



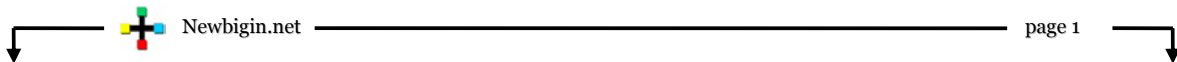
## The Gospel as Public Truth

(91gpt)

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This is the title chosen for the National Consultation in July 1992 for which the programme on 'The Gospel and Our Culture' has been and is preparatory. Having now seen chapters of the book which Bishop Hugh Montefiore is editing as the basic material for the Consultation I am excited about what is in store. These papers, the work of acknowledged leaders in various fields of public life, begin to flesh out in an exciting way the implications of the Gospel for various sectors of public life.

But the title also raises questions. 'Public truth' it is said, 'does not exist. There is no official dogma'! But even without a National Curriculum it would surely be hard to deny that all our children are expected to know certain things by the time they leave school, and (unless we are very cynical) expected to believe that they are true. The question is whether the Gospel forms part of this public truth, even if only as a contestant among others, or whether it is outside.

The other term in the title, 'The Gospel', provokes a different set of questions. 'What do you mean by 'The Gospel?'' I am asked by puzzled theologians. "Is it different from 'Christianity'? The latter is a very heterogeneous affair; which of the various brands are you promoting as a challenger for 'our culture?'" My answer is "Yes, Christianity is constantly changing, but there is a Gospel which does not change and which provides the bench-mark against which varying brands of Christianity have to be assessed." Can this be maintained? I believe so. The Gospel is the story of things which have happened. What has happened has happened and cannot be changed. But of course the way these happenings are understood changes. The historian E H Carr described his craft as a continuing conversation between the present and the past. History is being constantly re-written, not only because fresh evidence turns up, but also because past events are understood differently in the light of new experience. Christian theology is, in one aspect, a continual conversation between the present Church and the past events for which the Bible is the evidence.

Within the New Testament itself the story is told in different ways, and yet it is recognizable as the story of things which really happened. The fact that Jesus did not write a

definitive version of the Gospel; that we have not one but four versions (to the scandal of Muslims) is not an unfortunate weakness. It is evidence that the conversation began immediately and that our Lord intends it to go on. It is surely absurd to say, as some theologians do say, that what we have in the New Testament is not reliable evidence for 'what really happened', but evidence of the faith and religious experience of the early Christians cast into narrative form. Of course the New Testament is evidence of the faith of the disciples - faith about what had really happened. And of course this faith is shaped by their culture. But it would be a strange cultural chauvinism which led us to suppose that our culture gives us a better means of knowing 'what really happened' than the culture of first century Palestine.

It is not difficult to bring a little 'hermeneutic of suspicion' to bear on this kind of scholarship. One of the obvious features of 'modern' (as distinct from 'post-modern') culture is the belief that there is available to us a body of 'objective facts', a knowledge which is disinfected of all subjectivity, a kind of knowledge from which the knowing subject has been eliminated. It is not difficult to detect the cultural conditioning of the famous phrase 'what really happened'. It implies that it is possible to have an understanding of past events which is not affected by the cultural formation of the historian. It suggests that E H Carr's conversation can now come to a full stop, for there cannot be any further amendment to the knowledge of 'what really happened'. But of course this whole way of thinking is a very natural one, for it is part of our human nature that we imagine ourselves to be in the unique position of understanding how things really are. In truth the conversation has to go on until the end of the world. Christian theology has to be continually seeking afresh to understand those events which form the substance of the Gospel, the events which we recite in the ecumenical creeds and of which we have the primary evidence in the Bible. The continuing conversation which is the task of the Church must exclude two possibilities. It cannot merely repeat the words of creed or scripture; that would be to negate the intention of Jesus who did not write a Qur'an but formed a community of fallible men and women. It cannot float away from the testimony of those first disciples to follow wherever the wind is blowing. It has to bring all the powers which contemporary culture may have equipped it to bear on the understanding of 'what really happened'. And it has the promise of Jesus that the Spirit will lead us into the fullness of the truth.

The evidence for the events which we tell in preaching the Gospel is far stronger than the evidence for events of the same period about which historians write with a confidence sharply contrasted with the scepticism of many biblical scholars. And the reason for this is not hard to see. Any information about past events which is brought to our attention can only be grasped by means of the conceptual framework which has been given to us by our cultural formation. It must be told in a language we understand. It must 'make sense', must be capable of comprehension within our understanding of 'how things are'. Some reports of events cause us little dis-

turbance. They do not disrupt normal patterns. Others may cause surprise, astonishment, unbelief. If the evidence is strong enough, we may in the end be forced to 'change our mind' about how things are. The report of events which is the Gospel is of such a kind that it calls for the most radical possible 'change of mind'. That is signalled in the first announcement of the good news according to Mark. What is announced is only credible as good news if there is a radical metanoia, a U-turn of the mind. One of the weaknesses of much Christian apologetic is that it fails to take this seriously. The fact that the Good News Bible can translate this crucial word as 'turn away from your sins' makes Jesus into a mere revivalist. There is a danger that the Decade of Evangelism may be interpreted in this way and fail to embody a clear call to a radical conversion of the mind. And since no one can live a totally privatized religion the call has to be addressed to the public life of society. The Gospel is public truth. In the continuing conversation which is the life of the Church, we have to use our own ways of thinking as we seek to grasp the meaning of

the Gospel for our time. But we have first to believe the Gospel – and that means a radical ‘change of mind’, I hope that the National Consultation in 1992 will help to make more clear what that change of mind will involve, and even help to make it happen.

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