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Opening the Book

by Colin Greene

The present issue of *TransMission* could be conceived as a meditation upon the profound biblical maxim, “Where there is no vision the people perish” (Proverbs 29.18). Duncan Forrester introduces us to the text and the corresponding need to create a new cohesive social vision that utilises the evocative redemptive images and symbols of the Bible. Chris Sunderland upholds a biblical vision of what political authority could mean and how it could be exercised. Jolyon Mitchell and Lynn Schofield Clark argue that in the context of a pluralist culture the role of the media is paramount in both mediating and creating powerful social visions, some of which are positive and others deeply disturbing.

The *Open Book* campaign, now in its second year, is itself a vast vision of possible cultural change and renewal. It is a movement to create what Walter Bruggemann has termed a new biblically informed social imagination. Social vision needs to be earthed in the practicalities and eventualities of ordinary people’s hopes and aspirations.

Coran and Charlie are two of the most typically modern English children you could ever meet. I came across them in Israel some months ago when I forsook the usual tour of Jerusalem and tagged along with their parents and became their instant minder.

Coran, the boy, is four, Charlie, the girl, is two and both are already steeped in the media-driven mythology of popular culture. We were, I discovered from Coran, on a kind of Holy Grail. We were off to find the home of the baby Jesus. But, as we travelled

this route together from Eliat to Bethlehem, I became aware of two much more important and significant heroes whom Coran sought to emulate. One was Hercules who, I discovered, was not the official version but the central character of a recent Disney cartoon. In true post-modern fashion the original story had been deconstructed, the characters rearranged but, interestingly enough, the overall plot had a familiar ring to it.

Coran’s other hero was a modern version of the same tale, Luke Skywalker, the leading character in the first three *Star Wars* films. Luke also has to learn to become a true hero. And so with the help of his mentor Obi-wan Kenobi and of Yoda, the monkish creature of the underworld, he learns all the old disciplines that equip him for battle against the dark side of “the force” epitomised in the dangerous and evil Darth Vader.

By the time we got to Bethlehem, interest in the baby Jesus had miraculously resurfaced. In the midst of the arcane and solemn surroundings of the Church of the Nativity, that interest was momentarily nourished. However, as soon as we emerged into the bright sunlight of Bethlehem square, we were immediately overtaken by a new adventure of Hercules which some of the Palestinian bystanders found highly amusing.

On the return visit to Eliat, I could not help reflecting on the power of storytelling and these new modern myths which animate and indulge the minds of children. To me they seemed like secular versions of a story that formed the background of my upbringing. In that other story the same themes of

sacrifice and discipline, judgement and salvation, love and compassion, good and evil, faith and unbelief, are earthed in a religious narrative that used to be common currency. I reflected with the writer of Hebrews on the stories of other reluctant heroes who had to learn the ways and wonders of their God. People like Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Samuel and all the prophets, “who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned into strength, and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.” And all of this reluctant heroism was exercised so that we could “fix our eyes on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorned its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 11.33–34 and 12.2)

Why is it that this story seems to no longer feed the imagination and grasp the attention of so many of our contemporaries? It is this fundamental and crucial issue that Bible Society’s *Open Book* campaign must address over the next ten years. If the campaign is to be in any way successful the story might go something like this.

One of the prime ingredients of popular culture, as we have already had cause to note, is the cartoon film and video. Those absorbing fantasies that delighted Coran and Charlie with the recycled Hercules myth were created by Disney. But, as the creators of the *Testament* videos noticed, there are other great stories around and they found

theirs in the Bible. First shown on BBC 2 to record ratings, they are now increasingly used in schools and homes. Murray Watts, one of the original screenwriters for the series has since written the sequel called *The Miracle Maker* which comes out next Easter as a major film production.

The Miracle Maker is the gospel story recreated through the eyes of Jairus' daughter and it has already received plaudits from both the worlds of film and theology. Significantly, the animation technique deliberately rejected the fantasy world of Disney and went instead to Moscow, where animation has links with the iconography of Russian Orthodoxy. That is practical hermeneutics, the reinterpretation of the gospel story through another cultural medium with the help of the Christian tradition.

In a year or so, Coran will be in school where he will remain until he reaches adolescence. According to research recently published by David Hay at Nottingham University¹, children from a non-church background are well able to express their spiritual apprehensions and feelings. But the channels for this are cultural myths like *Star Wars*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King* and *Star Trek* – myths which are continually dished out to them through the media-saturated channels of popular culture.

Much of this material, as Walter Wink has warned us, is still fuelled by the myth of redemptive violence, but what is equally disturbing are the findings of Hay and colleagues that by the time children reach puberty it is the very educational environment itself, with its dominant liberal, secular mindset, which has shut down their spiritual awareness.

Enter now the *Open Book* and research we have been conducting with the education department of Exeter University called the Biblos project. This research into how the Bible is or is not used in schools has now developed a fascinating *modus operandi* for opening the book to children in a way which re-engages with their imagination, desires and feelings. Curriculum resources are under development and a research report, *Echo of Angels*, has recently been published.

When Coran and Charlie do eventually reach their teens they will find themselves submerged in what Roger Scruton has recently referred to as the culture of

“Yoofanasia”². As the Brit awards demonstrate, groups like Oasis, the Verve, Prodigy and probably the greatest 90s pop icon, Robbie Williams, dole out their own brand of urban religion specially crafted for the times when “the drugs don’t work”.

Enter again *Open Book*. It might just be the case that some of today’s teenagers could be interested in a work called *The Cry* written by singer/songwriter Adrian Snell and Murray Watts, which interweaves the reflections and stories of children caught up in war, ethnic cleansing and the Holocaust with the structure of the Requiem. Starting with a tour of some of our main cathedrals in the autumn of 2000, this work will combine Latin and English, classical and popular, choir and band, video screens and traditional religious symbolism, children’s pleas for a better world with the great biblical affirmations of judgement and redemption.

Now that is also a fascinating exercise in practical hermeneutics.

An essential component of popular culture is, of course, the world of fashion – something which both Coran and Charlie will become more and more involved in as they go through their teenage years. This May the top fashion magazine *Vogue* ran an interesting story under the brand name of *Heartland*, at the moment another subsidiary of the *Open Book* campaign. This was a pilot project which represents an embryonic partnership between ourselves, *Vogue* and the department store Fenwicks. When we began conversations we were told that the fashion industry had lost its soul and would welcome some input from a mainstream Christian source. We located some familiar New Testament stories which could stand behind such a fashion shoot and held a fascinating Bible study in the offices of *Vogue* magazine. Fenwicks turned the result into a front window display and, as a result, the Kingston School of Fashion, the country’s leading fashion school are talking about the possibility of an MA in theology and fashion.

This pilot project represents our first sortie into the world of popular culture, dominated as it is with lifestyle issues and concerns. We are presently looking at other lifestyle areas like food, home and garden and leisure, areas about which, as Tom Wright put it,

people have simply forgotten that the Bible has anything to say.

Finally, what happens when Coran and Charlie reach adulthood? Will they take any interest in the political processes that supposedly guarantee them a better future? What happens when they discover that the secularisation narrative that replaced the religious foundations of culture has itself run out of steam? Will they have any interest in a possible religious alternative or will they listen only to whoever shouts the loudest? Will they simply buy into the other dominant metanarrative that purports to tell us how things are at the end of the twentieth century, the narrative of the free market economy? Or could it be that by then some other more plausible stories are being rediscovered and retold? Could the national storytellers network, the fruit of a partnership between Bible Society and the Northumbria Community, have achieved its end of reminding people that the good story is remembered long after the face is forgotten? Could we find that the political, social and economic implications of the story the Bible tells are once again being rediscovered?

Above all, will theology still be safely ensconced within the academy and the theological college or will it have ventured out into the public domain? Will there be a new interdisciplinary public theology that can make sense of political processes and realities from the vantage point of a book that is now open and so provides the basis for a new social vision of conviviality, peace and justice?

Like all great opportunities for cultural renewal we will have to wait and see. However, a key way in which this is being achieved is through our partnership with *Churches Together in England*. Resourcing and equipping churches is an ongoing *Open Book* commitment and we are encouraged by the innovative and serious way in which individual churches are responding to the opportunities offered. ■

Notes

¹ David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, London: HarperCollins, 1998.

² Roger Scuton, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Culture*, London: Duckworth 1998.