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Afterword: the Bible and the Laity in Long-Term Perspective

Sabrina Corbellini

The present volume is the result of a significant change in the research landscape on Bible, vernacular translations and laity in a timeframe that could be described as the 'long sixteenth century'. Spanning from the last decades of the fifteenth century to the first half of the seventeenth century, this period encompasses some of the most significant transformations in the cultural history of Europe: humanism, the rediscovery of classical languages and a redefinition of the value of the vernacular, dramatic changes in the production and distribution of books (printing press and on-going professionalization in book production and distribution), a substantial rise in literacy and accessibility of textual material.¹ These transformations are moreover taking place in a Europe growing towards an enduring confessional divide between, generally speaking, a Catholic South and a Protestant North. Although primarily concerning the religious landscape, the process of religious fragmentation of Europe involves at least three cultural aspects that are at the very core of the contributions to this volume: the discussion on the accessibility of the biblical text for lay people, the non-professional users of the Holy Writ; the discussion on the use of Latin or vernacular in the transmission of the biblical text;² and the actual

- 1 These themes have been central in the activities of COST (Collaboration in Science and Technology) Action IS 1301 'New Communities of Interpretation. Contexts, Strategies and Processes of Religious Transformation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe' (2013–2017). Supported by the EU Framework Programme Horizon 2020, COST promotes the creation of European collaborative research networks. Action IS 1301 consisted of about 150 researchers from 25 European countries. The Action is chaired by Sabrina Corbellini (University of Groningen, the Netherlands) and John Thompson (Queen's University Belfast, UK).
- 2 In traditional research Protestant movements are connected with the promotion of the vernacular, while the Catholic Church is associated with a nearly exclusive focus on Latin. On this paradigmatic view on the Reformation movement, see Gow A.C., "Challenging the Protestant Paradigm: Bible Reading in Lay and Urban Contexts of the Late Middle Ages", in Heffernan Th.J. – Burnan Th.E. (eds.), *Scripture and Pluralism. Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 123 (Leiden – Boston: 2005) 161–192; Gow A.C., "The Contested History of a Book: the German

practices of reading the biblical text (silent, oral and aural reading; individual and group reading; mediated and unmediated access to the text).³

Although these cultural transformations have been much discussed topics in research agendas over the last twenty years, research has often been conducted along confessional and national lines and has reinforced differences and specificities instead of stressing patterns and similarities across different regions and languages.⁴ Especially in the case of reconstruction of the passage from Latin (and successively Hebrew and Greek) to vernacular languages, the process of translation, of the lack thereof, has often been interpreted as symbolic for the process of formation of national linguistic identities and for the strive towards intellectual freedom, democracy and participation in social, cultural and political life. In fact, the availability and the circulation of the biblical text, especially in the vernacular, have been often evaluated as indicative of a transformation towards modernity and scientific progress: literacy, cultural participation and innovation are traditionally strictly connected with the transmission of the biblical text. Essential for unleashing the 'transformative' power of the biblical text is the dissemination of the text among non-professional users, i.e. those not belonging to ecclesiastical hierarchy (in any possible confessional declination of the concept) and the development of a critical attitude towards the text, through a process of study, interpretation and adaptation. This transformation has however often been geographically restricted to Protestant countries⁵ and chronologically placed in the sixteenth century, under influence of the reformation movement. As a matter of fact, the traditional triad 'late medieval Church – accessibility to lay people – heterodoxy' is for example reiterated in the recent *New Cambridge History of the Bible*:

Bible of the Later Middle Ages and the Reformation in Legend, Ideology and Scholarship", *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9 (2009) 1–37.

- 3 On these transformations, see Corbellini S. – Hoogvliet M. – Ramakers B. (eds.), *Discovering the Riches of the Word. Religious Reading in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Intersections 38 (Leiden – Boston: 2015).
- 4 See for example Marsden R. – Matter E.A. (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible. From 600 to 1450* (Cambridge: 2012); Cameron E. (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible. From 1450 to 1750* (Cambridge: 2016).
- 5 The titles of two volumes by the Italian historian Gigliola Fragnito is revealing for evaluation of the absence of the biblical text in the Italian Peninsula: *La Bibbia al rogo. La censura ecclesiastica e i volgarizzamenti della Scrittura (1471–1605)* (Bologna: 1997), ('The Bible to the Stake. Ecclesiastic Censorship and the Translations of the Scriptures. 1471–1605'); *Proibito capire. La Chiesa e il volgare nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: 2005), ('Forbidden to Understand. The Church and the Vernacular in Early Modern [Italy]'). The classicist Luciano Canfora reflects in a recent study on the consequences of the difficult relation between the Church of Rome and philological approach to the biblical text; see Canfora L., *Filologia e libertà. La più ever-siva delle discipline, l'indipendenza di pensiero e il diritto alla verità* (Milan: 2008).

The Bible as focus of the Christian faith played, of course, a prominent role in the laity's religious education. Nevertheless, outright translations of the Bible, as a whole or in parts, were not widespread and were often seen as quite problematic because of the fears of 'heresy'. [...] The vernacular literacy of laypeople – especially with regard to the Bible and its translations – aroused suspicion among clerics and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, who feared to lose control over the belief-systems of their flocks. This was certainly not without reason. Unauthorised interpretations of biblical texts by laypeople were often connected with heterodox propositions which were vehemently opposed by the representatives of the church. They made attempts to bar unauthorised persons from access to the Bible by prohibiting or hindering translations into the vernaculars, since they were well aware that the growing literacy of laypeople implied also a growing interest in reading scripture themselves without ecclesiastical mediation.⁶

The key role played by the Bible in European cultural, political and scientific life cannot be overestimated, as it becomes clear from the studies presented in this volume. The contributors and the editors make clear to what extent the Bible plays a pivotal role in late medieval and early modern society. It was a book of reference, an encyclopaedia, a scientific book, a textbook for philosophers and natural historians and starting point for developing legal principles and government theories. It is essential for understanding early modern medical writings and instrumental in the composition of writing in defence of the dignity of women in early modern Italy. In this broad process of analysis, the contributors take moreover a good distance from a monolithic view of the Bible as one single book that is only effective when transmitted in its completeness. They make clear that the use and the practice of the Bible in early modern Europe is essentially a process of selective readership, of careful choice of passages and of focus on specific facets. The process of selection, ranging from a specific focus on the Gospels or on the Passion narratives to short Bible citation in medical treatises, does not moreover implies taking a distance from 'the book' as a whole. Functioning as a *pars pro toto*, the selected passages trigger in both writers and readers a process of 'reconstitution' of the complete text and creation of a shared ground of prayer, reflection and scientific and political discussion. Thinking in terms of European patterns, it constituted a connecting thread in a politically and religiously fragmented early

6 Ehrenscheidtner M.-L., "Literacy and the Bible", in Marsden R. – Matter E.A. (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible. From 600 to 1450* (Cambridge: 2012) 704–721.

modern world, a common background and starting point for study and discussion across confessional divides and political boundaries. It was moreover a weapon and instrument of conversion in the process of European expansion, taking place at the very same moment processes of religious redefinition were occurring across Europe and reinforcing processes of (re)formation of religious identities.⁷

The combination of a broad European perspective (virtually encompassing all European territory) with a focus on the use of the Bible by the late medieval and early modern laity that is at the very core of the volume touches indeed on one of the central issues of early modern cultural history. Most importantly, it combines the analysis of the production and circulation of early modern Bibles in Europe with a focus on interpretation, reading techniques, educational practices and science. In first instance, it contributes to a significant expansion of the traditional research corpus on early modern Bible by presenting new and more accurate overview of Bible translations in Italy, France and in the 'periphery of Europe'. Élise Boillet describes in her contribution "For Early Modern Printed Biblical Literature in Italian: Lay Authorship and Readership" to what extent the laity has participated in the dissemination of biblical material and stresses how biblical material in Italian vernacular (including not only translations, but also commentaries, anthologies, summaries, paraphrases, rewritings, sermons, plays) has been the result of far-going forms of collaboration between members of the laity and the clergy. Drawing from the results of the forthcoming *Repertorio di letteratura biblica in italiano a stampa (ca 1462–1650)*, Boillet states that the question of lay readings of the Bible must be approached 'not only from the point of view of the readership of printed biblical literature in Italian, but also from that of its authorship, as the writers, that is the authors, the translators and the editors, read, meditated and studied the Bible and other texts derived from the Bible before producing new printed biblical books.' Contribution of laypeople to the 'biblical world in Italian vernacular' goes thus even further than reading and appropriating the biblical text, as lay author seems to be actively involved in the dissemination of biblical contents, often in collaboration with members of the clergy. Hoogvliet significantly opens up the traditional definition of 'the Bible' or 'the Gospels' by focusing on Lives of Christ and Passion narratives in late medieval and early modern France, a particular rich text group that is virtually absent from overviews of French Bible translations. She affirms that 'lives of Christ and Passion stories offered readers the Gospel narrative in a format designed for specific reading practices:

7 Cervantes F., "The Bible in European colonial thought c. 1450–1750", in Cameron E. (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible. From 1450–1750* (Cambridge: 2016) 805–827.

for purposes of basic instruction, for devotional exercises, which helped the reader to imagine being present during Christ's life and Passion, for reading during specific moments of the liturgical year, and for helping the reader to follow Christ by imitating the humility of his human life'. These works functioned thus as mirrors, instructing the readers to follow models of humility and evangelical simplicity. Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin discusses vernacular Bible translations in three peripheral regions in Europe: Hungary, Gaelic Ireland and Croatia. He discusses a process that is seldom discussed in biblical scholarship: the fact that 'in much of Europe Catholic reformers were forced to acknowledge that the competition from Protestant versions of Scriptures meant that the Church of Rome had to embrace the lesser evil of authorised Catholic vernacular editions of the Bible'. This reveals a much more complex picture of resistance to and promotion of dissemination of vernacular Bibles, a process of negotiation and external pressures interacting with the traditional confessional identities. The complexity emerging from the reconstruction of the production of Bible translations in the medieval and early modern Low Countries by Wim François illustrates to what extent conventional linguistic, national and geographical boundaries are inadequate for framing the multi-confessional religious situation. The research shows also that biblical materials were lent across confessional borders, challenging thus fixed processes of categorisation.

Secondly, the image emerging from the studies in *Lay Readings of the Bible in Early Modern Europe* is that of the omnipresence of the biblical text, which is even made clear by references to 'irreligious uses of the Bible' in manifestations of libertinage and free-thinking, clearly separated from the world of religion and devotion. Merging discussion of religious and devotional uses with non-religious and even critical and dissenting attitudes, the volume offers a fresh view and new perspectives on biblical literacy.⁸ Although not systematically stressed in the introduction and in the contributions, one of the connecting threads of the volume is moreover the agency of the laity in the process of translation, production, dissemination and transformation of the biblical text, either in Latin or in the vernacular. The 'erosion of the [clerical] monopoly' that had started in the fifteenth century reached its acme in the course of the sixteenth century maintaining its cultural relevance during the early modern

8 With respect to this issue the present volume presents a new and fresh approach when compared to recent volumes on the connection between Bible and laity in early modern Europe. See for example Lamberigts M. – Hollander A.A. den (eds.), *Lay Bibles in Europe, 1450–1800* (Leuven: 2006) and François W. – Hollander A.A. den (eds.), *'Wading Lambs and Swimming Elephants': The Bible for the Laity and Theologians in Late Medieval and Early Modern Era* (Leuven: 2012).

period, in spite of clerical counteroffensives.⁹ This is an essential and pivotal element in research on late medieval and early modern religious textual culture: the switch from a mere textual and philological approach to a more 'social' study of the production and dissemination of biblical material that considers the circulation and the fruition of the biblical text as the result of a process of negotiation. The number of agents is laid bare in the contributions: printers, scribes, translators, buyers, sellers, readers, listeners, performers, teachers, pupils, philosophers, astronomers, libertines, free-thinkers, medical doctors, lay and religious from virtually every confessional group. The innovative focus on agency and the performative power of the laity allows also the clear European scope of the volume: instead of focusing on single languages and translation techniques, the contributions take their start from the intrinsic dynamics that typify early modern Europe.

A third aspect that deserves to be stressed is the intrinsic ethical dimension of the dissemination of the Bible, a point that merits to be put high in the future research agenda on pre-modern European religious culture. While on the one hand it is essential to study the production and the dissemination of biblical literature in the context of cultural and literary transformation and to evaluate it as part of more general cultural, political and social transformations, it is also imperative that the role of the laity in this process is investigated in terms of ethics and moral behaviour. The abundance of biblical literature implies also the moral obligation to engage in a process of appropriation and internalisation of the biblical message. The Franciscan preacher Bernardino da Feltre (1493) is very clear on this issue:

What does it mean, such an abundance of books filling every town and every house? Once it was forbidden to translate the Bible into vernacular and now it is put into print in the vernacular. What would this mean other than that God in these dark and miserable times has given us so much light that it is not possible to make allowances for yourself? All Christians cannot be excused because we have access to so much knowledge, or at least we are supposed to. If from the legal point of view, there is no difference between knowing, having to know and being possible to know, who can excuse himself with so many books, preachers, confessors, religious men and laws?¹⁰

9 The term 'erosion of a monopoly' is based on Williams-Krapp W., "The erosion of a monopoly: German Religious Literature in the Fifteenth-Century", in Blumenfeld-Kosinski R. – Robertson D. – Bradley Warren N. (eds.), *The Vernacular Spirit. Essays on Medieval Religious Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2002) 239–259.

10 The excerpt from the sermon by Bernardino da Feltre is cited by Frajese, V., *Nascita dell'Indice. La censura ecclesiastica dal Rinascimento alla Controriforma* (Brescia: 2008) 15–16:

In his words, knowledge of the Bible should be defined as by law: availability implies a serious engagement. This clear call for taking responsibilities to ignite a process of personal and social religious acculturation could be the starting point for opening up new research avenues: how did individuals and groups of readers, users, translators and performers perceive their role in a seemingly politically, religiously and socially fragmented Europe? How did they reflect on their role of go-betweens? And how did they cope with changing views about the possibilities and the rules of access to the biblical text? Which strategies were developed in this 'long sixteenth century' in order to keep 'Jonas' sign' visible, readable and audible?

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'Che cosa vuol dire tanta abbondanza di libri di cui è ricolma ogni città e casa? Un tempo era proibito che mai la Bibbia venisse redatta in volgare e tuttavia adesso è stampata in volgare. Che cosa vuol dire questo se non che Iddio, in questi tempi infelicissimi e oscurati, ha fatto a tal punto luce che nessuno può addire scuse? I cristiani non saranno scusabili dal momento che abbiamo una maggior conoscenza, o almeno siamo tenuti ad averla. Dal momento che, secondo il diritto, stanno sullo stesso piano il sapere, il dover sapere e il poter facilmente sapere, chi può addurre scuse con tanta abbondanza di libri, di predicatori, di confessori, di religiosi e di leggi?'. See also Corbellini S. – Van Duijn M. – Folkerts S. – Hoogvliet M., "Challenging the Paradigms: Holy Writ and Lay Readers in Late Medieval Europe", *Church History and Religious Culture* 93 (2013) 171–188, at 177.

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