

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BIBLICAL RELIGION FOR A BASIC OBJECTIVE

The original text was double-spaced, except for certain quotations and footnotes. The sexist language of the early 1970s remains along with the styles of punctuation, footnotes, etc. Misspellings have been corrected, and bracketed 2008 comments have been added to some footnotes. Hyperlinks have been newly inserted here and there.

The pagination conforms to the original text; this results in some awkward appearing places in this version.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that when this dissertation was researched and written, the author had no access to computers for word processing or internet searches; even copy machines were not common. His typewriter make and model are pictured below.



What follows is a 2008 edition of Chapter Five (pp. 193-204) of the 1973 New York University Ph.D. Dissertation

“The Significance of the Religious Thought of Edmond La B. Cherbonnier for a Basic Objective for Religious Education” by Richard T. Nolan

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(Available Within This Website by June, 2008)

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A Synoptic View of Biblical Religion

With the assumption that reality is found exclusively in the natural order, biblical religion interprets deity as a personal agent. For Cherbonnier, the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities are to be interpreted within this perspective, in order to understand truly their common heritage. Sharing this position on God is Kirkpatrick, who wrote: “God in our argument is conceived as a being beside other beings. He is a being who shares the general characteristics of all personal beings.”¹ With him is Dilley, who noted:

The categories which come to the fore in this interpretation of God’s nature are person and the various qualities essential to personality, namely metaphysical separation from other persons (yes, God is a being alongside other beings, although their creator), mind, emotions, and the ability to act. God is literally related to his creation, affecting and being affected by it, is literally involved in space and time, literally suffers and literally intervenes in the historical order to bring about the accomplishment of his purposes so far as he can. God is a free, personal being with

various super powers. . . . God has all the essentials which constitute personality.²

Contrary to the non-physical dimension of mystical religion, biblical religion is grounded in the physical (the visible and the invisible) with a God who acts. The primary distinction between atheistic naturalism and biblical naturalism is then not by the latter's appeal to anything or anyone supernatural, but by the latter's assumption that the physical is most adequately interpreted within a theistic perspective and commitment. In this sense, the common positions of the atheistic and biblical naturalists with regard to their physical monism bind them together more harmoniously in a philosophic sense, than would the conflicting ontologies of perennial philosophies and any form of naturalism. This implies a greater kinship between physical scientist and biblical theologian than between the latter and any classic Hindu or Buddhist philosopher!

Finite reality is sole reality, created by God. Though the process of creation is a scientific mystery, both the *ex nihilo* explanation held by Cherbonnier and the bringing order-out-of-existing-chaos interpretation view God and world as compatibly existing in time and space. Because the biblical God is the Creator and His will is sovereign, history is not

²Frank Dilley, "Is Myth Indispensable?," *The Monist*, L (1966), p. 589.

without purpose. Presided over by a Creator who confers freedom on His creatures, historical events have the overarching purpose of conforming to God's will of love. Though capable of frustrating the immediate goals of the Creator, a capacity which could be recalled, participants are -- knowingly or not, willingly or not -- under His ultimate sovereignty.

Each person is a unique child of God with the capacity to choose allegiance to the biblical God or an idol. Man's existence begins in the physical world as a visible person as a basically good body and soul, conceived as "flesh-animated-by-soul, the whole conceived as a psychophysical unity."³ The total personality, minus the flesh after death, may continue normally invisible for all time, but yet physical (hence, the term "resurrection of the body")⁴ The fulfillment of personality requires love, *agape*.⁵

Though one might construct *a priori* a theistic naturalism, biblical religion rests primarily upon *a posteriori* knowledge of God, His participation in the world. Religious knowledge is conditional upon God's choice to reveal Himself, particularly His intentions, purposes, or will through specific acts. Hence, revelation is a key motif in biblical thinking.

³Robert McAfee Brown, "Soul (Body)," *Handbook of Christian Theology*, p. 355. Also, Cherbonnier, *Judaean-Christian Sources*, pp. 14f.

⁴Robert McAfee Brown, "Immortality," *Handbook of Christian Theology*, p. 188. Also Cherbonnier, *ibid*.

⁵Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart*, p. 168. [Added in 2008: visit the Cherbonnier subsite within www.philosophy-religion.org/.]

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Revelation or “God’s word” is communicated through literal language as well as myth. Through an encounter such as Abraham or Moses had, through prophesied outcomes of national idolatry, and through myths such as the Adam and Eve stories, God’s will and relations with mankind are revealed but not always recognized by His community. Unlike the mystical experience of achieving Oneness with the Other through profound meditation, the biblical encounter with God, however communicated and portrayed, must await His initiative. The clarity of interpretation by man is dependent upon the right alignment of man’s heart, not merely a sharpness of his intellect.

It is clear in Cherbonnier’s writing that love, *agape*, is the basis for a biblical axiology. This kind of love is truly liberating: “. . . to live truly is to live in a relation of *agape* with one’s fellows.”⁶ This kind of love, however, stands in direct opposition to its mystical counterpart *eros*.

Consequently, life within biblical religion regards human existence as an opportunity to live in *agape*. Though many persons, if not most, will choose to become idolatrous and others will know nothing but false gods, there is always hope that God’s purpose for mankind, His intention of *agape*

⁶Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart*, p. 48.

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for all peoples, will become real. In the meantime, those persons choosing God’s will as their life orientation will be fulfilled with the *agape* they experience, though they will struggle with their own lapses into idolatry and its consequences. Finally, there is the conviction that the true God is sovereign, regardless of the corporate condition of mankind at any given moment, and that forgiveness is available when *agape* is truly sought.

The Biblical Concepts and the Basic Objective

God

Unlike the ontological Other of the mystical religions, biblical religion seeks not essential union with divinity, but a relationship of *agape*. Man, while in the flesh or after death, does not seek absorption within God’s being or a static presence with ultimate reality. Rather, each person has a goal. or a love relationship not only with God, but also with his fellows.

Capturing this notion is Miller, who wrote concerning “relationship theology”:

It puts the primary emphasis on personal relations on both the human and the divine levels. . . . The goals of such an educational process are in terms of discernment and commitment. Teaching begins with the genuine concerns of the learner and the content of Christian teaching becomes a guide to living as a Christian in the world.⁷

⁷Randolph C. Miller, “Relationship Theology,” in *The Westminster Dictionary*, pp. 564f.

Because God is a being beside other beings, the basic objective of religious education within this perspective is relational. God is not ontologically other, so that He is not foreign to space and time, but compatible with the temporal. Consequently, God is not in a ‘perfect’ realm, while man is cut off ontologically in evil finitude. Quite the opposite: though only God is God, man shares the very same realm with God. Thus, a biblical concept of God orients the basic objective toward a relationship with a personal Being who is sovereign creator and participant wholly in space and time.

The World

An implication of the biblical interpretation of the world, as proposed by Cherbonnier, is the significance and basic goodness of creation. Worldly matters, especially the actions of persons, are primary ingredients of reality. The truths of the Scriptures, whether clothed in mythological stories or recorded as actual events, are pivotal. Though man may not comprehend those events he labels disasters or evil, the biblical world is a creation of God that God calls good.

The basic objective, therefore, is oriented to the good, physical, temporal world in which God and man interact. Such an orientation is opposite to mystical religion, even in its Christianized forms, that calls for man either to flee

from the world or simply put up with its misery until death.

Human Nature

Because man is an organic unity, the whole person is the concern of religious education. Because he is basically good (though often jaded by inheritance and/or choice), it is not his very nature that needs changing, but rather his heart softened with *agape*. In this context, Miller has written:

We live in community and experience loneliness, anxiety and sin. Loneliness and anxiety may or may not be the result of responsible moral action in relation to persons, but sin is seen as a free choice that separates us from God and from our fellows. But the result of sin is such that we remain in this broken relationship unless, by the grace of God, we are empowered by God, working either directly or through others, to heal this broken relationship.

Implied for a basic objective is an orientation to the whole person, not just his soul, with a view toward the realization of *agape* in his life. Here Munro’s words on nurture are helpful:

Nurture means providing the conditions and resources that facilitate and promote the growth of any creature endowed with the capacity and tendency to grow. . . . The term “nurture” applied to the religious life usually implies a theological interpretation of human nature.⁹

Within Cherbonnier’s biblically-based interpretation of human nature and the centrality of *agape* to human

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 564.

⁹Harry C. Munro, “Nurture,” *Westminster Dictionary*, p. 471.

fulfillment, it is evident that the nurture of persons in *agape* is vital to a basic objective for religious education.

Religious Knowledge

“Revelation is God’s activity.”¹⁰ The Christian community has authorized certain writings as canonical records of this activity. Though problems of interpretation are many and scholars differ radically in their approaches to, and conclusions about, the Bible, as do other possible authorities for understanding God’s activity (*e.g.*, the Papacy), Christian communities hold the Bible as normative for their members.

Because, according to Cherbonnier, revelation or religious knowledge can be captured literally in words, the data of God’s activity are available to persons. Silence, human fellowship focusing upon man-to-man encounters, contemporary writings, and the contemplation of nature all fail to convey pivotal acts in God’s activity. Instead, a focus of religious education is upon those events recognized by the biblical community and so canonized. Only with those events, the disclosures of God to man, is one able to attempt an interpretation of one’s contemporary scene, his relations with others, the writings of his day, and nature itself. Therefore, any basic objective of religious education within

¹⁰John E. Burkhardt, “Revelation,” *Ibid.*, p. 572.

this perspective must take seriously the central place of the Bible as the primary source for religious knowledge.

Consequences for Living

The primary value of biblical religion, according to Cherbonnier, is love. Contrary to the liberation of mystical religion, true liberation is found through loving relationships. As he wrote, “The way to preserve and enhance human freedom is to love and be loved.”¹¹

Unlike *eros*, however, biblical love or *agape* affirms individuality in the world. Characteristics of *agape*, in his understanding, are illuminated by the following passages:

If Biblical perfection has appeared to some as unattainable in this life, the explanation may lie in still another connotation imported from non-Biblical sources. Outside Biblical thought, it is nearly universally agreed that the highest perfection is completely sufficient unto itself. Since the Bible emphatically denies that a man can gain perfection by himself alone, it might seem to suggest an intrinsic weakness of human nature. The Bible’s aim, however, is not to disparage human nature, but to redefine perfection. Biblical perfection is the opposite of self-sufficiency. It consists in a special kind of relationship between man and man, and between men and God, translated, for want of a better word, as “love.”¹²

It [*agape*] is not a unilateral relation but a reciprocal one; not something which I radiate in sublime independence of my neighbor but rather a relation of a certain quality between myself and

¹¹Cherbonnier, "Liberty," *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 583.

¹²Cherbonnier, "Perfection," *Ibid.*, p. 750.

him. Where there is only one person there can be no *agape*.¹³

Love "fosters trust and respect"; "laws are subordinate -- useful rules of thumb, but never absolute."¹⁴ Its centrality is highlighted in these words: ". . . the purpose of life is that everyone should love *you* as much as he loves himself."¹⁵

Within the Hebraic naturalism proposed by Cherbonnier, therefore, *agape* in contrast to *eros* is a mutual relation between persons (including God) sharing time and space; it is the primary value for life.

Cherbonnier's interpretation of some implications of *agape* have not gone unrecognized. In a classic study in contemporary ethics, Fletcher refers to Cherbonnier's lecture, "[Can There Be Morality without Rules](#)," as an illustration of the use of rules as guides subordinate to love.¹⁶ Pruyser cites Cherbonnier's recognition of certain idols as shifts from the proper concerns of normal, religious persons.¹⁷

¹³Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart*, p. 52.

¹⁴Cherbonnier, "Judaeo-Christian Sources," p. 20.

¹⁵Cherbonnier, "Can There Be Morality Without Rules?" (mimeographed address from "The Senate Lecture Series" of Trinity College, delivered on December 14, 1964).

¹⁶Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 28.

¹⁷Paul W. Pruyser, "Some Trends in the Psychology of Religion," in *The Psychology of Religion*, ed. Orlo Strunk, Jr. (Nashville and New York: The Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 112.

Commenting on the same problems, Menninger wrote:

Cherbonnier in his beautiful essay, *Hardness of Heart*, describes the forms of idolatry indulged in by the hardhearted. He lists the hidden gods of cynicism as nationalism, humanism, phallicism, promiscuity, the glorification of money, and the various euphemisms such as frugality, shrewdness, and sound economy. Cherbonnier also lists iconoclasm, existentialist despair, and a so-called state of "adjustment" and "relatedness" toward which some psychiatrists are believed to steer their patients.¹⁰

The concept of love, as noted earlier, is vital to a basic objective of religious education because of the focal point on relations with God and man as the highest good or value and the implications axiology has for the basic objective. Unexamined, the relations spoken of can be interpreted as a variation on *eros* or *agape*. Cherbonnier's *agape* implies a naturalistic, physical, theistic axiological base for a basic objective, different from the perspective of *eros*.

The significance of Cherbonnier's interpretation of biblical religion for a basic objective of religious education is as follows:

1. Reality consists of the physical world with a personal God compatible with the world as sovereign participant; consequently, the basic objective is within a theistic naturalism.

¹⁸Karl Menninger, *The Vital Balance* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), p. 375.

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2. The temporal world, including the visible and invisible, is the good creation of God in which historical events are important; consequently, the basic objective must take into account the "here and now" positively and seriously.

3. Man is a part of the natural order with the capacity for *agape*, indeed the basic need for this kind of love; consequently, the basic objective must recognize that the nurture of persons in *agape* is central.

4. The Bible is a record of God's relations with man during a portion of man's history; consequently, the basic objective within biblical religion looks to this canonical literature as the primary source for interpreting religious knowledge, of receiving the revelation of God's will of *agape*.

5. The value that is primary for biblical religion is *agape*, the quality of mutual concern between persons, including God; consequently, nurture in this kind of love is significant for a basic objective.

ADDED IN 2008

Directly related to "Consequences for Living" are these chapters of *Living Issues In Ethics*:

5. Who Am I?
6. Love and Friendship
7. Marriage and the Family
8. Mental and Physical Health

They are available at <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/living/living-contents.htm/>. As an alternative, please access www.philosophy-religion.org/; the subsite containing the entire book is self-evident.