RaY

Research at the University of York St John

Running head: BIBLICAL LITERALISM

FACTORS SHAPING BIBLICAL LITERALISM: A STUDY AMONG ANGLICAN LAITY

Andrew Village

Director of the Centre for Ministry Studies

Department of Theology and Religious Studies,

University of Wales,

Bangor,

Gwynedd LL57 2DG.

Email: a.village@bangor.ac.uk

FACTORS SHAPING BIBLICAL LITERALISM: A STUDY AMONG ANGLICAN LAITY

ABSTRACT *Biblical literalism was assessed among 404 adult Anglicans from a variety of church traditions using a summated rating scale based on 10 items referring to events in the bible. The literalism scale showed high internal reliability (α = .92) and scores were highest (i.e. most literal) in Evangelical churches, intermediate in Broad churches and lowest in Anglo-catholic churches. Decisions about whether or not an event happened appeared to be based on a combination of general doctrinal belief about the bible, the plausibility of the event and the doctrinal weight associated with it. A number of different factors predicted the degree of literalism, including general educational experience, experience of theological education at certificate level or higher, charismatic experience and the frequency of reading the bible. Both general and specifically theological higher education seemed to reduce literalism in Anglo-catholic and Broad churches, but this was not so among Evangelicals, who maintained high levels of literalism whatever their educational experience.*

Introduction

The rise of biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century led to a widespread questioning of the veracity of many parts of the bible. In particular, accounts of miraculous events or healing were seen to be at odds with modern scientific understanding. Rudolf Bultmann (1972) attempted to make the bible comprehensible to 'modern' people by demythologising those parts that seemed to be based on an outdated worldview. New Testament miracles were reinterpreted as symbolic or didactic myth that pointed to the underlying belief of the early church, not to events that actually happened. His programme was highly influential within the discipline of biblical historical criticism, though it was strongly opposed by some (Nineham, 1990).

Academic study of the bible has largely moved on from the historical criticism of the mid to late twentieth century. Post-modern approaches to history, epistemology and hermeneutics have resulted in a wide range of approaches to academic biblical interpretation (Thiselton, 1992; Watson, 1994; Clines, 1997; Fowl, 1998), and there is generally little debate in universities about the historicity of biblical miracles (Hartlich, 1980:7-8). Although Francis Watson (1997) made the case for a return to a more historical (and less narrative) approach to the New Testament, even he conceded that history recorded in the gospels is not pure description but narrative history written in the context of the 'historic Christ-event' (Watson, 1997:52). At the other end of the scale, Don Cupitt (1997) argued that all religion is entirely a mythical representation of the world of language: there is nothing 'behind' religious language. Seen in this light, the historicity of biblical events is an irrelevance.

This is not so in the church, where there has been strong reaction against suggestions that key events such as creation, divine incarnation and resurrection may not have happened as written. For example, when David Jenkins was made Bishop of Durham in 1984 he voiced opinions about the resurrection that were widely held by scholarly critics, but which caused an outcry and debate within and beyond the Church of England (Dyson, 1985; Harrison, 1985). For other events there is greater diversity of opinion, and no clear consensus on the dividing line between historical and fictional event. The ambiguity about literalism within the church is evident in the way that some Evangelical scholars write about the historicity of biblical events. While nearly all would uphold as historical fact the key events in the life of Christ, they vary in their stance on the historicity of, say, the Genesis account of creation. In general, there is more willingness to use non-literal interpretation of Genesis when addressing an academic audience (e.g. Goldingay, 1994:69) than a popular one (e.g. McCartney & Clayton, 1994:212; Travis, 1994:15). This implies a tacit assumption that more highly educated readers are less likely to interpret the bible literally. Is this so?

There has been little effort by the academy to study in detail what lay people believe about the bible (Clines, 1997). Sociologists have used biblical literalism to identify particular socio-religious groups, especially in connection with the rise of the political right wing in the USA in the 1980s (Wilcox, 1992; Carpenter, 1997). Ammerman (1982) suggested that belief in the historicity of the Creation story would distinguish Fundamentalist Christians from Evangelicals, but a single question seemed to be too narrow a focus (Dixon, Jones & Lowery, 1992). Smidt (1989) reviewed the questions used in various American surveys on Christian belief and found that the exact phrasing of questions about the bible had important consequences for interpreting the

results. Despite this, most surveys have used answers to single questions to assess the extent of belief in biblical literalism or inerrancy. Using a range of events to assess literalism, rather than a single test question, should enable a more nuanced definition than has hitherto been possible. Fundamentalists tend to believe that the whole of the bible is literally true, but they are only a small proportion of Christian believers.

Village (in press a) used a 12-tem scale to assess a variety of beliefs about the bible including inerrancy, exclusivity and authority. Among Anglican laity there was a wide range of beliefs, from conservative to liberal, with many people holding beliefs that did not fall easily into either category. This suggests that biblical literalism may not be an 'all or nothing' belief that can easily be assessed by a single question. While the majority of lay Christians might uphold the literal truth of the 'major miracles' associated with the life of Jesus (e.g. incarnation, virgin birth, resurrection), there may be subtle but important differences in how they interpret other biblical events, miracles and stories. Literalism may be indiscriminate, so that all events and stories are assumed to have actually happened, or it may depend on the content of what is being described.

Literalism may be related to a number of different factors. Almost by definition, literalism would be expected to be higher among Evangelical Christians than others. Are there other specific factors than can predict the extent of literalism within particular traditions?   If literalism is related to religiosity in general, it might be might be associated with groups that tend to be more religiously inclined, such as women (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Maltby, 1994; Miller & Hoffmann, 1995), the elderly

(Maltby & Lewis, 1997; Argue, Johnson & White, 1999) and those with lower educational experience (Feldman, 1969; Petersen, 1994).

Education is likely to be a key factor in shaping literal belief in the bible because the aim of much higher education is to expose students to the sort of critical thinking that has influenced academic biblical studies. Education might be general, or might be specifically 'theological' (which may range from bible study courses to broader theological studies). For some Christians, critical scholarship challenges core beliefs about the bible, and they may be less susceptible to changing beliefs than those who hold more liberal beliefs anyway.

The aim of this paper is to examine literalism among churchgoers from a variety of Anglican traditions within the Church of England. This denomination is a useful one in which to study literal beliefs because it embraces a wide range of congregations from liberal Catholic to conservative Evangelical (Hylson-Smith, 1989; Hylson-Smith, 1993; Baker, 1996; Furlong, 2000). Questionnaire items were produced after 26 open-ended interviews with Church of England members around Northampton, England (Village, 2003). Items were refined in three pilot studies and the final sample was from churches in central and southern England. Churches were divided *a priori* according to tradition as given by incumbents and were grouped as Evangelical, Anglo-catholic or Broad church. General beliefs about the bible and miraculous healing in the study sample are reported elsewhere (Village, in press a; in press b).

Method

Sample

Questionnaires were sent to eleven different Anglican churches classified *a priori* according to tradition as indicated by incumbents. Roughly equal numbers of Anglo-catholic, Evangelical and Broad churches were included. Broad churches were those described as 'traditional Anglican' or 'middle of the road' by incumbents and parishioners, and were in small towns with only one Anglican parish. The 404 questionnaires returned came from a sample that spanned much of the variation found in the Church of England but one that contained more middle-aged people, more frequent church attendees and more people with higher degrees than expected from the church at large (see Village, in press a).

Instruments

A summated rating scale (Likert, 1932; Spector, 1992) was created to assess literalism with respect to a range of familiar bible passages. Ten short, Likert-type items drawn from the Old and New Testaments were presented randomly and introduced with the instruction: *'Say if you think that a particular bible event actually happened, or whether you think it is a fictional story'.* Possible responses were 'definitely happened', 'probably happened', 'not certain', 'probably a story' or 'definitely a story'. Responses were numerically coded so that a high score indicated a more literal belief.

The questionnaire also assessed gender, age (to the nearest decade), bible reading frequency (1 = hardly ever; 2 = few times a year; 3 = few times a month; 4 = more than once a week) and church attendance (1 = monthly or less; 2 = twice a month; 3 =

once a week; 4 = more than once a week). There were two questions on educational

experience: the first assessed general education level (0 = no formal qualifications to

4 = postgraduate qualification). A second open question asked for a description any

theological or biblical training. Responses to this question were used to identify

participants who had experienced higher education in theology or biblical studies (that

is, certificate, diploma or degree-level), those who had experienced church or para-

church based training and those who had experienced neither. Charismatic experience

was assessed by a 5-item scale based on speaking in tongues, words of prophecy,

dreams or visions, laying hands on people and God speaking directly through the

bible (Village, in press b).

Data analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS for Windows 12.0 (SPSS, 2003). The literalism scale

was produced using a combination of factor analysis (McKennell, 1970; Kim &

Mueller, 1978 a; 1978 b) and reliability analysis (Cronbach, 1951). Items were

included in the scale if they had a high loading on a factor and if their removal from

the scale would significantly lower the Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Spector, 1992;

Norusis, 1994). Mean scores for individual items were used to assess the degree of

literal belief in particular events within the sample population, a high score indicating

more literal belief than a low one. The sum of individual item scores was used as a

single measure of biblical literalism that ranged from 10 (all items recorded as

'definitely story') to 50 (all items recoded as 'definitely happened').

Analysis of variance was based on the general linear model procedure in SPSS, which

allowed categorical factors and continuous covariates to be included in the same

model. All independent variables were initially included, but were removed step-wise

until only significant predictors remained. The model was restricted to main effects in the first instance due to the large number of independent variables in the initial model. Significant predictors were then analysed separately to explore variation between church traditions.

Results

Literalism scale

The 10 items (Table I) formed a single factor on factor analysis and the resulting literalism scale had high internal reliability as measured by Cronbach's alpha (.92). Mean individual item scores were higher for New Testament items ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.9$) than Old Testament ones ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.0$, paired $t = 17.4$, $df = 403$, $p < .001$). New Testament items were all treated as more literal, apart from the feeding of the five thousand, which rated lower than David and Goliath and the plagues of Egypt. The highest scoring item referred to the virgin birth, an event associated with a central doctrine of the Christian faith.

Factors affecting literalism: initial analyses

Mean literalism scores were highest in Evangelical churches (43.0, $SD = 6.8$, $n = 201$), intermediate in Broad churches (36.3, $SD = 8.7$, $n = 109$), and lowest in Anglo-catholic churches (32.7, $SD = 8.2$, $n = 94$, $F(401,2) = 65.69$, $p < 0.001$). Taking traditions together, more literal interpretation (higher literalism score) was also associated with more frequent charismatic experience ($r = .51$, $df = 399$, $p < 0.01$), and with more frequent bible reading ($r = .47$, $df = 399$, $p < 0.01$). Literalism was higher among women ($M = 39.8$, $SD = 8.0$, $n = 250$) than among men ($M = 37.2$, SD

= 9.9, n = 150, $F(399, 1)$ = 7.95, $p <$ 0.01), and negatively correlated with age (r = -

.17, df = 399, $p < 0.01$).

Literalism scores declined with general education experience (r = -.14, df = 401, $p <$

0.01). In terms of specifically theological training, they were lowest among those with

experience of higher theological education (M= 34.7, SD = 11.4, n = 27), highest

among those with church-based training (M= 41.9, SD = 8.6, n = 33) and

intermediate among those who had experienced neither (M= 38.8, SD = 8.4, n = 340,

$F(401,2)$ = 5.56, $p <$ 0.01).

Multivariate analysis

Multivariate analysis indicated that some of the above relationships were indirect

effects. Adding all variables and testing for main effects left church tradition, general

education level, higher education in theology, charismatic experience and bible

reading frequency as the only significant predictors of biblical literalism (Table II).

Investigation of interactions suggested that some effects varied between traditions, so

analyses were repeated within each tradition (Table III).   Literalism scores declined

with increasing education in Anglo-catholic churches but not in Evangelical churches.

The trend in Broad churches was similar to that among Anglo-catholics, but was not

statistically significant. Conversely, charismatic experience and bible reading

frequency were significant predictors of literalism in Broad and Evangelical churches,

but not in Anglo-catholic ones. Theological education was associated with significant

reductions in literalism in Anglo-catholic and Broad churches, but not in Evangelical

ones.

Discussion

The high internal reliability of the literalism scale suggests that general biblical literalism is a single construct that is applied to a variety of texts. Participants generally responded in a consistent direction to New and Old Testament events, but this did not mean that all events were treated identically. Those that were rated most likely to have happened were events associated with the life of Jesus, especially events that also carry doctrinal significance. Items based on the death and resurrection of Jesus, which related to central doctrines of the Christian faith, were tested in pilot studies but excluded from the final questionnaire because churchgoers invariably responded with 'definitely happened'. There was more ambivalence about other miracle stories of Jesus, but they were generally rated as more likely to have happened than Old Testament stories.

Judgements were not based solely on rational decisions of how probable or improbable a story might be as history. Virgin birth is logically no more likely than someone surviving inside a fish for three days, but the former was thought to have happened by 81% of the sample compared with only 41% for the account of Jonah. It seems that churchgoers apply a sophisticated reasoning to biblical events, which takes into account both the feasibility of an event and what is at stake in taking it as fiction rather than history. Implausible accounts may be understood as story provided they do not limit the ability of God to intervene in the world or threaten a wider understanding of the nature of God (especially the nature of Jesus). These results suggest that churchgoers combine their general doctrinal belief about the bible with their perception of the plausibility and doctrinal weight of a particular event. Combinations

of these three factors could largely explain variations in literal belief about particular passages, but not necessarily variation in general literal belief between Christians.

A number of different factors seemed to influence individual decisions about biblical literalism. Literalism was consistently higher among Evangelicals than other among traditions, higher among those with frequent charismatic experience and higher among those who read the bible frequently. Although there were more Charismatics and frequent bible readers in Evangelical churches, each of these factors exerted independent effects on literalism. Those who belong to Evangelical churches may be influenced by the prevailing teaching, or may be predisposed to join churches that take a more literal view of the bible. Charismatic belief upholds the direct intervention of God in the world through the agency of the Holy Spirit, so it may predispose believers to interpret literally stories that are otherwise hard to explain. The link between frequent bible reading and literalism could work causally in either direction, and may be related to other factors. Frequent bible reading is associated with the use of bible notes, many of which take a literal view of the bible. Again, it is hard to disentangle cause and effect because such notes may shape people's beliefs, or people may choose notes that teach what they already believe.

Education exerted a significant impact on literalism over and above these other factors, but it interacted with them. General education seemed to reduce literalism among those from Anglo-catholic and Broad churches, but there was no relationship among Evangelicals. This implies that literal interpreters are not a homogenous group of believers, but may be reading the bible in this way for different reasons. Evangelicals are guided by a basic doctrinal belief about the bible (Village, in press a)

and their literalism is relatively unaffected by general education. Those in other traditions have less conservative beliefs, but may nonetheless interpret literally unless they have experienced some sort of higher education.

Theological education may also affect people differently in different church traditions. It was difficult to be certain on this point because a retrospective study could not control the exact nature of the theological education received by different people. People who reported church-based training, as opposed to theological training at certificate or degree level, interpreted more literally, but this may have been because conservatives were more likely to attend such training and/or because such training reinforced already existing views. When people who had received some higher education in theology or biblical studies were compared with those who had not reported any theological education (higher or church-based), the results were similar to education in general: Evangelicals showed little or no changes, whereas literalism declined among people from Anglo-catholic and Broad churches.

Theological education is not about destroying literal belief in the bible, but it ought to help people to discern different genres of biblical writing and to recognise that not everything in the bible has to have happened for it to be true. These results show that, at least in terms of biblical literalism, there is a complex interaction between the exact nature of theological education (higher education versus church-based) and church tradition. Care is needed if the aim of such education is to broaden understanding because it can end up reinforcing already held beliefs.

This study highlights the need for a careful and more thorough examination of how education in general, and theological education in particular, influence the way that people interpret the bible. Such a study would need to look at other aspects of biblical interpretation and would probably have to be a longitudinal study that compared people across a wide range of church traditions before and after education. Students should also be compared with people from their home churches, because there may be a strong element of selection among those who take up either church-based courses or higher theological education.

Author Note

TABLE I. Item scores and item-rest correlations for the literalism scale

Item	Mean (*SD*)	IRC
Jesus' mother was a virgin when she conceived Jesus.	4.4 (1.0)	.66
Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.	4.3 (0.9)	.75
Jesus turned water into wine.	4.2 (1.1)	.79
David killed a giant called Goliath.	4.1 (1.0)	.66
Moses went to Pharaoh and threatened terrible plagues.	4.1 (1.0)	.70
Jesus fed 5000 people with two fish and five loaves.	4.0 (1.1)	.76
Joshua destroyed the walls of Jericho.	3.9 (1.1)	.72
Noah built an ark and filled it with animals.	3.5 (1.3)	.75
Adam and Eve lived in a garden called Eden.	3.2 (1.5)	.64
Jonah was in the belly of a fish (or whale) for three days.	3.1 (1.4)	.76

Note. Italic type = New Testament events; ordinary type= Old Testament events.

Sorted by mean score, *n* = 404. IRC= Item-Rest Correlation coefficient.

TABLE II. Analysis of variance of the literalism score

Source	df	F	η^2
Model	6	55.64***	.46
Church tradition	2	27.13***	.12
Theological education	1	4.56*	.01
General education	1	21.24***	.11
Charismatic experience	1	48.43***	.07
Bible reading frequency	1	30.99***	.05
Error	392	(42.72)	

Note. Model tested main effects only. The following independent variables were initially entered into the model as factors (F) or covariates (C) and removed in a backwards stepwise procedure: Tradition (F); church attendance (F); gender (F); theological education (F); general education (C); age (C); charismatic experience (C); bible reading frequency (C). Values enclosed in parentheses are mean square errors. Two-tailed probabilities: * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

Table III. Literalism score predictors by church tradition								
		Church tradition						
Predictor variable		Anglo-catholic		Broad-church		Evangelical		
		r	*n*	*r*	*n*	*r*	*n*	
Education		-.41**	93	-.17	109	.08	192	
Charismatic		.16	91	.46***	107	.51***	198	
Bible Reading frequency		.10	91	.45**	108	.49**	198	
Theological education:		*Mean (SD)*	*n*	*Mean (SD)*	*n*	*Mean (SD)*	*n*	
	Yes	29.1 (8.6)	14	26.0 (9.9)	4	45.7 (6.9)	9	
	No	33.8 (7.9)	74	36.3 (8.4)	95	42.5 (6.9)	171	
	F	4.03*		5.64*		1.83 NS		

NOTE. NS = Not Significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Analysis for
theological education excludes those who had received church-based training.

References

AMMERMAN, N. T. (1982) Operationalizing evangelicalism: An amendment, *Sociological Analysis*, 43, pp. 170-72.

ARGUE, A., JOHNSON, D. R. & WHITE, L. K. (1999) Age and religiosity: Evidence from three wave panel analysis, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 38, pp. 423-35.

ARGYLE, M. & BEIT-HALLAHMI, B. (1975) *The Social Psychology of Religion* (London, Routledge & Keegan Paul).

BAKER, J. (1996) Churchmanship, in: I. BUNTING (Ed.) *Celebrating the Anglican Way*, pp. 110-124 (London, Hodder & Stoughton).

BULTMANN, R. (1972) New Testament and mythology, in: R. H. FULLER (Ed.) *Kerygma and Myth: Theological Debate*, pp. 1-44 (London, SPCK).

CARPENTER, J. (1997) *Revive us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

CLINES, D. J. A. (1997) *The Bible in the Modern World* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press).

CRONBACH, L. J. (1951) Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests, *Psychometrika*, 16, pp. 297-334.

CUPITT, D. (1997) *After God. The Future of Religion* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson).

DIXON, R. D., JONES, L. P. & LOWERY, R. C. (1992) Biblical authority questions: Two choices in identifying conservative Christian subcultures, *Sociological Analysis*, 53, pp. 63-72.

DYSON, A. (1985) The bishop of Durham and all that, *Modern Churchman*, 27, pp. 1-2.

FELDMAN, K. A. (1969) Change and stability of religious orientation through

college, *Review of Religious Research*, 11, pp. 40-60.

FOWL, S. E. (1998) *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford, Blackwell).

FURLONG, M. (2000) *C of E: The State It's In* (London, Hodder & Stoughton).

GOLDINGAY, J. (1994) *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI/Carlisle,

Eerdmans/Paternoster Press).

HARRISON, T. (1985) *The Durham Phenomenom* (London, Darton, Longman and

Todd).

HARTLICH, C. (1980) Is historical criticism out of date?, in: J. MOLTMANN (Ed.)

Conflicting Ways of Interpreting the Bible, pp. 3-8 (Edinburgh, T & T Clark).

HYLSON-SMITH, K. (1989) *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734-1984*

(Edinburgh, T & T Clark).

HYLSON-SMITH, K. (1993) *High Churchmanship in the Church of England from

the Sixteenth Century to the late Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark).

KIM, J.-O. & MUELLER, C. (1978) *Factor Analysis: Statistical Methods and

Practical Issues* (London, Sage).

KIM, J.-O. & MUELLER, C. (1978) *Introduction to Factor Analysis* (London, Sage).

LIKERT, R. (1932) *A Technique for the Measurement of Attitudes* (New York,

Columbia University Press).

MALTBY, J. (1994) The reliability and validity of the Francis scale of attitude

towards Christianity among Republic of Ireland adults, *Irish Journal of

Psychology*, 15, pp. 595-98.

MALTBY, J. & LEWIS, C. A. (1997) The reliability and validity of a short scale of

attitude toward Christianity among USA, English, Republic of Ireland and

Northern Ireland adults, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 22, pp. 649-54.

MCCARTNEY, D. & CLAYTON, C. (1994) *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (USA, Victor Books/SP Publications).

MCKENNELL, A. (1970) Attitude measurement: use of coefficient alpha with cluster or factor analysis, *Sociology*, 4, pp. 227-45.

MILLER, A. S. & HOFFMANN, J. P. (1995) Risk and religion: An explanation of gender difference in religiosity, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34, pp. 63-75.

NINEHAM, D. E. (1990) Demythologization, in: J. L. HOULDEN (Ed.) *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. (London, SCM Press).

NORUSIS, M. (1994) *SPSS Professional Statistics 6.1* (Chicago, IL, SPSS Inc.).

PETERSEN, L. R. (1994) Education, homogamy and religious commitment, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 33, pp. 122-34.

SMIDT, C. (1989) Identifying Evangelical respondents: An analysis of "born-again" and bible questions used across different surveys, in: T. JELEN (Ed.) *Religion and Political Behavior in the United States*, pp. 23-43 (New York & Wesport, CT, Praeger).

SPECTOR, P. E. (1992) *Summated Rating Scale Construction* (London, Sage).

SPSS. (2003) *Spss Base 12.0 User's Guide* (Chicago, Ill., SPSS Inc.).

THISELTON, A. C. (1992) *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London, HarperCollins).

TRAVIS, S. (1994) *The Bible as a Whole* (Oxford, Bible Reading Fellowship).

VILLAGE, A. (2003) Biblical Interpretation Among Church of England Lay People (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Bristol)

VILLAGE, A. (in press a) Assessing belief about the bible: A study among Anglican laity, *Review of Religious Research*.

VILLAGE, A. (in press b) Dimensions of belief about miraculous healing, *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*.

WATSON, F. (1994) *Text, Church and World* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark).

WATSON, F. (1997) *Text and Truth. Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark).

WILCOX, C. (1992) *God's Warriors: The Christian Right in twentieth-century America* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press).