



## The Bible: Good News for Secularised People

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I must begin by expressing my gratitude for having a share in this meeting, for I am sure that the Bible Societies have a crucial role to play in the re-evangelisation of our pagan continent. I must also indicate my limitations. I have no first-hand experience of Christian witness in a Muslim society. But I am quite certain that Islam is going to be a vital element not only in the Middle East but in the religious and cultural development of Europe during the 21st century. The Muslim scholar Shabir Akhtar has recently remarked that Islam will probably have to face a great many heresies before it comes to terms with the Enlightenment. Europe will be the place where this happens.

I offer, without argument, three statements as defining our present situation as Bible Societies.

1. For the thousand-year period following the fall of the Roman Empire the period in which Europe became a cultural entity under the tutelage of the Church, the Bible belonged to the Church. It was interpreted from within the Christian tradition. It was read as Holy Scripture. In the absence of printing it could not be in the hands of every Christian, but it was part of the liturgy in which every Christian participated. We rightly think of St Benedict as perhaps the greatest architect of Christian Europe because he made the regular liturgical reading of Scripture so central to the common worship of all the people of Europe.

2. The 16th century Reformation, making use of the new invention of printing, put the Bible into the hands of individual Christians. It now became accessible to them apart from the common worship of the Church. It was still Holy Scripture and it continued to provide the language, the images, the models for the peoples of Europe. It was, one could argue, their greatest common possession.

3. From the late 18th century onwards, the Bible came more and more into the hands of the scholars whose scholarship was shaped by the new perspectives of the Enlightenment. The Bible was read and interpreted from within another belief-system, another world view. It was (to the

scholarly world) no longer Holy Scripture, but a corpus of ancient writings to be understood and assessed in the light of a different creed. It no longer stood in judgment on culture but was itself judged by new cultural standards. It was still available in print for everyone, but it could no longer function in the way that it had done (for example in family prayers). The ordinary Christian needed the scholar to interpret it – and the scholar was not a bishop or preacher, but a person certified as competent in terms of the new credo.

There is an ironic footnote to this threefold statement. It seems that the only places where the Bible is read by ordinary Christians as Holy Scripture is in the Base Communities which are such a growing reality in mainly Catholic countries, but so rarely flourish in mainly Protestant ones. The Second Vatican Council has released the Bible into the hands of ordinary lay Christians, and the scholars have not (yet) taken it from them.

The papers in our hands tell us that in Sweden 80% of households have a Bible somewhere in the house, but suggest that not many read it. Sweden is surely not exceptional. There are many parts of the world where the demand for Bibles far exceeds the supply. The Bible is felt to be utterly essential for the very existence and growth of the Church. We know well that it is not so in Europe. And the Bible Societies of Europe cannot be content to go on printing Bibles without also becoming involved in the business of getting the Bibles read.

But we who live in Europe know that this is not easy. The Bible is not perceived as good news. I have worked in India where, when there was a shortage of Bibles during the war, a flourishing black-market developed. I have also worked in an inner-city parish in Birmingham where the Bible is treated with cold contempt. It is not good news, not news at all, but the old, old story which has nothing to do with our problems. And I think that we in the Church have a heavy share of responsibility for this situation, for we have allowed the Bible to be taken out of the hands of the Church. Could it be the task of the Bible Societies to challenge the churches with the question: “Why do you want us to go on printing Bibles?”

What we have to recognise is that secularisation is not just the withdrawal of areas of life and thought from control by the Church. It is the substitution of one credo by another. It is a conversion. The reigning illusion in societies which pride themselves on being secular is the illusion that in such societies there is no dogma but everyone is free to think as he or she wishes. What has happened to the Bible in Europe is the result of the intellectual conversion of Europe from one credo to another. This conversion is (once again) largely the fault of the Church. The religious wars of the 16th century sickened Europe and discredited the old credo. The intellectual leadership turned to new ways of looking at the world, a way which seemed to promise deliverance from this strife of dogma.

But no society can long cohere without dogma. I use that word to denote those beliefs which are normally taken for granted and not questioned. They are, indeed, often hardly brought to consciousness. They are the assumptions which everyone shares and which, therefore, no-one needs to talk about. They shape what Peter Berger calls the ‘plausibility structure’ of a society. And, as we in Europe well know, they can be such as to make the whole Christian story simply implausible. And what is implausible is hardly perceived as good news.

One way of becoming conscious of what is normally below the level of consciousness is to look at the transition from the old credo to the new. The intellectual conversion of Europe was a slow process. It began with very small groups of elite scholars. It took time to filter down and to become the unexamined assumption of everyone. It is perhaps absurd to try to compress the story into a few minutes, but one can at least note some key names. Let me mention three.

Francis Bacon is often seen as the morning star of the new kind of knowing which came to be called ‘science’. He urged his contemporaries to “eschew speculation and collect facts”. By ‘speculation’ he meant the ‘universals’ of mediaeval philosophy which cannot be seen or touched or measured, but which were ardently discussed. The only one of these which he retained was causality. He rejected purpose as a category of explanation, but retained cause. Things are to be understood by what causes them to be or to happen, not by the purpose for which they exist. This has two enormous consequences.

First, it created the dichotomy between ‘fact’ and ‘value’ which underlines the division of our society into a public world of facts which we know and a private world of values in which some people are free to believe. Cultural anthropologists, looking at our ‘modern’ culture and comparing it with other human cultures, tell us that this public/private dichotomy is unique to our culture. Its heart is the separation of ‘facts’ which are true for everyone and form the substance of public truth which every child is expected to understand and accept as a condition for living in society, and a private world of personally chosen values. In this society, therefore, there is no logical possibility of moving from a factual statement “this is the case” to a value judgment “this is good”. For if purpose is rejected as a category of explanation, this gap must be unbridgeable, for we do not know whether a thing is good or bad unless we know the purpose for which it exists. It may be good for one purpose but bad for others. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ can only be expressions of personal opinion.

Second, Bacon’s elimination of purpose opens the way to another central development in ‘modern’ culture. If things have no intrinsic purpose; if the only purposes in operation are our human purposes; and if I can discover the causes which make things happen; then I am free to intervene in the chain of cause and effect which controls things in order to cause them to serve my purposes. Here is the taproot of the second distinctive feature of our ‘modern’ culture, the drive to power through the development of science-based technology. “Knowledge is power” said Bacon, and we have taken him at his word. If, to use Moltman’s phrase, Nature is merely a piece of unclaimed property which we are free to use according to our own purposes, then we can understand the enormous drive for power which characterises our culture.

The second name I would bring forward is that of Descartes. He lived in an age in which it was hard to know what we mean by ‘facts’. The new science had called old certainties into question. The sun appears to rise in the east and set in the west, but apparently our senses deceive us; it is the earth which is moving under our feet, although it seems to be stable. Can we be certain of anything? Descartes accepted the challenge to find a foundation on which certain knowledge could be built. As we know, he claimed to find it in the certainty of his own existence as a thinking being, and from this he proceeded by logical steps to prove the existence of God and of the external world. The model for indubitable knowledge is mathematics. The external world is to be indubitably known in so far as it can be understood in mathematical terms. What can be accounted for with the precision and certainty of mathematics is the object of real knowledge. What can not be doubted. The way to certainty is by way of the relentless application of the principle of doubt.

Again, the consequences of this are two-fold and form two more of the distinctive features of ‘modern’ society. Firstly, the Cartesian programme has bequeathed to us a totally illusory ideal of objectivity, a bogus ideal of knowledge from which the knowing subject has been eliminated. The idea that there is available to human beings a kind of knowing for which the knowing subject has to take no personal responsibility, which in no way depends upon fallible human judgment, has become part of our culture. The name of ‘science’ is, in spite of the testimony of real scientists, used to suggest that there is available a kind of certainty in which faith and personal commitment play no part. In contrast to the true insight of Augustine that faith is the way in which we come to know (*Credo ut intelligam*), faith is seen as that which we have to fall back upon when knowledge is not available (John Locke). As Christians trying to share our faith with unbelievers we often face the question: “But how do you know?”, as though there were available some kind of knowledge more reliable than what God has done in Jesus Christ.

The second consequence of the Cartesian programme, and another of the distinctive features of ‘modern’ culture, has been the quite absurd exaltation of the principle of doubt, the widespread illusion that to doubt is a more honest exercise than to believe. Clearly this is absurd. Both faith and doubt have necessary parts to play in the enterprise of coming to know, but the role of doubt is secondary. We can only begin to learn anything about the real world by trusting the evidence of our eyes and ears and fingers, and the teaching of our parents and teachers. To make doubt the fundamental element in knowing could only lead to idiocy if it were possible. But it is

not possible because we can only exercise the necessary faculty of doubting on the basis of things which we believe without (at this moment) doubting. I can only doubt A, because I believe B, C and D. All knowing is an enterprise to which we have to be personally committed, have to recognise that we can be mistaken, in which doubting is a necessary element, but in which faith alone can sustain the enterprise. The idea that there is available to human beings a kind of certainty in which faith plays no part is one of the master illusions of our culture.

The third name to be mentioned is that of Nietzsche who was, perhaps, the first to recognise that the Cartesian programme must destroy itself. The critical principle must criticise itself. The principle of doubting must be doubted. We must come to a point where it is no longer possible to speak of truth. There will only be the will. Bacon's initiative has come full circle. Bacon said "Knowledge is power". Now, after Nietzsche, a claim to know something, a claim such as "I know whom I have believed", is merely a concealed assertion of power. Words which profess to speak the truth have no reference to a reality beyond themselves. They are to be examined in order to see who is trying to exercise power. We come to the post-modernists and apostles of Deconstruction. There is nothing to be known and 'meaning' is a meaningless word.

If one now looks at the ways in which the Church has sought to respond to these profound changes in European thought, one has to say that the response has been more in the direction of seeking to accommodate 'modern' thought than in seeking to challenge it. Since the 18th century Enlightenment the effort has been to show 'the reasonableness of Christianity', to show that religion could be held 'within the limits of reason'. The Age of Reason, quite naturally, did not recognise that what it called 'reason' was the product of a very particular cultural development. When Lessing affirmed that accidental happenings of history cannot prove universal truths of reason (the "great ugly ditch which I cannot pass"), he demonstrated that the 'universal truths of reason' are in fact the product of a very specific cultural history. When Descartes set out to tackle the scepticism of his age by providing indubitable proofs of the existence of God, he did not seek certainty in the biblical story of God's saving and revealing work in Israel and in Jesus Christ. All this was seen as a matter of faith, not knowledge. The Jesuit scholar Michael Buckley, in his book *The Roots of Modern Atheism* argues that the root of the specifically modern form of atheism lies exactly here, in the attempt to demonstrate the existence of God without relying on God's revelation of himself. He shows how Descartes' arguments for the existence of a supreme being could be and were turned round in the 19th century to show that this supreme being is matter-in-motion. He even dares to suggest that the root lies deeper. How, he asks, was it possible for Aquinas in Book I of the *Summa Theologica* to demonstrate the existence of God without any reference to Jesus Christ, and then, in Book IV, to speak of Jesus as the one through whom we know God? Aquinas was responding to the impact of the new Aristotelian philosophy transmitted to western Europe through Muslim scholarship. Is it wide of the mark to suggest that the God whose existence Aquinas claimed to prove in Book I was a synthesis of Aristotle's Prime Mover with the Allah of the Qur'an, and that this essentially unitarian image of God is the one that has dominated western (as distinct from Eastern Orthodox) Christianity ever since? Certainly one has to say that the God whose existence was said to be demonstrable by inference from that which is not God, was not the triune God of Christian faith – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

For the model which we need for our time, I think we must go back to the theologians of the first four centuries. They recognised that what had been done and revealed in Jesus Christ could not be fitted into the assumptions of contemporary thought. From the standpoint of contemporary thought, the statement that the eternal logos was identical with the man Jesus, was simply absurd. There had to be, as Athanasius saw so clearly, a new starting point. The reigning assumptions could not be the starting point. What God had done in the history of Israel and consummated in the history of Jesus Christ had to be the starting point. With this as foundation it was possible to develop a new way of thinking about God, a new model, the trinitarian model which enabled the Church to heal the dichotomies which had always defeated classical thought. Proposals, such as that of the Arians, to fit the gospel story into the requirements of contemporary

thought had to be rejected. The new starting point had to be accepted by faith, but it was this faith which opened the way to a fresh understanding of nature and history.

By definition the starting point is not something whose truth can be demonstrated from some other starting point. It cannot be proved a priori. Its truth is demonstrated a Posteriori, in that it leads to understanding. This faith is not a substitute for reason; it is the starting point for rational exploration of the world. As Augustine said *Credo ut intelligam*. The critical reason, which our culture has so highly (and rightly) prized, can only work on material which is, to start with, accepted as given.

Christians have traditionally used the word 'dogma' to denote that which is accepted as given. 'Dogma' has become a dirty word, but that has only served to blind people in our societies to the fact that they are accepting at every moment of their lives a variety of dogmas which are never identified as such because they are never questioned.

The Hungarian scientist Michael Polanyi has used a vivid parable to describe the present cultural situation in Europe. The past 300 years, he says, have been the most brilliant in all human history, but their brilliance has been achieved by the combustion of a thousand years of Christian tradition in the oxygen of Greek rationalism; the fuel is now exhausted and pumping more oxygen does not produce more light. If Polanyi is right, and I think he is, we have to ask, "How do we replenish the fuel?" He speaks of a thousand years of Christian tradition. The core of that tradition is the Bible. How can the Bible become once again the fuel which, critically and rationally understood, gives light to the life of Europe? That is our question. When we put that question, at least if we are Protestants, we find ourselves in the middle of a bitter quarrel between those who label each other as 'Fundamentalists' and 'Liberals'. Any theologian who calls for a recovery of biblical authority in the life of the Church finds himself caught up in this dispute – a dispute which tragically weakens the public witness of the Church. If you have accepted my argument so far, you will recognise that this dispute is simply one form of the deeper division that runs right through what we call 'modern' culture – split between 'facts' and 'values'. I have said earlier that cultural anthropologists identify this as perhaps the most distinctive feature of our culture. If our thinking is shaped by our culture (as of course it is), then, when we think about the Bible, we will have to ask: Is it facts? Or is it about values? So we fall apart. On one side there are those who would eliminate from recognition all the factors of fallible human judgment which have been involved at every stage of the making of the Bible, from the very first remembering and telling of an event, an experience, to its first recording in writing, to the collection of these records in continuous histories, the collation of different records, the editing and re-editing of these collections, their translation into other languages, the copying of manuscripts and finally the printing and distribution of the book in my hand. At every point fallible human beings are being called to speak and act in response to the calling of God, and the result is put into our hands in order that we, who are also fallible human beings, may make our own response in word and act in our situation today. And on the other side there are those for whom the Bible is merely a collection of records and religious experience, part of the history of religions, having therefore no unique authority which sets it apart from all other books.

This split is, as I have suggested, an example of the more fundamental division in our culture, the falling apart of the objective and the subjective poles in all knowing. The program of Descartes had created the illusion of a kind of objective certainty which has no place for the responsible commitment in faith of the knowing subject. And this has created, on the other side, a false subjectivity which sees all truth claims as equally subjective, culturally conditioned and unreliable.

If we take the Bible in its canonical wholeness, as we must, then it is best understood as history. It is universal, cosmic history. It interprets the entire story of all things from creation to consummation, and the story of the human race within creation, and within the human race the story of the people called by God to be the bearers of the meaning of the whole, and – as the very centre, the story of the One in whom God's purpose was decisively revealed by being decisively effected. It is obviously a different story from the stories that the world tells about itself. During

that thousand years of which Polanyi speaks, world history was taught in the schools and universities of Europe on the basis of this biblical outline. For three centuries after the break-up of Christendom, it was taught as national history. Today it is taught as the history of civilisation. All telling of history involves the selection of significant events out of the billions of things which have happened. To call an event 'significant' implies some belief about the meaning of the story as a whole. How do we know the meaning of the story as a whole? How do we know the meaning of the story while we are still in the middle of it? It is flattering to ourselves to teach world history as the history of civilisation, since it implies that we, the civilised people, are the point of the story. The Bible contradicts that belief and affirms that the meaning of the story has been revealed by him who is the author of the story. It follows that my own life has meaning, has significance, only as I seek responsibly to live it as part of this story. And I have to live it as part of the people whose story this is. The Bible is the book of this people and these are the people of this story. I spoke earlier of the way in which the Bible has so largely ceased in Europe to be the book of the ordinary people and has become a book to be interpreted by scholars. No one, surely, should deny the illumination which has come to us through the work of critical scholars during the past two centuries. It has shown us how the Bible has been formed by the telling and re-telling of the story of God's dealing with his people in different times and places. But there are excellent biblical scholars who now say that this movement has exhausted itself. Surely there will never come a time when fresh critical work on the Bible is no longer needed. The question must always be: "From what stance is the critical enterprise directed? What are the uncriticised assumptions of the scholar?". When we ask these questions, it is obvious that much of this work has been done from a stance outside the faith of the Bible itself. As always, in every fundamental enquiry, one has to ask: "What is the starting point? What are the assumptions which are not questions?". If the starting point is the faith of the Bible, then there is vast scope for fruitful critical historical and linguistic work in order to bring the word of God freshly to the ever-new situations we face.

A Latin American theologian has said that the important thing for the student of the Bible is not to understand the text but to understand the world through the text. Of course the second is not possible without the first. In this respect the Bible functions in the life of the Church like the language we use. Of course we have to learn the meaning of words and the rules of grammar and syntax. But when we are actually speaking, writing or reading, we do not attend to these things. We attend through them to the meaning, through which we deal with the situation 'out there'. All knowing, and all human dealing with the world is conducted by means of a language. We do not think about the language so much as live in it. It is part of ourselves. In an analogous fashion we need to live in the Bible so that its language, its images, its histories, its prayers, its songs become our way of understanding and dealing with the world.

There is obviously no short cut to the recovery of the Bible as 'Holy Scripture' for modern secularised Europeans. Much will depend upon faithful biblical preaching by our pastors. And this must encourage the daily reading of the Bible in our homes. When you read a good novel you come to know the hero of the story as if you had actually met him. No description of him, for example in an obituary notice, can be a substitute for this. It is as you watch him dealing with actual situations and people that you come to know him. So it is, I think, in reading the Bible. As you read and re-read and go on reading, you come to know God. He is the one whose nature the Bible discloses. You come to know him personally. And because this is the whole story from the beginning of the world to its end, I who am now part of this story, feel that I know the one who is the author of the story and that I can trust him. I do not find infallible answers to be questions or solutions for my dilemmas. But I can go ahead, take risks, with the sort of confidence that is expressed in the apostle's word: "I know whom I have believed".

It is when there are congregations of men and women and children who are living the story now, here, that the Bible will become good news for secularised people. And therefore I venture to make a suggestion which may be rash. I said at the beginning that I thought the Bible Societies had a key role to play in the re-evangelisation of Europe. Would it not be a good idea for the Bible Society in each European country, at the beginning of this decade of evangelism, to

put to the churches in that country the following questions: “Why do you want us to go on printing Bibles in the languages of our country? What encouragement are you giving to your people to think that reading the Bible is important?”

When my book *Foolishness to the Greeks* was reviewed by a leading clergyman in England, he wrote: “I do not understand what Newbigin means by ‘the Bible’”, and went on to suggest that to offer the Bible as a critique of ‘modern’ culture was like pretending to move a bus when you are sitting in it. There may be other clergymen who could be encouraged to step off the bus and see where it is going.

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