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*The God of Books and the Body of Christ: Printing,
Reading and Burning the Bible in Reformation
England (1535-1640)**

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, students and friends, I want first of all to thank wholeheartedly the HoTT program, the university libraries, and my Religion department for having allowed me to propose over the last three years, here in Special Collections, the course “The Bible as a Book (13th-18th century)” that was directly at the origin of the exhibition whose display cases still surround us, and of the virtual exhibition that will shortly succeed it - as a Phoenix reborn from its ashes. I also want to salute the memory of Milton Carothers, Director of FSU’s Presbyterian Center, who assembled the Bible collection and bequeathed it exactly thirty years ago to the Strozier library.

As a kind of farewell address to the exhibition let me now invite you to join me in a few pre-aperitif reflections on what it meant to print, read and burn the Bible - yes burn, you will understand later why I mention this here - in England between the reign of Henry VIII and that of Charles II. At first the subject might

* This is the text of the lecture as it was pronounced on 2 April 2012, hence its colloquial tone and the absence of notes or bibliography.

sound like old time religion to you, I mean a well-known old old story, but as Ariel Hessayon, from the university of London, one of the best specialists in the field recently wrote: “the story of the **English Bible** has often been told, but the story of the **Bible in England** is still incomplete.” This lecture is thus a modest contribution to the task from the point of view of someone who spent the best part of the last thirty years working on the social history of Bible production and use in early modern continental Europe, and is very happy to have now the opportunity to confront the continental situation to the English one in a book that I am writing for Palgrave and that bears the same title as the exhibition: *Book of kings, king of books. French and English sovereigns and the Bible.*

Christ and the material book

John Fisher, bishop of Rochester and chancellor of the university of Cambridge, is mostly known today because of his opposition to the divorce of his former pupil Henry VIII, which led to his trial and execution in 1535, but he was also one the most celebrated preachers of his time, preaching in 1509 the funeral orations of Henry VII and Lady Margrete for example. In a sermon pronounced on Good Friday 1531, which it is fit to remember in this first day of Holy Week, he commented the vision of Ezekiel in which the prophet “*telleth that hee sawe a booke spread before*

him, which was written both within and without", equating Ezekiel's book "*written both within and without*" with the passion and crucifixion of Christ. Fisher wanted his congregation to read Christ crucified as a book. Let me quote him at some length:

"But you marvell peradventure why I call the crucifix a booke? I will now tell you the consideracion why... A book hath boards, leaves, lynes, writings, letters both small and great. First I saye that a booke hath two boards, the two parts of this book is the two parts of the cross, for when a book is opened and spread the leaves be couched upon the boards. And so the blessed body of Christ was spread upon the cross. The leaves of this booke be the armes, the hands, legges, and feetes, aith the other members of his most precious and blessed body... there were also great capytall letters preciously illuminated with roset colour... which colour was that most precious blood which issued out of his hands and feet... I mean by these capital letters the great wounds of his body, in his hands and in his feet and in his side."

These gory comparisons may seem surprising but Fisher was using a common place of medieval symbolism for a thousand years, recurrent from the period of the Church fathers to the Humanism of the Italian Quattrocento, a common place that was as common to artists as it was to Christian writers.

You have all seen medieval images of the Christian God represented with a book, either a scroll or a codex, sometime with more than one according to the plural meaning of the Greek title

of the Bible *ta biblia*, the books. Books are a common attribute of the Christian God, and God transmits these books to prophets and evangelists. In situations of contact between God and inspired writers medieval artists extend the scheme of the tablets of the law written by God's finger.

Appearing to Moses in the Burning Bush God hands him a scroll as he handed him the Decalogue in tablet form. Prophets of the Old Testaments are repeatedly described as receiving books from God, and so are evangelists. A very early type of Saint Matthew iconography has him copying his gospel from a book brought to him by God through an angel, and in the iconography of Revelation the "little book" that John "ate up", allowing him to prophesize, was constantly identified by commentators with the Bible or with the Eucharist, that is the body of Christ.

The idea that Jesus-Christ is the *Logos*, the Word, even led a number of Christian writers to present allegorically Jesus as a book, drawing an analogy between the Scripture in its materiality as a manuscript book and the body of Christ. Following Origen and Jerome who had explained that as the Word was incarnate in Christ - the Word made Flesh - so it was made flesh in Scripture - the Word made Page. In his *Dictionarium seu Repertorium morale* of 1355 the Benedictine Pierre Bersuire, known mostly by literary historians for his *Ovide moralise*, gave a graphic account of "*Christ as a book written on the skin of the virgin... That book was spoken in the disposition of the father, written in the conception of the mother, exposit in the clarification of the*

nativity, corrected in the passion, erased in the flagellation, punctuated in the imprint of the wounds, adorned in the crucifixion above the pulpit, illuminated in the outpouring of blood, bound in the resurrection, and examined in the ascension.”

In 15th century Florence, one of the European capitals of de luxe manuscript production the Neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino wrote more concisely in his *Platonic theology* that Jesus was “*a certain living book of moral and divine philosophy sent from Heaven and manifesting the divine idea of the virtues to human eyes.*”

So for Fisher in 1531 the body of Christ was a Book, the Book, the Bible, and partaking in the body of Christ during communion was of the same nature as reading the word of God. Both were meant to spark in the faithful a conversion to knowledge, an enlightenment that would turn him away from ignorance and idolatry, an idolatry frequently figured as a misunderstanding of the proper relation to the world because the faithful must know how to read the world, this book of nature, as the Scripture teaches him to, both being God’s creations.

Lest you would think that all this was just an antiquated medieval tradition pertaining to the old church let me remind you that the analogy between the body of Christ and the material Bible is a constant in the biblical writings of Martin Luther and in reformed exegesis in general. In his commentary of Psalm 22, the Psalm of Passion, Luther deals for example with verse 6 :“*I am a worm and*

no man” and writes: “*The Holy Scripture is God’s word, written and in a manner of speaking spelled out and reproduced in letters, like Christ is the eternal Word of God, concealed in his humanity.*” Therefore according to Luther the written word of God has to suffer the same treatment as Christ in this world: “it is a worm and not a book like other books”. In other terms it belongs to the nature of the word of God, whether it comes to us as the Bible or in Jesus Christ, to be a stumbling block to sinners.

It was important to establish the centrality, the long duration and the strength of the parallel between Christ and the material book at the beginning of the sixteenth century before trying to understand the role of the printed Scripture, especially the vernacular Scripture, in Tudor and Stuart England, this English nation of which John Milton in his *Areopagitica* of 1641 wrote that the Reformation had made it “a knowing people, a nation of prophets, of sages, and of worthies” that had “sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation to all Europe.”

The multiplication of English Bibles

Fisher’s sermon was pronounced four years before the first complete English Bible was printed, in Cologne, sparking a century of intense scriptural publications in England itself, from the Great Bible of 1539 to the London Polyglot of 1657 that emphatically signified the end of the long dependency of English

printing on the resources of continental Europe. If the Great Bible was printed in Paris in the workshop of Francois Regnault the London Polyglot, which you can admire in the cases to your right, was a symbol of the renewed vigour of English publishing after the Civil War. Financed by public subscription with the support of the highest English aristocracy whose names figure prominently in the subscribers list, the Polyglot is also a masterwork of typographic art. The seven series of oriental type - among which, for the first time, Ethiopian - had been designed and cut in England, as were executed in England the famous engravings by Wenceslas Hollar, and the *virtuoso mise en page* of Thomas Roycroft allows the reader to consult easily the parallel versions presented on a double page. (In these all English volumes only paper is not. Thanks to an agreement brokered between Cromwell and cardinal Mazarin, prime minister of France, it is Auvergne paper. But then, isn't paper is the invisible part of books?)

What are the main features of these Bibles? First they were extremely numerous. Of them you could truly say that they "multiplied and replenished the earth." It is now estimated that no less than 465 editions, a million copies, of the whole Bible and 217 editions, 500 000 copies, of the New Testament in English were published during that period, a huge number as the population of the British Isles did not exceed 3 millions. This was a sea change from the situation of the early sixteenth century

when production and possession of Bibles in the vernacular, manuscript or printed, were still flatly prohibited, a unique case in Europe that harked back to the repression of the Lollard movement, and Latin Bibles were all imported, mostly from Lyon. Marveling at the ubiquitous presence of printed Bibles in English life John Knoxe attributed thus the “*gift of printing*” to direct divine intervention and the Puritan poet Christopher Harvey could write in 1640: “*It is the Book of God. What if I should/ Say, God of Books?*”

Book of God, the English Bible was also, essentially, the Book of Kings and its publication followed the fluctuations of royal policy in establishing a national Church in England. After continuing to refuse publication of the Scripture in English during the first part of his reign Henry VIII allowed it in 1535, when Coverdale’s Bible, printed in Cologne, was left to circulate unhindered in England, followed by new editions that marked the advance of reform policies in the 1530’s, then stopped abruptly after the execution of Thomas Cromwell in 1541 and was only resumed with the reign of Edward VI. The “Great Bible” corresponded to injunctions from the king in 1538 demanding that an English Bible “*of the largest volume*” be set up “*in summe convenient place*” in every church in the realm. On its title-page Henry VIII was represented as the head of the Church receiving God’s Word from the translators and passing it down to Thomas Cromwell on the right and to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer on the left, then through the hierarchy of church and state to a numerous

populace that repeats “*Vivat Rex*”- Long Live the King (ill.). At the beginning of the reign of Edward VI, often compared to king Josiah, the Great Bible was completed by the publication of an English translation of Erasmus’s paraphrases on the Gospel launched under the aegis of the king. Prepared by Catherine Parr, the last queen of Henry VIII, it involved numerous translators - among whom the future Mary I- and numerous printers as Edward VI ordered that a copy of the within a year of its completion in 1548, making it the authorized commentary of the Scripture by the Church of England. Queen Elizabeth, represented in the 1563 edition of the Acts of martyrs as a new Emperor Constantine offering her country the benefits of Godly rule ordered that the Great Bible be revised in 1568 by a commission of bishops and scholars under the direction of Archbishop Matthew Parker. This new Authorized Version, which was to be displayed in all cathedral and parish churches of sufficient means, avoided “bitter notes upon any text” and was constantly republished until 1633, long after the KJV appeared in 1611, seven years after the Hampton Court Palace conference of 1604 in which English bishops, Puritan leaders and other churchmen were convened by James I for the purpose of determining "things pretended to be amiss in the church". The privilege of printing and publishing the KJV was conferred to the King’s Printer, Robert Barker, who already held the privilege to the Bishop’s Bible, and remained in the Barker family until 1709. King James I also prepared for many years a metrical translation of the Psalms that would be his legacy to the Churches of

Scotland and England but after his death Charles I failed in his attempts to make his father's version the standard liturgical text.

Third feature, in spite of the involvement of sovereigns in all these publications, and in spite of the misleading title of Authorized Version given in England to the KJV - it was not employed before the 18th century -, the textual history of the English Bible was far from being unified from above, being characterized until the middle years of the 17th century by multiple and parallel revisions of the first printed translations of William Tyndale, who fled to the continent because there was "no place to do [the translation] in all of Englonde" and was burned at the stake as a heretic in Antwerp in 1536. Tyndale's text was used by Miles Coverdale in 1535 and by "Thomas Matthew" (John Rogers) who edited Tyndale's unpublished manuscripts, in 1537. Miles Coverdale again, in the "Great Bible" of 1539, and Richard Taverner, also in 1539, both revised the "Matthew" version. Although it was condemned by Parliament in 1543 as "crafty, false and untrue" Tyndale's version sifted into the "Bishop's Bible" and the King James Bible itself in 1611. It was also used in the Calvinist Geneva translation of 1560, printed in England from 1575 to 1616 when Robert Barker, whose family had held the right to print it in England, concentrated on the publication of the King James Version. Logically the only sixteenth century English version to be exempt from Tyndale's influence was translated from the Latin Vulgate by William Allen and his collaborators of the English Catholic seminary, founded in 1568 in Douai,

according to Rome's policy that supported vernacular translations of the Scripture in countries where Catholics and "heretics" cohabited, such as England, Germany, the Netherlands, France or Poland. The New Testament was first printed in Douai in 1582 then Antwerp in 1600, and smuggled clandestinely into England where its detailed refutation by William Fluke, printed by the royal printer Christopher Barker in 1589, proved to be a powerful means of diffusion.

This polyphony, so to speak, of textual versions corresponded to a diversity of visual presentations that persisted, there again, until roughly 1650. If the text of the Scripture, the word of God itself, is almost always expressed in the black letter, modeled on Parisian types of the early sixteenth century French origin, that strangely enough became the English "national idiom in type" (Harry Carter), three essential formal criteria essentially differentiated English Bibles: the existence of theological notes, of visual aids to reading, of the presence and the nature of illustrations. Theological notes of strict Calvinist interpretation were a characteristic of Geneva Bibles, as well as historical tables, explanatory pictures, plans and maps, all being aimed at a better understanding of the "darke" places of the text.

On the contrary Bibles sponsored by the sovereigns from the beginning eschewed theological notes, considered a dangerous Pandora's box that could only foster religious division, and until the King James Bible provided numerous woodcut illustrations

inspired from German or French models. Even if the KJV editions were not illustrated, to respond to Calvinist criticism of visual gloss, this absence was compensated by the largely diffused practice of “grangerizing”, that is interpolating printed Bibles with series of woodcuts or engravings printed on loose leaves, often produced in Antwerp.

Numerous, very much dependent on government policy, corresponding to a diversity of versions and presentations, English Bibles were not significantly different from the ones produced at the same time on the continent of Europe from the Netherlands to Transylvania and from France to Poland, both in Protestant and Catholic countries under the aegis or with the authorization of political authorities, of the sovereign to use Hobbes’s word that could designate the king of France as well as the *stadthouder* of the republic of the Netherlands. Contrary to an entrenched idea the Roman Church in the council of Trent did not prohibit vernacular Bibles and with the significant exceptions of Spain and Italy, where all production of Italian Bibles abruptly stopped in 1568, in the rest of the continent vernacular Bibles, Protestant and Catholic, made the fortune of many booksellers well into the early 18th century and the general collapse of the Bible market. France is a case in point.

Gift of God or Idol of the Antichrist?

How did the English people use “*the book thus put in every vulgar hand*” to quote John Dryden’s *Religio laici* (1682)? In 16th and 17th century England the Bible was constantly discussed to seek guidance on the form of worship most pleasing to God in a society which cast off traditional forms of church and of government and – some thought – had not yet finally settled into a better one. The words of the Bible defined the way in which English people thought about their own society and its institutions. Hence fierce quarrels about whether “Church” meant a national or an international organization, or a local congregation. In 1633 two Somerset boys who were in trouble for breaking church windows by playing ball defended themselves by asking “where is the Church? The church is where the congregation is assembled, though it be at the beacon at the top of the hill.” That theological remark may have not been more than a ploy to get themselves out of difficulty, but its sophistication suggests that they moved in circles where such ideas were familiar. The Bible in England was a battle-field as it was on the continent where Reformed Christians, Lutherans or Roman Catholics all considered it to be the ultimate “judge of controversies”. “*Le juge des controverses*” these were the vey words of the famous preacher François Véron, who had left the Jesuit order to become vicar of Charenton, where the temple was, and published more than 200 treaties against Protestants. Far from asking for the

prohibition of Protestant Bibles, he wanted them to be recognized as “depravations” of the Scripture, and never shied away from public confrontations with ministers. A chapter in the introduction to his own version of the New Testament in 1647 was tellingly entitled *La lecture de la Bible en francais non defendue a aucun*. (“Reading the Bible not prohibited to anyone”). Beyond war and controversy, beyond religious identities and frontiers existed between Christians a community of destiny, under the sign of the Bible, in the whole of Northern Europe, and England was part of it.

To prolong the military metaphor it also became a weapon, notably for the millenarian radicals who came to dominate the English political and religious debate during the Civil War and the Interregnum thanks to the breakdown of censorship in the 1640s. This is a uniquely English phenomenon and was considered with awe in the rest of Europe. For the first time numbers of persons, including women, who had had no university education, often no grammar school education even, found no obstacles to publication. What became the radical’s manifesto was a sermon entitled *The Sufficiency of the Spirits Teaching without Humane Learning*, published by Cobbler How in 1640. He argued that while learning might be useful to scholars, laymen and gentlemen, uneducated persons were preferable to scholars in the pulpit since the Spirit’s teaching was all that mattered to understand the “*mind of God.*” All men

should read the Bible and decide for themselves, not as the learned told them.

To decide for themselves could lead some of these new readers of the Scripture to bewildering novelties, such as noticing, as the Leveller Walwyn, that the Bible “*is plainly and directly contradictory to itself*” and cannot be the word of God. Ranters were accused of saying that the Bible was “*a bundle of contradictions... the cause of all the blood that hath been shed in the world... There would never be peace in the world till all the Bibles were burned...*” This was not just an image. There were actual episodes of Bible burning. In 1649 six soldiers invaded the church of Walton-on-Thames announcing that the Sabbath, tithes, ministers **and the Bible** were all abolished. Five years later the goldsmith Thomas Tany, who called himself Theaureaujohn, publicly burnt the Bible as an idol in Saint George’s Fields, Lambeth, “*because the people say it the Word of God and it is not*”, “*the Bible is letters, not life.*” And the Welsh radical clergyman William Erbery tells of “*a chief one of the army*” who would usually say that “*the flesh of Christ and the letter of the Scriptures were the two great idols of Antichrist.*”

For a significant fringe of radical Protestants the ubiquitous English Bibles, KJVs in the first place, were unbearable signs of idolatry “*Christ in believers*” had to check the “*dead letter*” of the Scripture. In the words of the Puritan minister William Dell the Reformation had brought about a new situation in which “*the believer is the only book in which God now writes his New*

Testament". Biblical print culture was for them just a trick of the Anti-Christ.

Such radical moves, stemming from Puritan obsession with idolatry, were unique in Europe and, with the regicide of Charles I, contributed to the great fear that the continental Protestant establishment, in Leyden, Saumur or Geneva, felt in learning of the "events in England" as the understated expression went. But they should not be considered as marginal expressions of English eccentricity. They only exacerbated central tenets of Reformation thought. The great Reformers, Calvin and Luther in the first place, considered that, in the words of Calvin, "*the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols*" (Institutes of the Christian Religion. I, 11, 8.), and pursued idolatry in every human activity, not excluding Bible reading.

Because they have become so associated with a text-centered religion we forget that they often expressed the belief that writing, conceived as the graphic dimension of language, was an aspect of the fall, and the Bible only a necessary evil because of the fallen nature of writing. For Luther God's revelation was ineluctably finite, material and historical, due to humanity's carnal and fallen nature, which required Christ's human incarnation in the world. What mattered most was how we responded to sacred texts and images of God. Concerning sacred texts this meant that it was necessary to read them according to the analogy of faith, or "proportion of faith" (KJV), the *analogia fidei* defined by the Lutheran Theologian Matthias Flavius Illyricus in his *Clavis*

scripturae sacrae of 1567 as “the constant and perpetual sense of the scripture... agreeable to the Apostle’s creed, the Ten Commandments, and the general sentences and axioms of every main point of divinity.” As an invisible hand the analogy of faith directed thus the choice from among parallel passages or from among alternative meanings of a Greek or Hebrew vocable. The words of the Scripture were thus less *norma normans* (the norm that regulates all other norms) than *norma normata* (the norm that is itself subject to another norm).

In his *Lectures on Genesis* Luther even suggested that the experience of the word of God was the defining feature of Paradise and read the divine command to abstain from the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil as the first preaching of the Word. “*Here the lord is preaching to Adam and setting the Word before him.*” Disobeying the divine command Adam and Eve are exiled from a perfect world of direct knowledge for a fallen world of material signs, **the fallen world of the letter.** “*If Adam had remained in his innocence this preaching would have been like a bible for him and for all of us and we would have had no need for paper, ink, pens and that endless multitude of books which we require today.*” The Bible itself could condemn the Bible as an idol.

Historians, bibliographers, librarians - I belong or have belonged to all three categories - necessarily use the “endless multitude of books” transmitted to us from the past to try to recapture life as it was lived by our ancestors, and the risk is always present, in our trades, to treat them, even in our lay context, as idols or fetishes, especially when we encapsulate them under glass in display cases. In front of the Carothers Bibles I hope nevertheless to have conveyed to you not only interest or admiration for a series of objects, but - in a phrase Philip Sidney about the poet’s art that Christopher Hill, the great historian of the English Revolution liked to quote - to have painted also “the effects, the motions and the whisperings of the people”, of the people of the Bible in Reformation England.