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Review Essay

Biblicism, Reception History, and the Social Sciences

Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study, by James S. Bielo
New York: New York University Press, 2009 | x + 187 pages | ISBN: 978-0-8147-9122-6 (softback) $21.00
The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism, edited by James S. Bielo
Signifying (on) Scriptures | New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009 | vii + 237 pages | ISBN: 978-0-8135-4606-3 (softback) $28.95

These two works from anthropologist James S. Bielo, an ethnographic monograph of an Evangelical small group Bible study in Michigan and an edited collection, released within a few months of each other, focus and develop the study of "Biblicism." Abidingly an anthropological undertaking pioneered, in part, by Brian Malley's earlier ethnography, *How The Bible Works*,[1] these studies and the broader emerging field offer interesting parallels, insights and divergences when considered alongside somewhat similar

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[1] Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004).

developments in the analysis of scripture and society within, in particular, reception history. In his essay comparing processes of exegetical and pastoral authority amongst mainline and charismatic Catholics in Guatamala, Eric Hoenes del Pinal gives us a nice definition of Biblicism as a question of "the ways that social actors construct certain understandings of and relationships to sacred text, and how those understandings and relationships order their religious practices" (84). As this sandwiching of scripture between the recognition of social agency and the broader process of religious practices suggests, the biblical text is not where the analysis begins or ends.

The social scientific studies presented here are particularly relevant in an interdisciplinary light given recent debates around the practice of reception history within biblical studies. A rather loose term for comparative analyses of diverse understandings and uses of biblical texts in diverse cultures and eras, the manner in which reception history has been carried out to date within biblical studies is exemplified by collections such as John F. A. Sawyer's, which gives us the Bible in Calvin's Geneva and the Bible in Barnum & Bailey's circus.[2] Roland Boer sees within the loosely defined discipline a Bourdieusian distinction between scientific/theological biblical exegesis carried out in the academy that seeks—under appropriate supervision—to uncover an original or authoritative meaning of the text, and the explanation and analysis of comparatively deviant (ab)uses of the text.[3] To cite examples from the two texts under review here, the distinction Boer sees as foundational to reception history would be between the exegeses of the "strange guild" of biblical scholars and scholar-priests in secular and ecclesial academia on the one hand, and the exegeses of the small Evangelical Bible study group that meets for breakfast in a Michigan restaurant featured in Bielo's monograph (47–72) and the exegetical dialogue between anthropologist John Pulis and his interlocutor Bongo (a mango farmer and Rastafarian "bredren") featured in a chapter of Bielo's edited collection (30–43) on the other hand. In a response to Boer's criticism, Christopher Heard denies any claim that reception history, as a loosely defined discipline, asserts "ideological primacy to singular textual meanings,"[4] but doesn't quite get to the

[2] John F.A. Sawyer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, Blackwell Companions to Religion (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

[3] Roland Boer, "Against 'Reception History'," *Bible and Interpretation*, May 2011, http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/boe358008.shtml.

[4] Christopher Heard, "In Defense of Reception History," *Blackwell Bible Commentaries*, June 12, 2011, http://bbibcomm.net/2011/06/in-defense-of-reception-history/.

nub of Boer's complaint that the very existence of a subdiscipline of biblical scholarship called "reception history" implies that there is a form of biblical studies that is not reception history.[5] There is an echo, then, of Adorno's act of distinction within twentieth-century music; that which he certified "serious" was suitable for scholarly engagement and philosophical reflection, while that which he proclaimed "popular"—the mass-produced products circulated amongst a browbeaten proletariat—was suitable only for sociological explanation.[6]

Much like Adorno's distinction, there is a disciplinary and methodological division at work in the study of the reception of scripture as well, with this incarnation of "reception history" predictably emerging from within anthropology and studying the Bible's interpretation in contexts where the authoritative voice of academia is almost wholly absent. Thus, in his monograph, Bielo (12–14) makes reference to Stanley Fish's work on "interpretive communities,"[7] but could also make reference to the work of Stuart Hall and others within sociological cultural studies who insist upon the relative autonomy of interpretation in the context of even the most scholarly derided and supposedly didactic media. In so doing, they render wholly inadequate any analysis that takes no account of the different ways consumers—as canny and contrapuntal makers of meaning—might interpret the text.[8] This is an abiding feature of the project of Biblicism; there is no concern with, or reverence for, scripture as literature here, as one frequently encounters in reception history insofar as it is counted a subdiscipline of biblical studies. Locating it instead within human relationships and the human sciences means a focus on scripture solely as interlocutor to social action and identity—an approach which has much to offer, yet must also necessarily transform, the practice of reception history.

The question of the Biblicist project's relationship with other disciplinary approaches is a particular concern of the two concluding essays in Bielo's collection. Both Brian Malley (194–96) and Simon Coleman (207) contrast the

[5] On this discussion see also, William John Lyons, "Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010): 207–20.

[6] Theodor Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[7] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[8] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (1980; London: Routledge, 2005), 128–38.

project of Biblicism to theological approaches that dwell on issues generally irrelevant to the social sciences. As Coleman (207) notes, social scientists are generally not given to worrying whether the "interpretation of our informants is theologically orthodox." The exception is if unorthodox interpretations relate to broader social or cultural changes or conflicts, or to scholarly conundrums. So, when "born-again Jews" and self-identified "fundamentalists" who dispute the authority of the Bible start to appear in large-scale surveys, social scientific eyebrows are raised.[9] Malley (194–96) also distinguishes Biblicism from comparable developments within ("comparative") religion studies and traditional biblical studies. He differentiates the Biblicist approach from the former by criticising the "transcendent ideal" of scripture and ritual invoked in interchangeable comparative studies that lack sufficient theoretical or empirical grounding. In his monograph, Bielo (6–7) criticises the sociologist Robert Wuthnow for ending at a similar place in his study of religious small group meetings by suggesting they are an unremarkable social activity interchangeable with others.[10] Reception theory, presented by Malley (196) as "a variant of the reader-response theory of literary meaning" is then differentiated on the basis of its "fundamentally historical" concerns, and grounding in textual studies. It is this latter discipline, however, that he sees as the most appropriate interlocutor for dialogue with Biblicism with its knack for dragging up "evidence pertinent to anthropological claims." To paraphrase Schweitzer: the reception theorist is my brother, but my junior brother. But the point of these two chapters, and the studies as a whole, is not to insist upon the superiority of an anthropological or broader social scientific framework. Indeed, Coleman argues for the necessity of inquiring into whether "theologians deal with the Bible in ways that we would recognize and, more important, can profit from," beyond the "knee-jerk reaction" that assumes anthropology to be a more culturally sensitive discipline (207).

If we look now at the subjects of the Biblicism project, then it comes as no surprise having discussed the emphasis Biblicism places on scripture as an active agent and reference in contemporary social lives, that Biblicism has an elective affinity with the study of Evangelicalism. As Bielo's monograph notes (8–9), copious studies have examined the relationship between North

[9] Conrad Hackett and D. Michael Lindsay, "Measuring Evangelicalism: Consequences of Different Operationalization Strategies," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008): 499–514.

[10] Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

American Evangelical scriptural practices and Evangelical social and political activism, so while Biblicism tries not to subordinate the act of reading scripture to these issues—not least because reading scripture has its own social and political aspects anyway—Evangelical hermeneutics and spirituality ensure that one can never descend into the play of texts within texts. In concluding his monograph, Bielo returns to familiar tropes in the study of North American Evangelicalism within the social sciences, such as Presidential elections and pastoral sex scandals (155–57), but even when strictly focussed on "what happens when Evangelicals are 'just sitting around talking'" (19) he observes little interest from his research participants in engaging in analysis and discussion of the text "removed from the process of personal application" (86). So too with the social scientists concerned with Biblicism, which for argument's sake could be treated as the inverse of the typical practice of reception theory within biblical studies. Introducing his collection, Bielo frames biblicism as the dynamic "between biblical texts and communities of practice," (2) which could also apply to reception history and reflexive biblical studies or theology, but the difference can be conceived of as beginning with, or prioritizing, the text or the community. In other words, reception history emerges from within biblical studies through the recognition that the text of principal scholarly inquiry was and is used in interesting and unusual ways in diverse communities; Biblicism emerges from within the anthropology of Christianity through the recognition that the communities of principal scholarly inquiry owe their interesting and unusual characteristics in part to their particular way of using the Bible.

Malley aside, these essays lack any articulations of disciplinary superiority, the chapters in Bielo's collection show the importance of fieldwork, and thus move beyond engagement with just textual sources in order to appreciate how the Bible is negotiated in a particular context. Aside from the two concluding theoretical chapters, it is only Susan Harding's chapter on the "hip wholesomeness" (187) of Evangelical youth Bibles that does not engage with any substantive fieldwork. Harding relies on online reviews and scholarly analysis, reasserting social scientific givens such as the multifaceted nature of Evangelicalism. We are accordingly offered little insight into how the consumers of the text actually consume it; would a fourteen-year-old reader really imagine Jesus chaperoning her next date (178)? The importance of fieldwork is most obviously necessary when dealing with oral traditions, as John Pulis's chapter on Rastafarian hermeneutics illustrates (30–43), but Jon Bialecki's chapter on a branch of the Pentecostal Vineyard church in

southern California also demonstrates this particularly well (136–56). Vineyard offer a standard conservative Evangelical/Pentecostal statement on "the sufficiency of scripture," complete with twenty-two biblical references in a single paragraph, but such statements can be mere "shibboleths of religious allegiance," he argues, absent an appreciation of how they work themselves out within individual and institutional relationships (139). An interview with the pastor of this church who upholds the notion of Moses's "authority over" Genesis but not "the fine details of authorship" is revealing enough, but observing that the Pastor "visibly choked" when ecclesiastically obliged to assert this (theological) authority in his sermon adds more complexity to the dynamic of text, community and authority (142–43). Weaving a congregational identity self-consciously distinct from the "fundies" of Vineyard's rival and feeder churches, and a world away from equally embarrassing "nineteen-century German scholarship," members of the congregation would nevertheless engage in discussions about the difference between "word-for-word," "thought-for-thought," and "book-for-book" translations of the Bible (138–43). Questions of Biblical authority were further complicated by the dialectical relationship between scripture and charismatic experience in the life of this Pentecostal congregation; sandwiching sermons between pop-rock worship and Pentecostal outpourings placed the text in a particular context, as did the particularly Pentecostal experience of an embodied religious authority emerging dynamically from "meaning" and "contact" with Christian scripture (140, 143–51, 209).

Despite Biblicism offering a new focus within the social scientific study of religion, a new banner or identity to rally behind, and new methodological ideas for interested scholars in other disciplines, the collection's findings are not necessarily novel. For example, in comparing the Biblicism of the staunchly Loyalist (pro-British Northern Irish) Orangemen, and Northern Ireland's rather more pastel-hued charismatics, Liam Murphy shows convincingly, entertainingly, but far from uniquely or originally, that the Bible is a "goldmine of narrative, imagery, and ideas" to be deployed either in its scriptural fragments—"Remember the Second Book of Chronicles, chapter fourteen?" (21)—or as a "single, internally undifferentiated volume" pictured beneath the British crown (14), to support various spiritual and political endeavours. In a differently similar context, Erika Muse's chapter on Chinese American Christian women shows us that "there are both challenges to and affirmations of patriarchy on many levels; there is simultaneously a process of transformation and continuity.… The Bible is the source for guidance but is itself replete with contradictory and multiple meanings" (132–33). Another

unspectacular commonality is that ecclesial tradition fills in perceived biblical gaps and errors, whether it is Bongo locating hidden references to Ethiopia in the various translations he is given (33–34), or Tzotzil men in southern Mexico looking to a church pastor as the model of Protestant masculinity when an appropriate biblical example cannot be located (55). Further, in the study of the pastoral sermons of charismatic and mainline Catholics in Guatemala, those that give them are equally dedicated to the study of scripture, and what sets them apart and makes their situation worthy of study is the vastly different ecclesial structures they find themselves within; their relationship to the Bible is quite subordinate within this (80–99).

This leads to a key critique of Biblicism, if understood as a unifying and emerging social scientific project. C. Mathews Samson argues in his chapter on the translation of the Bible in Guatemala (64–79) that "'Biblicism' seems an odd term for the social scientist.... The '-ism' gives a pejorative rather than descriptive or analytic feel ... familiar alongside discussions of 'literalism'" (64–65). The apparent problem Samson identifies here is that even a quick dip into these studies of Biblicism shows that the attitude to scripture is often very different from the one most associated with "literalism" in the scholarly mind: North American conservative Evangelicalism. As I suggested, this seems to be the model here—not least under the influence of Malley's earlier work. Even if we take that half-step from conservative Evangelicalism into Pentecostalism, there is the immediate complicating relationship with spiritual experience a step removed from scripture that carries its own accompanying or countervailing authority to contend with. In other contexts, such as indigenous communities in southern Mexico in Akesha Baron's chapter (44–63), one encounters the conundrum of biblical "literalism" in a society "that is not very literate" and wherein (comparatively) imprecise oral communication and citation carries greater authority (44–45).

So following from Samson's imminent critique of "Biblicism," we see one of the tendencies emerging from these studies is a downplaying of the perceived or presumed significance of the biblical text. Rosamond Rodman's study of the use of scripture in the controversies over same-sex relationships in the worldwide Anglican Church is instructive here. Her hypothesis is that scripture will provide "proof texts" in the debate; that "'The Bible says such and such ... ' [will be] greeted by a counterclaim, 'Yes, but ... the Bible also says ... '" (101). Rather, she shows that much like Vineyard's paragraph statement on biblical authority with its 22 biblical citations (139), and the Orange Order marching under a banner displaying the Bible beneath the British crown while a pipe band strikes up a merry tune like "Up To Our

Necks [in Fenian Blood]" (27), scripture is invoked as a symbol of identity. Rodman argues that it is the invocation of the very idea of scriptural authority, rather than the precise citation of scripture, that is most significant in the Anglican debate. This echoes the restatement of Malley's argument in Bielo's monograph that to identify with "literalism" is to claim and demarcate a particular identity (49–50), even if the work of the biblical scholar James Barr would insist that "literalism" is very much a hermeneutic, and not simply a statement of identity;[11] it is hard work styling a single "literal" interpretation from a text as multivocal as the Bible. Thus, in Bielo's monograph he observes Evangelical rhetoric and self-identity insists upon the "inerrant," "unswerving" truth of scripture, but this Evangelical rhetoric is somewhat autonomous from Evangelical hermeneutics; a failure to fully grasp the single truth does not undermine the existence of the truth (52–54). So Anglicans who can rally behind the notion of "scriptural authority," much like those "literalists," can re-arrange Anglican "identity and identification" refuting the assumed split between North/South, Developed/Developing countries (102–3). Interestingly, Rodman shows that while conservatives could be accused of hiding behind one of Bialecki's "religious shibboleths" by invoking the vagueness of scriptural authority, liberals did much the same thing by invoking "contexts", which becomes rather muddled in an exchange between two Nigerian-born priests on either side of the argument who reveal unsurprisingly that one should be rather contextual about invoking "context" in the first place (107–8).

There are abiding similarities within these differences, of course. Within Baron's southern Mexican context, we see the invocation that "our Lord wants it like this," with the vaguest of allusions to scripture, can be used to enforce a patriarchal order in the Evangelical household (55–56). However the broader discourse labelled "Protestant teachings" also becomes a way for men to reveal their emotional vulnerabilities, revealing a newer form of patriarchy has developed in dialogue with evolving contextual biblicism that maintains the sense of scriptural authority associated with literalism, but nothing of the "bibliolatry" (64) with which literalism is associated (45, 61–62). There is still the connection between "text and action" that Bielo notes in his monograph is an important feature of Evangelical Biblicism (50), insofar as one is still invoking scripture as authority, but it is an evidently looser association, even given the plasticity of Evangelical close reading and the ability to construct a seamless narrative from the biblical text "guided by the ideologi-

[11] James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

cal principle of biblical continuity" that merges the unique textual utterance with the invocation of scripture as a singular, signifying unit (62–67). Some of the case studies here show that scripture has a less-than-privileged position within religious and social practices than the term "Biblicism" suggests, but in each context scripture is signalled as an important source and symbol of spiritual and social authority. What precisely constitutes scripture and how one engages with the biblical and extra-biblical text can be radically different, but Malley can smooth over these contradictions by placing scripture within a broader category of "authoritative discourse" (197) within which, just like the dual streams of the (differently divine) English Common Law, strict textual interpretation and application is just one part of what is going on. Biblicism in its various incarnations is also uniformly a process of the production of knowledge, as Bielo makes most clear in his monograph (157–58), both in terms of constructing a framework for interpreting and interacting with the social world and the production and performance of knowledge of self and social identity, including gender and ethnic identities.

The ways forward for Biblicism are all quite apparent from within the existing studies present. John Pulis's essay on Rastafarian hermeneutics (30–43) sets the tone for developing the discipline of Biblicism—or Scripturalism, I suppose—beyond its present position as a subdiscipline within the anthropology of Christianity. A veritable industry in interpreting and reforming illiberal Islamic exegesis has developed in the last decade amongst newly deputised scholar-sheriffs, for example. The inevitable irruption from quantitative sociologists—the social sciences' very own version of nineteenth-century German biblical scholars—that what is offered are random and imprecisely impressionistic vignettes that tell us little about the broader sweeps of contemporary society will have to be dealt with sooner or later, also. As Malley suggests (196), developing interdisciplinary dialogue with reception historical biblical scholars doing a similar job with different methodologies, data and priorities, seems particularly fruitful. This might create a more inclusive field of study; an "ology" rather than the "-ism" that Samson dislikes (64–65). Finally, a way of interrogating the problem of scholarly distinction I raised at the beginning of this review, would be a study of the biblicism of biblical scholars, as Deane Galbraith suggests.[12] An ethnographic study of an SBL conference would be an intoxicating place to begin.

[12] Deane Galbraith, "The Author of the Bible Revealed! And It's You," *Religion Bulletin*, December 17, 2010, http://www.equinoxjournals.com/blog/2010/12/the-author-of-the-bible-revealed/.