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# The Formation of the Christian Teacher

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## The Formation of the Christian Teacher: the role of faithfulness to the Bible in conceptualising learning

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### Prologue

“If the King James Bible was good enough for Saint Paul, it’s good enough for me!” This was said to me over forty years ago by the builder employed by my father to lay new paving outside our house. David Edgar also quotes it in his recent play about the production of the King James Bible<sup>1</sup>. According to Edgar it was made by “the proverbial American Baptist” (p.113) and he cites it to highlight the irony of literalist adherence to this sacred text when it is actually the outcome of the very human process of interpretation portrayed in his play. Edgar’s point is to underline the problems there are with treating the King James’ Bible as God’s authoritative word when, in his view, it is a construction of the opinions and attachments of the politically influential of the time. In the struggle between the Protestant/Puritan separatist faction and the more Catholically-minded conservative faction of the Church, Edgar portrays the King James version as the construction of the latter group, exemplified through its employment of words like “priests, church and penance” rather than “elders, congregations and repentance” (pp. 14 & 110). So he concludes that “doctrinally, the King James was not so much steady-as-she-goes as a pretty firm wrench on the tiller back to the traditional religion” (p. 110). As Giles Fraser, writing in the programme for the play, puts it: “The Bible did not fall from heaven in 1611 – it reflected the preoccupations of its age and time. Just as, for good or ill, the way we read the Bible now, from both stage and pulpit, reflects the preoccupations of our own time.” (p. 12)<sup>2</sup>.

In this chapter I will suggest that these insights, deriving from reflection on the production of a Bible that has recently enjoyed its 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary, offer enlightenment in the formation of Christian teachers<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> David Edgar, *Written on the Heart*, London, Nick Hearn Books, 2011. The play was written for performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon as their contribution to the celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King James Bible in 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Giles Fraser, ‘The Word for all Time?’ in *Written on the Heart Programme*, Stratford-upon-Avon, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> In writing this chapter I have drawn on the writings of a number of scholars who take what I deem to be a conservative view of the Bible, who share the conviction that God speaks through it and who consider that to hear Him one has to give careful attention to what are called the two horizons, namely those of the text and of the reader. E.g. Miroslav Volf, *Captive to the word of God*, Grand Rapids, USA: Eerdmans, 2010; Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-centred Hermeneutics*, Nottingham: Apollos, 2006; Kevin, Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in a Text?*, Nottingham: Apollos, 1998; Christopher J. H. Wright’ *The Mission of God; unlocking the Bible’s grand narrative*, Downers grove, USA: IVP, 2006; Craig Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory*, Rome: Pontifical Bible Institute, 1998. See also the work of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar at <http://www.paideiacentre.ca/history-and-ethos-scripture-and-hermeneutics-seminar>.

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## Introduction<sup>4</sup>

There is much that could be written about the formation of Christian teachers<sup>5</sup>. Comment is often made about the need for a well-developed personal spiritual life and particularly for them to be active in prayer for their students<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore there is the expectation that they will involve themselves in specific Christian ministries in school. My own memory of beginning my career was that I assumed that, as a Christian teacher, I would volunteer to support the Christian Union, to attend Christian camps in the holidays, to take assemblies and to teach RE. Then there is the emphasis placed on the Christian teacher's quality of life; the aspiration is to be a person whose behaviour in professional work and towards pupils and colleagues is a living witness to their God. Certainly Neil Hawkes' research on values education underlines the significant impact of the teacher as a role model<sup>7</sup>.

However, as important as these aspects of Christian teachers' lives are<sup>8</sup>, they ignore one fundamentally important dimension, namely their approach to their *professional* role. My question is this: "is it possible for Christians to think and act *Christianly* in the way they conduct themselves *as teachers*?" This would take them beyond praying for their pupils, beyond adding Christian activities to their professional duties, beyond contributing to areas of school life which have a religious focus and beyond being role models in their behaviour and would lead them to ask: "is there something distinctive about the task of teaching itself when undertaken by a Christian?"<sup>9</sup> The question then becomes, I suggest, "what insight is it then that Christian faith brings to *learning*?" If promoting learning defines the professional responsibility of teachers in the way that promoting healing defines the professional responsibility of doctors, then surely the formation of Christian teachers must entail something to do with approaching learning christianly? But the available evidence is that Christian

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<sup>4</sup> I am, in this chapter, making the contestable assumptions that (a) teacher education should be concerned with the formation of a particular type of person rather than simply with the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies and (b) that it is not irrational to look to the Bible as an authority for life. There is not the space to defend either of these assumptions here, but that would be an important, albeit separate, project.

<sup>5</sup> Writing in this way about Christian teachers may feel like treating them as an object of scrutiny in the vein of a science laboratory or law court. This is not intended to be insulting. I am proud to be a Christian teacher myself, who takes biblical authority very seriously. So I am the subject of my own objectification.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Peter F Jensen, 'Is there such a thing as Anglican Education?' in *Journal of Christian Education*, Vol. 52(2), pp. 7-18, 2009

<sup>7</sup> Neil Hawkes, "Values and Quality Teaching at West Kidlington School, UK" in T. Lovat & R. Toomey (eds), *Values Education and Quality Teaching: the double helix effect*. Houten: Netherlands: Springer. 105-120, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> My commitment to them is evidenced by my leadership for six years of the *Transforming Lives* programme which set out to promote teaching as a Christian vocation. Part of that programme involved encouraging churches to nurture Christian teachers in these three areas of their lives. See my publication written with Mark Greene, *Supporting Christians in Education*, London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2008 and [www.transforminglives.org.uk](http://www.transforminglives.org.uk).

<sup>9</sup> These sentences are challenging what is usually called the sacred-secular divide. This is the assumption that the professional process of teaching is essentially neutral and that the faith of the Christian teacher does not impact on that, but only on their extra-curricular activity, their behaviour and in areas of school life that are set apart to deal with matters of religious faith. See my *Doing God in Education*, London: Theos 2010 for an extended discussion.

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teachers do not always find their faith helpful in developing their understanding of their professional role<sup>10</sup>.

## Learning and Authority

In a recent research project Ruth Deakin Crick and Helen Jelfs explored the relationship between spirituality and learning.<sup>11</sup> In their view the key issue is who holds authority in the learning process, distinguishing between what they called “self-authorship” and “external authority for learning”. In the latter, learning is controlled by an outsider like a teacher, whereas in the former learners create “meaningful knowledge” for themselves (p.5). This important insight is what I shall call the pedagogical priority and reflects the widespread concern that learning ought to be enquiry-based. For Deakin Crick and Jelfs, self-authorship represents spiritually-infused learning and resonates with the constructivist approaches to teaching which are influential in modern educational thought. Their conclusion seems to challenge the belief that learning is subject to an external, higher authority as epitomised in the builder’s attitude to the Bible described in my prologue. It seems difficult to see how Christian teachers could both hold to such a belief in an authoritative Bible and accept the concept of self-authorship in learning. Yet the belief that the Bible is authoritative is characteristic of traditional Christian teaching. In the rest of this chapter I will use it as a case study to test the idea that it is possible for a Christian teacher to develop a distinctive understanding of learning<sup>12</sup>.

Concerns about Christians who take a conservative view of the Bible were expressed by Peter Vardy when he wrote: “The problem with the Bible .....as an authority is that so much depends on how the text is read and the interests of the reader” (p. 79)<sup>13</sup>. In his analysis of the difference between good and bad religion, Vardy argues that text-based religions are particularly dangerous (e.g. pp. 98, 173) because they engender what John Hull called “religionism”, an attitude that nurtures rejection, exclusion and tribalism when encountering views different from its own.<sup>14</sup>

But this is not the only problem. Elsewhere Hull observed that “in a changing world, an unchanging theology soon becomes irrelevant”<sup>15</sup>, which means that those that consider that they have access to God’s authoritative, presumably unchanging, Word are either left with a beached theology or have to mount a defensive action to preserve its integrity in the face of new situations and new knowledge. The question then becomes how their duty to fulfil their professional responsibility to promote learning is to be fulfilled when their over-riding loyalty is to transmitting “God’s

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. Hazel Bryan & Lynn Revell, “Performativity, Faith and Professional Identity: Student Religious Education Teachers and the Ambiguities of Objectivity”, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 59(4), pp. 403-419, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Deakin Crick, R and Jelfs, H (2011). *Spirituality, learning and personalisation: exploring the relationship between spiritual development and learning to how to learn. Report for Advisory Board on phase 2*. Bristol: Graduate School of Education, Bristol University.

<sup>12</sup> Other traditions may offer different case studies of the role of authority. For example within the Roman Catholic tradition the authority of the Church would be more central and in Islam the authority of the Qu’ran. The reflections offered in this chapter specifically apply to conservative Protestant approaches to the Bible but hopefully stimulate thinking about authority and learning in other traditions.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Vardy, *Good & Bad Religion*, London: SCM, 2010

<sup>14</sup> Editorial, *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 14(2), 1992, pp. 69-72 and in *Utopian Whispers: moral, religious and spiritual values in schools*, Norwich: Religious and Moral Education Press, 1998, pp. 54-58.

<sup>15</sup> John Hull, *Studies in Religion and Education*, Brighton, Falmer Press, 1984, p.208.

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authoritative word”? Hull’s point is that change and learning are intimately related and teachers who hold to what they perceive as unchanging, authoritative biblical teaching find themselves in an uncomfortable position if required to promote an approach to learning where students develop new insights rather than simply being the passive recipients of fixed and time-less truths.

For Christopher Rowlands and Jonathan Roberts<sup>16</sup> a root problem with conservative approaches to the Bible is the “baton exchange” mentality to teaching and learning which they engender. This consists of the expert exegete discerning the fixed meanings of the text, the theologian systematizing them and then the preacher and teacher applying them to life situations in modern contexts (pp. 35-36), with the learner absorbing the resulting “sound teaching” as the final step in a linear, transmission model of learning. Here the Bible is treated as the “univocal, authoritative text”, the “final word” or “court of appeal” (pp. 13 & 15) and learning is perceived as top-down transmission resulting in the successful reception of authorized, authoritative meanings. In contrast Rowlands and Roberts wish to emphasise the importance of the context within which the text is read as a key influence in shaping what is learnt from the text and of the role of the Spirit in creating new and radical meanings which may transcend the text itself. Furthermore, in the spirit of self-authorship, they assert the desirability of “sinners” interpreting the text for themselves and deny the need for a hierarchy of approved “experts” to ensure the correct meaning is discerned. Indeed they regard such experts as exercising their power in an act of oppression through their control of authoritative textual meanings (p. 23). For them the text is a catalyst for interpretation and a gateway to personal understanding for learners (p. 85), not a source of given meanings to be delivered by authorized teachers irrespective of the receiving context. They therefore criticize those who “consistently return conservative answers from a set of Gospels that are essentially a profoundly radical set of texts” (p. 31) and champion “radical” uses of the Bible, as opposed to conservative uses which seek to discern an intended authoritative meaning. Here is how they describe their position.

The model we advocate.....looks past this hierarchical hermeneutic, and seeks to find ongoing, contingent understandings of Christianity within the messiness and compromised ‘sinfulness’ of everyday life (p. 25)

They no doubt would agree with John Hull when he criticized conservative models of biblical interpretation that claim ownership of authorized meanings saying:

It is as if squatters have taken up residence in this vast mansion, which is really public property, and refuse to let anyone in, unless they become like the people who have already squatted there. (p. 201)<sup>17</sup>

There are therefore concerns that those Christians who treat the Bible as authoritatively God’s word will struggle to embrace the pedagogical priority that learning in the religious domain should accommodate self-authorship and the consequent diversity of interpretation. These concerns are

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Rowlands and Jonathan Roberts, *The Bible for Sinners*, London: SPCK, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> John Hull, “The Bible in the Secular Classroom: An Approach Through the Experience of Loss”, Astley, J & day, D (eds.), *The Contours of Christian Education*, Great Woking: McCrimmons, 1992, pp. 197-215.

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heightened by the fact that increasing numbers of schools are seeking to make teaching and learning distinctively Christian *across the curriculum*, making this an issue for more than RE teachers<sup>18</sup>. It is therefore sometimes suggested that teachers of this persuasion need to experience “deconstruction” and be offered a constructivist alternative to their “baton exchange” model of learning if they are to be able to function with integrity as “learning professionals”.

## The Constructivist Alternative

For many a constructivist understanding of learning is the way forward. Clive Erricker and Michael Grimmitt are influential advocates of constructivism, which they describe as follows:

At root it identifies knowledge as a human construct which is the consequence of the way in which individuals and communities order their experience. As such what is conceived as “knowledge” does not and cannot reflect some “objective”, ontological reality because that is unknowable. Human knowledge, as a consequence, reflects the way in which individuals order and organise their experience of the world, using concepts which fit the situations they encounter. A characteristic of human knowledge...is that it is subject to multiple interpretations or “constructs” and is controversial or problematic by nature (Grimmitt 2000, p. 208, cited in Erricker, 2010, p. 78 and Erricker et al, 2011, p. 59-60)<sup>19</sup>

This quotation clearly embraces the concept of self-authorship in learning and “highlights the necessary involvement of the learner, as a situated and contextualized individual in the construction of learning” (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 225). Their constructivism challenges the instructional models of learning valued by those religious communities who wish education to transmit the content “authorized” by their community. In response to this, Erricker argues for the superiority of what he calls relativism. He is worried by those religions that claim to own the *true* grand narrative because, in so doing, their *faith* becomes an exclusivist and oppressive *ideology* (e.g. Erricker, 2000, p. 10)<sup>20</sup>. Therefore Erricker presents the teacher with a stark choice: “He or she. ....must side with the relativists or accept the ‘native’ view”....and thereby place him- or herself on “one side of the fence or the other” (p. 33). This means accepting that “no narrative does more than serve its own ends for the community for which it proves useful” (p. 34)<sup>21</sup>. This clearly has huge implications for Christian teachers who are “natives” in their approach to the authority of the Bible and are, therefore, apparently on the wrong side of the fence.

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<sup>18</sup> See [www.whatiflearning.co.uk](http://www.whatiflearning.co.uk).

<sup>19</sup> Clive Erricker, 2010, *Religious Education: a conceptual and interdisciplinary approach for secondary level*, Abingdon, David Fulton Books and Clive Erricker, Judith Lowndes and Elaine Bellchambers, 2011, *Primary Religious Education – A New Approach*, Abingdon, Routledge both quoting from Michael Grimmitt, 2000, *Pedagogies of Religious Education*, Great Woking: McCrimmons

<sup>20</sup> Emphases mine. This distinction between faith and ideology is central to Erricker’s thesis. His position is unashamedly non-realist and rests on the distinction between “a believers’ faith and knowledge as an epistemological claim or ideology” (2000, p. 61). For detailed discussion of this point see Clive & Jane Erricker, *Reconstructing Religious, Spiritual and Moral Education*, London: Routledge, 2000 e.g. pp. 65 & 74. See also my review article on this book in *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, Vol. 23(1), April 2002, pp. 107-111.

<sup>21</sup> Clive Erricker, “Shall We Dance? Authority, Representation and Voice: The Place of Spirituality in Religious Education”, *Religious Education*, Vol. 96 (1), 2001, 20-35.

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Grimmitt is more circumspect and merely comments that it would be unfortunate if teachers' personal theological assumptions became "the major determinant" of how they reacted to the challenge of constructivism (2000, p. 225). However neither Grimmitt nor Erricker offers advice to Christians who accept biblical authority as to how they do this, other than to convert to relativism and abandon their conservative convictions. This clearly has significant outcomes for the formation of Christian teachers in implying that one must be relativist in order to be a fully professional teacher, which seems discriminatory. In his later work Erricker acknowledges this problem and, following Grimmitt's lead, distinguishes between his preferred radical technical constructivism and what he calls a broad constructivist approach (2010, pp. 78-79). This, he claims, gives careful attention to the quality of the interaction of the student with the religious content being studied by embracing open enquiry rather than instruction, but does not require acceptance of relativism. However he never offers a non-relativist understanding of religion that resonates with these broad-constructivist, pedagogical aspirations. The question is whether our Bible-believing Christian teachers can appropriate any insights from the broad constructivist approach? My intention is to answer "yes" in the closing section of this chapter. But before that can be done it is necessary to dwell a bit longer with constructivism.

Both Grimmitt and Erricker insist that constructivist insights mean that primary consideration should be given to pedagogy, understood as the interactions that occur between the learner and religious belief. Erricker comments that the danger for pedagogy lies "at the point at which religious content is introduced". It is then that "the process of enquiry breaks down" because the invitation to the pupils to be constructivist is so easily withdrawn with passive reception becoming the required response to encounter with the authorized text. As far as Erricker is concerned it must be remembered that the religious material is only illustrative having "no prescribed role in the enquiry" (2010, p. 85-86). For learning to occur this encounter must enhance the learners' capacity to act independently as an interpreter in relation to knowledge and as a constructor of the meaning and significance of religious "knowledge", rather than assume that their duty is to absorb received knowledge and pre-packaged meanings. Different members of the same class will therefore arrive at different understandings as they creatively construct different interpretations of the religious knowledge that they are encountering. Erricker describes learning as "constructing and voicing our own fictions within a listening community" (2000, p. 9). The key point to note is that the locus of authority in learning is with the student and not the religious text. The key question is to ask whether we have to treat these constructs as "fictions" as the relativists like Erricker require?

What is meant by this "constructing and voicing" in response to text is illustrated in a recent interview with Dominic Dromgoole, the Artistic Director at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, who said, about his childhood, that growing up without religion meant that he needed another "big canonical thing".<sup>22</sup> The works of Shakespeare played this role for him which he described as "emitting generous, warm, brilliant energy". He used them to help him understand himself and the wider world. They acted as a guide to his life. He contrasted this experience to what often happened in schools where it was assumed that certain "priests" (i.e. teachers) understood Shakespeare while the rest, who didn't, sat in dumb silence whilst the priests told them what it meant. Dromgoole was

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<sup>22</sup> See *Lenny Henry on Shakespeare*, broadcast on 1st April 2012 on ITV1

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here advocating a constructivist approach to Shakespeare and condemning a view of the text which sought to transmit authorized and authoritative meanings.

The question is therefore whether, in the formation of Christian teachers, they must be persuaded to abandon traditional approaches to biblical authority. Must they embrace the radical constructivist approach that makes the reader's response the authority, if they are to move beyond transmissionist teaching and be able to embrace the pedagogical priority given to self-authorship in learning? Will they be able to accept the influence of the readers' context in constructing meaning, the necessity of change in religious learning and the legitimacy of a diversity of views emerging?

The rest of this chapter will explore an alternative approach to constructivism and the Bible that embraces the pedagogical priority but without conceding the relativism inherent in radical constructivism. This will draw on Grimmitt's notion of a broad constructivist approach whilst affirming the authority of the biblical text as God's word<sup>23</sup>. It will suggest that the shift necessary for Christian teachers is to move from seeing learning as an exercise in persuasion that draws on the theological discipline of apologetics, to seeing learning as an exercise in promoting insightful interpretation that draws on the theological discipline of hermeneutics<sup>24</sup>. But they do not have to abandon their attachment to the Bible as authoritatively God's word.

## Responsible Hermeneutics and the Formation of the Christian Teacher <sup>25</sup>

In the rest of this chapter, I will argue that the way to support teachers who accept the authority of the Bible in their pursuit of the pedagogical priority is not to deconstruct their faith as Grimmitt and, particularly, Erricker apparently want to do<sup>26</sup>, but rather to call on them to be *faithful* to the Bible in developing an appropriate theology of learning<sup>27</sup>. Alister McGrath invokes the concept of the organic theologian to capture a similar idea<sup>28</sup>. He describes this person as seeing:

...himself (sic) working within the great historical Christian tradition which he makes his own. Even when he feels he must critique the contemporary expressions or applications of that tradition, he will do so from a deep sense of commitment to the community of faith and its distinctive ideas and values.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> I agree with Tom Wright in seeing the phrase "the authority of Scripture" as shorthand for "the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow through Scripture". This is a significant nuance with consequences for how the Bible is viewed. See N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, London: SPCK, 2005, p. 17 & 92.

<sup>24</sup> Note that I am not arguing that apologetics is an illegitimate enterprise per se. Rather I am arguing that it is not the most helpful theological discipline to draw upon for thinking about learning, particularly in schools.

<sup>25</sup> See also my "Curiosity: vice or virtue for the Christian teacher" in *Journal of Education of Christian Belief*, Vol. 9:2, pp. 87-103, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Clive Erricker, "Shall We Dance? Authority, Representation and Voice: The Place of Spirituality in Religious Education", *Religious Education*, Vol. 96 (1), 2001, 20-35.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness (expanded edition)*, Downers Grove, USA: IVP, 2007 and James D Hunter, *To Change the World*, Oxford, OUP, 2010. Both employ the concept of faithfulness as the marker of a Christian approach to life.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer also uses this idea derived from Antonio Gramsci to illuminate his concept of the everyday theologian. See *Everyday Theology*, Grand Rapids, USA: Baker Academic, 2007, p.57.

<sup>29</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Future of Christianity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, p. 152. Richard Briggs develops this notion of faithfulness in a different way by examining the virtues that are desirable in a "virtuous" reader of



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My argument will be that Christian teachers who accept the authority of the Bible and who are organic theologians will desire to be faithful to the Bible and that faithfulness, understood properly, will embrace the pedagogical priority. The problem, I suggest, is that many such Christians interpret faithfulness as obligating them to take a literalist attitude to Scripture, in the vein of my father's builder, which entails a "baton exchange" mentality to learning<sup>30</sup>. This makes outcomes like self-authorship, recognition of the impact of the reader's context, change in view and acceptance of diversity of interpretations problematic for them and means that such teachers think that they must favour a transmissionist or apologetic approach aimed at persuading students to accept a biblical view, rather than adopt one which respects their students as self-authoring interpreters.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it is also common for their critics to assume that faithfulness to biblical authority entails a literalist approach<sup>32</sup>.

However approaches accepting biblical authority do not have to be literalist. The problem is the assumption that literalism and realism are one and the same. But there is a critical distinction, I suggest, to be made between *naïve* realist approaches and those that are *critical* realist. The key distinction is that the latter embrace insights from post-modernism in regard to the subjectivity and situatedness of the knower whereas the former do not. Within British RE, probably the most well-known exponent of critical realism is Andrew Wright<sup>33</sup>. He outlines three defining features of critical realism<sup>34</sup>, which I have listed below and to which I have added some implications for an approach to reading the Bible:

1. Ontological realism - meaning that there is an external truth to be known which is communicated through the text by the human author and which is legitimately viewed as "God's word" and is therefore authoritative. This means that the idea that the text has an intended meaning makes sense.
2. Epistemic relativism – meaning that access to that truth is always mediated through situated, human interpretive activity and therefore entails subjectivity.
3. Judgemental rationality – meaning that discerning the truth conveyed by the text is dependent on critical enquiry into and judgement of the validity of the interpretations made by different people.

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the Old Testament. See *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue*, Grand Rapids, USA: Baker Academic, 2010

<sup>30</sup> The conservative theologian Christopher J.H. Wright calls this a militarist approach. See *The Mission of God: unlocking the Bible's grand narrative*, Downers Grove, USA: IVP, 2006, p.52

<sup>31</sup> I explored the distinction between apologetic and hermeneutical approaches in my paper presented to the Anglican Education Commission in Sydney. In that I drew on the case study undertaken by Elizabeth Green in *An Ethnographic Study of a CTC with a Bible-based Ethos* (Unpublished D.Phil. thesis). Oxford: University of Oxford. See Trevor Cooling, *Distinctively Christian School Leadership: wishful thinking or practical reality? An English Case Study*, Sydney: Anglican Education Commission, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>32</sup>E.g. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London: Black Swan, 2006; Michael Hand, "Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?", *Theory and Research in Education*, 5, 2007, 69-86; Richard Norman, *On Humanism*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. Andrew Wright, *Critical religious education, multiculturalism and the pursuit of truth*, Cardiff, University of Cardiff Press, 2007. NT Wright is an influential theologian who has embraced a critical realist approach. See, for example, his *New Testament and the People of God*, London, SPCK, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> These are sometimes called the holy trinity of critical realism.

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A naïve realist will focus entirely on ontological realism and ignore the other two dimensions of the growth of knowledge. In relation to the Bible they therefore assume that discerning meaning is a straightforward task. “The words say what God means and I understand the words”. The literalist really does believe that God is speaking to him or her directly and unmediated through the text. A critical realist will however understand that there is considerable work to be done in interpreting the text if it is to be “understood correctly”. Unlike the naïve realist, she will also be considerably more cautious about asserting that her interpretation *is* God’s word, recognizing that her inescapable subjectivity and situatedness makes her interpretations of the text contestable. However unlike the radical constructivist, the critical realist will see meaning as flowing from the text to her and not just from her into the text<sup>35</sup>. She will therefore treat the text as of intrinsic worth with an intended meaning and not just as an instrumental catalyst in the construction of her own narrative. She will however recognize that the new questions generated by the new contexts which readers inhabit may well generate new meanings. However, for the purposes of this discussion, the important feature of a critical realist approach to the Bible is the belief that God speaks *authoritatively* through the text and that it is possible to hear His voice if appropriate care is taken. The text, therefore, “remains in control” interrogating and constraining the reader in their role of enquirer (Thiselton 2009, p.8). The reader therefore sits under the text benefitting from its insights, rather than over and against the text adjudicating on its value. In the model that I am proposing, *self-authorship in learning is therefore constrained by the external authority of the text*.<sup>36</sup>

Anthony Thiselton is an influential scholar in the field of biblical interpretation who utilizes a critical realist stance<sup>37</sup>. His concept of *responsible hermeneutics*, I suggest, offers a way forward for Christian teachers that enables them to draw on the helpful insights associated with the pedagogical priority whilst remaining faithful to their own commitment to biblical authority. Thiselton maintains that the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics is that in hermeneutics one asks “exactly what are we doing when we read, understand and apply texts?” (p. 4) whereas there is a tendency to assume that exegesis is a science that enables one to unearth the objective meaning of a text. Rather he argues that every reader approaches the text with a “pre-understanding”, which he describes as “an initial and provisional stage in the journey towards understanding something more fully” (p.12). So no-one reads a text totally “objectively” in the naïve realist sense. There is always a subjective process of constructing meaning which draws on one’s worldview, reflects one’s cultural situatedness and often serves one’s own interests. For many scholars this engenders what is called a *hermeneutics of suspicion* and is exemplified in Grimmitt’s and Erricker’s approach to institutional religions and their priests. In a sentence this regards official interpretations as instruments of power with which to oppress one’s opponents by the imposition of the priests’ pre-understandings. This is what David Edgar’s play was all about and was also exemplified in the way that the white South African Dutch Reformed Church found the justification for apartheid in the text of their Bible.

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<sup>35</sup> In theological discussions of the interpretation of biblical text, the radical constructivist position taken by Erricker, and less so by Grimmitt, reflects what would be called reader-response theory.

<sup>36</sup> See Christopher J.H. Wright, 2006 pp. 68-69 for a discussion of this point using the metaphor of the London Underground transport system map. Richard Briggs describes this as a hermeneutics of trust in *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue*, Grand Rapids, USA: Baker Academic, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, London: SPCK, 2009. He has written many other volumes on the subject. This is selected as his most recent overview and distillation of his thinking.

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Thiselton is hesitant about the hermeneutics of suspicion, not because it does not offer a valid insight, but rather, because, it too often takes cynicism about motive and scepticism about objectivity as normative, rather than faithfulness to and trust in the text. His view is that the existence of pre-understanding is simply a fact of life, namely that we all interpret from somewhere; he argues that this is not inherently threatening to the enterprise of discovering truth, but it does have to be taken into account.

Thiselton's notion of responsible hermeneutics leads, I suggest, to seeing the importance of holding two activities in balance, which together enable the learner to participate in the oft-discussed hermeneutical circle.<sup>38</sup> These are the hermeneutics of retrieval whereby the interpreter seeks to discern the intended meaning of the text through critical study of its background, language, symbols, metaphors, meanings and narratives and a moderated hermeneutics of suspicion where the pre-understanding and interests of the reader and his/her shaping community/ies are examined (2009, p. 19). Central to responsible hermeneutics is that the conclusions reached by interpreters on the basis of their pre-understandings are ultimately constrained by the results of the retrieval process. The text cannot be made to mean simply anything<sup>39</sup>.

Responsible hermeneutics reflects the faithfulness to the Bible that I am advocating. This idea is skilfully captured in the New Testament theologian NT Wright's widely-cited analogy where he compares living under the authority of the biblical text with the task of completing a newly discovered but unfinished Shakespeare play<sup>40</sup>. Wright asks us to imagine how experienced Shakespearean actors would go about this task. He suggests two significant insights. First, they would seek to be faithful to the thrust of the narrative of the unfinished play and to Shakespeare's wider corpus of writing, which acts as an authority. Their suggested completion of the play must be "justifiably Shakespearian", a concept which acts as an authoritative constraint on the actors' creativity<sup>41</sup>. Second, they would need to be creative in writing the new text and this creativity would inevitably reflect their own situated, contextual setting and personal interests. Wright argues that Christians seeking to live their lives under the authority of Scripture face a similar task to these

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<sup>38</sup> This is better understood as a spiral according to Thiselton because this metaphor acknowledges that there is growth in understanding as text and reader interact with each other (2009, p. 15). Erricker uses the hermeneutical circle in his recent work on a conceptual approach to RE, but it is unclear whether he would accept the spiral metaphor which would imply the possibility of growth in knowledge. See Erricker 2010 and 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *Can the Bible Mean Whatever We Want It to Mean?* Chester: Chester Academic Press, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> See NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, London: SPCK, 1992, pp. 139-143. See, for examples of citations, Brian Walsh & J Richard Middleton, *Truth is stranger than it used to be*, London: SPCK, 1995, Craig Bartholomew & Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: finding our place in the biblical story*, Grand Rapids, USA: Baker Academic, 2004 and Rowlands & Roberts (2008). Note my description here is truncated and thereby misses many of the nuances of Wright's original and the subsequent discussion of it.

<sup>41</sup> The authority of the text does not then primarily reside in individual propositions, but in the overall narrative or storyline. Many would say that the text of the Bible as a whole should be interpreted through the lens of the Christian gospel. The Bible is therefore viewed as a coherent sacred text with a unified message which acts as the means of God's revelation. However within this unified message there are many discernible themes or theologies, which can illuminate the readers understanding, but over-reliance on one can distort the text by ignoring the others.

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Shakespearean actors. The analogy affirms acceptance of the Bible as authoritatively God's word, but replaces the literalist, militaristic conception of unthinking obedience to commands with faithfulness to the Bible as a shaping narrative<sup>42</sup>. It requires Christians to show creativity if they really are to live under the authority of their shaping text. Wright calls it "improvising".<sup>43</sup> In other words it entails a constructivist, learning relationship with the text in order to be faithful to its authority<sup>44</sup>. The notion of responsible hermeneutics is therefore I suggest a helpful model for illuminating Deakin Crick's and Jelfs' concept of self-authorship which honours the pedagogical priority.

## Conclusion

The pedagogical priority means that the Christian teacher ought to pay attention to the quality of the interaction between the religious content and the student. The radical constructivist approach of Grimmitt and, particularly, Erricker problematizes the concept of biblical authority in this relationship. In contrast, I have argued that if by self-authorship, we mean embracing creativity, change and diversity as products of interpreting biblical texts, then there is no need to abandon the concept of the Bible as an authority. Rather if we accept the notion of responsible hermeneutics as outlined by Thiselton and reflected in NT Wright's work, then there is creative harmony between the pedagogical priority and biblical authority. Learning then is not just self-authoring, but self-authoring whilst respecting the constraining authority of the biblical text. Neither is learning a process of "baton exchange", but rather creative living in the light of the text.

I have argued that Christian teachers who accept biblical authority do not need, therefore, to be deconstructed if they are to honour the pedagogical priority associated with constructivist theories of learning. Rather they should be pointed to the hermeneutical scholarship which offers an alternative model of faithfulness and accountability to Scriptural authority from the literalist and transmissionist models that are so often assumed to be required. In this way their professional instinct that self-authorship and personal response is a good thing is honoured without compromise to their personal commitment to biblical authority. This will enable Christian teachers to teach both in a pedagogically effective way and with personal integrity. It may even change their own relationship with the Bible for the better.

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<sup>42</sup> See also Christopher Wright "The ethical authority of biblical social vision" in *Jubilee Manifesto; a framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform*, edited by Michael Schulter & John Ashcroft, Nottingham: IVP, 2005, pp. 67-81.

<sup>43</sup> NT Wright (2005, pp. 91-93). Vanhoozer describes this as creating "forms of life that correspond to the biblical text in contemporary contexts" (2007, p. 55).

<sup>44</sup> Rowlands & Roberts approve of Wright's metaphor except that they object to his suggestion that "experts" are required to read the text, interpreting this as the imposition of a hierarchically mandated meaning and disenfranchising "sinners" from reading the text for themselves (see 2008, pp. 8 & 25). This is to misunderstand Wright's point which is not to argue for authoritative interpretation by priests who tell the laity what it means, but rather to emphasise that a hermeneutics of retrieval requires careful listening supported by the sound scholarship of those experienced in working with the texts. So it emphasises that interpreting text is scholarly work that is accountable to the text and carried on in community and not only the creative work of individuals as implied in radical reader-response theory.