

UBS reborn?

Scripture engagement in a globalised world

Dr. Bill Mitchell

UBS beginnings

The United Bible Societies (UBS) traces its beginnings to the founding of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in 1804.¹ The organisation itself did not come into being until 1946, though there were earlier calls for such a ‘World Federation of Bible Societies’ in 1910, and much later at a conference in Woudschoten, Netherlands in 1939. Following the urgings of Hendrik Kraemer, it was resolved then to form a ‘Council of Bible Societies’. The outbreak of war in Europe meant that was not implemented. However in Haywards Heath, Sussex in May 1946, in the first non-governmental international conference in Britain since the end of the war, representatives of 13 national Bible Societies decided to form UBS.

The bicentenary celebrations of BFBS in 2004 gave UBS, by then a global fellowship of 145 national Bible Societies, an opportunity to reflect and celebrate the past, but equally to examine its role and ministry in a changed and changing world.

UBS in a changed and changing world

At the beginning of the third millennium these Bible Societies found themselves in a *globalised* world characterised by a “loss of boundaries”, viz. loss of identity, loss of certainty and loss of authority. All of those impacted on the religious, economic and social life of people across the world. Yet there was paradox in the midst of change. The loss of identity was paralleled by a search for personhood and community. The global was complemented by the local and individual. There was loss of certainty, yet equally there was a longing for meaning and significance. The loss of authority contrasted with a rise of authoritarianism, as seen, for instance, in the growth of fundamentalism, whether religious, ethnic, or nationalistic (Schweitzer, 2005).

New technology held out the promise of wealth, quality of life and safety—a promise that remained unfulfilled for the overwhelming majority of the world’s six and a half billion people. Rather than enhancing life, technology had dehumanised people, reducing them to things rather than persons. Yet this technology had produced an inter-connected world—the communications revolution provided the driving force for globalisation.²

This technology had become the preferred means of communication of youth culture. New communities existed on the web, internet-based tribes with neither accountability nor responsibility, networking through social media. Beyond the global youth culture, the media were the major resource for many people of spiritual information and exploration—a place for creating meaning, ritual, and religious and transcendent experience. Martín-Barbero sees the

¹ See Mitchell, 2010.

² Not a single phenomenon with a uniform impact, instead a reality that takes some powers from the nation state into the global arena, but equally pushes other aspects ‘down’ to a different level, promoting local identity. The global and the local are interdependent.

media “as *the* place of resacralization and re-enchantment of cultures today” (1997: 107, 111-112).

This challenges the churches and Bible Societies to intentionally engage the new culture, to express the faith in new media forms. Making the Word of God accessible on the Internet, as opposed to making it possible to access the standard text of the Bible via the Internet, requires understanding and use of a new “media language”.³ The Internet opens up a semiotic maze where meaning is built through multiple sign systems. The focus is not on notions of reading and writing linear text. Instead it is centered on the integration of semiotics and hypertext. David Crystal has noted “nothing in traditional language remotely resembles the dynamic flexibility of the Web” (2006: 210). Internet language is “something fundamentally different from both writing and speech, as traditionally understood...it is a development of millennial significance” (ibid., 272).

The Bible Societies operate in cultures which may be pre-modern, modern or postmodern, or perhaps all three in juxtaposition. Yet increasingly they find themselves in a *post-modern world* characterised by “the rejection of metanarratives, the loss of confidence in reason and the sciences, a sense of deception with the idea of sustained progress, and a frustration with unfulfilled promises of betterment”.⁴

This is producing relativism in ways of thinking and acting, together with the loss of a sense of values, the lack of commitment to institutions and anything permanent, the prevalence of the emotional over the rational, and fragmentation at personal and community levels. In this setting the Christian faith is not an important matter in people’s lives—it has lost the evidence of its validity. Anything traditional has run out of steam, while the Church means less and less for people. Yet many of these same people have begun a spiritual journey, seeking coherence and integration to their existence. Their distrust in the ‘big story’ has not invalidated the personal story—the human story has immense validity (e.g. blogs).

This new reality required UBS to revisit its own identity and ethos.

UBS identity and ethos

The UBS World Assembly held in Newport, Wales in 2004 reaffirmed the fraternity’s nature and purpose in the following terms:

The world fellowship of national Bible Societies joins together, as the United Bible Societies, for consultation, mutual support and action in their common task of achieving the widest possible, effective and meaningful distribution of the Holy Scriptures and of helping people interact with the Word of God. The Bible Societies seek to carry out their task in partnership and co-operation with all Christian churches and with church related organisations.

³ For instance, the new interactive *Basisbibel* project of the German Bible Society involves a new Bible translation designed for the screen, not for the printed page. <http://www.basisb.de/>

⁴ *Declaración de Barueri II*, UBS Americas Consultation held in Barueri, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 6-8 March 2007.

The Assembly theme was ‘*The Unchanging Word for a Changing World*’—the Word unchanging in truth, power and purpose—“what the Bible wants of us, what it impels us toward...is agreement with the direction in which it looks itself. And the direction it looks is to the living Christ.” (Karl Barth).

As the delegates looked to the past they remembered that “the Word of God had been heard in all of this book and in all parts of it”. They looked to the future with conviction: “we expect that we shall hear the Word of God again, even in those places where we have not heard it before. The Bible has a living dimension, because of encounter with the Living Word”.

The UBS response to the changing mission landscape meant recovering Biblical patterns for mission:

- God’s mission is the source of mission.
- Jesus Christ is the embodiment of mission.
- The Holy Spirit is the power for mission.
- The Church is the instrument of mission.
- Cultures are the context in which mission takes place (UBS, 2004a:7).

Strategy and priorities

The commitment to serve in cooperation with all churches raised issues of strategy and priorities. In part this came from the change in the global Christian community, whose centre of gravity had moved from the ‘North’ to the ‘South’. What might serving *all* churches mean?⁵ Without the Scriptures, there can be little ‘Scripture engagement’ and in affirming that “translation remains at the heart of our task.” (UBS, 2004b:1), priorities and methodology needed to be established.⁶

Depending on the social context of a given Bible Society, issues such as availability, relevance and credibility of the Scriptures needed to be addressed. These in turn led to strategies for provision of the Scriptures, encounter with the Word and advocacy of the Word. This marked a move from dealing with Bible needs to developing mission strategies.

In the BFBS Bicentenary Celebration in St. Paul’s Cathedral Archbishop Rowan Williams reminded those present that “our history and our theology alike tell us that no human style or speech is finally impermeable to Scripture.”⁷ The Bible Societies saw the need to move from distribution targets to engagement and encounter, from biblical illiteracy to transformational change, and from sales strategies to shared communication.

Scripture engagement

In UBS thinking Scripture Engagement is a concept that emphasises making the Bible discoverable, accessible and relevant, that includes both making the Bible recoverable and discoverable *as Sacred Scripture*, and making Scriptures accessible as a place of life enhancing

⁵ E.g. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, ‘Mainline’, Pentecostal/charismatic, Post-denominational, the ‘emerging’ church, Africa-initiated churches, etc.

⁶ E.g. The so-called ‘unreached’ languages, ‘new’ languages such as creoles, sign languages, media languages; or the type of translation—formal, functional, liturgical, oral, etc.

⁷ <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1171>.

and life transforming encounter. The following examples from Latin America and the United Kingdom illustrate the creative implementation and localisation of global mission strategies.

a. Making the Word available in Brazil

The rapid growth of evangelical and pentecostal churches in Brazil—now representing at least 15% of the country’s 190 million inhabitants—has created an ongoing demand for Bibles. The demand also comes from the Roman Catholic community. The implementation in the last 40 years of *Dei Verbum* recommendations, plus the role of the base communities, have led to biblical renewal in the Roman Catholic Church. A further impetus to this has come from Benedict XVI’s call to Latin American bishops gathered in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007:

“As the missionary Church prepares... to begin a new stage in its life, a deep, experiential knowledge of the Word of God is essential... We must build our missionary commitment, and indeed our whole lives, on the rock of the Word of God.”⁸

The ‘Bíblia Almeida’ is the ‘classic’ Bible of Protestants, the NT first published in 1681 and the OT in 1753, and revised many times since then. Herculano Alves shows convincingly that this Bible is the ‘most widely distributed book in the Portuguese language’ (over 110 million copies of all editions). Demand continues. The Brazil Bible Society has also developed the *Nova Tradução da Linguagem de Hoje*, the work of an interconfessional team, a Bible which is now used widely by evangelicals and Catholics. Its translation style and its study notes facilitate not only access and understanding of the Scriptures, but its use in interconfessional community groups.

Currently the Brazil BS prints and distributes over 5 million Bibles each year for Brazil, and also publishes in Spanish and produces in African languages (e.g. Yoruba, Igbo) to meet the needs of partner societies there.

b. Latin America’s exploding youth population

Among the challenges facing the Church (and governments!) is the continent’s high birthrate. In many countries fully 40% of the population is under 15. The average age in Mexico City, with 20+ million people, is fifteen and a half. When asked what his greatest challenge was, a Costa Rican priest immediately said ‘how to catechize the cell phone generation’.⁹

In 2006 the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) and UBS began work on a *Lectio divina* programme for young people and children using a variety of media—print, music, radio and Internet. This multimedia initiative would provide access for different strata of society—individuals, families, schools, churches, parishes and dioceses—to network together throughout the continent. Technological and social networking developments since then moved the programme to a different level, as *Lectionautas*¹⁰ for

⁸ CELAM, 2007. §247.

⁹ Personal conversation with Fr. Omar Solís, Bogotá, 1 June 2005.

¹⁰ www.lectionautas.com.

young people, and *Discipulitos*¹¹ for children show, with MP3 downloads, Facebook, My Space now also finding a place.

Already over 12,500 young leaders from parishes in a dozen countries have been trained in the programme. They are introducing it in their churches and forming groups of young people using cell phones, computers and other technology to access the Biblical passages for their prayer, reflection and action. The young people themselves develop the programme in creative and innovative ways—texting has become a way of encouraging one another and sharing together their experiences of the Word. From its beginnings in Spanish, the programme is now available in other languages and is being accessed globally.

For this programme the Church's own language was one obstacle that had to be faced. The Aparecida document notes: “evangelization, catechesis, and pastoral ministry as a whole, are still speaking languages that mean little to contemporary culture, and to young people in particular.”¹² Here a new Spanish translation of the Bible for young people and children developed by a UBS interconfessional, inter-disciplinary team—the *Traducción en Lenguaje Actual*—has proved providential.¹³

c. Peru – responding to violence

Domestic violence, spousal abuse, and child abuse are major concerns in Peru:

A World Health Organization study carried out in 2000 of women in the 15-49 age range in the greater Lima area showed that 51% of women have suffered physical or sexual violence at least once from their partner. (Mitchell, 2008:13)

The Bible Society of Peru has developed Bible-based materials for use by churches—*Alto a la Violencia*—to create critical awareness and action on spousal abuse.¹⁴ This has been extended to take into account the situation of sexual abuse of children and adolescents with materials for use in and by churches, as well as by a network of NGOs working in this area. An agreement has also been signed with the *Ministerio de la Mujer* to develop together a programme using these materials in the nation's schools.¹⁵

d. Bible Society in England and Wales: Advocacy and Encounter

In the dystopia that is the post-modern England, the Bible Society sums up its mission as *Making the Bible heard*, where the Bible is “available, accessible and credible”¹⁶. Bible Society initiatives therefore aim to connect different narratives—cultural, personal and biblical—with the aim of transforming culture through the Word. Their advocacy involves confronting contemporary paradoxes and working in open, uncertain

¹¹ www.discipulitos.com.

¹² CELAM, 2007: §100d.

¹³ Sánchez, 2007.

¹⁴ www.casadelabiblia.org.

¹⁵ See “Cartilla educativa para niños y adolescentes busca prevenir el maltrato y la violencia sexual”,

www.casadelabiblia.org.

¹⁶ Bible Society CEO, James Catford. <http://www.christianmarketplace.org.uk/engine.cfm?i=43&cma=1717>

environments. It sees the need for telling stories, and *the* story, with the purpose of changing the prevailing discourse, leading to transformational change in society.

They identify the ‘drivers’ of change in society and aim to influence the change makers in order to bring something that is on the edges of society—i.e. the Bible—back into the centre. Their multi-faceted initiative of Scripture engagement has led to developments in the media, arts, politics¹⁷ and education¹⁸. For them the nature of advocacy and encounter with the Bible involves wide-ranging research¹⁹ and imaginative engagement initiatives to ‘change the conversation’ and re-tell the story.²⁰

e. Scottish Bible Society: The Bible in Religious Education in Scotland

Scotland has a Christian heritage reaching back at least to the arrival of St. Ninian in Galloway in the late 4th. century. Contemporary Scotland is, however, now a multicultural, multifaith society. Religion continues as part of the school curriculum, albeit in a pluralistic context. The SBS ‘*Bibleworld*’ Centre in Edinburgh, and the ‘*Bibleworld*’ mobile unit, introduce schoolchildren and students to the Bible as part of religious education’s ‘Curriculum for Excellence’.

The programmes have been designed to aid teachers and educationalists cover the Religious and Moral Education curriculum. Each workshop intentionally deals with other areas including Expressive Arts, Health and Wellbeing, Literacy and Social Studies.

“We use Bible texts and historical events to help develop an understanding of Christian beliefs and practices and how they have been fundamental in the fabrication of our society in Scotland. We also examine social and religious values in context with Christianity and the message of the Bible.”²¹

The wide use of the Centre and the mobile unit’s visits by schools and the public in general underline the important role *Bibleworld* plays in contemporary Scripture engagement in Scotland.

UBS reborn?

Now at ‘age 64’ UBS perhaps evokes the Beatles’ song “will you still need me...when I am sixty-four?” In answer, the changing strategies and mission priorities seen in UBS and the examples of how these are contextualised and implemented in specific countries, suggest that UBS can and does play a key role in contemporary mission, global and local.

¹⁷ E.g. The Bible Society public theology think tank *Theos*.

¹⁸ E.g. The BIBLOS Education and the Bible research initiative (with Exeter University).

¹⁹ E.g. ‘Bible in Pastoral Use’ (with Cardiff University), ‘Scripture and Hermeneutics’ (with Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education).

²⁰ E.g. Interfacing with contemporary ‘cultural icons’ such as *Eastenders*.

²¹ www.bibleworld.co.uk

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