

“Arguing With the Bible”: Reporting Biblical Argumentation in Contemporary North American Debates*

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One of many pleasures in sixteen years of working beside Fred Wisse has been an increasingly shared interest in the argumentative economy of the New Testament texts, especially at a time in the life of the churches when reference to a few schematized master biblical narratives has all but eclipsed appeal to the Bible’s propositional arguments. In Biblical Theology and Christian Ethics today, as well as in the discourse of journalism, “the story” takes priority over the arguments in public debate. There continues to be, however, in North American culture, an important subcultural discourse of theological, ethical and political argumentation more or less based on claims from and about the Bible. It is with particular pleasure, then, that I offer to Fred the following first attempt on my part at an analysis, not of the Bible’s own argumentation, but of argumentative appeals to the Bible in a few examples drawn from the North American press.

In the words of Stephen Fowl, Professor at Loyola College in Maryland and an influential voice in the contemporary revival of Biblical Theology:

Almost anyone who has been involved in some form of church-based Bible study, particularly within the mainline Protestant denominations, will be familiar with the following claims: Nobody’s interpretation is better than anyone else’s; everyone has a right to his/her own interpretation; it is rude and not inclusive to fail to accept someone’s interpretation as true for that person. These are all forms of anti-determinate interpretation. They are not, however, the result of a theory of interpretation. Rather they reflect many American Christians’ deep and unshakeable commitments to the doctrines of liberal democracy in a market economy. A different theory of interpretation will not address the type of anti-determinacy represented in these views.¹

What Fowl says here is interesting to us on several levels. First, I can attest to the wide currency of the maxims of what he calls “anti-determinate interpretation” not only in “church-based Bible study,” but also, for example, among North American undergraduate students of every religious background. Thus, North Americans “know” about the Bible that “you can’t take it literally” and that “you can make it say anything.” In a carefully-balanced statement in advance to the release of Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*, two officers of the Canadian Jewish Congress felt confident enough of this to assert the equal Christian fidelity of literal and non-literal readings of the Passion narratives: “There are believers who do take all the Gospels literally but it is our understanding that others, equally true to their faith, do not.”²

Second, in Fowl’s presentation of the maxims of anti-determinate interpretation, I hope we can all hear quite particular argumentative combinations of universal topics of better/worse, true/false with more culture-specific topics such as rights/duties, rude/polite, exclusive/inclusive, individual/community, literal/non-literal, etc. It is such combinations and transformations of *topoi* that I want to highlight and investigate in what follows here.

Finally, I agree with Fowl that yet another “theory of interpretation will not address the type of anti-determinacy represented in these views,” though ironically Fowl spends his next hundred and fifty pages developing just such a theory. Rather I think that the anti-determinate maxims of liberal Bible interpretation *and* the also probably over-determined maxims of fundamentalist interpretation *both* call for a modest application of existing communication and argumentation theories.

Inside most Christian communities in North America today serious, even bitter debates are unfolding, debates in which the Bible is claimed on all sides as a source of arguments, and indeed debates about the normative authority of the Bible itself in principle. Remarkable in many of these debates within specific Christian communities is the failure of consensus about conventions for valid, that is, effective biblical argumentation: members of the same religious community, for example of a single denomination, are often not arguing from within the same rhetorical sub- or counterculture. In other words, inside Christian communities, arguments claiming biblical authority are often aimed at consolidating prior persuasion rather than at persuading

opponents or the uncommitted. Voices arguing within Christian communities seem to assume that biblical argumentations are decisive for defining distinctive positions and parties, but do not seem to expect that biblical arguments will be decisive in resolving debates.

Christian communities are sometimes even more reticent in applying specifically biblical arguments outside the private sphere of denominational debates. To take a trivial example, the Washington Office of the Presbyterian Church (USA) used to distribute a six-page brochure entitled “How To Be an Effective Advocate . . . Making our voices heard!” in which detailed information is given on how to persuade Members of Congress.³ The nearest thing in the brochure to a reference to Christianity—let alone the Bible—is the example sentence, “The Church has a humanitarian concern for all the children of God who suffer from hunger and poor nutrition.” Nothing in this document suggests that the Presbyterian Church’s humanitarian concern is in any way different from what I would like to think is a universal moral concern. When a Presbyterian living in a representative democracy addresses her government, is it reasonable, or maximally persuasive for her to use argumentative conventions, such as “humanitarian concern,” which are indistinguishable from those used by non-Presbyterian citizens? Beside such reticence to use distinctively Christian or biblical rhetorics there is nonetheless a surprising eagerness in some political voices to sound biblical or to make biblical claims: U.S. presidential rhetoric is often argumentatively, not only ornamentally, biblical. Before returning to such issues, it may be useful to consider one example text in some detail.

I

On June 11, 2002, *The New York Times* published an article headlined “Sad Story in Splittsville, Tenn. ‘I Said I Do but Now I Don’t.’”⁴ The article reported on attitudes toward marriage and divorce in Lake County, Tenn., the county with the highest proportion of divorced people in that particular state.

Why was *The New York Times* interested in the high proportion of divorcees in this otherwise unknown place (at least in the Web version, the newspaper provided a map to help readers find the locale)? The actual statistic, that 14.1% of the population of Lake County have been divorced, is clearly not the focus of the story as published.

We are told in a parenthesis that the highest population of divorced people in the U.S. actually lives in San Juan County, Colo.—19.13%. The article also admits that the high divorce rate in Lake County, Tenn., may have something to do with the presence, in a total population of 8,000, of 2,000 state prison inmates. Finally, *The New York Times* does mention, euphemistically I fear, that “Lake County . . . is hurting economically” and that this poverty has some impact on local marriages.

The essential story of *The New York Times* article, however, is that people in Tennessee are not *supposed* to be as comfortable with high rates of divorce as people in, say, Colorado or New York. . . The story is about a presumed cultural dissonance in Tennessee between expected conservative attitudes toward divorce and actual social experience. If I read the story aright, it presumes that inhabitants of Lake County, Tenn., would feel shocked that nearly 15% of their number are divorced. On another level, the story presupposes that this dissonance between social values and experience among Tennesseans will be of interest to the readers of *The New York Times*, very few of whom live in Lake County. For its actual readership, the story is not effectively about the shaken self-understanding of people in Tennessee. Instead, the story is about the confirmed presumption of readers of *The New York Times* about myth and reality in Tennessee. The story is about social aspects of identity, regional identity in Tennessee and editorially constructed identity among readers of *The New York Times*.

On this reading of the article, its climax comes exactly halfway through, with words which bring me to my theme: “This,” *The New York Times* informs us portentously, “is the Bible Belt.” For readers of *The New York Times*, what is explained about Lake County, Tenn., when it is labelled, “the Bible Belt”? In context in the article, what is explained is several different features of the discourse of one of the article’s interviewees, a certain Renee Bledsoe and of her unnamed aunt. Here is an extract from *The New York Times* article:

EXTRACT 1

Mrs. Bledsoe was talking at the Abundant Life Pentecostal Church, where she is a member. She ended her first marriage after three years because her husband, she said, besides being irresponsible, was unwilling to accept Christ.

This is the Bible Belt, where preachers blame a dissolution of morals on divorce and tell couples to work harder at staying together.

"My aunt said, 'You do not have a scriptural right to divorce,'" Mrs. Bledsoe said. "I told her, 'You're not living with him.'"

Here, there are represented at least three distinct levels of what I call "argumentation," all of them using the Bible. *The New York Times* emphasizes Mrs. Bledsoe's membership in the presumably fundamentalist Abundant Life Pentecostal Church and then adds a characterization of the "Bible Belt" as a milieu where people called "preachers" claim that divorce causes immorality and advise couples to work harder on their marriages. I guess that some readers of *The New York Times* would agree that at least some divorces *are* caused by moral failure and that some couples *should* "work harder at staying together." Surely many readers of *The New York Times* would treat both the causes and the consequences of divorce more often as bad luck than as bad morals. The point of *The New York Times*' Bible Belt rhetoric would therefore be that preachers there, unlike readers of the big city newspaper, not only blame divorce occasionally *on* moral decline, but also blame divorce consistently *for* moral decline, and that they tell couples to work harder *instead* of ending even the worst marriages. The newspaper does not report how or why Bible Belt preachers think divorce causes "a dissolution of morals."

One possibility is in fact emphasized in the biblical tradition criticizing divorce: in several places Jesus classifies remarriage after divorce as adultery (Mark 10:11–12, compare Matthew 5:32; 19:9 and Luke 16:18) and argues that when a man divorces his wife and remarries, he is effectively also forcing the ex-wife to contract an adulterous new marriage. We may well wonder how all of this might translate out of a specifically Jewish and peasant society; we know, in fact, that the earliest non-Jewish, urban Christians already found Jesus's critique of divorce culturally hard to understand, let alone socially hard to implement. The essential point for now is that the Bible Belt preachers are in a specific biblical tradition if they argue that the dissolution of marriages promotes adultery, not only by example, but also by direct socio-economic pressure, especially on the weaker ex-spouse. A second point is that for its own purposes *The New York Times* does insist on attributing some rhetoric to these Bible Belt preachers, yet the newspaper gives its readers only traces of that rheto-

ric. Finally, if I have correctly reconstructed the preachers' argument, it actually has a much closer bearing on Mrs. Bledsoe's situation than a vague moral condemnation: it questions not only Mrs. Bledsoe's divorce, but also her second marriage to the current Mr. Bledsoe.

In any case, the immediate context for the text's invocation of the Bible Belt is a feature of Mrs. Bledsoe's own argumentation and of her aunt's argumentation as reported by Mrs. Bledsoe. In a previous paragraph, unquoted here, Mrs. Bledsoe attributed the failure of her first marriage to her own immaturity and to emotional wounds left by her own parents' divorce. In our quotation, she goes on to mention as actual grounds for divorce, her ex-husband's irresponsibility and his unwillingness "to accept Christ." Here, perhaps is a feature sufficiently foreign to readers of *The New York Times* to elicit once again the explanation that it has something to do with the specific discourse of the Bible Belt.

Mrs. Bledsoe herself, however, offers a more precise explanation for using her husband's refusal to accept Christ as a ground for divorce. Her aunt, we are told, said "You do not have a scriptural right to divorce." Here we have an explicit biblical argumentation. The aunt assumes that scripture is not only a normative source for rights for herself and her niece, but is also negatively a constraint on their other possible sources of rights. In a classic modernist move, Mrs. Bledsoe's rejoinder—"You're not living with him"—shifts the argument off her aunt's assumption about scriptural normativity and onto Mrs. Bledsoe's own, private experience.

Readers of *The New York Times* can see this argumentative shift from the authority of exegesis to the authority of personal experience. Only the biblically literate, however, will have seen that, even from what the newspaper reports, it is possible to reconstruct a thicker, more specifically biblical argument between Mrs. Bledsoe and her aunt. In this half-reported, half-hidden argument, both Mrs. Bledsoe and her aunt argue from the same basis in scriptural normativity and indeed from the same text segment, 1 Corinthians 7. On any reading of the apostle Paul's argumentation in 1 Corinthians 7, the text is designed to dissuade its readers from divorce, based on Jesus's authority. Mrs. Bledsoe and her aunt probably agree that those readers should include Christian people in Tennessee. Hence, plausibly, the aunt's denial of a "scriptural right to divorce." But Mrs. Bledsoe has also read the fascinating paragraph in I Corinthians 7:12–16 in which

Paul, on his own pastoral authority, seems to permit separation or possibly divorce or possibly even remarriage to Christians whose spouses are not believers and are not willing to continue living with the believer. This is the so-called *privilegium Paulinum*. From this point of view, it is highly pertinent that Renee Bledsoe's ex-spouse was both irresponsible and refused to accept Christ.

My point in beginning with this example is that the article cannot quite conceal that Mrs. Bledsoe, her aunt, and even those Bible Belt "preachers" are engaged in a rather sensible discussion of the normative implications of specific passages of the Bible. It is not a figment of fundamentalist imagination that key passages in the Christian Bible do really claim normative authority over their intended audiences and specifically over their marriages. In the argumentative discourse of *The New York Times*, however, the argumentation is represented instead as a conflict of very general, abstract values, "dissolution of morals," "scriptural right," and, finally and decisively, Mrs. Bledsoe's private experience. On the whole, and specifically in its representation of Mrs. Bledsoe, the article depicts biblical argumentation from the outside, as a sign of illusory otherness: people in the Bible Belt believe they are different, when really they get divorced just like readers of *The New York Times*. On the other hand, the article is candid or careless enough to let people who read *both* the Bible and *The New York Times* see hints of an internally coherent and in its own way quite rational biblical discourse.

I don't know exactly why North American voices like that of *The New York Times* would tend to understate specific biblical argumentations like that which I tried to reconstruct among two women and various preachers in Tennessee. It may well be that Mrs. Bledsoe herself led in the process of "simplifying" the biblical argument. It may reflect a general journalistic tendency to suppress argumentative complexity and especially technical argumentation that might not be fully understandable to a general readership (or to a non-specialist reporter). This particular article's references to the "Bible Belt" unfortunately allow the suspicion that a rational debate about scripture between the likes of Mrs. Bledsoe and her aunt simply does not fit *The New York Times'* religious prejudices. In the argumentative world of *The New York Times*, Tennessee religion and the Bible are closely associated; Tennessee religion and rational argumentation are not.

In the space of a few sentences, then, this article illustrates three points basic to this discussion. First, it attests that some voices in North America today (in this case, Bible Belt preachers, Mrs. Bledsoe, and her aunt) argue about some issues from the normative authority of the Bible ("Scripture argues against divorce and remarriage") and/or from the normative complexity or ambiguity or even incoherence of the Bible ("Scripture seems to make an exception"). Second, some voices in North America today (here, rather broadly the voice(s) of *The New York Times*) at least sometimes understate arguments *from* the authority of the Bible and emphasize arguments *about* the authority of the Bible (Mrs. Bledsoe's counter-argument, "You're not living with him"). Third, North American journalism today seems also to like transposing statements about or from biblical authority into statements about or from authoritative persons or groups (here the negatively imaged group "Bible Belt . . . preachers" and elsewhere often such vague groupings as "religious leaders," "scholars," "conservative Christians," etc.).

II

The research problem that I want to define and illustrate here is essentially a problem in rhetorical criticism. That is, I am interested in differentiating critically among the many attempts to use the Bible persuasively in North America today. My initial assumptions are that there are several different ways of using the Bible in persuasion in North America today and that they are sufficiently important, sufficiently varied, and sufficiently contentious to warrant study. Biblical rhetoric of one kind or another is more-or-less typical of many different speech communities within North American culture. At least since de Tocqueville, it has been a cliché of American ethnography to emphasize the Bible's influence on U.S. political discourse.

I believe that rhetorical analysis can help to describe a serious gap between the continuing influence of the Bible on North American, especially U.S., civil mythology and the uses of biblical argumentation in religious subcultures and countercultures. In terms of the example we have just seen, a serious gap appears even in a text controlled by *The New York Times* between the biblical argumentation of voices from the Bible Belt and the biblical argumentation of the implied author and implied readers of the newspaper. I am interested in the degree

to which biblical argumentation remains an active *sub-cultural* discourse within North American culture, that is, a way of arguing that is seen by most Americans to be different from the cultural norm, but still complementary to it. I am also interested in the degree to which biblical argumentation is represented as *counter-cultural*, that is, as widely recognizable but unintelligible and unpersuasive outside a particular speech community, a practice seen as confined to specific religious and political minorities.

We will proceed here to examine only a few more suggestive examples of the Bible's presence in current or recent debates. Eventually, however, my hope is not only to produce an interesting rhetorical description and analysis of various attempts to persuade using the Bible. I also hope to offer some degree of rhetorical prescription. In particular, I would like to increase the transparency of biblical argumentations wherever they are used. The problem which I hope to address is finally not so much the problem of "abuse" of the Bible as it is the problem of mutually incomprehensible uses of the Bible.

It matters that my goal is ultimately prescriptive rather than descriptive, not least of all because a really satisfying description of argumentative Bible use in North American culture as a whole would be far beyond my powers. Pragmatically, I have focused on examples of biblical argumentation which have been reported in the public print media. Any sample of North American discourse which I could hope to analyse will be obviously superficial. This superficiality, however, is, I think, appropriate to the research problem and method: what I hope to study here is precisely the surface, the skin of American biblical discourse and only those deeper structures which somehow express themselves, perhaps as blemishes, on the skin.

Within North American culture today there is considerable awareness of some "issues" about which at least minorities are expected to make "biblical" claims, notably sex, sexualities, gender, reproduction, family life; less often more "public" issues of power, leadership, social justice, money, and debt. Certain groups are especially identified with biblical argumentation on specific issues, e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses with Acts 15:28 on the avoidance of blood products. North American attitudes to Israel, Iraq, and the Middle East, perceptions of terrorism, and openness to military action are singularly grounded in a range of biblical arguments. Ultimately, I hope to organize an analysis of North American biblical argumentation not around specific issues or labels,

but around specific argumentative turns, what the old rhetoricians called “topoi” or commonplaces.

The best way to define topos is by example, since topoi are, in practice, exemplary patterns, models for argumentation. Characteristic topoi in the tradition of biblical argumentation are, for example, the topos of the old versus the new, the topos of the spirit versus the letter, of the law versus the good news, strong versus weak, etc. Topoi from the argumentative culture of modernity which are often superimposed on biblical argumentation might include the topoi of liberal versus conservative, of inclusive versus exclusive, of diversity versus conformity, individual versus community. Influential topoi from biblical criticism might include story versus proposition or history versus theology. Topoi which are universal across cultural boundaries might include the part versus the whole, exception versus rule, specific versus universal, insider versus outsider. Some of these universal or common topoi were identified together in the tradition of Aristotle as commonplaces par excellence (*loci communes/koinoi topoi*), the building blocks of all argumentation (e.g., the topoi of less versus more or of genus versus species). In this essay, I am less interested in the universal topoi than in those topoi which are distinctive of biblical argumentation and/or of North American argumentative discourse.

Ideally, topoi are represented as pairs of contrasting values. Sometimes the terms of a topos are mutually exclusive, that is, they are contrary opposites, e.g., good versus evil, true versus false. We all know that good and evil, truth and falsehood co-exist in the world, but that socio-linguistically they contrast as much as possible. I find personally more interesting those topoi in which each member represents a *positive* appeal, that is, they are complementary or supplementary opposites. Thus, for example, depending upon the argumentative context and goal either the new or the old can be presented as the stronger value within the topos of the old versus the new. At the same time, within a given cultural setting, the positive values within a topos are unlikely to be evenly balanced. Argumentatively in North America, the old *can* be better than the new, but usually, I guess, the new is more persuasive. Lastly, thinking in terms of topoi can help us see that argumentative values are not stable in societies or even within arguments. Thus, for example, for some audiences and occasions the most persuasive, most topical opposite of “judge” might be “tolerate”; in other contexts, however, the topos of

judging versus tolerating might be successfully modulated into a topos of judgement versus acceptance or even forgiveness.

In keeping with the Western tradition of rhetorical theory, I distinguish rhetorical persuasion from brute force, from mental or physical bullying, by persuasion's attempt to win at least some level of consent and, indeed, to win that consent from a real audience. Persuasion wins consent largely, though certainly not only, through argumentation. Again, at least in Western rhetorical theory, argumentation is the attempt to structure social conflict into words. Argumentation seeks to represent social conflict in words which will help the speaker "win" or resolve the conflict for a real audience. Argumentation gives this verbal structure to conflict by selecting, combining or separating ideas and attitudes which are already conventional in the minds of the intended audience. Such conventions are the *topoi* which constitute the repertoire of social truth for a given speech community. Argumentation persuades by establishing in the minds of an audience the particular relevance of particular conventions, of particular *topoi* over against other possible *topoi*. Thus, even especially, the most novel and radical argument must establish itself rhetorically as a new constellation of conventional values. This process has special interest in relation to speech communities in which revolutionary values of newness, progress, rebellion, change, etc. are themselves longstanding, traditional social values, constitutive of powerful *topoi*.

III

Probably the most intense and public discussion of the use of the Bible in contemporary North American debates has been the discussion of Bill Clinton's personal rhetoric. A study of Clinton's own inner psychological relation to the Bible and religion is beyond the scope of this project. It is of interest here that throughout his pursuit and tenure of the presidency, Clinton was both praised and attacked for his uses of biblical language and biblical *topoi*. Not the least interesting thing about Clinton's lifelong habit of biblical argumentation is that it sometimes failed politically to persuade as intended.

Clinton himself allegedly reported that as governor of Arkansas he was persuaded by biblical argumentation by his pastor on two issues of public policy: abortion and the death penalty. In interviews given during his campaign for the Democratic nomination in 1992, Clinton recalled that the Rev. W.O. Vaught persuaded him first that the Bible does not prohibit capital punishment by the State and, second, that the Bible did not prohibit abortion. In both cases Clinton reported that Vaught's argument depended on "literal" reading of the Bible in the original languages. In both cases the successful biblical argumentation was negative, that is, it functioned to remove the Bible as a potential normative obstacle to Clinton's moral and political judgement. Here Clinton, like Mrs. Bledsoe earlier, illustrates an interesting argumentative situation in which the normative authority of the Bible is felt and in principle respected, but most obviously as an obstacle to free choice. For Clinton, the obstacle was to be removed by the appropriate *topoi* from technical exegesis, argued, by the way, not on Clinton's own responsibility, but rather in the reported voice of a respected clergyman. In other words, at a time in his political career when his moral integrity was already being publicly questioned, Clinton used the story of a biblical argumentation to represent himself as the conscientious layman relying on the argument of a trusted expert.⁵

A more positive and more characteristic use of the Bible in Clinton's argumentation is implicit in his campaign description of his proposed economic and social programs as a "covenant" rather than as, say, a "social contract." North Americans who recognize the word "covenant" at all would almost always feel its biblical, religious and political implications. Clinton's repeated designation of his social programs as a covenant constitutes an argument that the identity of the United States as a covenant community in relation to God prescribes not only loyalty to such political values as federal union, personal liberty and democracy, but also a degree of practical social solidarity. Clinton takes for granted an understanding of United States polity as deeply analogous to God's biblical covenant with Israel, an understanding which would be especially dear to many of Clinton's political opponents. Clinton succeeded at least temporarily in associating the idea of covenant with that of social liberality. We will see later a very different argumentation on the same basis of biblical covenant theology.

By January 1993 and his inauguration as President, Clinton had largely dropped the language of “covenant.” In his 1993 inaugural address he spoke instead of “American renewal” and stressed, even more than the ritual occasion demanded, the topos of continuity versus change.⁶ That is, Clinton’s argument in a largely, but never purely ceremonial speech is that to retain its founding values, America must periodically pass through internal crises of change (the Civil War, the Great Depression and the civil rights movement) and that his presidency would address another such crisis. Moments before the end of his speech, Clinton explicitly quoted the New Testament, specifically a line from Paul’s letter to the Galatians (6:9):

EXTRACT 2

And so, my fellow Americans, at the edge of the 21st century, let us begin with energy and hope, with faith and discipline, and let us work until our work is done. The Scripture says, “And let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season, we shall reap, if we faint not.”

From this joyful mountaintop of celebration, we hear a call to service in the valley. We have heard the trumpets. We have changed the guard. And now, each in our way, and with God’s help, we must answer the call.

Thank you and God bless you all.

I want neither to over- nor to underestimate the Bible-knowledge of Clinton’s audience. For the sizable minority who might recognize the quotation or even intuitively understand its content, the quotation contributes seriously to the argumentation of the speech. Many, who might be uncertain about exactly where the quotation comes from, would nevertheless recognize it as a moral exhortation primarily addressed to individual Christians. Many Americans would recognize sowing versus reaping as a common biblical topos within which the “due season” for reaping is an eschatological, otherworldly time or, at any rate, a time widely separated from the time of sowing good works. Especially in combination with a reference in 1993 to “the edge of the 21st century,” Clinton’s quotation argues that a considerable time of doing good works will be required before benefits will be harvested. Already at the time, Clinton was understood by one approving Christian

observer, Professor Gabriel Fackre, of Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, to be arguing in addition that Clinton's call for ambitious domestic social reforms was indeed morally analogous to the apostle Paul's summons in Galatians to Christians to persist in doing good especially though not only to "those of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10, the verse following Clinton's quotation).⁷ At the time at least some American Christians found Clinton's appeal to Galatians to be a persuasive argument in favour of extending private Christian benevolence and fraternity into a policy of greater public, national social solidarity. This was a potentially important argument to make at a turning point in federal policy in a society where the Bible is perceived by many to sanction private and religious charity rather than government social programs.

During his second term of office as President, Clinton began referring to himself publicly as the "healer of the breach." This epithet comes from Isaiah 58:12, a prophecy in which God addresses the House of Jacob:

Your ancient ruins will be rebuilt;
 You will build on age-old foundations.
 You will be called 'Healer-of-the-Breach',
 'Restorer of streets to be lived in.'
 (*NJB* modified)

Apparently Clinton received this messianic-sounding epithet from no less a prophet than the Rev. Robert Schuller, a world-famous television preacher.⁸ My own research background is in early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism—the present study is an experimental departure for me—and so it is irresistible for me to hear echoes of John the Baptist calling Jesus "Lamb of God" or of Rabbi Aqiba re-naming Simeon ben Kosibah as bar Kochba "Son of the Star" from the messianic prophecy of Numbers 24:17. Such phenomena are not beside the point in the America of the 1990s where Vernon Wayne Howell could rename himself prophetically "David Koresh" to wait in Waco, Texas for the climax of history. Whatever prophetic and messianic self-understandings Schuller and Clinton may have been flirting with, Clinton's self-references as "healer of the breach" were reported in the press as making a specifically biblical claim about the

status of Clinton's program of social reconciliation: the renewal of America *is* analogically the restoration of fallen Jerusalem.

Clinton's second term is memorable for—among other, much less edifying, things—a spectacular burst of explicitly biblical argumentation in American political life, which unfortunately demands our attention here. In a televised statement of August 17, 1998 Clinton admitted to a relationship with Monica Lewinsky “that was not appropriate. In fact,” Clinton said, “it was wrong.” The statement famously gives much more space to the faults of his accusers than to the President's own. There is no recognizable biblical argumentation and the only reference to God appears within the central topos of the private versus the public: Clinton argues succinctly that his misbehaviour is a private, personal matter for himself, “my wife and our daughter—and our [*sic*] God.” By contrast, Clinton represented the behaviour of his investigators at length as publicly, politically damaging.

Less than a month later, on—of all dates—September 11, 1998, Clinton addressed a Religious Leaders' Prayer Breakfast in much more strikingly repentant and biblical language. It is difficult to overstate the differences between the initial, defiant statement and the later admission of sin. The Prayer Breakfast speech and subsequent well-publicized “private” pastoral meetings especially with the Rev. Jesse Jackson and with the Rev. J. Philip Wogaman, the minister of a Methodist church where Clinton often worshipped, helped provide the American public with a religious rationale for forgiving Clinton and *blaming* his *persecutors* as vindictive and self-righteous. Jackson and Wogaman became highly visible advocates of forgiving Clinton without heavy political or juridical penalties.

Already on the morning of his defiant television statement, Clinton's “aides told reporters that he had been reading Psalm 51, a passage that begins ‘Have mercy upon me, O God . . . blot out my transgressions.’”⁹ The famous rubric at the beginning of Psalm 51 relates it to the story of King David's murderous and adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and both Jackson and Wogaman compared Clinton to the Israelite monarch, who despite spectacular sins retained God's anointing. In the Prayer Breakfast speech Clinton himself refers to Psalm 51:17 when he refers to “what my [*sic*] Bible calls a broken spirit.” All who heard his speech and many who saw it in the media will have been able to complete Clinton's reference to *his* Bible from their own Bibles and their own liturgical uses:

Sacrifice to God is a broken spirit,
A broken, contrite heart you never scorn.

The Psalmist is, of course, talking to God, but Clinton is talking to America. Later in his brief speech, Clinton twice combines the notion “broken spirit” with that of a “strong heart” to describe his intended demeanour in the future. Clinton is arguing by this oxymoron that his religiously sanctioned inner brokenness of spirit is compatible with the outward strength of heart demanded by his political office and situation. His political combativeness and legal evasions are not signs of unrepentance. Interestingly Clinton again refers to himself in terms of Isaiah 58:12, this time in a promise “to repair breaches of my own making.”

Clinton’s Prayer Breakfast speech was possibly the most successful of his rhetorical career. At any rate, it provided the American public with a biblical rationale for forgiving his sexual indiscretions. It also did something which Clinton’s occasionally biblical rhetoric in general tended to do: it showed that the liberal President was spiritually at home in the same populist and biblicist religious culture more often associated in public discourse with the “Religious Right” and “Bible Belt preachers.” Specifically by confessing his sin and talking of repentance, Clinton distanced himself from a libertarian-sounding discourse in which he might have denied that his actions had been wrong, or in which even more bizarrely he actually did try to deny that sex was sex and that lying was lying. Instead, he identified himself with his fellow citizens as a biblical moralist who sometimes fell short of the standard to which he still aspired. His opponents, then, who insisted on political and juridical accountability, appeared guilty of at least the greater sin of unforgiveness.

The Prayer Breakfast Speech in particular and Clinton’s generally successful management of the topic forgiveness versus consequences and his blending of collective psychological *healing* with personal religious *repentance* did spark protests. A personal favourite is Donna Britt’s comment in *The Washington Post* about Clinton’s argumentative success in converting his personal moral failure into a national psychological ailment:

Tell me, are we healed yet? Are we, individually and as a nation, working hard enough to forgive our now-apologetic president, since he has told us he’s trying to “focus more on how I can properly

atone, how I can be forgiven, and then how I can go back to healing with my family”? Americans have to forgive him to become whole, right? I mean, our nation’s recovery could get stalled if citizens refuse to toil as “diligently” at their healing process [as we should].¹⁰

A more sober and extremely rare critical response to Clinton’s biblical and religious rhetoric came in two volumes of papers by Christian scholars most of whom had been religiously motivated supporters of Clinton’s political programs. The two volumes are: *Judgement Day at the White House: A Critical Declaration Exploring Moral Issues and the Political Use and Abuse of Religion* published in 1998 and the sequel, *The Day After: A Retrospective on Religious Dissent in the Presidential Crisis* published in 2000, both edited by the same Gabriel Fackre mentioned earlier.¹¹ These voices from a “Religious Centre Left” nevertheless argue that Clinton’s biblical argumentation succeeded where it should not have, in *dissociating* public forgiveness from public consequences. This dissent by biblically literate experts, politically well-disposed toward Clinton exposes a fundamental aspect of biblical argumentation in North America today. Biblical argumentation, like Bible reception generally, is itself topical, that is, organized in topoi. Clinton’s arguments worked as well as they did because everybody in America “knows” that the Bible is in *favour* of forgiveness and *against* self-righteous vindictiveness; it is not so active a part of North American Bible “knowledge” that the God of the Bible, even of the Christian Bible, judges and even punishes individuals and communities. The most persuasive topos was forgiveness versus self-righteousness, not sin versus responsibility.

In effect, Clinton’s two most public statements on the Lewinsky scandal successfully used religious and biblical topics about sin and forgiveness to build a one-way connection between the public/political and the personal/private. The topos of the public versus the private is combined with the biblical topos of repentance versus forgiveness, on the one hand, to facilitate the massive transfer of private forgiveness into the public sphere. On the other hand, the same combination is used to condemn the transfer of public, political vindictiveness into the allegedly private sphere of the President’s personal actions.

Such topics of forgiveness versus consequences, forgiveness versus therapy, private sin and public accountability have remained very

much alive and very much conditioned by Clinton's voice in discussion of such things as school killings in the United States and, in Canada, in discussions of State and Church liability for abuse in Native Residential Schools. Most recently, topics of religion, responsibility, therapy, and forgiveness are structuring the tormented discussion in the United States in relation to histories of sexual abuse by Roman Catholic clergy. To quote again *The New York Times*:

Dr. Frederic M. Luskin, a psychologist who is director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, said a series of nonconnected events helped bring about a forgiveness surge [in the last decade]. There were scientific studies about its health benefits. There was also a growing public acceptance of the connection between spirituality and wellness. Even Bill Clinton helped, by bringing forgiveness into the public lexicon . . .¹²

IV

In the examples I have offered so far, evidence in the public print media for the existence of biblical argumentation in North American culture has been indirect: newspapers refer to such argumentation more readily than they describe it. It may not be wholly insignificant that relatively thick reports of biblical argumentation are part of public reports on debates within churches about the place of homosexuality in Christian communities. Perhaps the essential point here is that a debate about homosexuality is portrayed in such reports as a sub- or countercultural debate within Christian minorities within which all parties are expected by the press to invoke scripture. On the other hand, perhaps relatively thick reportage of biblical argumentation about aspects of homosexuality reflects still deep social division within the larger North American culture.

The following exchange was reported on March 25, 2001 in a long story (the quotation below represents about a tenth of the whole) in a Sunday local interest section of *The New York Times*.¹³ The story describes the members of Mount Kisco Presbyterian Church as "Unlikely Rebels" as their congregation "Battles For Rights of Gays." The article notes that "[u]nlike many other religions and Protestant denominations, Presbyterians are almost evenly divided over the issue

of homosexuality, making them a mirror for the broader debate in the country at large.” To the same extent the issue and the article are interesting mirrors of argumentative Bible-use in North America.

In the excerpt below, the newspaper plausibly constructs a debate between the Rev. Jack S. Miller, senior minister of Mount Kisco Presbyterian Church (the congregation which is the focus of the article) and the Rev. Marc Benton, pastor of nearby Bethlehem Presbyterian Church. In the preceding paragraph, Mr. Benton is introduced as asserting that the Mount Kisco congregation was precipitating “a constitutional crisis” in the denomination. Mount Kisco had widely advertised an intention not to comply with existing church regulations limiting eligibility for church office, based on sexual behaviour. The issue is, however, clearly not limited to questions of polity:

EXTRACT 3

Like many others in the denomination, Mr. Benton believes that homosexuality is “one of a number of ways in which our sexual identity and beings have been distorted by the fact that we’ve rebelled against God,” as he put it. The issue is one of adherence to the Bible, which he said states that homosexuality is an abomination.

Mr. Miller counters that the same section of the Bible also calls for unruly children to be taken to the temple and stoned to death. There is no reason to abide by a rule designed thousands of years ago to ensure that the Jewish people would survive by having as many children as possible, he said.

In the 19th century, he added, many Presbyterians believed slavery was justified by the Bible, and the issue split the church. (The southern segment, called the Church of the Confederacy during the Civil War, did not rejoin the denomination until 1983.)

Moreover, Jesus never condemned homosexuality, “What he did condemn was hypocrisy and greed, yet we say nothing about that,” Mr. Miller said.

Mr. Miller believes the church’s disapproving view of homosexuality has done incalculable damage. Twice in the past year Mr. Miller has gone to emergency rooms to help gay people who attempted suicide, he said. “They remembered exactly when they were first told it was wrong, in Sunday School.”

Benton's words echo an issue which has been alluded to several times in the newspaper article already: the offending church regulations as quoted in the article deny church office to "anyone . . . who does not practice fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." The Mount Kisco objectors to the policy raise the general civil rights concern that this policy forces congregations to enquire into the private lives of potential office-holders. But the article accepts the Mount Kisco perception that "the rule's main target was clearly gay people. . . . Like many other liberal ministers and activists, Mr. Miller sees the debate over gay rights as a continuation of the civil rights struggles of the 1960's."

Against this representation of the conflict among Presbyterians as a conflict over the civil rights especially of homosexuals, Benton identifies homosexuality as a special case of a presumably universal "distorted"-ness of "our [*sic*] sexual identity" in consequence of rebellion against God. In the actual debates in the Presbyterian Church (USA), this is a more important point than the reference in the article suggests; it is quite often common ground between a Mr. Benton and a Mr. Miller that *all* human identity and therefore *all* human sexuality is somehow distorted or fallen in (ir)relation to God. For the conservative Mr. Benton this is apparently grounds for emphasizing the unique normativity of heterosexual marriage; for Mr. Miller we may guess the same narrative of fallenness grounds a reluctance to judge. Surely most readers of the article are expected to identify Mr. Benton's narrative of rebellion-fall-and-(especially)-sexual-distortion as a reading of Genesis 3. It is perhaps too much to hope for that a newspaper story—even a long one such as this—would discuss the distinctively (controversially) Christian and Latin, if not Presbyterian character of Benton's narration of the Story of the Fall. In any case, whereas *The New York Times* explicitly presents the inner-church debate as a mirror of the wider society's civil rights discourse, the article has at least one voice refer in shorthand to an imaginably interesting and distinctively biblical discussion of the relations among sexuality, createdness and sinfulness in human existence.

The next sentence is the first explicit mention of "the Bible" in the text and references a different biblical discussion from that implied in the reference to readings of Genesis 3. *The New York Times* has Benton assert that "[t]he issue is one of adherence to the Bible" and that the Bible "states that homosexuality is an abomination."

Earlier in the article, “Billie Jean Sorenson, a church member whose adult son is gay, said the issue is about ‘loving your neighbour as yourself.’” The contrast between these two neighbouring definitions of “the issue” is difficult for the reader to ignore. Presumably Ms. Sorenson means that protesting an anti-homosexual policy is adhering to the Bible via Leviticus 19:18 and its New Testament receptions (e.g. Mark 12:31–3; Luke 10:27–37; Matthew 5:43; Galatians 5:14), while Benton understands adherence to the Bible as including also Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 with their New Testament receptions (Romans 1:27). This implied exchange between Sorenson and Benton again conceals much possible common ground.

Both Sorenson and Benton might agree that adherence to the Bible is important and entails compliance with at least some normative commands. Sorenson’s position is represented less clearly: it is unclear whether Sorenson thinks that her (homosexual) neighbour should be loved *because* scripture commands such love (and defines ‘neighbour’ expansively). Perhaps Sorenson cites Leviticus 19:18 to illustrate her really autonomous liberal ethical position rather than to mandate it. Perhaps Leviticus 19:18 and its reception are necessary to Sorenson as normatively authorizing non-compliance with other biblical mandates. In context in *The New York Times*, Sorenson’s citation serves to undermine Benton’s competing normative claim to represent the voice of scripture. This effect would be heightened for a readership which recognized both citations as coming from “the same section of the Bible.”

Thus both Sorenson and Benton would probably agree that some aspects of Leviticus 17–26 are not binding norms for the Presbyterian Church (USA). This is underlined by Miller’s reference, apparently, to Leviticus 20:9 (compare Exodus 21:15, 17; Deuteronomy 27:16) which seems to mandate the death penalty for filial impiety. Miller here formulates an argument which, in several variants, has been very important in inner-church debates about homosexuality and which also has considerable appeal for non-church audiences. We may schematize the argument as follows:

- > Leviticus (especially 17–26) expresses many commands which are not normative for (OR: are repugnant to) Christians today (N.B. including those who oppose toleration of homosexuality);
- > Biblical intolerance for homosexuality derives from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13;

- > Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and their receptions need not be normative for (PERHAPS: should be repugnant to) Christians today.

Unlike many arguments from scripture, this pattern is not merely aimed at reinforcing the commitment of the already persuaded. Leviticus, not only but especially in chapters 17–20, does indeed contain sentences which closely resemble Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in form, but which hardly any Christian community seriously asserts as norms. The persuasive force of the argument derives especially from the possibility of selecting striking examples of commands which resemble 18:22 and 20:13, but are obviously offensive to a contemporary North American Christian audience. Thus, to cite an example which I have heard used but not yet found in print, if inter-male coitus is an “abomination” (Benton and Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13), so apparently is eating oysters (Leviticus 11:9–12, cf. 20:25). This particular example suffers, however, from the whiff of anti-Semitism; few Christian liberals wish to go on record arguing that condemning homosexual practices is as un-Christian as keeping *koshrut*.

From this point of view, it is extremely important that Miller chooses an example, from Leviticus 20:9, of a mandate which is followed today neither in Judaism nor in Christianity. Miller’s criteria for selecting this example of an obnoxious Levitical command may indeed include a desire to avoid anti-Jewish offence: *The New York Times* article attributes to Miller a summary of Leviticus 20:9 which is more closely related to rabbinic discussions of this text than to the text itself, “the Bible also calls for unruly children to be taken to the temple and stoned to death.” In fact, Leviticus 20:9 and its parallels (Exodus 21:15–17; Deuteronomy 27:16; Matthew 15:4) say nothing of the place or manner of execution. Deuteronomy 27 famously substitutes a ritual cursing for any direct punishment for many of the crimes condemned in Exodus and Leviticus, including that of unruly children, but not that of same-sex coitus. It is Deuteronomy 21:18–21 which specifies stoning at, n.b., the town gate as the place to which both parents must bring a rebellious son for stoning, thus reducing the arbitrary power of the *paterfamilias*. Biblical condemnation of rebellious children has thus figured prominently in a long rabbinic discussion of punishment, especially capital punishment, a discussion which has tended to follow the lead of Deuteronomy 27 in leaving punishment in God’s hands. The rabbinic discussion is a classic argument for the

moderating of legal sanctions without repudiating basic judgements of Torah, shifting the emphasis in reading away from defining punishment toward admonition (*b. Sanhedrin* 8.1); it is an interesting contrast with the all-or-nothing rhetoric of the Christian debate on the Bible and sexual mores.

Miller also appeals to a topos with a very ancient pedigree in legal argumentation when he contrasts the design intention of a biblical norm with its apparent literal application in changed circumstances. "There is no reason to abide by a rule designed thousands of years ago to ensure that the Jewish people would survive by having as many children as possible, he said." The topic of *scriptum* versus *voluntas* (that is, of "what is actually written" versus "the design intention") has a long history in Roman judicial rhetoric, especially in the contesting of wills.¹⁴ Jesus, moreover, is said to have used the topic (along with the topos of permission versus prescription) in an argument against divorce: Torah permitted divorce only in order to regulate its adverse effects on women; God's original, creating intention was for permanent marriages (Mark 10:1–9). Whether in probate law or in Jesus's Torah-interpretation, the topos of *scriptum* versus *voluntas* is more easily applied by a lawyer who can plausibly claim to know the intention of a text's legal author.

The argument is also strengthened by evidence that the text does not adequately reflect the author's intent. Historical criticism of the Bible is often used in something like the latter role: the intention that was relevant for interpretation "thousands of years ago" can be determined and is not normatively relevant for, at any rate, non-Jewish reception of the text today. In biblical argumentation since Paul, this topos is often reformulated in terms of an even more abstract opposition between *gramma* and *pneuma* (2 Corinthians 3:6–7); this opposition is so deeply engrained in Western hermeneutical consciousness that I doubt that it is possible to juxtapose *scriptum* and *voluntas* in reference to the Bible without subliminally activating the tension between spirit and letter in which the spirit of the text supersedes rather than elucidates the letter.

In the case of Leviticus 20:9 it may reasonably be wondered whether Miller is right in claiming to know the design intention of the text. Was the levitical prohibition of male-male coitus "designed thousands of years ago," by God or anyone else to promote "Jewish" fertility rates? A somewhat more scholarly use of the same topos guesses

that the design intention of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:8 is to prohibit putting any male in the [subordinate] sexual place of a women: “the specific concern of these verses appears to be about maintaining the status of men and avoiding the shame associated with *confusing* social roles in the community” (Duffield 2004, 111).¹⁵ The latter guess seems to me less unlikely than the former. Argumentatively, moreover, Duffield’s guess has the further advantage of identifying a thoroughly disreputable design intention for a rule which is to be rejected. For better or for worse, according to Duffield’s reading, the design intention could not possibly be attributed to God; Miller’s could be.

Miller’s assumption about the design of Leviticus 20:9 would seem to leave it a relevant (therefore binding) *Sitz im Leben* in post-Holocaust Jewish communities, concerned with the imperative of survival. I do not really think that Miller is meant to imply to readers of *The New York Times* that Leviticus 20:9 is normatively binding, but only on Jews. It is interesting, then, that no attempt is made to exclude this reading; Miller and the article as a whole assume that Presbyterian and Jewish debates about the normativity of Leviticus 20:9 interact only in the remote past. Still, the essential point is that the often historical-critical claim (however implausible) to know what a biblical text was “designed” to do is an important aspect of much contemporary biblical argumentation.

In the context of his argument about the production of the text, its historic design, Miller is allowed to offer a supporting argument from the history of its disputed reception at different times in the nearer past. “In the 19th century . . . many Presbyterians believed slavery was justified by the Bible.” The division of the church and arguments from the Bible over slavery are held to be analogous to the division of the church and arguments from the Bible over homosexuality. In Aristotelean argumentation theory, the two essential types of argument are deduction from propositions in topical form (syllogism or enthymeme) and induction from a narrative example (*paradeigma*: precedent, analogue, or myth) (*Rhetoric* 2.20). In this case the argument is not from a single topos, but rather from a complex paradigmatic narrative in which reference to the Bible is only one plot element: in U.S. American discourse, arguments that can be narrated in terms of “slavery” and “the Civil War” have enormous mythic power. They combine, for example, respect for the valour of the losing

side with complete confidence in the inevitability of the right side winning and in the acceptability of any cost. “Civil War” and “slavery” narratives serve also as preambles to “Civil Rights” narratives; through living collective memory of “the civil rights struggles of the 1960’s,” references to unfinished business of the “Civil War” and “slavery” have a contemporaneity lacking to more recent events. Induction from historical and/or mythical narratives, “examples” and “precedents,” is the great alternative in classical rhetorical theory to deduction from *topoi* (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20).

A nice reflection of the power of the narrative of biblical argumentation both for and against slavery may be observed in a much-publicized item from the Canadian press, Canadian discourse here drawing explicitly on a U.S. American paradigm. On April 10, 2002, the *National Post* reported on the barring of a student—Marc Hall, who was attending a state-funded Roman Catholic high school—from bringing a same-sex date to his school prom.¹⁶ Part of the context, that of a publicly-funded, yet confessional school in Ontario is distinctly strange to U.S. American discourse. It is all the more interesting, then, that the one reference to biblical argumentation, and almost the only thing Mr. Hall is quoted as saying about the school’s banning of his boyfriend, evokes a narrative about Bible-reading which derives much of its argumentative force from the U.S. Civil war context, though the context actually mentioned is the Enlightenment narrative of Dark Ages:

EXTRACT 4

Marc says the decision to ban the couple from the prom is “ignorant.”

“The Bible says slavery is OK, but that doesn’t mean we accept slavery. It’s the year 2002,” Marc said.

The argumentative centrality of Marc’s narrative is headlined above the article itself: “How a Catholic family took on their Church: Court battle imminent: ‘The Bible says slavery is OK. That doesn’t mean we accept slavery’.” From a formal point of view, Hall’s argument from analogy is flawed in ways which suggest that both he and the newspaper regard it as symbolic and supportive, rather than decisive: neither Hall nor the report is trying to change the mind of someone who claims that the Bible forbids same-sex romances. That is, the argu-

ment is actually from non-analogy, that what the Bible permits we forbid, so what the Bible forbids we may/should permit:

- > the Bible “OKs” (= justifies, permits OR tolerates?) slavery:
- > BUT we forbid slavery.
- > the Bible forbids same-sex couples:
- > we [should] OK same-sex couples.

My initial sense that Mr. Hall’s argument here is imported from U.S. American discourse is perhaps strengthened by the observation that, within the newspaper report, the Durham Catholic District School Board is said to base its position, not on any claim about what the Bible says, but rather on “Church teachings and our values as a Catholic school system.” It may be that Hall’s claim, that the “Bible says slavery is OK,” derives from his own extensive Bible-study; my guess is that Hall and the *National Post* are both representing the presumed “knowledge” of Canadian newspaper readers, who are not over-curious about either “Church teachings” or the Bible (or the history of servility). As regards the Bible, it might be truer to claim that ‘the Bible does not urgently condemn slavery’ or that ‘early-modern Christian slaveholders often claimed that the Bible condemned Africans to subjugation,’ a version of Miller’s claim that “many Presbyterians believed slavery was justified by the Bible.” The *National Post*, however, does not expect its readers to question significantly the repeated claim about what the Bible says. There is thus a suggestive (national?) contrast between *The New York Times*’ parenthetical, but precise reference to slaveholding, Bible-citing American Presbyterians and the *National Post*’s emphatic repetition, without analytical comment, that “the Bible says slavery is OK.”

VI

What I hope I have been able to show in this extremely limited sample of recent surfacings of biblical argumentation in America is, first of all, that biblical argumentation does happen. Many in North America are thinking and arguing about issues important to them in terms of biblical topoi. A second point is that where biblical argumentation is influential, its influence is acknowledged in the U.S. and

Canadian press, but its content is almost never presented or analysed with any degree of precision or sympathy. Biblical argumentation is presented as an important but marginal subcultural discourse: non-members need to know it is there, but do not need to understand its internal structure. The tendency to report what people think, but not why they think it is by no means confined to reporting about biblical argumentation. It is, I think, a dangerous tendency for a society which desires to be authentically pluralist.

Perhaps my most controversial point has been that where biblical argumentation does impinge on the public sphere in North America today, the underlying biblical argumentation is qualitatively not bad. For better or for worse the Christian Bible is, I think, reasonably available as a source of arguments against most divorce, in favour of forgiveness, but only for the truly repentant. Arguments against slavery or in favour of freedom of homosexual intimacy appear in the press rather as arguments against biblical influence. Yet even these are biblically inspired. My point is not that such arguments are necessarily compelling, but that they are biblically non-negligible and should be better understood especially by those who reject them.

Notes

* Much of this essay was originally presented to the Universitäts-gesellschaft Erfurt, 25 July, 2002.

1. Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 40–41.

2. Keith Landy and Reuven Bulka, “Canadian Jewish congress statement to our fellow Canadians of the Christian faith in advance of the release of *The Passion of the Christ*,” 16 February, 2004.

3. Presbyterian Church (USA): Washington Office, “How To Be an Effective Advocate ...Making our voices heard!” n.d.

4. Sara Rimer, “Sad Song in Splittsville, Tenn. ‘I Said I Do but Now I Don’t,’” *The New York Times* June 11, 2002, Late Edition—Final, Section A, Page 20, Column 1.

5. David Maraniss, *The Washington Post*, June 29, 1992, a1.

6. “‘We Force the Spring’: Transcript of Address By President Clinton,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 1993, A15; “This is our Time. Let us embrace it.” *The Washington Post*, January 21, 1993, a26.

7. Gabriel Fackre ed., *The Day After: A Retrospective on Religious Dissent in the Presidential Crisis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000) 4 and n. 4, citing *American Press*, February 7, 1993.
8. Hanna Rosin, "Scandal Forces Religious Issues Into Public Eye," *The Washington Post*, August 19, 1998, A17.
9. Rosin, "Scandal."
10. Donna Britt, "Forgiving Clinton Is Beside The Point," *The Washington Post*, 2 October, 1998; B1.
11. Gabriel Fackre ed., *Judgement Day at the White House: A Critical Declaration Exploring Moral Issues and the Political Use and Abuse of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998) and Fackre, *Day After*.
12. Dean E. Murphy, "Beyond Justice: The Eternal Struggle to Forgive," *The New York Times*, 26 May, 2002 Late Edition—Final, Section 4, Page 1, Column 1.
13. Robert Worth, "Unlikely Rebels: A Church Battles For Rights of Gays," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2001, Late Edition—Final, Section 14WC, Page 1, Column 1.
14. Kathy Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 56–58.
15. Ian K. Duffield, "The Clear Teaching of the Bible? A Contribution to the Debate about Homosexuality in the Church of England," *ExpTim* 115.4: 109–15
16. Sarah Schmidt, "How a Catholic family took on their Church: Court battle imminent: 'The Bible says slavery is OK. That doesn't mean we accept slavery,'" *National Post*, April 10, 2002, A8.