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Understanding the Bible's Influence

BRIAN MALLEY

The Bible is often said to be the most influential book in history, and that may be so. Certainly some important institutions have promoted it, some weighty ideas have been attributed to it, and many historic figures have been moved by it. How and why the Bible has had such influence is as yet rather poorly understood. Although much attention has been paid to the formation and meaning of biblical texts, the social and psychological processes affecting the way these texts are perceived, understood, and deployed have not been much investigated. Historically, reflections on the Bible's influence have focused on exceptional qualities of the Bible, qualities that, it is argued, have impressed generations of readers. The relatively greater influence of the Bible in comparison to other books was to be understood as the result of the Bible's superiority to other texts. Without denying that there is something—in fact, much—to be said for the Bible's literary, ethical, and philosophical qualities, such explanations will not do. Even the most high-minded and literary of works can be ignored.

Anthropologists look to the people who read and interpret the Bible as the source for the Bible's continuing influence. To some degree this influence is the result of deliberate acts by translators, publishers, and preachers, but it is also the result of Biblicism: the complex of ideas and practices that surround the Bible. The processes that make up Biblicism differ in history, distribution, scope, time course, and technology. Some processes, such as the formation of an explicit institutional epistemology in which doctrines are attributed to the Bible, can span many centuries. Others, such as the cognitive search process whereby the devotional reader finds the ancient text relevant to his life, can take less than a second. Biblicism, as I see it, is less a literary phenomenon than a human one, and therefore it requires an anthropological and psychological account.

Treatment of Biblicism as an anthropological phenomenon distinguishes it from three related endeavors. First, there is both room and need for an anthropological approach to Biblicism in contrast to a "theological" one. Many Christians view the Bible as a divinely inspired book, a means by which God speaks to them. When, in her devotional reading, a woman feels convicted of despising her

husband, she may well feel that the Holy Spirit has opened her eyes to a moral shortcoming in her life. Whether this has in fact happened is a matter of theology, not the sort of empirical question that can be answered by an anthropologist. What the anthropologist studies is how she came to be reading this passage in the first place, how she connected what the text says to her life situation, and how she has come to attribute the insight to the Holy Spirit. Anthropology is concerned with the human side of the story, and really cannot speak to loftier matters. Conversely, theological accounts enormously underdetermine the ways in which people actually use and experience the Bible; so an anthropological account is needed, regardless of one's theological commitments.

Biblicism is an anthropological phenomenon also in that it is a cultural phenomenon requiring explanation in terms of social and cognitive theory. For the last few decades, comparative religionists have been exploring Biblicism and other scriptural traditions as "scripture." In principle, this research is anthropological, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith emphasized: "On close inquiry, it emerges that being scripture is not a quality inherent in a given text, or type of text, so much as an interactive relation between that text and a community of persons (though such relations have been by no means constant). One might even speak of a widespread tendency to treat texts in a 'scripture-like' way: a human propensity to scripturalize" (1933: x). Insofar as there is a human "tendency to treat texts in a 'scripture-like' way," scripture is an anthropological phenomenon. But, in practice, scholars in religious studies—especially Smith—have frequently expressed their findings as predicates of "scripture," and it is clear that many are exploring scripture use not as a human behavioral phenomenon but rather as a transcendent ideal to which humans respond.

One unfortunate result is that many claims about scripture are not really empirical claims at all, despite appeals to historical evidence. Rather than describing how a scripture emerged or was maintained as the result of local social and psychological processes, comparative religionists tend to use historical data merely as a touchstone for claims about scripture as a category that transcends any particular place or time. What makes this especially problematic is that if scripture is viewed as a transcendent phenomenon, and it has all the properties found in any place and time, then one must explain why those properties are not universally expressed. It is not enough to examine a historical period and to argue, on that basis, that scripture is "X." One must then explain why "X" was not expressed in all the other times and places where people used scripture. To my knowledge, not a single study does this.

Another unfortunate characteristic of this research tradition is a notable failure to engage with broader theories of human behavior. Scripture use tends to be described, at best, in terms of ritual theory, but not in terms of broader social and psychological processes. The assumption seems to be not only that scripture is transcendent but that it is sui generis as well. In stark contrast to these

unfortunate trends, the papers in this volume relate scripture use to broader social processes of legitimization, discourse formation, and identity formation.

An anthropological approach insists that the use of scripture is a kind of human behavior that should be understood, so far as possible, in terms of theories of human thought and action. The principle of biblical authority, for instance, can be understood as part of institutional processes of self-definition in a particular historical context (Malley 2004). Much individual Bible interpretation can be understood as normal cognitive processes operating in Bible-specific discursive and epistemological frames (Keller 2005; Malley 2004). If Biblicist activities are understood in the larger context of social and psychological processes, the study of Bible use is both the study of a historically important tradition and also has ramifications for our understanding of human beings generally.

Finally, an anthropological approach to Biblicism differs from studies of the Bible's reception. Reception theory is a variant of the reader-response theory of literary meaning. Reader-response theory claims that the meaning of a text is to be found in the reader's interaction with the text. Insofar as reader-response theory maintains that meaning is a human phenomenon rather than a property of things, it is decidedly anthropological. Reception theory adds to reader-response theory a particular focus on people's resistance to texts and the social construction of accepted meanings. Increasingly, scholars in biblical studies are including the reception of the Bible within the scope of their textual studies, as is reflected in the *Blackwell Bible Commentaries*, the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, and studies such as Brevard Childs's *Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (2004).

Reception theory is fundamentally historical; but, like all history, involves implicit anthropological claims. Anthropologists are well positioned to contribute to the historiography of scripture reception, and to draw upon studies of the Bible's reception for evidence pertinent to anthropological claims. Both kinds of accounts are necessary for an understanding of the Bible's influence.

The present volume marks an important advance in the anthropological understanding of Biblicism, particularly our understanding of the social processes underwriting the Bible's influence. In this chapter I would like to call two of these processes to the reader's attention—the governing concepts of "God's word" and "the Bible," and the social shaping of "what the Bible says"—and to sketch how these contribute to the Bible's ongoing influence.

"God's Word" and the Bible

Specific biblical texts are, for the most part, influential because they are part of the Bible, part of "God's word." Expressions like "the word of God," "God's word," and "the word of the Lord," refer to a kind of authoritative discourse that includes the Bible, but is seldom limited to it. So, for example, among the Tzotzil Protestants studied by Akesha Baron, the term *sk'op dios* ("God's word, the word of God") encompasses the Bible, formal religious sermons, Protestant Christianity

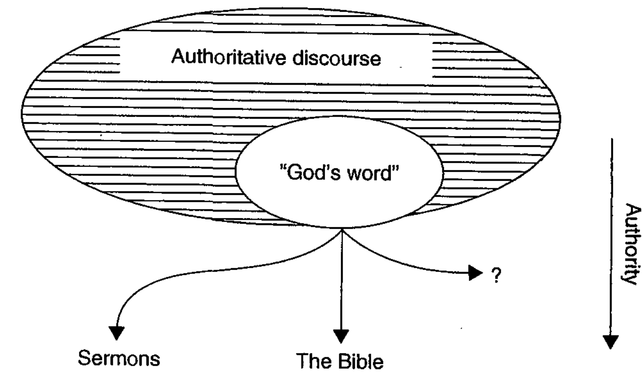

Figure 11.1 The structure of "God's word"

generally, as well as the informal discussion of Protestant teachings in families and peer groups.

James Bielo (personal communication) also witnessed "God's word" being used to refer not just to the Bible but also to books and discussions in which no biblical text was cited. Even among the theologically conservative U.S. evangelicals that I studied, there was some ambiguity in the way the phrase "word of the Lord" was used: although it normally referred to the Bible, in some contexts it was used of the sermon as well. Uncertainty about the precise extent of "God's word" is not just a result of incomplete ethnography: my informants indicated they were not certain, and it is likely that "God's word" is not a well-bounded concept.

Relations between the Bible, "God's word," and socially authoritative discourse are depicted in Figure 11.1. In every society some forms of discourse are authoritative. In Christian communities, "God's word" is a part of this authoritative discourse. In most Christian communities, including those represented in this volume, "God's word" includes the Bible and also other forms of discourse.

Probably the clearest case where "God's word" is not limited to the Bible occurs in charismatic churches, where divine gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues may be found. As Jon Bialecki's essay demonstrates, prophecy is an important way in which the Bible is complemented by another manifestation of "God's word." Bialecki argues that prophecy figures structurally as an indicator of presence in contrast to the written text, with its implication of absence. The problem of the written, fixed text, as we shall see, constitutes a general problem for Biblicist communities.

The depiction in Figure 11.1, if generally correct, captures two features of Biblicism as a cultural tradition. First, it implies that when children are socialized to the Bible's authority, they first become sensitive to socially authoritative discourse, then to that part of socially authoritative discourse that is called "God's word" (and its accompanying institutional contexts), and finally, if they happen to live in a community where the Bible is particularly emphasized, to the Bible as

the paradigmatic instance of "God's word." The Bible's authority, on this view, is derived from its inclusion in socially authoritative discourse rather than in any doctrine of divine inspiration.

Second, the depiction in Figure 11.1 suggests that the concept of "God's word" provides a flexible interface between the changing requirements of authoritative discourse and the relatively fixed text of the Bible. One of Baron's informants describes a man who tells his wife, "God's word says this, 'Whoever loves her husband has Life, whoever doesn't love her husband has none.'" This statement (as reported by Baron's informant and translated by Baron) echoes the language and syntax of the general instruction to love one another in 1 John 2, but its substance—that a wife's devotion to her husband is a precondition for her spiritual salvation—is invented. Baron's other informants hold to a different view of masculinity, for which they too can cite "God's word." They have a great deal of flexibility in establishing connections between "God's word" and the points they want to make precisely because "God's word" has a wide scope and hazy boundaries.

This distinction between "God's word" and the Bible may account for the concept of "the Bible." I have argued elsewhere that, at least among American evangelical Christians, the notion of "the Bible" is cognitively represented as a kind of placeholder that skirts the need to define what exactly the Bible is by relying instead on stereotypical ways Bibles are marked in the cultural environment (Malley 2004). Because evangelical Christians can identify Bibles by use of recognition criteria, they do not need to define what it is that makes a book a Bible. They do have assumptions about how such a definition might be constructed—that the Bible is a text (but no particular text) that has a generally defined meaning—but they do not actually have a definition of "the Bible." This cognitive structure allows evangelical Christians to use a variety of books as Bibles while still referring to them all as "the Bible." The flexibility of Bibles is evident nowhere more than in the genre of children's Bibles (Bottigheimer 1996).

But why have a singular concept, "the Bible," at all? I suspect the notion of "the Bible" is itself a mediating term between the plurality of books that are called Bibles (and treated accordingly) and the singular role in authoritative discourse that Bibles are thought to play. The relation between Bibles and authoritative discourse is actually quite dynamic, but it tends to be conceptualized in very simple terms—often just that "the Bible" is authoritative—and the complexities of actual practice chalked up to "interpretation." The notion of "the Bible" is a simple way of reconciling the plurality of Bibles with the expectation (at least among many evangelical Christians) that all are authoritative and ultimately in agreement on fundamental points, while leaving open a lot of room for social processes to influence what "the Bible" is said to say. On this model, the openness of "the Bible" provides an ideology for the use of various different Bibles.

Liam Murphy's analysis illustrates this dynamic quite well. On the one hand, it is an iconic representation of a particular kind of authoritative discourse, the

association between religion, national identity, and tradition in Northern Ireland. In the context of Loyalist-Protestant parades, the image of the Bible invokes, in the vague way symbols often do, the association of the Crown with Protestantism and, more generally, the "forces of light." On the other hand, the framing function of "the Bible" allows this sizeable collection of varied texts to serve as a kind of repository of images, quotations, characters, ideas, and moralities upon which people can draw. Canonical critics have drawn attention to the implications of juxtaposing these texts, but it is worth noting also, as Murphy does, that Christians draw upon them selectively, and with great freedom. The concept of "the Bible" allows Christians to draw upon motifs and texts found in any passage in a variety of Bibles.

"What the Bible Says"

An implication of this model is that "what the Bible says" is partly constructed, either individually or socially. An instance of individual construction of the Bible's message is offered by John Pulis's description of a Rastafarian's use of scripture, searching the "dead letters" of print and constructing ("citing-up") them as meaningful and relevant ("livical sounds" or "up-full sounds"). Bongo uses his creative imagination in combination with different readings of his dog-eared King James Version to construct the "living testament" of Haile Selassie. Of course, the kind of creative freedom evidenced by Bongo is potentially disruptive to institutions, and so in institutional contexts we might expect to see some degree of social influence on how "what the Bible says" is constructed—and indeed we do.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this volume is the contributors' depictions of how "what the Bible says" gets shaped by the social contexts in which "God's word" is invoked. Akesha Baron describes the conversation of three men who engage in *sk'op dios* to work through conflicting models of masculinity, each of which is rooted in the Bible: in favor of male authority in the home, they cite the biblical teaching that the man is the head (*cabeza*) of the home, and wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord (Ephesians 5:22–24). On the other hand, in favor of gender equality, they cite the general biblical teaching that Life is to be sought together, and Jesus' example of *paciencia*. Their conversation is, cognitively, a shared search process, in which they explore not only various understandings of masculinity but also various ways of connecting their ideas to the Bible (Malley 2004; Bielo, this volume). The interpretive process here is not a deduction based on the text, as classical models of interpretation maintain, but rather a search through possible text-world connections.

Erika Muse, similarly, shows how Chinese-American Christians are using biblical texts, especially "new creation" discourse in the New Testament, as a source for constructing a new identity. With regard to gender relations, the principle of biblical authority creates a difficulty, because the New Testament both affirms

and denies social equality between men and women. Those in favor of male privilege must reckon with passages like Galatians 3:28, where gender difference is denied for those who are new creations; those in favor of gender equality must reckon with passages like 1 Timothy 2:11–12, where male privilege is enjoined. Muse does not say how those in favor of male privilege deal with counter-texts, but I would surmise that they are simply ignored, because tradition already offers male privilege as a norm, and there is insufficient social impetus to mount an effective challenge to it. They can simply presume that the text is not relevant to the issue at hand. Those in favor of gender equality dismiss their counter-texts by historically relativizing them, denying the relevance of the text to their situation. Muse's and Baron's analyses show how the Bible is both fodder and foil for the working out of identity.

Eric Hoenes del Pinal's essay indicates another way in which interpretations are socially adapted, through the legitimizing of particular interpreters who will represent the meaning of the Bible in sermons. In mainstream Catholic Celebrations of the Word, the sermon is given by catechists, who are selected for their practical skills, such as the abilities to read and to speak publicly, and for their social standing and moral reputation. Even so, the interpretation that the sermonizer will deliver is a product of prior instruction from those further up the church hierarchy along with the consensus of the other catechists, who provide an informal *nihil obstat* to the general plan of the sermon. In contrast, charismatic Catholic preachers are authorized not by any formal hierarchy but rather by the recognition that they are studied in the text and have received the divine gift of preaching. In practice, however, their sermons reflect a mixture of teaching from those further up the ecclesiastical hierarchy—in this case, those who can speak on the radio or at conferences, or who publish books—and the prior understanding of listeners. To these interpretive processes I would add another way in which "what the Bible says" is malleable: the text itself can be changed, either in the processes of publishing or in oral tradition. This requires a brief discussion.

Bibles have a certain degree of malleability in the hands of copyists and publishers. The text can be changed, as indeed it has been at various points in the Bible's evolution. Consider just a few New Testament examples:

- The longer ending of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:13) is increasingly relegated to a marginal note because of the near certainty that it is not original.
- There are four broad types of ending to the Gospel of Mark attested in different manuscripts, and more combinations of the four types. In recent years the longer endings have been increasingly consigned to marginal notes rather than the main body of the text.
- The pericope of the adulteress is absent altogether from many older manuscripts. Where it does appear, it is located sometimes following Luke 21:38 (eight manuscripts of f13), but usually in John, either at the end of the gospel, following 21:25 or, more commonly, after 7:52. Today it appears from John 7:53–8:12, but there is little doubt that it was not part of the original text.
- The *comma Iohannem* (1 John 5:7–8) seems to have originated as a medieval gloss in the Latin manuscript tradition. It was included in the King James Version, but in most recent translations it appears only as a marginal note.

Examples could be multiplied further, but these are sufficient to illustrate the plasticity of the biblical text. The motivation for changing biblical texts in recent times has been primarily to reconstruct the original texts, reflecting the priority assigned to the texts' earliest versions. Historically, the majority of the changes have been to express greater reverence (e.g., changing "Jesus" to "Lord Jesus Christ"), to clarify the text, and, at least occasionally, to bring the text into line with doctrines (Ehrman 1993). The text of Bibles, then, has responded to changing assumptions about what was important in the written word.

Oral traditions about "what the Bible says" have also been malleable. In a study of the Bible in British folklore (Malley 2006), I found that folk traditions about what the Bible said—including specific texts—often diverged from what any Bible actually says. For instance, the following text was a widely used amulet against toothaches, worn around the neck, sewn into the clothes, or carried in a pocket (Latham 1878: 40).

> As Peter sat weeping on a marvel stone. For, Christ came by and said to him, Peter, wat hailest thou—Peter answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God, my tooth eaketh. Jesus said unto him, Arise, Peter, be thou hole; and not the only but all them that carry these lines for my sake, shall never have the tooth ake.

The relation between this charm and the actual text of Bibles was the topic of a conversation reported between one Dame Gray and an unnamed parson ("Old Charms" 1850).

> PARSON: Well, Dame Gray, I hear you have a charm to cure the toothache. Come, just let me hear it; I should be so much pleased to know it.
> DAME GREY: Oh, your reverence, it's not worth telling.
>
> *[Here a long talk—Parson coaxing the Dame to tell him—old lady very shy, partly suspecting he is quizzing her, partly that no charms are proper things, partly willing to know what he thinks about it. At last it ends by her saying:]*
>
> DAME GREY: Well, your reverence, you have been very kind to me, and I'll tell you: it's just a verse from Scripture as I says over those as have the toothache: "And Jesus said unto Peter, What aileth thee? And Peter answered, Lord, I have a toothache. And the Lord healed him."

PARSON: Well, but Dame Grey, I think I know my Bible, and I don't find any such verse in it.

DAME GREY: Yes, your reverence, that is just the charm. It's in the Bible, but you can't find it!

Such ruptures between orally transmitted "biblical" texts and the texts of Bibles are not merely consequences of sparse literacy. In the Michigan evangelical church where I did my ethnographic research, the Lord's Prayer is recited in a form not found in any English Bible.

Our Father,
Who art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the kingdom,
And the power,
And the glory forever. Amen.

Subsequent to the period of my fieldwork, the phrase "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," was changed to "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." The change was announced by the pastor, and adopted by the congregation, without, to my knowledge, any controversy. This illustrates the process of oral transmission, independent of the processes by which Bibles are reproduced. The adaptability of the Biblicist tradition, then, comes, in part, from the malleability of the text and, to a greater degree, from interpretation.

Mechanisms of Biblicism

The Bible's influence is maintained in part by socially distributed processes that extend well beyond the explicit awareness of any single participant. The present volume goes a long way toward fleshing out the mechanisms by which Biblicism functions both to facilitate and regulate the production of new authoritative discourse. In this final section I would like to sketch out, very cursorily, my current understanding of how this works.

At the core of Biblicism is a fundamental tension between the relatively fixed text of the Bible and the ever-changing demands of authoritative discourse. In my lifetime I have seen, among evangelical Christians, a new emphasis on environmental awareness, on physical fitness, on community formation, and

changes in gender ideology. All of these changes reflected trends in the larger cultural environment, but all were incorporated into evangelical Christians' authoritative discourse by being expounded from the Bible, as what the Bible had always said.

The mechanism that allows for such adaptability in what the Bible says is the concept of "God's word," which corresponds to what I have called elsewhere "the principle of Biblical authority" (Malley 2004). The concept "God's word" is of a logical order higher than that of the Bible, sermons, commentaries, and so forth, and constitutes the framework within which these activities are carried out. This concept remains fixed even while what the Bible is said to say changes, so that what changes is the content rather than the form of Biblicism. Because "God's word" is a placeholder in a community's authoritative discourse rather than an actual body of discourse itself, the body of discourse to which it refers is malleable, without jeopardizing the Bible's authority.

The next mechanism is the notion of "what the Bible says," which corresponds to what I have called "the practice of Biblical authority" (Malley 2004). "What the Bible says" is informed both by individuals' interactions with specific Bibles and by interpretive traditions about what particular passages say. Individual Bible interpretation is structured as a cognitive search process wherein the reader seeks highly relevant connections between the text and the world. This individual cognitive process can be extended socially in interaction with others, as demonstrated by Akesha Baron's contribution to this volume, and can be applied iteratively to the same text, as demonstrated in John Pulis's interview with Bongo.

Such individual interpretive creativity can create a serious problem for a community, given the authoritative status of "what the Bible says." Therefore, in communities where "God's word" is part of authoritative discourse, social mechanisms for constraining interpretations have developed. Akesha Baron, Erica Muse, and Eric Hoenes del Pinal all document ways in which individual interpretations are captured and harnessed by social control processes. The specific methods and venues of such social control vary, and each variant probably has unique strengths and weaknesses as a control mechanism, but they all regulate the ascendance of an individual's interpretation to community consensus about what the Bible says.

The final mechanism is the notion of "the Bible." The notion of "the Bible" provides a fixed reference even as Christians use a variety of different Bibles, and the text of the Bible undergoes occasional change (Malley 2004). It also allows the Bible to be drawn upon piecemeal, as a repertoire of characters, ideals, and themes from which the reader may select what is relevant and likely to be socially authorized. Finally, it is the concept of "the Bible" that allows Bibles to be used iconically, as Liam Murphy demonstrates in the case of Loyalist-Protestant parades.

The essays in this volume thus illustrate how social processes such as consensus formation and the maintenance of authority shape traditions about "what the Bible says." Christians' engagement with the text is mediated by the principle of biblical authority, the explicit belief that the Bible is "God's word." It is this that makes the Bible influential, and leads Christians to try to connect the text to their lives. The practice of biblical authority, on the other hand, is differently structured. Cognitively, it is a search process in which different connections between the text and the world are tried out. The social dissemination of these interpretations, however, is subject to a variety of mechanisms of social control. It is this combination of openness and constraint that enables the Bible to be influential in widely varying times and situations.

12 *The Social Life of the Bible*

SIMON COLEMAN

As an anthropologist who works on Christianity I spend a lot of time watching other people read the Bible. At the Protestant charismatic ministry in Sweden that I have been visiting since the 1980s, virtually everybody takes a Bible to services.[1] Believers' copies are often ostentatiously well-thumbed. If the owner is young there is a good chance the cover will be decorated with garish but pious stickers—"God is a Good God!" or "God has a plan for your life!"—encapsulating the basic message of the sixty-six books of the Bible. During sermons, some of the keener participants write studiously in the margins of the texts, producing a running commentary on passages that they can reflect on at home, or possibly use in witnessing to others.

On the other hand, the Anglican and Roman Catholic pilgrims I study who go to the holy places in the English village of Walsingham apparently spend much less time dealing with scripture. They process along roads with statues, light candles, go to the nearby coastline, and sit in the pub. Whereas I feel slightly embarrassed if I turn up at the Swedish ministry without a Bible, I never feel the need to take one to the Anglican or Roman Catholic shrines that dominate the pilgrimage.

But consider the following. Swedish charismatics read the Bible a lot but they also clutch it to their breasts, draw pictures of it, lay hands on it. Even during a sermon, the giant television screen in the hall of the ministry might dwell on the iconic image of the preacher's hand, juxtaposed with an open page of scripture. And while English pilgrims spend less time than charismatics publicly reading, quoting, and reciting verses, some of them see pilgrimage itself as an enactment of scripture. In their imaginations, walking through the local countryside becomes a leafy equivalent of the road to Emmaus, the village turns into "England's Nazareth," or the lanes around the shrines come to represent the *via crucis*.

From these two brief examples we see how what looks deeply textual can quickly merge into the material and the iconic; and what seems to be a casual attitude to the scriptures can have profound links with biblical narrative and landscape.[2] Liam Murphy's depiction of Orangeism in Northern Ireland similarly