

Engaging the Bible in GCSE and A level Religious Studies: environmental stewardship as a test case

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Abstract

This article explores the potential for critical and informed engagement with biblical texts to form a key element of the study of Christian perspectives on ethical issues at GCSE and A level. Given the current dominance of philosophical and ethical topics, and weaknesses in the engagement with biblical texts within existing curriculum materials, the article appeals to recent developments in approaches to biblical scholarship, in particular a focus on the history of interpretation and influence, as a means by which the Bible may be fruitfully and critically engaged in modules focused on contemporary religious ethics. The article then presents the topic of environmental stewardship as a test case for the practical application of such a method, outlining two examples – the stewardship of creation (Genesis 1 and 2) and the future of the earth (2 Peter 3) – to demonstrate how a more sophisticated treatment of the Bible as part of ethical enquiry might be achieved.

Keywords

Secondary School; Religious Studies; Biblical Interpretation; Environmental Ethics

How is the Bible to be engaged in GCSE and A level Religious Studies (RS), in topics and modules primarily focused on issues in the philosophy of religion and religious ethics? This is the primary question underlying the present article, a question which, we argue, is of considerable current importance, given both the huge popularity of philosophical and ethical topics compared with biblical ones, and also questions about the importance and relevance of understanding of the Bible and its influence, questions highlighted not least during the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible in 2011.¹ Why, if at all, should students interested in contemporary questions about environmental ethics, inter-religious conflict and a host of other pressing concerns be persuaded that engaging with biblical texts might be an important and stimulating endeavour? More specifically, how are students (and their teachers) to be equipped to do so in ways that do justice to the Bible's religious significance but at the same time open it to critical and imaginative enquiry?

In this article, these questions are pursued within the particular context of environmental ethics and religious attitudes to the environment, with consideration given to the potential contributions that biblical studies might make to this area of study – a focus arising from a recent project to develop curriculum materials, 'Beyond Stewardship: Biblical Texts and Environmental Ethics', carried out at the University of Exeter.² Our aim here is to discuss some of the critical issues underlying such work, particularly concerning the need to engage the Bible critically and imaginatively in modules dealing primarily with contemporary ethical topics, and to point towards the potential for the further development of such an approach across other areas of Christian ethics as taught in schools.

The national RS context and the relevance of biblical studies

In terms of statistics, the current picture for secondary RS – certain recent challenges notwithstanding – would appear to be a healthy one.³ During the last five years, the number of students taking AS or A2 levels in the subject has steadily increased, with over 33,000 sitting the AS examination and over 22,000 sitting the A2 examination in the summer of 2011. The same is true at GCSE, with more than 220,000 students taking the full-course exam at this time. While numbers for the short-course GCSE have shown something of a decline, it was still the case that over 60% of all short-course examination entries in 2011 were in RS. Results from this period tell a similar story, with the number of students achieving a grade C or above in full-course GCSE, AS Level and A2 Level RS exceeding the averages for each of the qualifications

across all subjects (figures provided by the Joint Curriculum and Qualifications Authority).

This is not to say that the outlook is necessarily a rosy one. One prominent threat to the profile of the subject, as recently reported in a document on the website of the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE 2013), was the recent proposal, rejected at least for now, to exclude it from the list of core humanities subjects in the new English Baccalaureate, thus prompting fears of reduced spending and focus on RE in schools. A report of research by Professor James Conroy that featured on the AHRC website on 22nd February 2012 has further suggested that the subject is already poorly resourced, with an annual spend of less than £1 per pupil, and liable to become ‘the dumping ground of the curriculum’ where issues around citizenship, morality, and personal and social wellbeing are all expected to be treated. Moreover, as Mark Chater and Clive Erricker (2012) argue, it is highly questionable whether these ‘moral’ aims should be merged into the academic study of religion; instead, like other subjects, the primary aim of RS should be the acquisition of relevant knowledge and critical skills.

Recent reports have also highlighted certain weaknesses in the teaching of Christianity and in the materials available to support teachers. The Warwick Report (Jackson, Iprgrave, Hayward et al. 2010, 3, 5, 10 & 217), for example, found that RE resources relating to the six principal religions are often inaccurate, imbalanced and lacking in depth. Insufficient attention is paid to different perspectives from within each religion, with the views of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians in particular poorly represented or even omitted. In addition, it found that, although the majority of teachers now turn to the internet for resources, many have to resort to using material not intended for use in RE, resulting in an absence of suitable classroom activities and the need, at times, to navigate around the proselytising agenda of ‘confessional’, faith-based sites. The necessity for teachers to employ their professional judgement when selecting and using materials is therefore apparent – a challenge made even greater given the large number of non-specialists among those teaching RE.⁴

A particular issue for those who hope to foster informed engagement with biblical texts as a crucial part of the RS syllabus is the increasing dominance of ethics and philosophy units within those chosen by students. Examiner Jon Mayled writes on the website REonline that ‘experience and teacher comment suggest that approximately 90% of RS A level students study Philosophy of Religion and Religious Ethics’. Indeed, in the summer of 2011, nearly twelve times as many A Level students sat ethics units as

did biblical studies. In the case of GCSE students for the same period, the figure rises to nearly fourteen times as many.⁵ A variety of reasons goes some way towards explaining the relative decline in attention paid to the Bible in RS: the wider appeal and perceived relevance of contemporary ethical topics; the sense, among both students and teachers, that study of the Bible will be dull, or pertinent only to those who are Christians; a preference among (often non-specialist) teachers to treat philosophical topics. The Biblos Project, for example, found that, of the KS4 students surveyed, 57% were ‘not keen’ or were ‘uncertain’ about studying the Bible, and of these, 67% said this was because they found the Bible boring or were not religious; in addition, 37% of students questioned said they found the language of the Bible difficult to understand (Copley, Lane, Savini and Walshe 2001, 28-31). The tendency is also not unique to Britain, with Didier Pollefeyt and Reimund Bieringer (2005, 117) reporting that: ‘Recent research in primary and secondary schools in various European countries has shown a sharp decrease in interest for the Bible in religious education’.

Despite this, there remain good reasons why engagement with the Bible should form an essential part of any RE syllabus. It is, of course, a foundational text for Jews, Christians and Muslims, albeit in different ways. More broadly, it belongs, as Gerd Theissen remarks (writing in the context of contemporary Germany), to ‘the basic cultural information of our society’ (2007, 12). Put differently, the Bible has the status of a ‘classic’, and not only for religious believers (Pollefeyt and Bieringer 2005, 132-33); anyone wanting to understand Christian beliefs and practices – and, indeed, societies shaped by that heritage – needs to grapple with the ongoing legacy of the Bible, which necessarily requires some encounter with the texts of the Bible itself. What is more, as Mary Hayward (2006, 164) points out, there may be tensions ‘between the study and analysis of the Bible in an “academic” manner and the use of the Bible within Christian communities’, and it is therefore important that students are equipped to understand something of the diverse ways in which the Bible can be approached, of its various interpretations and on-going influence. In the following sections, we seek to show both the need and the potential for bringing the critical analysis of biblical texts into the study of environmental ethics, as one example of how such concerns might be addressed.

Environmental stewardship as a test case

Problems with existing materials

Some of the problems with existing materials and approaches for the study of Christian perspectives on environmental ethics, as well as the potential for developing new perspectives informed by contemporary biblical studies, may be illustrated through a specific case study focused on environmental stewardship. The Ethics courses offered by the major examination boards all include at least the option to study environmental ethics at both GCSE and A Level, and these units generally are taken by relatively high numbers of students.⁶ Across the boards, the syllabuses for environmental ethics incorporate religious perspectives on the subject together with secular approaches towards and theories about a range of environmental issues. Commonly occurring religious themes include the status and duty of humans within the world, with a particular emphasis on stewardship and responsibility for the environment; and the status of the non-human world, covering religious perspectives on how humans should relate to animals and looking at issues such as animal testing and vegetarianism. Secular theories referred to include the Gaia hypothesis and, in the case of OCR A level, environmental ethics is taught in conjunction with business ethics.⁷

Interestingly, only one of the published syllabuses suggests specific biblical texts that might be consulted in relation to various topics in Christian ethics.⁸ The AQA GCSE Specification A, under the heading of ‘The Environment and World Poverty’, lists three biblical texts: Genesis 1-2; Matthew 25.31-46; and 1 John 3.17-18. Although the syllabus does not explicitly say so, it would seem that only the first of these is intended to relate specifically to the theme of environment, since the focus of the other two is on doing charitable deeds for those in need. Further, apart from the lack of clarity on this point, the syllabus, perhaps unsurprisingly given the need to be concise, offers no indication as to how these texts might be studied in relation to the topic of the environment.

For help on such matters teachers will of course go to the available textbooks. Such resources, although not compulsory and indeed firmly regarded by examiners and teachers alike as never fully comprehensive, are nonetheless often used as a foundation for the planning and resourcing of schemes of work, especially by teachers working in an area that is not their specialism. All too often, however, these textbooks offer relatively little guidance as to the ways in which one might engage in study of these texts, beyond simply ‘looking them up’. In such an approach, texts are isolated from their literary and historical contexts, and treated as little more than ‘proof-texts’ used to

confirm or evidence, at times even inaccurately, foregone conclusions about Christian belief (Copley, Lane, Savini and Walshe, 2001, 24). *Philosophy Through Christianity for OCR B GCSE RS* (2009), for example, features boxes to the side of the page containing ‘Bible Bitz’ – lists of biblical quotations relevant to the topic in question. In the case of environmental ethics, these texts are Genesis 1:26, Psalm 24:1, Psalm 50: 10-11, Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 1:31. Students are then encouraged to use the quotes to ‘explain why Christians believe that they have a duty to care for the earth and its inhabitants’ (115), thus presenting the meanings of the passages in advance of any process of interpretation, and so doing little to foster critical and open engagement with the texts (Warwick Report 2010, 65). Highlighting the shortcomings of such an approach, Pollefeyt and Bieringer comment on:

... the dangers of an instrumentalized use of the Bible in religious education that imposes an absolute meaning on a text... the biblical text is then made into a ventriloquist of a priori fixed views. In religious education curricula, many texts seem to have been selected because of the association of a word, a parallel thought, an accidental link with other areas in the curricula. Such selection hardly takes into account the larger contexts of the Bible passages... Thus, students do not get the opportunity to learn from within the Bible or to discover their own interpretations (Pollefeyt and Bieringer 2005, 128).

A ‘proof-text’ approach to the Bible also does little to help students to begin to grasp why the Bible continues to generate such diverse and often opposed views among contemporary Christians. The Warwick Report (2010, 3) states that RE should enable students to develop a ‘recognition of each religion’s complexity and internal diversity’, yet the distinct views of different Christian denominations are at times overlooked by textbooks, and even where such contrasts are made apparent, little, if any, reference is made to the differences in interpretations of key biblical texts that underlie these contrasting beliefs.⁹ As a result, RE runs the risk of reducing biblical texts to points of reference that support some aspect of Christian belief, without inviting consideration of the diversity of contemporary Christian perspectives and the extent to which that diversity stems in part precisely from different (often competing) interpretations of biblical texts.

Further, such a method, which uses biblical texts simply to illustrate or confirm ‘what Christians believe’, does little to stimulate critical and imaginative engagement with the Bible itself. By contrast, an approach that encourages an open and critical reading of the Bible would provide a greater intellectual challenge, as well as proving more appropriate to the nature of the texts at hand. As Hayward (2006, 164) puts it: ‘Learning *that* there are different interpretations held by different groups is not the same

as discovering *how* or *why* this is so’, and she thus argues for the importance of students learning to handle biblical material for themselves rather than simply being taught about the varying interpretations. Indeed, the examining of different, and even controversial, readings of the biblical texts can prove to be an educationally-enriching process, as Pollefeyt and Bieringer (2005, 126-27) make clear: ‘From the point of view of religious education, a resistant reading of the text is as valuable as a compliant reading. In some cases, it is better to teach young people to read “against the grain of the text” – for instance, from the perspective of the underdog’.

Finally, despite the popularity of Ethics units at both GCSE and A Level, there would appear to be fewer resources available for environmental ethics than for some other areas of study. For example, the website of REonline, a major provider of materials for use in RE (and currently undergoing major redevelopment), lists many resources for use with Bible-based units at A level, yet only three books and no online materials for use with A level environmental ethics, despite their being a strong preference, as has been shown, for the study of ethics-based units at this level. Even within the resources that do exist, religious perspectives on the subject are at times omitted. Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch’s *The Puzzle of Ethics* (1999), for example, despite including Christian views on a variety of other ethical topics, does not do so in the case of environmental ethics, which is instead considered only from a variety of secular perspectives. Clearly, then, there is a need for new materials for use in the study of Christian perspectives on environmental ethics, and in particular for resources that encourage greater engagement with and a more sophisticated use of biblical texts within the topic.

Recent developments in biblical studies

Before we outline two specific examples of the ways in which a more informed, critical, and stimulating engagement with the Bible within environmental ethics might proceed, we sketch some of the developments in contemporary biblical studies that may help to make the discipline more amenable to integration into units of study not primarily focused on biblical texts in their ancient historical contexts.

The first such development is the dethroning of historical criticism, once the presumed paradigm for biblical studies. Historical criticism was based on the presumption that the task of the biblical scholar was to discern what the text originally meant, and what events actually happened, from an objective and unbiased perspective. It has pedagogical value not least in ‘distancing’ the Bible from its contemporary

readers: the Bible is a collection of ancient texts, rooted in the cultural assumptions of ancient societies, that cannot cogently be regarded as simply a textbook of eternal religious or moral truths. Using this method, students might be encouraged to identify different sources and traditions, to question which sayings of Jesus are likely to be authentic, or to consider aspects of biblical teaching that reflect ancient cultural or cosmological presuppositions. However, historical criticism itself came under attack as it became clear that such detached, objective historiography was impossible, and served, in fact, to conceal the interests and commitments that underlay particular construals of the past and particular readings of the texts (cf. also Pollefeyt and Bieringer 2005, 121-25).

Along with this critique came a wide variety of new methods that explicitly reflected the conviction that different readings could be generated depending on the social identity and location of the reader. These gave rise to feminist, black, liberationist and many other readings of the Bible which reflect the diverse contexts and perspectives from which the Bible is read (see e.g., Gooder 2008). Such approaches place much greater emphasis on the role of the reader in the construction of meaning and the influence of the reader's context – a development which is also to be found in the study of other kinds of literature, as well as in disciplines such as history and politics, and as such opens up the prospects for interdisciplinary collaboration. For example, teachers of RE and of English literature might study a biblical text alongside other pieces of literature, asking about imagery, structure, meaning and the different ways a reader might respond to it. Alternatively, teachers of RE and of history might examine the ways in which biblical texts were interpreted in Nazi Germany or Apartheid South Africa – both contexts in which interpretations of the Bible played significant roles in the underpinning and legitimating of the dominant state ideology.

Another development of significance in contemporary biblical studies has been a focus on the history of interpretation and influence. Pioneered by the Swiss scholar Ulrich Luz, the German term *Wirkungsgeschichte* – literally, the 'history of effects' – is often used to denote this interest, alongside the closely related terms *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (the 'history of reception') and *Auslegungsgeschichte* (the 'history of interpretation'). Rather than looking to the world behind the text – the social context in which it arose – this approach instead concentrates on the world *in front of* the text, that is, on the diverse ways in which the text has been understood and has shaped and influenced aspects of life and culture from art and music to ethics and politics (see, for example, Luz 1990, Knight 2010, and Elliott 2010).

This new approach holds at least two potential attractions in relation to the concerns of this article. One is that rather than assuming that the text has one clear, correct meaning, and attempting to decide upon this, attention is directed instead to the diversity of meanings that has, through history, been derived from this text. Whether such meanings are judged legitimate or not, they doubtless remain the proper object of historical and religious study, as is demonstrated, for example, in Kenneth Newport's studies of the interpretation of the book of Revelation among the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, in the 1980s and 90s (Newport 2000, 197-236; 2006), or Susannah Heschel's study of the use of the Bible by Nazi theologians in Germany (Heschel 2008). In relation to environmental issues, as we shall see, it is particularly relevant to see how Christians at different times and places have interpreted texts like Genesis 1–2 in relation to their particular convictions and concerns. A second attraction is that the focus on the history of interpretation and influence connects biblical studies much more directly with the study of issues and approaches in Christian ethics, from the earliest times right up to the present.

What these developments might mean, and how they might inform classroom study, shall now be illustrated in the following two examples.

Example 1: Genesis 1-2 and environmental stewardship

As is made clear by the AQA GCSE syllabus mentioned above, the opening chapters of Genesis are rightly identified as among the most important and influential texts for understanding Christian attitudes towards the environment. There is, however, something of a danger that these texts will be used simply to show or support the idea that Christians are called to be stewards of the earth when in fact the subject of how the relevant Hebrew words used in Genesis 1-2 should be understood, and whether or not they imply 'stewardship', remains open to debate. For example, *Christianity in Today's World* (2005, 71) cites Genesis 1.27-31 and 2.15, and writes of them: 'According to the creation story human beings are given a special responsibility within creation: to cultivate it and guard it – to be "good stewards"'. Similarly, as noted above, the biblical texts listed in *Philosophy Through Christianity for OCR B GCSE RS* (2009, 115) are intended to illustrate and support the idea that 'Christians believe that they have a duty to care for the earth and its inhabitants'. Such comments simply presume one (debatable) interpretation of these texts: that they commend care for the earth and specifically teach humans to be 'stewards' of the earth. Even in resources where reference is made to dominion in addition to stewardship, for example in *OCR Religious*

Ethics for AS and A2 (Oliphant 2007: 224-225), the two ideas are presented in a somewhat confusing manner, with little attention paid to the textual origins of the differing readings, nor to the interpretational ambiguities that persist today. Although a level of simplification is to some degree inevitable at certain levels of study and in a crowded timetable, there nonetheless remains the risk not only of conveying an historically inaccurate viewpoint but also of missing the opportunity to open up interesting and rich perspectives on the text.

Engagement with these texts – and, indeed, with the topic of stewardship more generally – might be helpfully introduced by reference to the accusation levelled at Christianity by the medieval historian Lynn White (1967). White argues that these creation stories, as interpreted within the Western Christian tradition, are responsible for a worldview in which humans are seen as distinct from the rest of creation, and as endowed with a God-given vocation to exercise dominion over nature for human benefit. Thus, for White, far from teaching people to care for the earth, Christianity ‘bears a huge burden of guilt’ in relation to our contemporary ecological crisis (1206). Many have, of course, rejected White’s argument, but it provides an interesting and provocative place to begin discussions of the Genesis text.

It is also important to point out that the words for ‘steward’ and ‘stewardship’ nowhere appear in the texts: such terms are an interpretation of what ‘subdue’ (*kabash* in the Hebrew) and ‘have dominion’ (*radah*) might be taken to mean, generated largely in response to the context of contemporary environmental concern (Horrell 2010: 35). Such a fact naturally leads to discussions of what the texts of Genesis 1 and 2 could conceivably have meant in their original historical setting – pre-industrial, agrarian, iron-age society – when their authors had no possible conception of humanity’s eventual domination of the planet, nor of the threats that such domination now poses, and also of the history of the interpretation of the texts up to the present day. In the Enlightenment, for example, a time of great optimism about the potential for human achievement through knowledge and science, Genesis 1.26-28 influenced important figures such as Francis Bacon in shaping their sense of the human vocation as focused on the understanding and control of nature for human benefit (see further Bauckham 2002, 128-77; Harrison 1999). By contrast, in recent years, chastened by the prospects of environmental devastation caused by human action, many Christian churches and charities have reinterpreted the same text from Genesis as a mandate for responsible (environmental) stewardship (for example, the Evangelical Environmental Network). As noted above, this form of critical and historical reading is common practice in the study

of literature; biblical texts, we suggest, should not be denied the same interpretative awareness.

Therefore, although stewardship has become a dominant motif in Christian environmental ethics, it is important for students to realise that it is not simply what the Bible ‘says’. Among contemporary Christian groups, the move towards stewardship and environmental care is by no means undisputed, as shall be shown in our second example below. What is more, not all scholars believe that stewardship necessarily provides a good basis for environmental ethics. Clare Palmer (1992, 75), for example, is highly critical of the assumptions woven into the stewardship ideal, writing that ‘Stewardship of the natural world, whether Christian or otherwise...remains profoundly anthropocentric and un-ecological, legitimating and encouraging increased human use of the natural world’. She argues that the notion of stewardship is problematic on biblical, theological, political and ecological grounds, and in so doing provides a provocative way into classroom analysis, critique and debate.

Placing the ‘stewardship’ interpretation of Genesis 1–2 in the context of the contemporary situation, and contrasting it with earlier readings, thus helps to problematise any simplistic sense that these texts teach humans to be good stewards of the earth, or that ‘Christians’, as a generic and unhistoricised category, unquestioningly so believe. Opening up the diverse history of interpretation also creates space for students to discuss what *they* might take the text to mean, and to consider whether they find its ideas (for example, about humanity made in the image of God) to be valuable or damaging ones, given our current environmental challenges.

Example 2: 2 Peter 3 and the future of the earth

Our second example concerns a text that is much less likely to be cited in the context of classroom discussions about Christian views of the environment; indeed, some academic books on the Bible and the environment also leave it aside (Bauckham 2010) or struggle to evade its difficulties (Bouma-Prediger 2001, 77). The reason for this is that it does not give an easy or obviously positive message about responsibility for the environment. Whereas texts such as Matthew 25.31-46 and 1 John 3.17-18 – cited, as we have seen, in AQA GCSE Specification A in relation to world poverty – are relatively uncontroversial (would anyone disagree that it is good to help people in need?), texts such as 2 Peter 3.10-13 hardly allow for any such comfortable or simplistic engagement. However, that the text is difficult or controversial is no good reason for it to be avoided in class; on the contrary, it may constitute a more rewarding and

intriguing focus than texts that seem to offer more straightforward (almost platitudinous) moral lessons in relation to the chosen topic.¹⁰

2 Peter 3:10-13 is a text that opens up questions about eschatology (that is, views of the end-times) and its influence on Christian ethics, specifically regarding the environment. Addressing concern among the early Christians about the apparent and extended delay in the return of Christ, it reveals the imminent expectation that characterised earliest Christianity and that continues to pervade some forms of fundamentalism and evangelicalism today. In this way, such texts can initiate discussion about Christian beliefs to do with life after death and the role of humans on earth, together with their associated implications for attitudes to the environment. If some Christians believe (as they do) that Jesus will soon return, that they will be taken to heaven, and that the earth will be destroyed, does this inevitably mean that they devalue the environment and have no motivation to preserve it? This charge is levelled at evangelical Christians by the conservation biologist David Orr (2005, 291), who argues that ‘belief in the imminence of the end times tends to make evangelicals careless stewards of our forests, soils, wildlife, air, water, seas and climate’.

Many Christians, including many evangelicals, would reject such a charge, insisting that a proper understanding of the Bible should lead Christians to be good environmental stewards, not careless ones (see, for example, Granberg-Michaelson 1987).¹¹ Those concerned to foster environmental care are inclined to argue that texts like 2 Peter 3 do not envisage the destruction of the earth, but rather its transformation – an interpretation inspired by texts such as Revelation 21:5 with its message ‘See, I am making all things new’. If God is engaged in the process of renewing the earth, so the argument goes, this is a task to which God’s people are also called, and one that may be expressed in action to preserve and care for the environment (e.g. Finger 1998; Bouma-Prediger 2001, 77).

However, there are also Christians, especially in the USA, who remain vehemently opposed to environmentalism, which they see as a neo-pagan and satanic heresy, threatening to distract Christians from their true priority in mission and evangelism (seeking to save human individuals). These views of the Bible’s teaching are less evident in academic literature, but they are of considerable influence among contemporary Christian groups, and as such warrant students’ attention, and may well spark lively discussion (see Maier 2010). For example, in a post on 7th August 2008 on his blog ‘Saving Earth One Human at a Time’, Spencer Strickland, opposing the idea that global warming is a threat with which Christians should be concerned, writes that

‘God will one day destroy the earth with the fire of judgment, and this is the warning that Christians must take to those who are lost, in order that they might be saved through the obedience of the Gospel’. As a further example, the American evangelical organisation the Cornwall Alliance, in a film posted on their website, presents a view of environmentalism as a ‘green dragon’ that poses a dangerous threat to true Christianity.

In such groups, scepticism towards climate change and resistance to environmentalism often goes hand in hand with a variety of other stances, including opposition to abortion and gay marriage, preference for minimal government, and freedom for enterprising business (Maier 2010, 257-58). As a result, this topic may lead to discussion among students about how biblical fundamentalism and particular political and ethical beliefs can be closely related. From here, students might consider how far the Bible remains influential in today’s societies, whether they think this influence is a positive one, and the extent to which the (contested) interpretation of biblical texts is important in shaping ethical convictions and related practices.

Conclusions

These brief examples hopefully go some way towards showing how biblical texts and contemporary biblical studies might be fruitfully woven into the study of Christian perspectives on the environment. They also demonstrate the considerable potential of this method of approaching biblical texts to become a significant and stimulating facet of units of study located primarily under an ‘ethics’ or ‘contemporary religion’ heading. In order for such ideas to be developed further, more needs to be done to invite exploration of these themes and to work for their inclusion within syllabuses and curriculum materials – an inclusion which, it might be argued, is already invited by the intentions of the examination board specifications not to be narrowly prescriptive but rather to be open to a wide variety of realisations and fulfilments. Further, additional resources would need to be developed to help teachers to deliver this kind of material, especially given the wide range of topics they have to cover, and the large number of non-specialists teaching RE lessons in schools. One of the recommendations of the Warwick Report (2010, 19) is that ‘teachers, RE advisors, university academics and scholars from the religious traditions’ should do more to collaborate to produce resources that are up-to-date and well informed by current research, yet at the same time relevant and suitable for classroom use. It is hoped that the ‘Beyond Stewardship’ project has gone some way to demonstrating the possibilities of such collaboration,

although much remains to be done if we are to reinvigorate the current rather minimal engagement with biblical texts in studies heavily dominated by philosophy and ethics.¹²

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¹ For example, reaction to the decision of Michael Gove, Secretary for Education, to send to every school in England a copy of the King James Version, to mark the anniversary, raised various questions: Is this book of merely antiquarian interest? Will it be more than a useful door-stop? Are Gove's actions in fact damaging biblical literacy? ('King James Bible: Revelation or Doorstop?' *The Guardian*, 31st May 2012).

² This project was carried out in 2011-2012 and funded by the St Luke's College Foundation. Drawing upon an earlier, collaborative project, run from 2006-2009 at the University of Exeter's Centre for Biblical Studies and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which examined the uses of the Bible in environmental ethics, the project brought together school teachers and academics to develop curriculum materials that enable this academic research to inform and resources RS teaching in schools. Further information about the project, together with the curriculum material produced, is available online at: <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/theology/research/projects/beyondstewardship/>.

³ Throughout this article, RS is used to refer both to specific GCSE and A level courses and to the academic subject itself, while RE is used either when following sources or when referring to the broader area of educational specialism and practice.

⁴ The Department for Education's report 'School Workforce in England: November 2011' found that 55.3% of RE teachers held no relevant post A level qualification.

⁵ Figures based on data from AQA, Edexcel and OCR examination boards.

⁶ This is the case with AQA, Edexcel and ORC examination boards. In 2011, examination entries for the ethics units involving the study of environmental ethics generally comprised between a quarter and a half

of the overall number of units examined by each board for RS qualifications. Full specifications for these qualifications are listed in the references.

⁷ Teachers remain free to choose which religion is studied, although textbooks commonly refer to Christianity.

⁸ GCSE and A level syllabuses, available online, were consulted for the following examination boards: AQA; CCEA; EDEXCEL; OCR; WJEC. Full details of the locations of these syllabuses are listed in the references.

⁹ For example, the textbook *Philosophy Through Christianity for OCR B GCSE Religious Studies* (2009, 110), when discussing animal ethics, includes the perspectives of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church but omits those of Evangelicals and the Orthodox Church. Further, no explanation is given as to why the different viewpoints are held.

¹⁰ Oliphant's (2008) textbook for OCR A level Religious Studies includes a section on 'rapture or end-time theology' in relation to environmental ethics, but only cites one biblical text, Revelation 6:12-14, and again does not refer to different interpretations of the text.

¹¹ There are a number of Christian organisations, such as A Rocha (www.arocha.org), who also support such aims.

¹² We would like to thank Helen John and Karen Walshe for comments on a draft of this article, and the Saint Luke's College Foundation, along with Dick Powell and Mark Chater, for their support of the broader project from which these reflections have emerged.