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### Biblical Literacy in Secular Society

The meaning of biblical literacy varies depending on its audience. It is often thought of as a theological discipline, or strict method of bible study. When approached literally, we could determine that the basic meaning of biblical literacy concerns one's competence in reading the Bible and communicating its themes. I believe that this perspective is the most valuable, as it introduces the idea of the Bible as a text to be universally read and understood. If and how we choose to read the Bible affects how we perceive and apply it, and familiarity with biblical narratives can provide insight into underlying cultural elements and motifs. elements and motifs.

Everyone knows that the bible is a religious book belonging to Christo-centric belief systems. With this understanding, many might assume that bible reading must require that the reader belong to its corresponding religion. However, I do not believe that this is the case. One's relationship with biblical literacy does not necessarily equate to them ascribing to a biblical worldview. A biblical worldview includes the values and morals that the Bible suggests within the text; these morals would include beliefs regarding acceptable ways of living, the character of Jesus, etc. From a biblical worldview, the perceived way of "correct" biblical understanding will vary from group to group, but overall their views will be very similar, as a biblical worldview is defined by a general understanding of the Bible. Adjacently, those who do not ascribe to biblical morals do not base their worldview upon biblical text – why would they? Despite this

disconnect, it can be said that a general understanding of the bible is also valuable to a non-believer. Furthermore, it can certainly be argued that even a person who has beliefs directly opposing a biblical worldview is directly affected by their understanding of biblical texts.

We live in a world of individuals, and each person is free to believe as they choose. In light of this, people generally fall into two groups: the religious and the secular. The history behind this idea of the “secular” emerged in the time of the early catholic church, but was around since as early as the renaissance period. A distinction began to be made as things like musical content, public gatherings, and the like were less centered on religious themes, leaning more toward emotional expression and revelations of the natural world. Speaking of this ever-growing concept of secularism, Jeffrey Morrow highlights that “Secular eventually became associated with space absent of what we might call religious particularity” (15). Indeed, there was a growing emphasis on the new waves of interest regarding non-religious thinking and creating. Circling back to our current era, Morrow also elaborates on the idea that modern america and its widely understood idea of religion was not always as it is now: there was once no necessary distinction between that which is secular versus religious. As we move toward modernization, the majority of people are under the impression that modernization is somehow equal to secularization.

With this background in mind we can see how, over the course of time, modernization has resulted in a widespread, secularized mindset. The issue that must be confronted in this modern era is the idea that religious beliefs are not currently relevant – and furthermore, that the Bible is a book that is irrelevant and outdated. This could not be further from the truth: regardless

of your beliefs, whether you are familiar with biblical texts or not you will eventually interact with them, as their influences are more common than the majority might think.

The biggest pushback against biblical literacy by non-believers is that it is a religious book and they do not believe in the beliefs presented in the book. However, the closer we look at the issue, we can begin to see that biblical literacy is less about religion and more about personal education. Being an educated individual would certainly include your ability to look at a text objectively, this includes religious texts like the bible. Both Secular and Non-Secular perspectives agree that the bible should be approached with objectivity (Cite Morrow). In fact, from the beginnings of the history of the “secular” and its initial popularization, Christo-centric church leaders have said that the key to understanding the Bible is to view it without outside bias. While religious biblical literacy aims to grasp the spiritual understanding of the text, the basis of this discipline hinges on the idea that the text must be approached as a book: historical, creative, and informative in nature. With this in mind, we see that the secular and non-secular parties are actually not completely at odds. Although there is certainly a point at which the two schools of thought depart, for a brief moment there is common ground founded in the idea of biblical literacy: this is the key as to why it is absolutely essential.

As the bible begins to be seen as a work of literature rather than a kind of religious manifesto, it can be approached in a way that is applicable to all. In fact, the more that the bible is studied, the more that our minds can be illuminated to its use in various ways.

Biblical themes are presented all around us, especially in the media. For example, popular tv shows like *The Good Place* explore the traditionally christian concept of the afterlife with heaven and hell. Similarly, we see illustrations of biblical themes in books like *The Girl with the*

*Dragon Tattoo*, which uses levitical law as a pinnacle element in its non-religious story. In a similar vein, we see biblical elements in popular music. When these media pieces are presented, as individuals we must be able to assess them critically to form opinions and make our own judgements. Although opinions formed around forms of entertainment may be seen as insignificant, this same principle is applied to more pressing matters.

On a more significant note, we can see biblical themes connected to political issues: in 2015, xenophobic attacks occurred in South Africa. It was later discovered that pieces of biblical scripture were shared on social media to justify and propagate the violence and chaos surrounding the issue (Dube). In addition to this, there have been many political issues involving matters of biblical faith and religion in both the past and presently. How might an educated, responsible adult begin to stand for ethical truth in religiously-charged political issues if they have no frame of reference for biblical themes?

There is much that can be said surrounding religion and our government; since the country's inception, there has always been looming questions surrounding the appropriate amount of involvement and influence that we give to biblical beliefs and ideals. Some believe that this

Similarly, we can see that as individuals go about choosing a career, there are certain vocational principles which reference biblical ideals as well. For example, in the field of psychology, religion – especially Christo-centric religion – has been viewed pejoratively and seen as an emotional crutch for mentally unstable individuals. Reber presents a great point in his article, which suggests that vocational principles should not communicate any kind of bias; in the studies of humanity, we should certainly take all things into consideration but dismissing a

greatly influential factor as irrelevant can be counterintuitive to conducting sound research and developing helpful methods. [insert direct quote] (Cite Reber) Biblical text has been rejected in many areas and dismissed as irrelevant because people see religion as something often fanatical or irrational; however, I believe that in the professional arena, possessing knowledge around this can make you more effective in relation to people and allow you to understand various situations from another perspective.

Despite continued claims to refute biblical relevance in society, biblical literacy is consistently highlighted as a need for the situations around us. Well-educated, literate individuals in this current era must have some semblance of familiarity with biblical concepts, stories, and themes. Not only is knowledge of the bible useful in forming personal thoughts and opinions on popular media and political stances, but it is also important to understand the perspectives of others, keeping an open mind and showing kindness and understanding to those who may not share the same values. If one does not maintain some kind of biblical literacy, they will have a diluted understanding of the world around them. Regardless of belief, cultural norms, arts, political and governmental policies, relevant elements of life are based upon and/or have history with biblical text and its values.

With all of this taken into account, biblical literacy should be declared a necessary discipline. It has been seen from many different angles and known in different ways. The term “biblical literacy” may need to be redefined to effectively communicate its accessibility and encourage others to engage in its disciplines: There is wisdom in the order, processes and systems included in the reading and study of the bible, whether for religious reasons or otherwise. In fact, studying the bible should not be seen as something purely academic, but also

recreation, therapeutic, and encouraging. The development of personal biblical literacy is not a principle that applies only to the Christo-centric religious lens, but I believe it communicates a more important underlying idea that we must be willing to engage those things that are removed from our lives in order to expand our scope. In truth, the limited perspective found within the realm of our own specific beliefs can leave us in a state of ignorance and misunderstanding. It is absolutely imperative that we not only engage with ideas, concepts, and information that is solely connected to us: I believe that this way of living allows for us to live in self-centeredness and judgement toward others. Even further, part of a modern social climate should be to educate ourselves (at least minimally) in other beliefs, their texts, and how those elements interact with related media, politics, and social norms. This will bring society to a new level of understanding. Ways to engage biblical literacy are all around us, and we must be willing to make ourselves familiar with those things necessary for us to maintain a respectable knowledge of the world in which we live.