on the Bible. For instance, any reader who has some knowledge of the Bible is able to recognize that Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Sun Also Rises*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, Geoffrey Chaucer's pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*, Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and so on, are more or less related to the Bible. There are more than a thousand biblical references in the works of Shakespeare alone [7]. Secondly, to name the name of a character in a novel or play is "a serious piece of business" [4] and the Bible provides a large number of significant names like David, Jacob, Jonah, Rebecca, Joseph, Mary, Stephen and Hagar." In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison's main family chooses names by allowing the family Bible to fall open, then pointing without looking at the text, whatever proper noun the finger points to, there's the name [4]. Thirdly, Western literature contains countless biblical allusions. "The apple of one's eye," "as poor as Job", "have clean hands," "Job's news," "land of milk and honey," "tablets of stone", to name a few, are all biblical allusions that often seem to go beyond the scope of a story's or poem's immediate dimensions. If readers are unaware or ignorant of the stories behind them, they will most probably run the risk of misinterpretation. Charles Dickens, for example, often used Biblical allusions in his stories.

Some, as in *Great Expectations*, would be apparent after reading the entire book. For instance, Pip's whole story could allude to the parable of the prodigal son, as read in the New Testament. Pip goes off on his own, leaving the one who

loved him most, with his expectations (like the prodigal's wealth), only to get into all sorts of trouble and finally end up broke and repentant and returning to that one who never stopped loving him [8].

IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, if what we discussed above is true, with the acceleration of China's integration into global culture, it will surely turn out to be a wise choice to increase Chinese college students' access to other cultures in the world, including other peoples' religious beliefs. In fact, some Chinese colleges and universities, including some top universities like Beijing University and Nanjing University, have already tentatively begun to open Biblical literature as elective courses to their students. However, owing to the shortage of qualified teaching staff and modern teaching facilities, as well as the cultural egoism noted above, there still seems to be a long way to go. So far, at least, it can safely be concluded that teaching the Bible as literature in university English programs in China, will not only help China to merge into the international cultural community, but also help to upgrade Chinese university students' cultural and literary qualities and provide them with new insights into the great world literature.

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