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USING OR ABUSING THE BIBLE? THE HERMENEUTICS OF AMERICAN PRAGMATISM

Benjamin Sargent

This article explores the background and philosophy of an approach to reading Scripture that is very popular in Anglican circles today. It is argued that, whilst pragmatism-inspired hermeneutics appear to make sense, they have the ability to relativise the Bible's teaching to the extent that interpretation simply becomes the use *of biblical texts.*

Introduction

Pragmatism is a philosophical tendency, known in many guises, that has its origins in the late nineteenth century. Put very simply, pragmatism is a rejection of philosophical idealism in favour of a concentration on the functional aspects of human thought, representation and communication. Even more simply, a pragmatist *might* ask, 'Does it work?' rather than, 'Is it true?' Whilst pragmatism has always had implications for the interpretation of written texts, recent decades have seen a growth of interest in hermeneutics. The hermeneutics of more recent American pragmatism, or to be more precise, literary neo-pragmatism, is something that should be well-known to everyone interested in the theological interpretation of Scripture in the Christian church today. Yet it probably isn't! Theological hermeneutics inspired by pragmatism have been a significant feature in the interpretative side-stepping of biblical texts which pose a problem to the redefinition of sexual ethics in recent years. In addition to this, theological hermeneutics inspired by pragmatism have been popularised within theological education to such an extent that in many places they are considered normative. This has largely been achieved through the success of David A. Holgate and Rachel Starr's *SCM Studyguide to Biblical Hermeneutics*: a set text for local ordination and lay ministry courses throughout the United Kingdom and beyond.[1]

The majority of twentieth-century and more recent developments in theological interpretation of the Bible have been inspired by continental philosophy. Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann drew upon Martin Heidegger's existentialism to view biblical interpretation as an act of demythologising the biblical text to give it meaning for the present.

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[1] David A. Holgate and Rachel Starr, *SCM Studyguide to Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM, 2006).

James Barr relied upon the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure to claim a form of objective meaning for biblical scholarship, grounded in the meaningful structure of language. Perhaps to a similar end, Kevin Vanhoozer and Nicholas Wolterstorff have engaged with Paul Ricoeur and Speech-Act Theory. The work of Anthony Thiselton and, in particular, his terminology of the interpretive horizon is heavily influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer. The contemporary approach to biblical interpretation discussed here stands out as having been primarily influenced by the more analytic and anglophone philosophy of pragmatism.

Hermeneutics and Neo-Pragmatism

The continental tradition has generally considered the subject of hermeneutics after defining questions about the human subject or the nature of language. Pragmatic thinking about hermeneutics proceeds from the observation that interpretation happens all the time and is largely successful. Whilst continental philosophers have been able to identify all sorts of problems with understanding interpretation as a purely objective exercise (such as the death of the author, historical distanciation, the chain of reference in language and the cultural specificity of the interpretive context), pragmatic philosophers have not been interested in making interpretation objective in theory, but have proceeded from the observation that, by and large, interpretation works. When we have a conversation, it is not normally baffling and confusing and when one reads a letter about an overdue gas bill, its meaning is not something that needs to be pondered at great length.

Contemporary pragmatism, or neo-pragmatism (to distinguish it from the earlier philosophical pragmatism of Charles Sanders Pierce) belongs to the world of Jacques Derrida and post-structuralism. Neo-pragmatists agree that the meaning of texts is not fixed or determinate because language itself fails to offer a guarantee of meaning. But whereas Derrida's readers are deconstructive 'undoers' of the text, exploring new realms of interpretive possibility, pragmatic readers are simply 'users' of the text. Whereas Derrida avoids looking for the 'meaning' of texts as something fixed because of the nature of text as part of an endless chain of reference, pragmatic thinkers tend to avoid fixed accounts of meaning because of the variety of situations in which the text is used. Like the continental philosophers, neo-pragmatic philosophers are intensely interested in language. Like Alasdair MacIntyre and Jean-François Lyotard, they see human society as consisting of different linguistic realities or cultures defined by particular languages or uses of language. In each of these, members share a rationality, or way of thinking and living, based on the language they use and the way they use it. When members communicate they generally understand what has been said or written. But communication and understanding is not universal and members of one linguistic culture may have real difficulty communicating in the same way with members of another, even if the two groups share a common language, such as English. A Jamaican English speaker belongs to an entirely different linguistic rationality to a Canadian English speaker. Indeed, it may be that a Jamaican English speaker from a privileged background belongs to an entirely different linguistic rationality from a Jamaican English speaker from a deprived background. Again, a Jamaican English speaker from a privileged background who is a Scientologist will belong to a different linguistic rationality to one who isn't. In each linguistic rationality, language is employed in subtly different ways. To some, this presents a real obstacle to meaningful communication and the notion of a universal and determinate meaning of written text: the idea that a piece of writing will mean the same in each cultural and linguistic setting.

However, humanity's division into distinct linguistic cultures is not always such a problem as it is for Lyotard. This is because, though linguistic cultures are theoretically distinct, communication between them does seem to happen in a more-or-less reliable way. As Jürgen Habermas, a prominent German pragmatist, writes,

> The pluralism of language games [context specific uses of language], of course, does not necessarily lead to a manifold of incommensurable, mutually foreclosed universes…the medium that gives the lifeworld [experienced lived reality] its structure—propositionally differentiated language—represents an empirically universal form of communication for which there is no alternative in any human form of life.[2]

Of course, all this is not to say that communication and interpretation are objective. All Habermas would say is that speaking or writing and interpretation generally functions well given the needs and demands of particular communities. But Habermas is more interested in general communication than the hermeneutics of interpreting written texts. Richard Rorty, the dominant figure in American Pragmatism for much of the late-twentieth century and early-twenty-first century, notes that reading is clearly conditioned by the personal context in which it occurs, the needs of the reader and his or her community, to the extent that interpretation simply becomes use of a text. Any sense of the meaning of a text being determinate or fixed from some other place than the mind of the reader is an illusion.

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[2] Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, trans. Barbara Fulther (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 20.

> [Reading] may be so exciting and convincing that one has the illusion that one now sees what a certain text is really about. But what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced. So it seems to me simpler to scrap the distinction between using and interpreting, and just distinguish between uses by different people for different purposes.[3]

According to Rorty, one might think that one has discovered the correct meaning of a text, but what has been found is simply the meaning that chimes in most with one's needs. Pragmatism makes the claim that the interpretation of texts is defined by readers and the particular culture in which they are interpreted. Because interpretation within these settings is so relativised, it is impossible to speak of interpretation as something aiming towards a universal and true meaning of a text: such a concept cannot be conceived of, for all the reasons established by Derrida. All that remains is the use of texts by different readers and different reading communities or cultural rationalities. But an hermeneutical question remains: given the limiting reality of specific communities in which reading takes place, how can interpretation be done well? What characterises a good reading?

For the fullest application of pragmatic philosophy to hermeneutics one needs to look to Stanley Fish. Stanley Fish is professor of humanities and law at Florida State university and has been a controversial figure in American University politics. He describes himself as anti-foundationalist and is responsible for introducing the concept of interpretative communities to contemporary hermeneutics. Like Rorty, Fish views meaning as arising entirely in actual use of a text, but adds to this the importance of use within a community in which a particular interpretation can be experienced and recognised as good, or if not, can be debated on the basis of agreed ideas of what good interpretation is.

> This, then, is the explanation for the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community). Disagreements…

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[3] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), 144.

> can be debated in a principled way: not because of a stability in texts but because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities and therefore in the opposing positions they make possible.[4]

For Fish, a good reading is one which supplies the particular needs of the interpretive community: a reading which advances what that community considers to be valuable or useful. The text may not have an established and universal meaning, but the community in which it is interpreted has established notions of right and wrong and an established hope for what a text might mean. So, to use one of Fish's examples, a community which was anticlerical might consider a reading of *Pride and Prejudice* which portrays Mr Collins as a ludicrous character as a good reading because it supports and stimulates the view of that community. Good readings are those which are useful and support the community in its understood identity. This approach has been adopted into theological or biblical hermeneutics by Stephen Fowl.

Pragmatism and Theological Hermeneutics

Stephen E. Fowl is professor of theology at Loyola College in Maryland and one of the most prominent scholars in contemporary theological interpretation of Scripture. Naturally, he views pragmatism's interpretive community of Scripture as the local church.

> Christian interpretation of scripture is primarily an activity of Christian communities in which they seek to generate and embody their interpretations of scripture *so that* they may fulfil their ends of worshipping and living faithfully before the triune God.[5]

Fowl argues that scriptural interpretation ought to reflect the needs, values and ends of the local church. A good interpretation, according to Fowl, is one which fosters virtue: which promotes the good of the community. Because of this, the mind or ethos of the Christian community has complete control over what readings can be accepted as good. But what is the good of the community? Fowl argues that values of inclusion and hospitality are good for the community and are to be promoted through biblical interpretation. This includes inclusion of those who are committed to sexually active homosexual relationships and who testify to the work of the Spirit of God in their lives.[6] It is up to the community of the local church to discern this activity of the Spirit through their friendships with homosexual Christians and enable this encounter to influence their understanding of who can be included in the people of God. Guiding this argument is an analogy with the inclusion of gentiles in Acts 10–15. Just as Peter witnessed the work of the Spirit in the lives of gentiles and his changed his belief as a result of their testimony, so the church today must be open to change as a result of the testimony of homosexual Christians in active sexual relationships argues Fowl. The new vision of inclusion that results from this testimony ought to then inform the task of biblical interpretation. Again, it is the values of the interpreting community that determine how the Bible is used and what particular passages are taken to mean. Fowl's work has been prominent in the discussion of homosexuality and Christian leadership as he argues that readings which exclude people in some way are to be avoided as not good for the community.

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[4] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 15. Indeed, Fish understands the text as having no force or power outside the imagination of the reader. Stanley Fish, 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,' *Diacritics* 11.1 (1981): 2–13.

[5] Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 181.

This approach, inspired by pragmatic hermeneutics, has been hugely influential on Holgate and Starr's *SCM Studyguide to Biblical Hermeneutics*, which is a core text on most ordination courses in England. Both authors have taught at the Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme (STETS) based in Salisbury and appear to have a firm grasp on communicating well to undergraduate ministry students. According to Holgate and Starr, interpretation of the Bible should be aimed at disclosing good news for everyone. This is, of course, a functional understanding of interpretation consistent with pragmatic notions of the *use* of texts. The purpose of Scripture is to give everyone a message of good news. But how does one discern what that good news is?

> Yet good news for some can mean bad news for others. How can interpreters adjudicate between these competing goals? One important criterion is to see whether the interpretation arrived at is good news for the poor, powerless or marginalized. This value derives from the Bible itself, which highlights God's concern for the oppressed (e.g. Exod. 3.7), aliens, widows and orphans (e.g. Deut. 24.17) repeatedly. By giving

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[6] Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 119–127. Cf. S.E. Fowl and L.G. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991).

> priority to the questions and needs of the most vulnerable, interpreters can be confident that interpretations are truly life affirming for all.[7]

There is perhaps an irony here, in that the hermeneutical criterion for establishing 'life-affirming' interpretation in the post-modern context where the meaning of Scripture is neither plain or determinate, is taken from two biblical texts whose determinate plain sense meaning is assumed without question: Exod 3:7 and Deut 24:17. Holgate and Starr arrive at this pragmatism-inspired approach to biblical hermeneutics after exploring the faults of traditional theological reading, grammatical and linguistic approaches and historical criticism. The effect of this is to give the impression that pragmatic communal 'life-affirming' interpretation is the simple solution to the interpretative chaos and ethical dilemmas provided by previous approaches. But is this the case? As a book that purports to be introductory, is its advocacy of one option for theological interpretation amongst many in a burgeoning field warranted?

Response

Fowl's pragmatism-inspired biblical hermeneutic has attracted strong criticism from other significant thinkers in the field of biblical hermeneutics, including Kevin Vanhoozer and Anthony Thiselton.[8] But before detailing some of the problems with this approach, some of the strengths must be noted.

Firstly, pragmatic hermeneutics make sense: to some extent we are always limited by our own particular social and cultural setting within a community, and for the most part, we *can* agree on what texts mean within those communities. We can never have pure and adequate knowledge of what a text's author meant, because there is no foundational reason which gives us perfect access to what took place in someone else's brain, within another culture, perhaps thousands of years ago. That doesn't mean that authorial intention must be dismissed, as Vanhoozer has shown, but pragmatism provides a robust response to some of the problems associated with authorial intention.[9]

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[7] Holgate and Starr, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 184.

[8] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), 379; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Four Theological Faces of Biblical Interpretation,' in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 135–137; and Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 547ff.

At the same time, pragmatic interpretation with its focus on the interpretive community has something to teach us about biblical interpretation for the local church, especially for those of us who are preachers. Whilst the interpretative community is all important in the pragmatic hermeneutics of Fish and Fowl, preachers face the danger of not making enough of the community in and for which the Bible is interpreted: the people of God. How much does preaching reflect the actual needs of the local church? To what extent do preachers simply try to copy teaching heard at conferences or festivals, or on the websites of large flagship churches? Do we really know what the needs of those we teach are? If we spend our whole time in the study we might not do. And yet the Bible offers an exalted picture of the people of God about whose needs God cares.

Nowhere is this clearer that in the way Scripture is interpreted for the audiences of 1 Peter. Peter places the local churches to which he writes at the heart of his biblical interpretation. He explains why this is appropriate in 1:10–12.

> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you searched and enquired, investigating the time and circumstances of that to which the Spirit of Christ in them was predicting: the sufferings of Christ and the glories which followed. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you who have now had the Gospel proclaimed to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, which the angels long to see into.[10]

According to Peter, the prophets of Israel's past did not grasp the full meaning or referent of their utterances: hence they vigorously sought this meaning. Peter goes on to say that it was revealed to these prophets that they were speaking or writing to serve the communities now addressed by the letter written by Peter. Like many of the Qumran writers, Peter understands his audiences to be of supreme importance, standing at the very climax of salvation history, a moment for which the past yearns.

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[9] This is the central argument of Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in this Text?* and as I have argued in Benjamin Sargent, *David being a Prophet: The Contingency of Scripture upon History in the New Testament,* BZNW 207 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 129–190.

[10] 1 Pet 1:10–12 (author's translation).

This is because they are the royal priesthood, the holy nation formed by God himself through the gospel about Jesus Christ, prepared before the foundation of the world. Because the audiences are so significant in this historical narrative, Peter understands Scripture to address *their* particular needs.[11] So he directs citations from Scripture to his audiences as though they were written, in part with them in mind: 'be holy for I am holy' (1:16): 'the grass withers and the flower falls but the word of the Lord endures for ever – this word is the Good News that was proclaimed to *you*!' (1:24b–25). If we understand Scripture theologically as divine discourse, a force which challenges and encourages real people in real situations, we need to foster a sense that it is in some way directed towards the particular needs of the church. This is something which Stephen Fowl has mastered which we could do well to learn from.

But a number of criticisms can be made of pragmatic interpretation which, at the same time, make it deeply problematic.

Pragmatic interpretation is exploitative: it sees texts purely as a means to an end and forces a particular agenda upon them. It comes to the text knowing already what it wishes to find there and seeking the text's blessing upon the interpretive community. Because of this, it is like any other type of biblical interpretation which uses a fixed rule of faith: the meaning of the text is heavily policed. But who decides what that rule of faith is? Who decides what constitutes a reading which benefits the community? The trouble is that the perceived good of the community could be anything and not necessarily something others might regard as Christian. In Holgate and Starr's version of pragmatic theological hermeneutics, it is perhaps obvious that the marginalised includes homosexual Christians barred from church leadership because of active homosexual sex lives, but how, one wonders, does this hermeneutic apply to the issue of abortion? Who is the marginalised victim in this case? It would be difficult to argue that the unborn child was not the most marginalised and voiceless in this situation, unless some sort of diminished humanity was claimed for the child, making her of less significance than the marginalised mother. Hermeneutics determined by human desire for the text to mean a certain thing are at great risk of straying into some very dark places indeed.

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[11] Benjamin Sargent, *Written to Serve: The Use of Scripture in 1 Peter,* LNTS 547 (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 28–49, and Benjamin Sargent, 'The Narrative Substructure of 1 Peter,' *Exp Tim* 124.10 (2013): 485–490. For my defence of Petrine authorship see Benjamin Sargent, 'Chosen through Sanctification (1 Pet1,2 and 1 Thess 2,13): The Theology or Diction of Silvanus?' *Bib* 94.1 (2013): 117– 120.

Pragmatic interpretation is unscholarly: it is a way of reading which does not foster a thorough examination or investigation of the text, nor does it view academic research as a resource for interpretation. Interpretation simply needs to benefit the interpretative community. It can make texts mean what they were never intended to mean in an historical sense. Because of this, readers are rarely confronted with an uncomfortable or challenging meaning. It is hermeneutical values such as the importance of literary context, the grounding of meaning in historical setting and authorial intention which ensure that the Bible speaks in a voice other than our own. These values are evidenced, to some extent, even in the earliest theological interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel in the New Testament.[12]

Now, given these criticisms it might be hard to see how hermeneutics associated with pragmatism could encourage Christians in the task of faithfully teaching the word of God. It could easily result in biblical interpretation in sermons which is safe and unconfrontational, which panders to the itching ears of the congregation. It could result in teaching which began with only a shallow engagement with the text, which is primarily informed by fashionable ideas and styled in communal jargon. Biblical interpretation inspired by pragmatism is something to be approached with real caution.

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[12] Benjamin Sargent, 'The Exegetical Middah מענינו הלמד דבר and the New Testament,' *Novum Testamentum* 57.4 (2015), 413–417, and Benjamin Sargent, '"Interpreting Homer from Homer": Aristarchus of Samothrace and the Notion of Scriptural Authorship in the New Testament,' *TynBul* 65.1 (2014): 125–139.