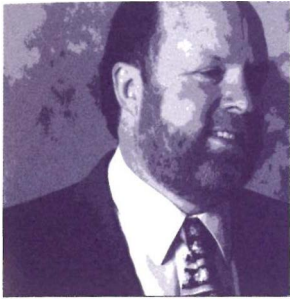


CHANGING TIMES MAKING THE BIBLE HEARD

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TIMES ARE CHANGING AND FOR MOST OF US THEY ARE CHANGING VERY FAST INDEED. The events of September 11th have seemingly changed the world beyond recognition. No longer can the one remaining super-power pursue its own domestic political agenda with little reference to the outside world. Instead, America must now come to terms with the new global threat of international terrorism which dared to strike right at the heart of its own cherished economic and political institutions. On that fateful day, the whole world watched incredulously as thousands of innocent civilians and service personnel perished in an apocalyptic scenario of death and destruction. And now, with the ensuing threat of bio-chemical warfare, our world seems much less secure and the future much less certain than it did even a few months ago.

In response to a world where political constellations, global economics and new developments in information technology are all changing at an unprecedented rate, Bible Society has been changing radically as well. Those of you who attend carefully to the issues raised in successive editions of *The Bible in TransMission* will already be aware of some of those changes. Many of our readers have also been part of a wide-ranging consultative exercise which began in January of this year with individual discussions with national church leaders of all denominations followed by further discussions and presentations to regional church leaders at 17 venues around the country. We are now extending that consultative exercise to clergy, ministers and our supporters through a 40-venue “roadshow” in England and Wales which began this autumn and stretches to spring 2002.

What is the essence of the conversation we are sharing with you?

Quite simply, that in partnership with all the churches we want to campaign to make the biblical narrative part of the discussion about the future wellbeing of our society and therefore a real agent for change and cultural renewal.

We believe passionately that the Bible is indispensable for the future wellbeing of our world because it reveals God’s character and purpose for humankind. Not surprisingly then, we want to see a world where the inspiration, wisdom and realism of the Bible shapes and changes the way individuals, communities and nations live, where everyone everywhere has the opportunity to encounter the drama of the Bible for themselves, to bring purpose, dignity and vitality to their lives. We also believe passionately that the Bible is indispensable for the future wellbeing of the church, that a profound interaction with

the biblical narrative sustains the Church and a healthy knowledge of Scripture informs and inspires the mission of the Church.

We imagine that most of our readership would accept this as an appropriate and laudable mission agenda for an organisation which has nearly 200 years’ experience of distributing and translating the Scriptures in many different cultures worldwide. But, of course, we are also very aware of the immensity of such a task given the reality of the cultural context we now all face. We are in a situation where the credibility of the biblical message and that of the witness and life of the Church has been losing ground steadily in society for many years.

It used to be argued, by those wedded to the techniques of the social sciences, that this was a result of an insidious process of secularisation that has been going on since the advent of the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century. It was generally accepted by those investigating the decline of the social significance of Christianity that the modern world changed some 200 years ago with the rise of the natural sciences and technology. This, in turn, led to increasing urbanisation, the creation of the nation state, the extension of market capitalism, the manipulation of nature for our own benefit and the emergence of the new political democracies.

Against all this, it was argued, Christianity could not stand, leading inevitably to the discrediting of the intellectual content of the Christian faith and a corresponding disenchantment with the continued social and cultural significance of the Christian faith: the faith that had previously been the natural birthright of every European citizen and provided what Peter Berger has called “the sacred canopy” of religious faith, practice and discourse.

While there is a certain plausibility to this thesis, it has now, thankfully, been seriously challenged and undermined.

So, for instance, Callum Brown in his seminal book *The Death of Christian Britain* argues that the problem with this thesis is the way in which social science understands the role of religion in society. Sociological studies of religion tend to concentrate on the roles or functions religion exercises in society at large. So in regard to Christianity we can talk in terms of four central functions: institutional Christianity – measured in terms of the growth or decline of church attendance and religious practice; intellectual Christianity – understood as shared structures of belief; functional Christianity – the role of religion in civil society, especially government, education ►

... this can only become a reality when both the Christian faith and the Bible occupy a much more dominant role in society: in short, becoming once again the discursive narrative that links increasing numbers of people to a story that begins in a garden and ends in a city where people of every race, creed and nation acknowledge the one who is “Lord of lords and King of kings”.

► and welfare; and diffusive Christianity – measured in terms of the success of evangelism and other outreach activity.

According to Brown utilising modern cultural theory, this analysis misses the crucial role of discursive Christianity. By this he means the way personal identity and a sense of belonging are mediated to the population at large through religious discourses and protocols of behaviour. To measure this aspect of religion, one has to listen to the voices of the people articulated through the dominant media such as books, magazines, television and film. Brown argues that it is, in fact, discursive Christianity that undergirds the other four functions of religion in a democratic society.

“For Christianity to have social significance – for it to achieve popular participation, support or even acquiescence – in a democratic society free from state regulation of religious habits, it must have a base of discursivity. Otherwise, it is inconceivable.”

Brown’s central argument is that if one attends to the reality of discursive Christianity in the period from 1850 to 1950, then the evangelical Christian narrative with its story of conversion and moral regeneration fitted very well with the cultural mores of contemporary society in what was, by and large, the last puritan age. Since the lifestyle and moral revolutions of the 1960s, this has all changed and it is this process of secularisation or social distancing of the population from the Bible and the Church that has led to the collapse of the Christian faith in all its functions in contemporary society.

Brown’s analysis can, of course, be challenged but if it is anywhere near correct it not only reinforces the enormity of the task we all face but it also points to the significance of campaigning for the Bible to be heard in the areas of lifestyle innovation, the media and popular film – a task we at Bible Society have already begun.

But then, as we noted at the beginning of this article, the world has changed. Most notably, as Melanie Phillips has pointed out in her column in *The Sunday Times*, there is now a desperate need for a religious narrative in the public domain that protects genuine multi-culturalism and the aspirations of different faith communities. A resurgent Christianity can only successfully undertake this, she claims, because it was from this faith that most of our cherished freedoms and genuine liberal ideals emerged.

To this we would add the central role that the Bible occupies in terms of preserving in dialogue two testaments, two covenants and therefore witnessing to the genuine

possibility of dissent and religious pluralism. But this can only become a reality when both the Christian faith and the Bible occupy a much more dominant role in society: in short, becoming once again the discursive narrative that links increasing numbers of people to a story that begins in a garden and ends in a city where people of every race, creed and nation acknowledge the one who is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17. 14).

This is the new journey we at Bible Society have embarked upon and it is our hope and prayer that, together with the churches and other interested members of society, we will be able to create a movement for change which has a new conversation between the Bible, the Church and contemporary culture as its central focus. ■

Notes
Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* 13