

CREATION, POWER AND TRUTH

CREATION, POWER AND TRUTH

The gospel in a world of
cultural confusion

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To a Wise and Generous Friend

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Preface

This book is based on the Noble Lectures which I was privileged to give in the Memorial Chapel at Harvard University in the autumn of 2006, as the guest of the Revd Professor Peter Gomes. I was and am very grateful to Peter for the invitation and for his cheerful and engaging hospitality. I have not attempted to add very much to what was said in the lectures, except for some tidying up and light editing, in view of the official ‘responses’ I received at the time from Professors François Bovon, Sarah Coakley and David Hempton. I am very grateful to them all. Harvard has been a special place for me ever since I was a visiting professor there myself in 1999, and it was a delight to renew old friendships and to be able to test out ideas with a friendly but not uncritical audience.

As will become apparent, the book is an attempt to bridge a gulf. People who write about current cultural and political matters, even from a Christian point of view, do not often engage with the Bible in any detail. Biblical scholars regularly repay the compliment. We are all inevitably specialists these days, and we know the dangers of intruding in subject areas where we are less qualified. Nevertheless, the attempt must be made from time to time, and it seemed to me that since I was living at the time with one foot in the world of biblical scholarship and the other in the world of current affairs in both church and state there was something to be said for having a go. When I thought my way through the various issues that seemed to me important and realized that the material would fall nicely into a Trinitarian pattern I decided that the three-lecture invitation from Harvard had found its answer.

Things have moved on, of course. The original lectures were given when the Iraq conflict was in full swing. Dan Brown’s book *The Da Vinci Code* was still being widely discussed. But

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the issues raised thereby have not gone away. If anything, they have intensified in complexity. The topics are still not only relevant but in my view urgent. As this book was going to press, I came upon a new novel by the bestselling Brazilian author Paulo Coelho, entitled *Manuscript Found in Accra* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). It purports to be a transcription of the wise teachings of a ‘Copt’, given in 1099 when the Crusaders were about to invade Jerusalem. In fact it contains numerous ‘wisdom’ sayings, some of which echo Kahlil Gibran, some of which sound a bit like the teaching of Jesus, and most of which sound like classic, dreamy postmodern quasi-spirituality. Coelho writes a preface in which he hints at a tenuous link between this ‘document’ and the so-called gnostic ‘gospels’ found at Nag Hammadi. There follows a passage which is pure Dan Brown, suggesting that the four gospels in the New Testament were selected from a much larger set of possible contenders for reasons that many today would regard as spurious. Once again, what we are offered, by implication over and against the teaching of the four canonical gospels, is a soft, squashy version of Gnosticism: ‘Who we are, what we fear, and what we hope for the future come from the knowledge and belief that can be found within us, and not from the adversity that surrounds us’ (quoted from the book’s dust jacket). The immense popularity of this kind of thing shows that the appeal of Gnosticism is as powerful today as when I gave the original lectures.

The Noble lectures were founded by Nannie Yulee Noble. Her stated aim was ‘to arouse in young people, and primarily in the students of that great university, the joy of service for Christ and humanity, especially in the ministry of the Christian Church’. I hope I have in some measure contributed to that cause.

Tom Wright

CREATION, POWER AND TRUTH

Introduction

The subject of this book is the challenge of today's and tomorrow's culture, and the resources in the Christian gospel, and the scriptures Christians read, with which to address those challenges. We are under enormous pressure in these days as the tectonic plates of Western culture slide this way and that, throwing up moral, social and political earthquakes and tsunamis to right and left. I want to reflect on three cultural pressures and the way they interact, and I suggest that this reflection will help us to see where we are in the confusing and disturbing times we face in our church and in the wider world.

I begin with a fascinating reflection borrowed from an article in *The Times* (4 February 2006) by the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks (now Lord Sacks). Dr Sacks is one of the most highly and widely respected commentators on the contemporary scene in Britain. He writes about the wanderings of the children of Israel through the wilderness, and suggests two images for our own pilgrim pathway.

The first is the new electronic toy, the global positioning, or satellite-navigation, system, which sits in your car and tells you where to turn in order to get where you need to go. He points out that for many men in particular – particularly, he says, Jewish men, on which I couldn't possibly comment – this is counter-intuitive: fancy having someone else's voice, quite possibly a woman's voice, telling you where to turn the car! So, he says, we behave like the Israelites in the wilderness, who had God in their midst to guide them: we hear the voice, but deliberately turn somewhere else, in the wrong direction. There is then a pause, after which the voice says, in effect: Well, this wasn't what we had in mind; but since we're now here, you will now need to turn round, to do this, and that, in order to get back on track. Thank God, says Dr Sacks, that even when

we take a wrong turning, perhaps deliberately, he will go along with us and pick us up from where we've landed ourselves and get us back on track in the end.

But not always, and not necessarily. In contrast to the image of the in-car navigation system, Dr Sacks points out that there is another kind of wandering which doesn't carry the same guarantee of ultimate rescue. There is a certain kind of ant, he says – again, I wouldn't be able to comment on this but I take his word for it – which, when it's lost, is programmed to follow the ant in front. This normally works fine, because ants are pretty smart and someone up ahead will surely know where we're all going. But sometimes, apparently, the ones up ahead will start to circle round, looking for another ant to follow . . . and another, and another . . . and before too long all the ants will be going round and round, convinced they are marching in the right direction but all merely following one another in a great circle. And the result is catastrophic. They will all die.

The question we face today, inside the church but just as much outside it in our wider Western culture, is whether despite all our blunderings we are still in fact listening for a voice from elsewhere, a guiding voice which will get us out of the mess and back on track to human and Christian flourishing, or whether we are in fact merely following one another round and round in a circle, convinced we're doing the right thing but heading for futility and starvation. Will the church, and the world, do the satellite-navigation thing or the ant thing?

In order to come at this question I want to plot three elements of our contemporary culture and to point out the ways in which they interact with each other, and the ways in particular in which they condition the debates and puzzles we face in the church and the wider world. Unless we reflect on these very different challenges, and the way they shape our society and the lives of the millions of individuals who make it up, we shall be walking around blindfold, shutting our eyes to the hidden but persuasive forces which put pressure on those

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among whom we live and work, and indeed on ourselves too. I choose these three; there are no doubt many others. And I shall then argue, on the basis of the New Testament, that to follow the living Jesus gives us the resources both to face these challenges for ourselves and to enable the work of the gospel and of God's kingdom to go ahead, to get back on track, to find the way to health and life. The three challenges are the contemporary versions of Gnosticism and imperialism, and then the apparently new (but in fact very old) phenomenon known as postmodernism.

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God the creator in a world of neo-Gnosticism

My aim in this book is to raise three key questions about our contemporary culture: to make connections, to suggest an interplay of assumptions and controlling narratives within today's world, and so to offer a rough sketch-map of certain aspects of contemporary culture on which we may discern key trends and link together some powerful ideas. At the same time I shall look afresh at certain aspects of the biblical story and draw out some often unnoticed themes.

I have used a traditional Trinitarian framework. But I approach this 'from below', coming at it through the exegesis of particular biblical passages and themes, rather than imposing it heavy-handedly as a dogmatic stereotype. I aim to re-read familiar biblical material with contemporary concerns in mind. I have increasingly found resonances between ancient and contemporary culture; exploring these is risky, but it remains full of potential.

Glimpses of *gnosis* in Western modernity

We live, I suggest, in a world characterized by certain types of Gnosticism. One of the most glaring recent signs of this is the extraordinary popularity of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.¹ This book was a runaway bestseller when it was first published in 2004, and it has had an enormous impact on the imagination of a whole generation. In that novel, Brown taps into a deep desire in our culture for *hidden knowledge*, a secret understanding whose possessor can pierce the mystery, find the key

to life, and in particular discover the buried truth about his or her own true identity. In his many books, but particularly in this one, Dan Brown has been saying things people in our day want to hear so badly that they are prepared to swallow ridiculous and unhistorical proposals in large quantity as long as they get the worldview they want.

In form, the book is a seemingly endless sequence of conspiracy theories, of the penetration of one secret after another. In substance, the plot hinges on the great conspiracy theory widely believed today: that Christianity as we have known it (not least Roman Catholicism) is based on a gigantic mistake, a huge cover-up, perpetrated by the second and subsequent Christian generations, including the writers of the canonical gospels, hiding the early and true person and message of Jesus himself behind self-serving ecclesial propaganda. Like many other writers in recent times, Dan Brown has offered us a mixture of seriously proposed scholarly theories and historically ridiculous notions, especially that of Jesus having a child by Mary Magdalene and starting a royal blood line whose current carrier is the unwitting heroine of the novel, who thereby finally discovers 'who she really is'. The average reader, innocent of genuine ancient history, is left with the impression that the church has hushed up the 'real Jesus', not least Jesus' own programme for discovering the 'sacred feminine'.

The phenomenal success of this book is the index of a cultural trend: the pursuit of hidden knowledge whose bearer will have the privileged inside track on the meaning of life, backed up by esoteric traditions purporting to be about Jesus. At this level we notice obvious parallels with ancient Gnosticism.

One word about the problem of description. We have recently been cautioned against assuming that there was any one 'thing' called 'Gnosticism'.² The evidence is pluriform and often confusing; generalizations can mislead; we should perhaps talk of 'Gnosticisms', plural, just as some have spoken of ancient 'Judaisms' and 'Christianities'. And yet, for the plural itself to

