



Response to David M. Stowe

1988

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The International Bulletin of Missionary Research 12, 4 (October): 151-153

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In gratefully accepting the editor's invitation to respond to David Stowe's important article, I must begin by saying that of course I agree with him that missions have been powerful propagators of modernization. That is one of the many sins I have to confess. And it makes it all the more incumbent upon missionaries to think about what they have been doing.

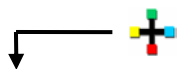
I must also, by way of preliminaries, say that Stowe misunderstands me at two points. First, he attributes to me the intention to return to a "Christendom" scenario "by having decisive preeminence and power assigned to a particular religion of which he [Newbigin] approves-Protestant Christianity." In support of this he misquotes me as saying that "belief in God should have controlling role in public life." I said no such thing. The passage in my book to which he refers (*Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. 106) simply says that while the Eastern (Marxist) world attempts to enforce atheism in the private as well as the public sector, the Western world "permits belief in God as an option for private life but excludes it from any controlling role in public life." The truth of that statement is amply confirmed, for example, in the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court in the recent Louisiana case where the Court ruled that any public school that permitted the teaching of the belief that "a supernatural being created humankind" would be acting illegally. In my book I repeatedly insisted that there could be no question of putting state power behind Christian belief.

Second, Stowe misrepresents me by suggesting that I am attacking science. In fact I want to affirm, with T. F. Torrance, that part of the problem with contemporary Christian thinking is that it is not scientific enough. In the natural sciences the method of investigating is governed by the nature of the reality being investigated. When we are investigating the inanimate world, which cannot itself initiate communication, the experimental methods of modern natural science are appropriate. As we rise through the scale of living creatures and of human beings to the supreme venture of knowing, the knowing of God, the proper method of seeking must change according to changing nature of the reality we are seeking to know. If it is true that God initiates

communication, then a truly scientific method will reflect that. It will begin from God's self-revelation, not from a speculative philosophy, however optimistic, based on the generality of human experience.

So far from denigrating science, I want to learn from the way that scientists proceed. Science depends as much as does religious faith upon profound personal conviction and commitment. Without this, science would wither and die. A true scientist-man or woman is passionately committed to his perception of truth. It is a personal commitment; *he* believes it. But that means that he believes it to be *true*, not just for himself but for all. He believes it, as Michael Polanyi says, "with universal intent." He therefore publishes it, argues for it, defends it against attack. He does not evade the struggle by saying, "This may not be true for you, but I feel it is true for me." There may be "schools of thought" in science as in everything else, but no one is content to suppose that there are different laws of physics in Tokyo from those in Chicago. The whole debate is carried out in freedom. There is certainly the powerful pressure of the scientific establishment, which will determine whether or not an opinion is worth publishing in the scientific journals and its promoter worth appointing to a chair. It is a disciplined freedom, something conspicuously lacking in contemporary theology. A person is not appointed to a teaching post in physics just because that person's ideas are new and interesting. There has to be some indication that they may be true. But there is no question of coercion by the state.

Perhaps the crucial question is: What do we mean by "public truth?" Stowe seems to identify public truth with "public recognition" and suggests that something qualifies as public truth when "in the long working of the Holy Spirit that truth will become *visible* to all, as the cumulative shared experience of humanity finds it ... to be true." If "public truth" means "unanimously accepted opinion," the gospel can never be expected to be public truth. Yet the early Christians refused to regard it as private opinion, protected by the Roman law, which offered security to the *cultus privatus*. They challenged the reign-



ing public cult even when they were a small minority, and paid the price.

Stowe takes comfort from the fact that there is a growing acceptance of certain "values" such as the concept of human rights and the belief that government exists for persons and not vice versa. He admits that these ideals "may be honored more often in the breach than in practice" and that their implementation is threatened by nationalism, but he does not seem to think that this invalidates his position. And it is true that our age is characterized by an unprecedented amount of moral passion. The air resounds continually with the rhetoric of moral values. Yet precisely the age that has produced this rhetoric has also produced more violence, more wholesale massacres of innocent people, more disintegration of the fundamental bonds of social life and family and neighborhood, more religious persecution, more destruction of human life by drug abuse, and a greater sense of helplessness of the individual person in the face of impersonal forces than any previous age in history. The contradiction between the rhetoric and the actuality is not an unfortunate accident; it is of the nature of the case. For as Nietzsche foresaw, the limitless operation of the critical principle since the Enlightenment must lead to a situation in which, since there is no ontological ground for saying judgments are "right" and "wrong," the only possible language is the language of the will – the will to power. That is why we do not talk of "right" or "wrong" but of "values."

"Values," if they are in a separate category from "facts," are a matter of the will. They are what some people *want*. Because they are not rooted in a perception of what is the case, they can be asserted only with the strength of someone's desire; they cannot be grounded in a perception of reality. If it is a fact that human beings exist by the kindness of a loving and wise creator who has redeemed them at enormous cost, then certain ways of life are appropriate. But this belief may not be taught in the schools, for example, as public truth. If, on the other hand, human beings exist as

an accidental result of a ruthless struggle for survival in which the secret of progress is the destruction of rivals (and this *may* be taught as "public truth"), then another way of life is appropriate. It is in general the way of life increasingly characteristic of our culture.

Michael Polanyi has, I think, illuminated the inner relationship between the rhetoric of values and the actuality of violence. The heart of the problem, he says, is that the critical spirit of "modernity" has removed any possible "factual" basis for morality. So, as Polanyi writes:

A man looking at this world with complete scepticism can see no grounds for moral authority or transcendent moral obligation; there may then seem to be no scope for his moral perfectionism. Yet he can satisfy it by turning his scepticism against existing society, denouncing its morality as shoddy, artificial, hypocritical, and a mere mask for lust and exploitation. Though such a combination of his moral scepticism with his moral indignation is inconsistent, the two are in fact fused together by their joint attack on the same target. The result is a moral hatred of existing society and the alienation of the modern intellectual.... Having condemned the distinction between good and evil as dishonest, he will still find pride in the honesty of such condemnation. Since ordinary decent behaviour can never be safe against the suspicion of sheer conformity or downright hypocrisy, only an absolutely amoral meaningless act can assure man of his complete sincerity.¹

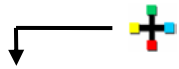
Here we have the only credible explanation that I know of the vandalism that is now a feature of our "modern" cities, the mindless destruction of what is beautiful and seemly and useful. I have never found anything comparable to this in the "traditional" life of an Indian village; it is one of the characteristic marks of "modernity."

This is surely the reason why our generation is experiencing such violent repudiation of "modernity." I share Stowe's distaste for what is happening in Iran and the Lebanon, but surely it is necessary to ask: Why are these things happening? Why, for example, should the people of Iran who were beginning to taste and enjoy the fruits of modernization, turn to rejecting them violently? Does one simply say that they are stupid? Or can we begin to understand what it means for a great and ancient people to see the whole fabric of life being eaten away by the "acids of modernity," to see their country beginning to go the way that Europe and America have gone? Is it wholly beyond our comprehension that they see the West (Marxist and capitalist alike) as the great Satan? Stowe asks us to see China as the paradigm for the future. Surely we can expect China to be the dominant world power in the twenty-first century, but (after the violent swings of the past eighty years) is he confident that China will be a liberal secular democracy? Is it not much more likely that the ancient principles that have molded Chinese civilization over the past three millennia will reassert themselves-perhaps in a violent form?

I recognize and am thankful to God for the good things in the culture that Stowe and I share. But I stand *by my* statement that our society is-in its central thrust-governed by a false creed, namely, that human beings are made for self-fulfillment apart from God, for "happiness" on terms that they are free to decide for themselves and apart from any consideration of what may be the ends for which God created us. The statement that governments exist for individuals is as much a half-truth as the statement that individuals exist for the sake of society. By itself, like the concept of "right" apart from responsibilities, it can only make society a perpetual warfare of each against all. Robert Bellah and his colleagues, in *Habits of the Heart*, have movingly documented the consequences of the breakdown of the older visions of the relation of the individual to society. Human beings exist for God and for responsible relations with each other under God. The church is required to affirm this as public truth, which must govern public life even if it is contradicted by the majority. If the church fails to make this witness, it is guilty of complicity in the destruction of the nation.

For Stowe, public truth emerges from the process of discussion in which the Bible functions as one of the elements but does not provide the central clue. This is in accordance with Stowe's fundamental philosophy, which, as his paper makes clear, begins from the concept of creativity as

inherent in the world rather than of God as creator. God is "deeply involved" but is not the sole creator and Lord. God is only one of the participants. The vision does not have a personal God at its heart; it is organismic and evolutionary. There is no "fall," no alienation of humankind from its creator, and so no place for the costly act of reconciliation through the cross, no place for radical conversion. Paul is quoted only when he quotes a pagan poet. John is quoted when he speaks



of God's love (1 Jn. 4:7-8) but his immediately following explanation of how he knows God's love is omitted: "Herein is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and *sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins*" (v. 10, italics added). I have to confess that, because I believe that God did *that*, and did it on the public stage of world history, I am bound to take that as the starting point, the master clue in the search for reality. I cannot agree, as Stowe seems to do, that it can function merely as one element in a scheme developed from another starting point.

Stowe sums up my position by saying that "one settles firmly into one opinion believing it to be God's revelation, and then projects this opinion into the public sphere." Yes, I do believe that the events that are the substance of the gospel are God's revelation. Believing it, I am bound to say so. I fully acknowledge and respect the right, for example, of the Muslims in Britain to challenge the public life of our country with the claim that Islam is the only answer to the corruption in our society. They are making that challenge openly and vigorously and I respect them for it. I only wish that my fellow Christians had the same boldness, boldness to proclaim the gospel as public truth-not something about which everyone is agreed, not something that relies on the support of the state, but also not something that is merely "true for me" or "true for Christians." The gospel is the announcement of those happenings that are the clue to the whole of cosmic history, the clue to the story of which every human life is a part. It is good news, gloriously good news. It has to be announced as public truth. And there is no more effective way of muffling its sound than the friendly embrace of an alien philosophy.

1. Michael Polanyi, "On Modern Mind," *Encounter* 24 (1965): 7f.

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