

# Imagining Tomorrow

by Colin Greene

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*In response to an initiative by the Archbishop of Canterbury, a major inter-church project has been launched. In acknowledging that the Bible has become marginalized, not only in public life, but also among those who belong to the churches, it aims to “open the culture to the book – and the book to the culture” as a means of recovering the Scriptures as a source of authority in society and the Church.*

In his influential book, *The Unfinished Task* (1957), Stephen Neill took up the issue of what it might mean to speak of a “Christian culture”. He was understandably cautious of claiming that we can speak of a culture as Christian, arguing that we can only do so if and when the gospel has penetrated the personal and social subconsciousness of a people, so that it influences human behaviour instinctively. He then asked whether Britain was ever such a nation, despite its undoubted influence as one of the leading powers of Christendom.

## Growth and Decline

Neill argued that we could only speak of a “near synthesis” of gospel and culture on two occasions. The first happened in the sixteenth century, during the second half of the reign of Elizabeth I, when a rapid diffusion of the Bible among the English people occurred. The second happened during the Victorian era when the impact of the Evangelical Revival, due to

the spread of education, increases in church attendance, the combination of evangelism and far-reaching social reform, allowed the Bible to become the book of the people. In both instances, access to the Bible, and an understanding of its central message, became active agents in transforming the cultural allegiances and values of the nation.

This near synthesis of gospel and culture was followed almost immediately by the rapid decline of religious influence in Britain. Neill claimed that this came about largely because of the influence of writers (such as Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw) who were either ignorant of, or hostile to, the Christian message.

Neill’s analysis, coupled with current concerns among the churches of England and Wales, raises basic questions about the nature and place of the Bible in contemporary culture. Has the continued decline of the social and cultural significance of the Christian faith in England and Wales come about as a direct consequence of the Bible becoming



a "closed book" to the general population? What steps can be taken to change this state of affairs, so that the Bible becomes an "open book"?

## The Open Book Project

Every other year the churches in Germany organize a *Kirchentag* festival, where Bible study and theological debate is brought out of the churches and universities into the public square. A variety of people, from all walks of life, representing the arts and media as well as the churches and academic theology, endeavour to open up the Bible to contemporary issues in society. It was as a result of attending a *Kirchentag*, that the Archbishop of Canterbury suggested the need for a re-focussing on the role of the Bible in contemporary culture.

His idea was taken up by a working party within Churches Together in England. As a result of their deliberations, Bible Society was asked to project manage a major national initiative called *The Open Book*, which seeks to "open the culture to the book – and the book to the culture". With the help of a number of prominent biblical scholars, five key passages and themes were identified from the Bible as the starting point for an interface between the Bible and culture.

I have been acting as Theological Consultant to the campaign with specific responsibility for developing various interdisciplinary "think tanks" which seek to undergird the campaign with a solid biblical and theological foundation.

## Imagining Tomorrow

At the beginning of 1997, a highly significant consultation was held, entitled "Imagining Tomorrow". It involved people from the world of academic theology, politics, education, media and the arts. The aim of the consultation was to gain the active support and involvement of key thinkers in these areas, to identify key issues that provide an interface between the gospel and contemporary culture, and to disseminate the ideas that emerged as a way of helping

local churches to own the campaign in their particular context.

There is no doubt that it was an inspirational event. The New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, the *Observer* columnist Melanie Philips, and BBC producer Norman Stone were among those who enabled everyone present to engage in interdisciplinary debate. The intention is that this debate will establish a "public theology" which will open up the Bible to the factors and influences in society and culture around which a sense of national identity is often formed. There will be both practical and theological dimensions to the way that this happens.

If we are to face this task and try to recover the Bible as the people's book, there is an urgent need to construct an appropriate *public theology* which addresses the issues of interpretation and application in the context of the kind of society to which we wish to contribute. We can only construct such a theology, however, when we work in the public domain in an *interdisciplinary fashion*.

With this in mind, a number of interdisciplinary groups or think tanks are to be formed (theology, arts, media, education, and politics) with a conference at least once a year. These groups will exist to provide the theological and biblical resources for those in Church and society whose task it is to pursue policies and programmes which effect change in public life.

I believe that *The Open Book* has the potential to develop into one of the most significant Christian initiatives, which could enable exciting developments and changes in the life of the Church and the culture. In future editions of *TransMission*, I will provide regular updates of how the aims and objectives of the project are taking shape and how they can become part of the missionary life of the local church.


If you would like to know more about how you and your church can become involved, or would like to be informed of future events and resources, write to me at:

**The Open Book, c/o Bible Society, Stonehill Green, Westlea Swindon SN5 7DG.**

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in this issue...

- 2 Welcome  
Martin Robinson
- 3 It Seems to Me...  
Lesslie Newbigin
- 4 New Life in the Church  
Robert Warren
- 6 Imagining Tomorrow  
Colin Greene
- 8 Charting a New Course for Your Church  
Barrie Cooke



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